

Author's Note: This essay was written to be read aloud, so it is sometimes less qualified than it should be in favor of "sounding right." I've tried to remedy any misleading statements with footnotes.

Ursula Kroeber Le Guin was born in 1929 to cultural anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber and writer Theodora Kroeber. She is an acclaimed novelist, poet, and writer of short stories.

Early in her life, Le Guin's father introduced her to the *Tao Te Ching*, the essential text of Taoism attributed to Lao Tzu. In reference to *The Dispossessed*, she said "Taoism and Anarchism fit together in some very interesting ways and I've been a Taoist ever since I learned what it was."¹ As you might then expect, Taoism is a key in understanding Le Guin's voice in *The Dispossessed*.

As one of the early feminist voices in fantasy and science fiction, Le Guin comes to us from a background, a genre and a gender we do not read much in Athenaeum. She has a perspective in many ways very different from our own, so we should take care to not easily dismiss it. With these things in mind, let us consider a framework for approaching Le Guin and her work:

Firstly, a brief perspective on Taoism², as it relates to Le Guin's work. You might summarize Taoist thought as saying that when we think in conceptual terms about how things ought to be, and then try to make them that way, we often make the situation worse. This is exemplified in well meaning laws that often create as many problems as they solve (I'm sure you can think of a few.)

Lao Tzu claims that beings (or phenomena) that are wholly in harmony with the Tao behave in a completely natural, uncontrived way. This involves recognizing our conceptions of reality as limited and taking a holistic perspective. Taoists strive³ to work within the reality of the situation rather than labour under the delusion of conceptions.

Ursula Le Guin spent 25 years creating her own English version of the Tao. To quote it:

Stop being holy, forget being prudent,
it'll be a hundred times better for everyone.
Stop being altruistic, forget being righteous,
people will remember what family feeling is.
Stop planning, forget making a profit,
there won't be any thieves and robbers.

¹ Roberts, Dmae. "[Ursula K. Le Guin: "Out Here"](#)". KBOO: Stage and Studio. Retrieved November 8, 2013.

² This version of Taoism may only exist in my own mind and may be a mix of Taoism, Zen Buddhism and misc. but I would hope a Taoist would agree in general terms with what I've written.

³ Strive is not a very Taoist word. I also use words like goals and aims. I intend them in only the most holistic, uncontrived sense. It's hard to write about Taoism in English.

Feminism also had a significant influence on Le Guin and the book. Taoism encourages taking a holistic perspective without focusing on a goal or a destination. These are often considered feminine attributes.

In her book of essays, *The Wave in the Mind*, LeGuin humorously describes herself as being born “before women were invented.” Taoism had shaped her thinking for decades before the second wave of feminism, giving her a way to value these attributes in a society focused on the masculine virtues. Perhaps this is why in the novel Bedap claims that men have to be taught to be anarchists, but women are born that way.

The concepts of cycle and return are integrated into Shevek’s physics, Annaresti culture, and the very structure of the book. The anarchist society depends on a rhythm of a ten day week, with one day set aside to get the shit work done. The symbol of the circle represents a holistic viewpoint that is associated with the feminine.

Anarres as a society has chosen to make the efficiency of the work secondary to taking care of everyone within the society. In this reflection of feminine values, it contrasts strongly with the culture of Urras.

The Dispossessed was published in 1974, and explores, without necessarily endorsing, many feminist concepts from that era such as the elimination of gender roles, a lack of shame in sexuality and other bodily functions, and perhaps most notably (among its feminist topics) the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, that language shapes thinking and thus culture... for example: not saying “my handkerchief” but instead “the handkerchief that I use.”

The Dispossessed is certainly Science Fiction. Science fiction does its job best when it uses the ability to create another world to tell us something about this one.

A recurring image throughout the novel is the wall. The novel starts with a wall, Shevek dreams of walls, he says is going to Urras to try to “unbuild walls.” Walls enclose Kad, the only Annaresti we know of to ever be a prisoner.

More important than the literal walls are the mental and cultural walls in the collective societies of both worlds. When Shevek first arrives in Abbenay, he remarks on how there are no walls, that nothing is hidden, but quickly discovers that is not the case. These walls are created in the minds of people. They are not real walls, but because a collective believes in them, they none the less become real obstacles to freedom.

If you are not one that reads much science fiction, you might be confused when supposedly alien characters refer to themselves as human and their planet as “earth” or simply “the

world.” These conventions have a long history in science fiction and I like to think that they are the author subtly reminding us that while they may be circumscribing a plot on another world, they are addressing the walls in our here and now.

The political configuration of Urras is clearly meant to correspond to the United States, Soviet Union and Vietnam. Le Guin’s intention was not allegorical (she says she prefers to leave allegory alone,) but simply to allude to three familiar states as a contrast to Anarres. Some have read the book as an attack on democracy and capitalism, but Le Guin offers anarchism as a “necessary ideal, at the very least” but not a “practical movement.”⁴ She offers a very middle road sentiment that, “Democracy is good but it isn’t the only way to achieve justice and a fair share.”⁵

The book’s politics, lack of political resolution or triumph, and open ending is to remind us, once more, of the futility of laboring towards a goal. We can find loyal capitalists as well as zealous anarchists making the same mistakes. Lao Tzu writes:

In the degradation of the great way
come benevolence and righteousness.
With the exaltation of learning and prudence
comes immense hypocrisy.
The disordered family
is full of dutiful children and parents.
The disordered society
is full of loyal patriots.

- Tao Te Ching - 18

On both Urras and Anarres Shevek’s personal freedom is rarely if ever limited by laws, but he is often not free to do what he wants because of the people around him. The book posits that freedom is the natural state of man, and that we ought to “act without fear of punishment or hope of reward: [to] act from the center of ones soul.” it also says of anarchist society that:

Sacrifice might be demanded of the individual, but never compromise: for though only the society could give security and stability, only the individual, the person, had the power of moral choice—the power of change, the essential function of life.

⁴ To my horror, the only source I can find for these quotes is Wikipedia. The complete quote is that anarchism “is a necessary ideal at the very least. It is an ideal without which we couldn’t go on. If you are asking me is anarchism at this point a practical movement, well, then you get in the question of where you try to do it and who’s living on your boundary?” She also did not explicitly say it is “not” a practical movement, so I regret a little bit how this paragraph comes across. Hopefully it seemed less definite when read out loud.

⁵ Baker, Jeff. [Northwest Writers at Work: Ursula K. Le Guin is 80 and taking on Google. The Oregonian.](#) Retrieved October 26, 2013.

- Chapter 10, p. 333

You could say this is a book without a point, but that would probably be missing it. I don't think this is a book intended to convince anyone to become an Anarchist, a Feminist or even a Taoist. It seems that the goals of this book are less direct but holistic, to lead us to examine our basic conceptions of our freedom, responsibility, and purpose as individuals and what that means to us in the context of our society. It aims to tear down the walls of ideology and conception built by our culture. It aims to transform us without trying to change us.