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The Word for World is Forest: Science Fiction as an Allegory for Misogyny, Ecofeminism, and Human Identity

For as long as anyone can remember, minority groups have used writing and artistic expression to convey their experience as oppressed groups to the dominant population. Whether it's African authors using speculative fiction to discuss colonialism and enslavement, or women using poetry and essays to provide a discourse on the patriarchy, art and specifically literature have provided an outlet for unknown voices to be heard. The use of science fiction and fantasy is wildly popular in this respect as its nonlinear definitions of space and time allow authors to move beyond constraining contexts of the western world and construct a narrative that often dramatically plays out the reality they live in. One poignant example of this is the commentary on not only misogyny but also ecofeminism in Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *The Word for World is Forest*. Le Guin, writing the piece during the second wave feminist movement, uses her characters to illustrate the oppression of women but also the subsequent denunciation of sex and sensuality, and the social device of "othering" proves to reveal truths about the human identity, femininity, and man's innate need to dominate nature.

This theme is most salient in the construction of the world in the novel and the systematic objectification and sexualization of women as points of pleasure for men. One of the first scenes in the book details a new "shipment" of women that have arrived on the distant planet the hains— the humans depicted here— live on, and Davidson, one of the main characters and a symbol of hyper-masculinity, notes that most of them must be "recreation staff" (11). It immediately becomes apparent that the role of women on this planet is purely to provide sexual

pleasure for men, and because of this they are seen as sexual objects but also intellectually inferior. Nearly every time women are mentioned in the novel they are disregarded or blatantly insulted as being good for nothing more than sex. References are made to either their physical measurements as a point of value, their facial appearance and fashion, specifically calling them “ugly as hell”(23), or condemning their intellectual capacity. Le Guin poignantly does this satirically to critique the discourse on women that was present in coordination with the second wave feminist movement. In the 1970s; women were fighting for rights beyond voting, and because of this there was an increased outrage towards them and thus more myths and stereotypes were created as a tactic for discrimination. This is played out in the novel with the understanding that women are incapable of hard labor and their service to men.

Davidson as a character is used to epitomize the male figure and hypermasculinity, not only in his actions and values, but his mindset as well, which we'll learn is deeply affected by the construction of the world Le Guin has created and his innate avoidance of all things feminine. From the beginning of the novel, we understand that Davidson draws nearly all his personal value from his supposedly high IQ, and he uses this as not only an intimidation tactic, but he leverages it against his opponents. Davidson is one of the military captains on this planet, but still directly reported to this commander, though he didn't let that stop him from denouncing others based on his quantitative capacities. When referring to one of his fellow captains, he noted the gap between their intelligence;

There was a difference of 11 points; but of course he couldn't say that to old Moo, and Moo couldn't see it, and so there was no way to get him to listen. He thought he knew better than Davidson, and that was that. (97)

There could not be a more illustrative example to Davidson's personality and his superiority complex, where he explicitly undervalues his comrade simply because he perceives them as less intelligent. This example is even more interesting when considering the context of the story's writing. Like Le Guin's satire of the oppression of women, she also pokes fingers at the fact that was becoming more widely known at this time, that IQ has very little to do with a person's intelligence. This, of course, comes with a more holistic approach to intelligence, and an expanded definition of what it means to have intellectual capacity. During this time in the 1970s, people were beginning to understand that IQ did play into intelligence, but things like social skills, emotional intelligence, and other qualitative factors also played a role. When that definition is applied to Davidson, it is clear that he is not nearly as smart as he thinks he is.

Le Guin uses this mechanism strategically to comment on the male elitist mindset that was prevalent for so long, and continues to play it out in Davidson's hypermasculinity that becomes nearly comical at some points. Not only is Davidson depicted as sitting down to casually eat one kilogram of steak at a meal, but he seems to avoid any and all things feminine or maternal unless he is able to dominate them or derive pleasure. Most notably his distaste for the Athsheans, a matriarchal society, demonstrate his use of "othering" as a tactic to create a perceived distance between himself and a way of life he can't conceive of. The Athsheans put all the power in their culture on the women, who control much of the operations of their colony; the way that Davidson describes it depicts his disgust and utter disagreement with women not only being involved in the running of the government, but having control and authority within it; "The Athsheans are governed, in so far as they have government, by old women. Intellect to the men, politics to the women, and ethics to the interaction of both: that's their arrangement. It has charm, and it works—for them" (115).

Though Davidson is not the only human in the book to express their hatred of the Athsheans, he is used as a quintessential example of the toxic mindsets of people in this world and as an allegory to the misogyny and oppression present in the world at the time of the book's publication. In this way, not only are the women in the story "othered" and systematically exploited, but the Athsheans are as well, and these two populations are drawn in comparison often, including when Davidson exasperatedly tells his men, "don't look for good sense from women or creechies, Ok!" (20). However, these are not the only examples, and when taking a step back and examining the setting of the novel, it is clear that Le Guin is not only exploring sexism and racism here, but also the theory of ecofeminism and power dynamics in relation to nature.

One of the hallmarks of the world depicted in the book is the context in which they're operating and the path it took them to get there. It is revealed early on in the novel that the humans and Athsheans were sent to the planet they're on to harvest the forests that cover it. This description of the forest as all consuming and dark is reminiscent of a womb, and Davidson makes an explicit effort to avoid it in accordance with his avoidance of everything maternal or feminine. In addition, the forest represents not only the unknown, but also where the Athsheans live, giving Davidson even more of a reason to stay away. Davidson's need to exercise control and power over all living things is very in line with the philosophy of ecofeminism. Alonso (2018), a scholar in ecofeminism, presents the idea in an article examining ecofeminism and science fiction, where the genre is used as a canvas to portray these progressive ideas, often in a satirical way, to make commentary on social and cultural ideas of the time period;

For ecofeminists, patriarchy and the domination of nature, as well as other forms of oppression, are deeply intertwined, with both women and nature having been perceived

as the other to men, who are associated with the cultural center. And for ecofeminists, these two oppositions—women/nature versus men/culture—are the basis of a dualistic pattern of thought. (217)

With this in mind, it is clear why Le Guin chose to portray Davidson and all the humans in the book this way, to point out mans' innate need to control and exploit nature, as that is the whole purpose for the colony of humans on this planet, and to express the same sentiments they feel towards women. It's interesting to look at Davidson's treatment of women and nature and how similar they are, centered around dominance and power. He says once that, "the fact is, the only time a man is really and entirely a man is when he's just had a woman or just killed another man..." (96) showing just how much personal value and confidence he draws from taking advantage of women too. We find Davidson nearly caught in his own trap when Raj Lyubov, a human sympathizer for the Athsheans, points out that Davidson raped one of the Athshean's, Selver who is another central character in the book, wife and calls into question the difference between man and animal in Davidson's eyes. Lyubov confronts him about it after Davidson denies the Athsheans of human status, and Davidson is forced to reconcile with the fact that, in his own mind, he either has to call the Athsheans human or accept the fact that he committed an act of bestiality.

Even if Davidson does stop for a second to consider this, it's not evident to the reader, and he seems to contradict any cognitive dissonance this might have presented at the climax of the novel when he is presented the opportunity to burn the planet and destroy the Athsheans with the press of a button. This scene represents the pinnacle of Davidson's power and how he is able to take advantage of not only women, but also athsheans and the planet, and directly represents the theory behind ecofeminism and man's need to exercise power over all things maternal.

This idea is illustrated in a slightly more subtle way in the way sensuality and touch are portrayed, which extends to the perceptions of emotions throughout the novel. Specifically Le Guin draws attention to the differences between Davidson and Selver and how they handle emotion, and this speaks to a larger allegory being made about human identity. At one point in the novel, it is mentioned how touch is a very big part of the Athsheans' culture, and not simply in a sexual way, but more a way to represent intimacy and sensuality. The humans own "eroticism" forces them to be disgusted and revolted, repressing one of the most basic forms of human connection. Selver in particular is very connected to his emotions and has an incredibly deep connection to Lyubov, a relationship we don't see between any other characters, nonetheless between an Athshean and a human. Davidson seems devoid of emotions and instead is only connected to people by the power he asserts over them, and yet Davidson considers himself more of a human than Selver.

Le Guin flips this narrative in an interesting way, where Selver and the Athsheans are portrayed as animalistic aliens, covered in green fur and capable of supernatural dreaming powers, and yet they also have an incomparable understanding of each other and their own emotions and their connection to the forest, since they are against the destruction of their planet. In this way, the Athsheans are almost the embodiment of the principles of ecofeminism and understanding what it means to have a relationship with the natural world. As Alonso (2018) puts it, it's important to, "develop an alternative culture which fully [recognizes] human identity as continuous with, not alien from, nature" (218). It is clear that the Athsheans have done this, as their entire culture and society revolve around the existence of the forest. At one point it is explicitly stated that in the Athsheans language, the word for world translates to the human word for forest, where the title of the book came from, and showcasing just how significant the forest

is to their society. Throughout the novel they express their upset with the way the humans treat their land, and the humans are aware of it, Davidson commenting, “We have killed, raped, dispersed, and enslaved the native humans, destroyed their communities, and cut down their forests. It wouldn’t be surprising if they’d decided that we are not human” (75). Though they are aware of it, the humans, or at least Davidson, show no remorse whatsoever as to what they’re doing to the Athsheans or their planet, or the women for that matter, which is all in line with the elitist, misogynistic, exploitative narrative that’s played out throughout the novel.

This question of man’s relationship with nature also opens up an interesting conversation about what separates man from animal. Typically we think that consciousness or agency differentiate man from beast, but in this case the Athsheans almost have a higher sense of consciousness than the humans as they’re able to reach a state of quasi-enlightenment through dreaming. Though their self-determination is in question because of their enslavement to the humans, they make it clear that they do have the ability to assert themselves, as the Athsheans make several raids on the human military camps, resulting in their complete destruction. In this case, the defining factor between man and beast is the understanding of emotion, but by that definition the humans are the animals here, and the “animals” are the true humans— with the potential for self-efficacy and emotional intelligence. We’ve already determined that Davidson has no emotional intelligence, but instead draws his personal value from his IQ, which we’ve determined to have no real value, and as is proven here. This truth about the human identity contradicts most of the things previously accepted, and causes the reader to reexamine their own distinctions of man and animal and what it really means to be human

Le Guin explores many political, social, and environmental ideals through the various literary devices in her novel *The Word for World is Forest*. Accutely aware of her context, she

leverages the second wave feminist movement, ecofeminism, and other widely accepted notions and plays them out satirically in her novel. She uses her characters as archetypes but also depicts them at crossroads between worlds; human and Athshean, man and beast, and alien and humanoid, calling questions to our treatment of minorities groups and our environment. Her composition and complex allegories reveal truths about the human condition and open discussion on questions of intelligence, exploitation of natural resources, and femininity.

Overall her work aims to uplift and highlight the oppression of minority groups in a way that creates a sense of separation from the world. Science fiction and specifically dystopian, post-apocalyptic literature is often used for this reason. We find often that dystopian authors create worlds that seem very far off and distant because of the fantasy elements involved in the story, but upon further investigation it's usually found that the societies constructed are not that unimaginable or set so far in the future. In this case, the world in which the Athsheans and hains live on is covered in forest but those sent there are serving a mission that aims to deforest the planet and send the resources to the dying planet earth, that many people have already had to abandon. The Athsheans are used as forced laborers and kept in cages like animals, which might seem very extreme, but when compared against the treatment and conditions of many child slaves and other forced laborers, or even the lives of many human trafficking victims around the world. Beyond that, with the current rate of deforestation and the rising temperature of the Earth due to climate change, this type of abandonment might not be as far in the future as we think it is. In this way Le Guin is heading a warning, not only about our oppression of marginalized groups, but about our treatment of the environment. At a time when these concerns were rising in the 1970s, they've improved only slightly or worsened in the case of climate change since the

publication of the book, making these issues even more salient, and increasing the significance of the novel in the literary world and our society.

References

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