Becoming Visible: Feminism, Gender and Science Fiction

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Joanna Russ’ *The Female Man* (1970) and various short stories by James Tiptree, Jr. reflect on gender and feminism. These three female authors were all active during the same period, and kept up a correspondence. I discuss how technology can overcome the limits of biology and allow for all-female and androgynous societies, examine the way in which the societies depicted in these books are shaped by gender and analyze how (biased) narratives influence the feminist message of the books.

Le Guin’s novel is hampered in conveying feminist politics by its biased narrator, its problematic use of language and its one-sided portrayal of the androgynes. Russ’ novel expresses strong feminist politics but is hindered by its difficult post-modernist structure and its lack of popularity compared to Le Guin’s book. Finally, Tiptree’s texts occupy a space somewhere in the middle when it comes to feminist politics, but possess an interesting double layer in that Tiptree was assumed to be a male writer.

The texts analyzed here provide an alternative viewpoint on the issue of gender, but offer no practicable solution as such. However, the stories do stimulate discussion about gender and women’s position, and may be useful educational tools, especially since they allow such a discussion away from the restrictions of reality. Furthermore, the texts suggest that the ‘problem’ of gender may be solved by redefining notions of gender, sexuality and identity and by escaping the binary discourse.
Becoming Visible: Feminism, Gender and Science Fiction

Although science fiction arguably has its roots in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), it has often been perceived as “male territory, boys’ own adventure stories with little to interest a female readership” (Lefanu 2). From the 1930s up to and including the 1950s, science fiction appears to have been dominated by men. Brian Attebery writes that:

Until the 1960s, gender was one of the elements most often transcribed unthinkingly into SF’s hypothetical worlds. Even if an author was interested in revising the gender code, the conservatism of a primarily male audience – and the editors, publishers, and distributors who were trying to outguess that audience – kept gender exploration to a minimum. (5)

As such, science fiction often tended to portray technological and extraterrestrial marvels alongside a system of gender relations lifted more or less right out of the social norms of the time. This changed in the 1960s, however, with the emergence of several developments which created an opening for feminist writers to begin publishing in the field of science fiction. Jeanne Cortiel describes these new phenomena as follows:

First, the ways in which New Wave science fiction and other developments opened the genre for formal experimentation and the so-called soft sciences enabled a greater range of expressive possibilities significant to feminist science fiction attempting to break out of conventionally male quest patterns. Second, feminist thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan began to forcefully revive the traditions of the earlier women’s movement. At this cultural moment, science fiction and utopian writing provided imaginative possibilities unavailable in mainstream (popular) literature. Precisely because science fiction was so noticeably dominated by male writers, characters, as well as a male audience, it became a place that enabled a pointed critique of male dominance in all cultural fields. (196)
Feminist theory appears to have played some role in this newly emerging feminist science fiction as well, and was characterized by significant theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Monique Wittig and Judith Butler. According to Linda Nicholson, “De Beauvoir sees in certain physiological differences between women and men, most notably men’s freedom from reproductive activity, the potential for men to first define themselves as subject” (7), and this discussion regarding (freedom from) female reproductive responsibilities is indeed a significant one in the feminist science fiction of the late 60s and 70s. One example of this which is discussed at length in this thesis is Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), which depicts a world of androgynes in which anyone may bear a child, since there is no biological separation in reproductive abilities. Wittig and Butler write, among others, on the topic of how heterosexuality is linked to gender. Nicholson summarizes Butler’s theory as follows:

*Within the regime of compulsory heterosexuality, it is often presumed that there is first a sex that is expressed in a gender and then in a sexuality. Subversion of such a regime would mean showing the derivative nature of gender and sex from sexuality, that is of employing sexuality against the idea of fixed concepts of gender and sexual identity.* (263)

The discussion of the impact heterosexuality has on gender is also significant to feminist science fiction, especially as “in many second-wave feminist novels, (…) the solution to the problem of gender is the disappearance of men” (Donawerth 117), leading to societies consisting entirely of women. For instance, in *The Female Man* (1970), another novel discussed in this thesis, Joanna Russ depicts the planet of Whileaway, which is populated entirely by women, and which is therefore, from a certain viewpoint, lesbian (if it is accurate to speak of such a thing in a mono-gendered society). According to Attebery, “a major task of the feminist revival of the 1960s and 1970s was a search for new tools for investigating and
challenging gender assumptions” (129) and it seems that science fiction was one such tool. The inventive nature of the genre allows for an unbridled exploration of society: gender roles, sexuality, even biology – none of these things are necessarily fixed in science fiction, allowing for radical possibilities. According to Sarah Lefanu, “the stock conventions of science fiction – time travel, alternate worlds, entropy, relativism, the search for a unified field theory – can be used metaphorically and metonymically as powerful ways of exploring the construction of ‘woman’” (5). Despite the compelling ability of science fiction to depict feminist concerns, it is still sometimes viewed as of little academic interest. In 1993, Marleen Barr writes:

   The category of women’s writing called feminist science fiction remains virtually invisible. When I cited Crossley’s description of “Sheldon’s famous story ‘The Women Men Don’t See’” above, I did so with the immediate realization that neither the story nor Sheldon/Tiptree are famous. Because Tiptree is categorized as a science fiction writer, she is invisible to most members of the academic community. (Lost 101)

Although some books and essays have been written on the topic of feminist science fiction, interest seems to have died down somewhat in recent years. Similarly, several prominent female authors of the time hardly appear to be read anymore (Le Guin being a notable exception)¹. However, in my view, the discussion in these books is still relevant, especially from a theoretical or historical viewpoint, taking the background of second-wave feminism into account. Barr writes that “speculative fiction is (…) a powerful educational tool which uses exaggeration to make women’s lack of power visible and discussable” (Alien xx) and Lucie Armitt comments that “the emergence of women’s SF as a force to be reckoned with

¹ On the Amazon.com rankings list for paid e-books, Le Guin’s Left Hand ranks at 169,598, the Tiptree anthology Her Smoke Rose Up Forever ranks at 466,965 and Russ’ The Female Man ranks at 794,383. There are also more reprints of The Left Hand of Darkness than of the other books. For instance, apart from the anthology mentioned, Tiptree’s work is hardly available in print anymore; most stories can only be purchased in ebook format.
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has played a large role in broadening out the readership of SF beyond the specialist clique to the more general reader interested in women’s writing and issues” (2). As such, these books can be useful educational tools as well; they can offer women (and men) insight into gender politics and women’s position in society by making these issues “visible and discussable”, as Barr writes. By presenting these political and theoretical discussions within the narrative framework of science fiction, feminist writers may be able to approach new readers, attracting a larger audience for their concerns.

In this thesis I discuss the works of three writers commonly associated with the genre of feminist science fiction: Ursula Le Guin (The Left Hand of Darkness), Joanna Russ (The Female Man), and James Tiptree, Jr. (“The Screwfly Solution”, “Houston, Houston, Do You Read” and “The Women Men Don’t See”). In my view, these works provide a good spectrum for analysis, since they often touch on the same issues, but do so in quite different ways. Le Guin, Russ and Tiptree were active during the same period, and in fact kept up a regular correspondence with each other:

Probably not by coincidence, two of the most important women writing SF in 1974 were two of Tiptree’s closest correspondents, Ursula Le Guin and Joanna Russ. They were very different from each other; Tiptree described them to Russ as the Martin Luther King and Malcolm X of feminist science fiction. (Phillips 331)

Of the three, Ursula Le Guin was and is undoubtedly the most popular. Her 1969 novel The Left Hand of Darkness (first published by Ace books) won both a Hugo (chosen by the audience) and a Nebula award (chosen by a panel of SF and fantasy writers), showing that she not only attracted critical praise, but was also popular with mainstream audiences. She was only the second author to win both prizes for the same work. Arguably, Left Hand made feminist issues accessible to a broad audience. However, at the same time, it is also clearly the least political of the texts discussed here, and it has often been criticized for not being feminist
enough, for reasons discussed in greater depth in the next chapters. Some of these criticisms include that one of the main characters is a man, the use of masculine pronouns for the androgyynes, and the masculine portrayal of the androgyynes themselves. Russ, in particular, disagreed with Le Guin’s brand of feminism:

Russ was angry with Le Guin for using male protagonists. It felt like a cheat, she told Tiptree. “It’s easy to avoid sexism and the incredible ugliness of the whole business if you half-pretend you’re really a man. I did it for years.” (Phillips 332)

Thus, there is some debate as to how feminist Le Guin actually is. Indeed, she herself was initially reluctant to describe her book as a feminist text: “the fact is that the real subject of the book is not feminism or sex or gender or anything of the sort; as far as I can see, it is a book about betrayal and fidelity” (Language 136). As such, despite the radical and revolutionary nature of the concept of introducing a planet populated entirely by androgyynes, Le Guin was perhaps held back in exploring this society to its fullest. She later wrote that she was “defensive” about her portrayal of gender, and felt that she “had opened a can of worms and was trying hard to shut it” (Language 136). She altered her views in the 1988 edition of her essay collection The Language of the Night and “changed her position on the question of pronouns, pointing out that she had indeed invented a new pronoun for the 1985 screenplay of the novel. She also recognizes that she had ‘quite unnecessarily’ locked the Gethenians into heterosexuality” (Basnett 56). The question that remains therefore is how successful Left Hand is in discussing feminist concerns. Lefanu believes that Le Guin’s “passion for synthesis at all costs leads to a surface calm that barely conceals the cracks beneath; in neither novel is the political potential lived in the language” (143). There appears to be a delicate balance: as mentioned, Le Guin’s novel is the least political of the works discussed here, but it is also the most popular. From a feminist perspective one might wonder whether the benefits of this popularity measure up against the book’s lack of political depth. As a piece of feminist
writing the book is at once a great success and a remarkable failure, yet Lisa Hogeland believes that *Left Hand* is “a tremendously important novel, for whether and in what way gender was ‘necessary’ continued to be a central concern of feminist science fiction throughout the 1970s” (111).

Joanna Russ is positioned on the opposite end of the spectrum. Her novel, *The Female Man* (1970, first published by Bantam Books), is the most outspokenly political of the texts discussed. She was not only a fiction writer, but also a critic and theorist, and wrote several novels on feminist criticism. Some of these books are related to being a female writer, such as *How to Suppress Women’s Writing* (1983). Lefanu describes her as follows:

> Joanna Russ is the single most important woman writer of science fiction, although she is not necessarily the most widely read. (…) I make this claim about her importance because of the seriousness of her feminist and her aesthetic concerns: the two are married (and as in any marriage are at times in conflict) in her work in a way that is not achieved by – indeed is not the ambition of – any other contemporary writer of science fiction. (173)

Indeed, much more than Le Guin’s novel, Russ’s work is political; she addresses the gender problems she herself faces in society and at times lashes out in anger, although her work is always laced with an undercurrent of humor as well. Her furious determination was at times off-putting to other writers, including Tiptree, who “told Le Guin that Russ was brilliant but exasperating, with ‘even less manners than she realizes. (…) Pees all over your leg, interspersed with the converse of angels’” (Phillips 306). Her way of addressing feminist issues is much more direct than Le Guin’s, and as such she attracts a different audience. Lefanu writes that “most of the women who read Joanna Russ would probably define themselves loosely as feminist – that is why they read her, and they are quite distinct – although of course overlap with – readers of, say, Ursula Le Guin or Anne McCaffrey” (174).
Thus, unlike Le Guin, Russ trades popularity for politics; to her the feminist message her work conveys is more important than the kind of audience it might attract. The structure of Russ’s book is quite different from Le Guin’s as well; whereas the latter provides a plot-driven, coherent narrative, Russ instead employs a post-structuralist method of jumping around from situation to situation and from character to character without ever providing full clarity about what is transpiring. Cortiel summarizes her writing style as follows:

Affiliated with experimental science fiction as well as postmodernist literary practices at large, Joanna Russ is usually seen as a ‘difficult’ writer, whose texts baffle novice readers. Her work certainly does pose a challenge to the student of science fiction; it pushes the envelope in terms of gender, genre, and sexuality, productively confusing simple definitions of 1970s feminism, reductive notions of science fiction as a genre, as well as what is possible to say about how characters interact erotically in a science fiction text. (Reading 168-9)

The shifts in narrative and setting make it difficult to know who is speaking at any given time, and this makes it much harder to keep track of the events in the book. Le Guin’s novel is clearly meant to be enjoyed; it is an afternoon’s light reading that occasionally touches on some deeper issues. Russ’s book, on the other hand, at times does not even seem meant as a work of fiction; sometimes it is more like a manifesto, an explanation of Russ’s dissatisfaction with society. This emphasis on the political aspect of feminism has often caused her to be criticized harshly. Her answers to such criticism are always defined by the particular brand of angry humor that also permeates her fiction: “much anti-feminist criticism of feminist writing can best be answered with, ‘Yeah? And where were you at the time, twinkletoes? Writing your ten-thousandth essay on King Lear?’” (How To Suppress 134). Despite the criticism her work receives, Russ is, as Lefanu states, one of the most important writers of feminist science fiction, especially because of her ability to combine politics and fiction. Still, whereas Le
Guin is widely read even today, Russ largely seems to have faded into obscurity, and is now mostly read for her views on feminism, not for her ability to write science fiction.

The final writer I discuss is James Tiptree Jr, the oldest and most enigmatic of the three. He wrote, among others, the short stories “The Women Men Don’t See” (1973, first appeared in *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*), “The Screwfly Solution” (1977, first appeared in *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*) and “Houston, Houston, Do You Read?” (1976, first printed by Facwett in the *Aurora* anthology). Tiptree was a mysterious figure who always refused to communicate in person and instead used a mailbox in a different state to conduct his affairs. Tiptree’s secrecy, alongside vague “CIA hints” (Phillips 217), caused many to conclude that he was working either for a secret service. He was a “masculine writer”, who “also showed a surprising sympathy toward his female characters” (Lefanu 105), someone who “wrote about women’s alienation in a world of men, and was held up as an example of a male feminist, a man who understood” (Phillips 2). Yet even so, Tiptree’s maleness made it more difficult for him to participate in the debate on feminism, and he was frequently scolded by Russ for failing to understand how different things were for women. Furthermore, Tiptree had a distinctly “masculine writing style” (Lefanu 105) and often wrote his stories from an “objectifying macho view” (Lefanu 107). As such, it was rather a large shock when James Tiptree, Jr. turned out to be pseudonym of Alice Bradley Sheldon, a 61-year old woman. Le Guin, when she found out, was ecstatic: “such a revelation, Le Guin says, must surely make us question all the theories put forward about feminine and masculine writing” (Philips 106). Indeed, the fact that Sheldon was able to keep up the male Tiptree persona for such a long time without ever being exposed is remarkable. Even Russ was blind to Sheldon’s true gender:
In the same year, another of Tiptree’s letter-friends, the feminist science fiction writer Joanna Russ, wrote him that a professor at a party had ‘asked me if you were a woman (!) by which I gather he can’t recognize a female point of view if it bites him’.

When Tiptree participated in a written symposium on ‘Women in Science Fiction’ as a token ‘sensitive man’, Russ told him he had ideas ‘no woman could even think, or understand, let alone assent to’. (Phillips 3)

As Le Guin states, by convincingly posing as a male writer for such a long time, Sheldon was able to completely overturn the existing notions of what constituted feminine and masculine writing. The male Tiptree persona allowed Sheldon to approach feminist science fiction in a unique way:

The way Tiptree uses male personae to tell her stories is (…) subversive both of a male-dominated world-view derived from unequal relations of power between the sexes and also of ideas of writing that divide experience, both lived and fictional, into separate spheres of masculine and feminine. (Lefanu 129)

Tiptree enabled Sheldon to write incredibly feminist works without receiving the kind of criticism a female writer such as Russ might expect. Behind the macho main characters some deeply theoretical and political notions about feminism can be found. Sheldon’s works often address the topic of gender, and are well-worth reading from a feminist perspective by themselves, but the revelation about Tiptree’s true gender imbues the stories with a double layer that make them even more interesting from a critical viewpoint. However, like Russ, Tiptree has largely become unknown, as her works have not been read much in recent years, and there appears to be less criticism on her than on the other writers. Still, her works remain interesting from a feminist perspective, and more than that, they are well-written pieces of fiction that have been honored with many awards.
In this thesis I explore the way in which the works by Le Guin, Russ and Tiptree reflect on gender and feminism. In order to do so I have divided the text into three chapters, each dealing with a different topic. Chapter One focuses on biology and is linked to the feminist discussion on (biological) gender and sexuality. This chapter discusses androgyny, (hetero)sexuality and single-sex societies and shows how science fiction is capable of using technology to overcome the limitations of biology. Chapter Two analyzes the way in which the societies depicted in the works by Le Guin, Russ and Tiptree function. It is focused on (the deconstruction of) traditional gender roles in society, and also discusses what the social effects might be of having a community populated solely by women. Chapter Three focuses on narrative. Remarkably enough, many of the feminist stories analyzed here feature the viewpoint of male protagonists, and this is sometimes problematic. Even when this is not the case, as with Russ, the narrative might still be troublesome due to the way in which it is (formally) constructed. Finally, in the conclusion I discuss the way in which these stories are linked to feminist theory and politics, including the struggle for greater gender awareness and for women themselves to become visible, and examine the current state of feminist science fiction.
Chapter One: Biology

Science fiction takes up an extraordinary position in literature because it is not bound by the same limitations of biology and technology our normal world is. As such, it grants writers a large amount of room to explore societies based on different principles of gender and sexuality, regardless of whether these things would actually be practicable in our own world. In “Variations on Sex and Gender” Butler discusses the importance that gender has in differentiating people:

[Monique Wittig] points out that there are other kinds of differences among people, differences in shape and size, in earlobe formation and the lengths of noses, but we do not ask when a child enters the world what species of earlobe it has. We immediately ask about certain sexually differentiated traits because we assume that those traits will in some sense determine that child’s social destiny, and that destiny, whatever else it is, is structured by a gender system predicated upon the alleged naturalness of binary oppositions and, consequently, heterosexuality. (Reader 30-1)

Indeed, as Butler argues, it seems that gender is central to our perceptions of other human beings; after all, it is one of the main determining factors in one’s “social destiny”. This, perhaps, is the main dividing factor between humans. How does one manage to look beyond gender at what humanity as a unified whole could be, when this apparently crucial difference begins playing a role right from the moment of birth? In many societies, gender determines what one is expected to do or not to do, and sometimes even dictates one’s rights and restrictions. So what would happen if gender was eliminated entirely? This is the thought experiment that Le Guin works out in Left Hand: “I eliminated gender, to find out what was left. Whatever was left would be, presumably, simply human. It would define the area that is shared by men and women alike” (Le Guin, Language 138). In Left Hand Le Guin portrays the Gethenians, a special species of humans that is asexual for most of the month, and which
only enters into *kemmer*, the reproductive phase, for about four days every lunar cycle. During this period one of the sexual partners assumes female genitals while the other assumes male. A Gethenian is not restricted to either of these; they may alternately assume both, and they are capable of both siring children and giving birth to them. This remarkable situation is hard to fathom for the ‘alien’ observers who come to Gethen from another planet, as they are gendered either male or female. One such observer, a female human from a planet that does possess gender, writes the following about Gethen, echoing Butler’s observation:

> Our entire pattern of socio-sexual interaction is nonexistent here. They cannot play the game. They do not see one another as men or women. This is almost impossible for our imagination to accept. What is the first question we ask about a newborn baby?

(Le Guin 100-1)

Indeed, the fact that Gethenians are biologically different in this way makes for several interesting consequences. Pregnancy and childbirth are no longer divisive factors, and as such “anyone can turn his hand to anything” and none of the Gethenians are “quite so thoroughly ‘tied down’ here as women, elsewhere” (Le Guin 100), a notion I will return to in Chapter Two. There is also no such thing as rape on Gethen, as “coitus can be performed only by mutual invitation and consent” (Le Guin 100). Due to the nature of Gethenian sexuality and the changes that each partner must undergo during *kemmer*, it is impossible for anyone to be forced into having sex against their will. Because of this, Le Guin says she “figured that they would have less fear and guilt about sex than we tend to have” (*Language* 143). Indeed, Gethen boasts a large amount of kemmerhouses that are publicly available to anyone, “however poor or strange” (Le Guin 99). However, at the same time it is noted that “room is made for sex, plenty of room; but a room, as it were, apart. The society of Gethen, in its daily functioning and in its continuity, is without sex” (Le Guin 99). This fact is interpreted radically differently by the ‘alien’ visitors to Gethen than it is by the Gethenians themselves.
The human female observer mentioned above calls the Gethenian sexual cycle “degrading” (Le Guin 101) and compares it to that of animals. At the same time, the Gethenians view someone such as Genly Ai, the Envoy sent down to Gethen by the Ekumen (an alliance of humanoid planets) as a ‘pervert’ because of his continuous capacity for reproduction. “A strange low-grade sort of desire it must be,” one of the Gethenians reflects in regard to Genly Ai, “to be spread out over every day of the year and never to know the choice of sex” (Le Guin 250). The Gethenian sexual cycle is advantageous in that it prevents “exploitation and frustration” (Le Guin 102) of the sexual drive, but it is also limiting. Gethenians are forced to obey a strict sexual cycle (unless they take medication to delay or prevent kemmer), one that is so rigid it even determines the structure of their month.

Le Guin’s portrayal of androgyny in *Left Hand* has sometimes been seen by critics as an attempt to “deconstruct gender” (Rudy 32) by providing an alternative to the “binary discourse on sex in which ‘men’ and ‘women’ exhaust the possibilities of sex, and relate to each other as complementary opposites” (Butler, *Reader* 32). Gethenians are not men or women; they are both and neither, and therefore eliminate this binary restriction. This might be perceived as freeing; there can be no oppression of women if there is no such thing as a woman, and no social division based on gender. Indeed, Butler writes that Wittig “argues that sex, like class, is a construct that must inevitably be disposed” (*Reader* 31), although Butler herself feels that binary restrictions should be overcome “with cultural innovation rather than myths of transcendence” (*Reader* 32). Regardless, *Left Hand* does provide the reader with an interesting insight into what a society might be like if it did manage to overcome the division of sex. However, there is also a clear problem with viewing the novel as a feminist work: *there are no women on Gethen*. Some critics have taken this to mean that *Left Hand* cannot possibly be a feminist novel: “in this logic, the principles of feminism are dependent on a firm, stable sense of what it means to be a woman; to destabilize that essence by collapsing
both genders into one being essentially harms women” (Rudy 32). Thus, whether one agrees
with the theories on feminism put forward in the novel (and indeed thinks of the book as
feminist at all) is dependent on whether one advocates the eradication or reformation of
gender, or wishes to maintain ‘traditional’ genders and simply seeks to improve the position
of the ‘woman’. There are other problems with the depiction of the book as ‘feminist’ as well,
but these I will return to in Chapter Three.

Joanna Russ’ The Female Man also discusses gender issues, in a similar yet different
way. According to Cortiel, it “moves away from an either/or binarism – either male or female,
powerful or oppressed – to a both/and, examining the contradictions in contemporary
American society without attempting to resolve them” (Reading 174). However, unlike Left
Hand, this book does not seek to remove gender binarism through unity and androgyny;
rather, it portrays a wide range of different perspectives by showing four women who are
genetically identical but who are nevertheless wildly different from each other as a result of
their respective environments and societies. Perhaps most relevant to the current discussion is
the character of Janet, who is from the utopian planet of Whileaway, a future version of our
Earth. On Whileaway all the men have died centuries before from a plague, and the world is
entirely populated by women who reproduce through the merging of ova. Like Gethen, it is a
world without sexual violence: “you can walk around the Whileaway equator twenty times
(…) with one hand on your sex and in the other an emerald the size of a grapefruit. All you’ll
get is a tired wrist” (Russ 81). This observation is immediately followed by a mournful cry
from the narrator/author: “While here, where we live-!” (Russ 81). This is a clear example of
how the worlds of Gethen and Whileaway are superior to ‘our’ world, through the virtue of
their being genderless. Still, although both Gethen and Whileaway are thus genderless in
some sense, this concept is realized in very different ways. Janet is “not-a-woman, that is
without gender in a genderless society, but at the same time also emphatically female in a
women-only utopian version of the future” (Cortiel, Demand 98). In a society containing only women there can be no gender or gender roles, and “Whileawayans do not have to act or dress in the ‘feminine’ ways that are naturalized/normalized in Jeannine’s or Joanna’s world” (Martins 406). Jeannine and Joanna are two of the other women depicted in the novel, and they both live on different versions of our 1969 Earth. As such, Janet’s position as a woman is still reinforced in the novel as soon as she leaves her own world and visits these places, places with men, places in which she is suddenly expected to conform to certain gender norms. This also opens up the possibility of discussing sexuality; Janet is not a lesbian in her own world, which after all only knows one gender, but as soon as she travels to Joanna’s or Jeannine’s 1969 worlds she stands out like a sore thumb in a society that still considers it taboo for two women to have sex with each other. Russ creates room for a discussion of sexuality, unlike Le Guin’s Left Hand, which enforces heterosexuality by always having two sexual partners take on opposite genders. Joanna, inspired by Janet’s origins, eventually begins viewing gender and sexuality in a different way as well, rebranding herself a ‘female man’ and becoming openly lesbian. Although Joanna had experienced feelings for women before, she was afraid to act upon them, because “they were Unreal and therefore culpable; to try to make Real what was Unreal was to mistake the very nature of things; it was a sin not against conscience (…) but against Reality” (Russ 201). In Joanna’s reality lesbianism is not an option, because it goes against the established sexual norms. Only her encounter with Janet shows her that her desires are not abnormal, making them visible and ‘real’.

However, Russ also provides a clear counterweight to Janet’s all-female utopia in the world of Jael, another of the four women, which is split up into Womanland and Manland, and in which the sexes are slowly battling out a cold war. Jael desires to create a world like Janet’s, but in order to reach that ideal her own world has become caught up in a constant state of war, a dystopian reality in which men and women become increasingly alienated from
each other. Despite this separation, and unlike Whileaway, Jael’s world is a heterosexual one. The Manlanders turn their ‘failed’ men into women; one-seventh of the Manlanders is turned into women through surgery, while another one-seventh does not undergo surgery but does assume a female gender role. The ‘women’ in Manland are owned and controlled by the men. Meanwhile, in Womanland, Jael has heterosexual sex as well, through the aid of her companion Davy, “a post-human being whose genetic material, originally chimpanzee, is shaped by Jael’s sexual fantasies in an ironic reversal of the way in which women shape their bodies to suit men in patriarchal societies” (Cortiel, Reading 178). This “ironic reversal” is crucial to the character of Jael; she is all that extreme criticism claims men to be: violent and vengeful. When she encounters a sexist man who tries to dominate her, she kills him without hesitation and with great enjoyment: “you have to kill them anyway, might as well have fun. There’s no standing those non-humans at all, at all” (Russ 176). As is clear from her words, Jael is so alienated from men that she does not even view them as humans anymore; she feels herself superior to them. Thus, through Jael, “Russ counteracts the notion that women are naturally non-violent, more nurturing than men” and possibly suggests that “women must turn to drastic measures to overturn patriarchal oppression” (Martins 411). As such, The Female Man offers its readers two alternatives to their normal world: one a utopian female-only world represented by Janet, “whom we don’t believe in and whom we deride but who is in secret our savior from utter despair” (Russ 206), and one a separatist dystopian world set on eliminating men and represented by Jael, “who says never give in but always go down fighting” (Russ 206). Neither one is real – one world functions like a dream, an escape from reality, whereas the other represents the failure of that dream, the externalization of “the state of war expressed in the dualism of sex that is the basis of patriarchal societies” (Cortiel, Reading 176). The “better” world seems obvious at first sight, but Russ puts the utopian character of Whileaway in doubt at the end of the novel when she has Jael proclaim that the absence of men on
Whileaway is not the result of a plague, but rather the outcome of a war between the sexes fought centuries before: “I, I, I, I am the plague, Janet Evasion. I and the war I fought built your world for you” (Russ 205). Whether Jael is speaking the truth or not remains unclear, but the point is made – even an apparently perfect world like Whileaway may have ugly secrets lurking beneath its surface. The utopia of Whileaway is ultimately incapable of providing a simple solution to the problem of gender.

The notion of a doubtful female-only utopia is further discussed in Tiptree’s “Houston, Houston, Do You Read?”. In this vision of a future Earth men have also disappeared as a result of an epidemic, much as on Whileaway. Only about two million people remain on Earth, all of them cloned from 11,000 original genotypes, and all women. Just as Russ’ Whileaway, this future vision of Earth is in some sense a genderless one. As on Whileaway, the women maintain (from our point of view) same-sex relationships, although they are not capable of reproducing through the merging of ova, as in Russ’ story. Instead, the women are limited to cloning people based on the original genotypes, and as such there may be as many as 200 copies of the same genetic individual in existence at once. The women in Tiptree’s story view this as an advantage and keep records of their lives and experiences to share with others of their genotype. When through an accident of time-travel they come across three men from an earlier version of Earth, the women reel at the implications of the fact that the men are each genetically unique: “all alone, and no sisters to share with! You don’t know what you can do, or what would be interesting to try. All you poor singletons, you – why, you just have to blunder along and die, all for nothing!” (Tiptree 201). Thus, the women feel strong bonds of kinship to their “sisters”, and enjoy being part of a larger whole. Another remarkable aspect of their society is that some women are engineered into becoming androgynes at an early age, because they “need the muscle-power for some jobs” (Tiptree 203). Whether this change is based on free will is not made clear in the text, but androgynes are not treated any differently.
from the other women, save for being assigned to more physically demanding jobs.

Furthermore, unlike Le Guin’s Gethenians, these people are not completely androgynous: they retain female genitals, and their physical differences are only meant to enhance their strength. Just as *The Female Man*, Tiptree’s story raises the question of sexuality as well. According to Wendy Pearson, it demonstrates “the viability of a successful, happy and entirely non-heteronormative world” (12). Furthermore, this version of Earth, just as Whileaway, knows no war. Tiptree takes her ‘utopia’ even further by suggesting that these women have no real capability for aggression: “not merely aggressive behavior but aggressive thoughts are alien to these women” (Steffen-Fluhr 208). However, this is also what is “so subtly nightmarish about this world” (208) in Nancy Steffen-Fluhr’s view. “It is not that the Sisterhood of the future is inhumane but that it is simply non-human” (Steffen-Fluhr 208), because it is so radically different from what we currently perceive as human. The women in the story disagree with this notion, however. When one of the male characters asks what they call themselves, one of the women answers: “why, we call ourselves human beings” (Tiptree 216). However, this humanity comes at a high price, as the women kill the time-travelling men in cold blood at the end of the story when it becomes clear that they pose a threat to the safety of their society, saying that they “simply have no facilities for people with your emotional problems” (Tiptree 215). This is apparently necessary in order to “maintain freedom for women” and “erase the threat of a return of the heterosexual repressed” (Hollinger 26), but it also shows that this all-women society is perhaps less utopian than it seems at first glance. In this case, the price for female visibility appears to be the eradication of men. Pearson also raises the question of what message the story conveys:

Surely the story’s assertion that heteronormative relationships are irredeemable argues not so much for a feminist uprising in which all men will be slaughtered as for a rethinking of the ideological and sociocultural presuppositions that make it impossible
to imagine relationships across the sexes outside the limited regime of what one might consider the ‘heterosexual imaginary’? (12)

This idea is refined by Lewis Call, who writes that “for Tiptree such [heteronormative] relationships are unsustainable not because they are *hetero*, but because they are *normative*” (64). This is in line with Butler’s thinking, who states that in maintaining a binary gender system, “we recapitulate heterosexuality as a precondition for human identity, and posit this constraining norm in the guise of a natural fact” (*Reader* 31). Both Tiptree and Russ offer alternatives for this heteronormative standard in portraying lesbian relationships – if one can call them that in single-gender societies. At the very least, both of these stories suggest an alternative way of thinking that is perhaps not meant as a solution – after all, eradicating all the men on Earth is hardly a viable plan – but rather as a way to shed some more light on these issues. Interestingly enough, Le Guin does not enter into this same discussion. As mentioned before, while her society largely does away with the concept of gender, it *is* heterosexual. There does not appear to be such a thing as lesbian or homosexual sex on Gethen: “if there are exceptions, resulting in kemmer-partners of the same sex, they are so rare as to be ignored” (Le Guin 96). As such, there is no viable alternative to heterosexuality in Le Guin’s novel, something which she now considers a failure: “I quite unnecessarily locked the Gethenians into heterosexuality. It is a naively pragmatic view of sex that insists that sexual partners must be of opposite sex!” (*Language* 144) Therefore, while all three of these works invite their readers to reconsider the apparent boundaries of sex and gender, making problems visible and stimulating a discussion, they do so in rather different ways, and to apparently different ends.
Chapter Two: Society

The planet of Gethen as depicted in Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* is extraordinary not only because of its androgynous population, but also because of the way in which its society functions. I already touched on this subject in Chapter One, when I mentioned that because anyone may bear a child on Gethen as pregnancy is no longer a divisive factor, none of the Gethenians are “quite so thoroughly ‘tied down’ here as women, elsewhere” (Le Guin 100). The previous chapter also addressed the fact that there is no rape on Gethen, and that sexuality is treated differently. However, Gethenian society also has some other remarkable qualities that are somewhat less obviously linked to the population’s androgyny: “there is no war on Gethen. (…) There is no hurried and anxious drive towards progress and there is little exploitation of people or the land. In government, there is a balance between hierarchy and anarchy” (Annas 150). On the one hand, this lack of war, progress and exploitation can be viewed as a consequence of the harsh environmental circumstances on Gethen; the planet is nick-named “Winter” for a reason. It is possible that the Gethenians simply do not have the resources to spare for structured warfare and hurried progress, although this is not necessarily a deterrent to opening hostilities anyway. On the other hand, it might be more interesting to establish a link between gender and society, especially since Le Guin herself also emphasizes this connection:

To me the ‘female principle’ is, or at least historically has been, basically anarchic. It values order without constraint, rule by custom not by force. It has been the male who enforces order, who constructs power-structures, who makes, enforces, and breaks laws. On Gethen, these two principles are in balance: the decentralizing against the centralizing, the flexible against the rigid, the circular against the linear. (*Language* 141)
The way in which Le Guin ‘balances’ these principles is through the construction of two different nations: those of Karhide and Orgoreyn. Karhide is characterized as feminine territory: it is governed by a king who rules through outward shows of tradition, it is “passive, anarchic” (Le Guin 63) and it is described as the opposite of “impatient” (Le Guin 6). As the Gethenian Estraven remarks at one point, there is a saying that “Karhide is not a nation but a family quarrel” (Le Guin 6). Karhide is not incapable of violence. In fact, it is largely governed by the practice of shifgrethor – “a conflict without physical violence, involving one-upsmanship, the saving and losing of face” (Le Guin 164). On occasion physical violence takes place as well, “but it does not become mass violence, remaining limited, personal” (Le Guin 164). Orgoreyn, however, is somewhat different. It “is seen through the eyes of the Terran envoy as orderly and rational— that is to say, masculine” (Marcellino 206), and Genly Ai, likely guided by his own masculinity, initially prefers Orgoreyn to Karhide. Ai notes that on Gethen, nothing leads to war, because Gethenians apparently lack “the capacity to mobilize. They behave like animals, in that respect; or like women” (Le Guin 51). Here Ai’s distaste for the ‘feminine’ lack of mobility shines through clearly, further establishing his initial preference for Orgoreyn as “an increasingly mobilizable society, a real nation-state” (Le Guin 51). Later in the story “the repressive and militaristic aspects of masculine Orgoreyn emerge” (Marcellino 206) and Karhide becomes more attractive to Ai. The entirety of The Left Hand of Darkness appears to be a search for balance, as the title of the book implies: “light is the left hand of darkness / and darkness the right hand of light. / Two are one, life and death” (Le Guin 252). On the one hand, Le Guin’s balancing act between ‘male’ and ‘female’ here can be read as positive, an attempt to further unite the differences between men and women, to bring them back to one coherent whole, as she already seems to be attempting with her androgynous Gethenians. On the other hand, there is an obvious objection to such an approach; it assumes that certain characteristics are uniquely male or female, and in doing so
it reinforces stereotypical gender roles. This goes directly against Le Guin’s claims that she “eliminated gender” (Language 138). Le Guin’s Gethenians may be androgynous, but the world of Getheen itself clearly is not, and by dividing Getheen’s two major nations according to feminine and masculine qualities Le Guin is upholding stereotypical notions of gender rather than attempting to break away from them. Her depiction of the Gethenians as androgynous seems an innovative step on the way towards the deconstruction of gender, but her world-building oddly seems to lag behind in this respect. This is something she herself also revises in her 1988 edition of The Language of the Night, writing that women are only associated with anarchy because “men have reserved the structures of social power for themselves” (141). She also argues that “on Gethen, the two polarities we perceive through our cultural conditioning as male and female are neither, and are in balance” (Language 141), although I personally do not believe this reasoning holds up in light of the information provided in the book. Looking back on her work, this is perhaps what Le Guin wishes her audience to read into it, but the actual depiction of these “polarities” is not quite so nuanced in my view, especially since Genly Ai’s biased perspective obscures the matter further.

Other aspects of the novel come closer to achieving such a “balance”. The religion of Getheen, the Handdara, “is based on a profound vision of transcendence through the weaving together of disparate elements” (Annas 151) and according to Douglas Barbour “there are many allusive connections between this invented religion and Taoism” (167), something Barbara Bucknall also comments on (69). This is indeed what the book’s title alludes to, and it is expressed in Genly Ai’s eventual realization that Gethenians are not female or male, but that they are both. The novel appears to attempt to use this backdrop of religion to illuminate the androgynous nature of the Gethenians. Ai compares the androgynous Estraven to the yin-yang symbol: “it is yin and yang. Light is the left hand of darkness … how did it go? Light, dark. Fear, courage. Cold, warmth. Female, male. It is yourself, Therem. Both and one” (Le
Guin 287). Here Le Guin once again attempts to unite the duality between “female, male” into a single whole, possibly in an attempt to look beyond gender differences to what is “simply human” (Le Guin, Language 163). Perhaps Karhide and Orgoreyn are meant to be taken as two sides of this yin and yang as well, but it seems strange that Le Guin allows herself to be guided by a stereotypical vision of what is “yin” – female – and “yang” – masculine.

According to William Marcellino, these depictions of balance do not eliminate gender so much as show the need for “gender interdependence” (206). This is a curious notion, since Le Guin’s stated goal is to eliminate gender; and yet she provides no universal symbol, but reaches back to the divided unity of yin and yang. How can Le Guin hope to eliminate gender while she is constantly searching for a balance between the masculine and feminine? To me, a balance of two polarities is not the same as the very inexistence of these polarities.

To continue the discussion of Left Hand’s society, there is one additional political entity that should be mentioned: the Ekumen. The Ekumen is the organization that Genly Ai represents, and it signifies an attempt to bring all human worlds together. However, the Ekumen is not an empire or an entity geared towards war; rather, it “functions through coordination, not by rule. It does not enforce laws; decisions are reached by council and consent, not by consensus or command” (Le Guin 174). David Higgins writes that “the Ekumen is engaged in what [Judith] Butler would call a process of cultural ‘translation’ that continuously rearticulates its own hegemonic constitution as it encounters and engages its external Others” (345). In other words, the Ekumen does not merely possess the power to change the worlds that come into its fold; it must also by necessity be changed itself through these encounters. As Ai puts it: “alone, I cannot change your world. But I can be changed by it” (Le Guin 279). Higgins argues that this also has bearing on the discussion of gender in the novel:
Le Guin shows that the central conceptual anchors that will be reshaped by both sides in this encounter are normative identifications of sexual and gendered difference. Members of the Ekumen, like Genly, must reconsider the way they understand divisions of masculinity and femininity, and Genthenians must reevaluate their attitudes concerning sexual perversion. (347)

Thus, the contact between disparate societies may be a catalyst for change. The way in which the Ekumen operates makes it necessary for the organization to constantly adapt to new ideas and perspectives, and to take up these new insights as an essential part of itself. Seen from a feminist perspective this could be considered a way to bring about change in the division between male and female, and to deconstruct stereotypical notions of gender. The Ekumen’s approach allows different perspectives and ideas to become visible, and then to be incorporated into the whole. The Ekumen “must always be newly rearticulating its constitutional identity” (Higgins 346), and this process can similarly lead to a rearticulation of gendered identity. At the same time, the Ekumen’s way of operating is also in line with the search for balance Le Guin describes throughout the novel. With each new acquisition the Ekumen must re-evaluate its position and unite new understanding with old, creating a balance. Thus, while Le Guin’s methods sometimes appear somewhat problematic, she does open up an interesting approach to the issue of how gender and identity interact.

Like Gethen, Russ’ futuristic Whileaway is a planet without war. However, Russ is quick to point out that “Whileawayans are not nearly as peaceful as they sound” (48) and the main reason why the planet lacks war is because it does not possess a central government, and because it does not have “true cities” (Russ 14). Battles and violence might be possible on a smaller scale, however, and indeed the book is not free of such things. It might be tempting to conclude that, like Gethen, Whileaway lacks the capability to mobilize and is therefore unable to go to war, but this does not seem to be true. As Janet states, “aggressive and bellicose
persons (...) always assume that unaggressive and pacific persons cannot protect themselves” (Russ 156), apparently alluding to her own planet. Earlier in the story, Jeannine asks Janet what Whileaway would do if they were to be invaded by people from another planet, and her too Janet’s response is cool and unconcerned, as she considers many of these scenarios to be “not that much of a threat” (Russ 90). This suggests that Whileawayans are in fact capable of going to war, but that they would only do so if an external power forced their hand. Indeed, violence and aggression are not absent from this planet, and “Russ does not construct Whileaway as a harmonious solution to all the problems in the other worlds” (Cortiel, Demand 87). Whileawayans channel their aggression into duels to the death, and this is only considered murder “if it’s sneaky or if she doesn’t want to fight” (Russ 53). Whileaway also has Safety and Peace officers who are apparently responsible for keeping order, although their duties are never described in detail. What is clear, however, is that they are authorized to use lethal force, especially to combat the only truly serious crime on Whileaway: that of solipsism, withdrawing from society and refusing to work. Thus, like Gethen, Whileaway is a society without war, but not one without conflict, and Russ once again “counteracts the notion that women are naturally non-violent” (Martins 411). Whileaway is also similar to Gethen in that its population does not exploit the planet. Russ points out that Whileaway’s “ecological housekeeping is enormous” (14) and illustrates the planet’s devotion to sustainability with a humorous example: “a Moujki invented non-disposable food containers in her spare time in AC 904 because the idea fascinated her; people have been killed for less” (14). Furthermore, as with Gethen, Whileaway is an “anarchist society” (Gardiner 89), a quality that Le Guin, at least, associates with the “female principle” (Language 165). Whileawayan society consists of ‘families’ of twenty to thirty people who are united through common interests. These groups are families only in a loose sense of the word, as most often their members are not related. Romance (which is non-monogamous) is generally sought outside the family, and any
children are only allowed to stay with their mother for a period of five years, and even then they are usually looked after by others rather than the mother herself, who considers this period a holiday. After the age of five children are sent away to be cared for in small groups. Even when these children are later granted greater freedom of movement, “they do not go back home” (Russ 50). Thus, Whileaway is a society that, according to Robin Silvergleid, derives “from communal or tribal ties rather than from the nuclear family” (161). Silbergleid proceeds to argue that there are links between patriarchy and the nuclear family, as well as between patriarchy and capitalism, and that “Russ uses Whileaway to underline the inextricability of gender from other structures of power” (164) precisely because it rejects these structures. Indeed, on Whileaway gender cannot be used as an argument for the division of labour, and women are not forced into the role of caretaker while men work, since there are only women:

The main premise that The Female Man sets out to deconstruct is that women and men are naturally different, and that women’s virtual exclusion from most prestigious careers – as well as the overall cultural expectations that women will provide the childcare and serve as helpmeets to men rather than pursuing any other ambitions – naturally arises from those fundamental differences. (Martins 407)

On Whileaway, any career path is open to absolutely everyone, provided you are of the right age. The women of Whileaway are aided by the invention of induction helmets, which make it possible “for one workwoman to have not only the brute force but also the flexibility and control of thousands” (Russ 13). The induction helmet allows the women to control machinery at a distance and through the use of minimal effort, which means that no job can be too physically demanding, and even the old are able to do their share of the work. Aside from its deconstruction of gender differences, Whileaway also “appears to avoid race and class
stratification” (Silbergleid 170), and the only real social difference is between the young and the old, as the old are allowed more leisure and more advanced jobs. As Cortiel writes:

Thus, Whileaway conflates the complexly interrelated power structures of racist, patriarchal capitalism in a single basis for stratification, age, which, since it resists the deadly binary, also resists the dialectic. (*Demand* 88)

The male/female binary that is usually the cause of differences is an irresolvable one; women can never become men, “the Haves never stop being Haves and the Have-nots never stop being Have-nots” (Russ 158). The age difference, on the other hand, is a resolvable one, since (nearly) everyone grows old at some point. As such, everyone on Whileaway will ultimately come into a position of power, and Russ is capable of destroying the normal power structures. Just as Le Guin does with Gethen, Russ’ Whileaway attempts to show a world free of the divisions between gender, and free of socially accepted gender roles. Although both planets are portrayed as anarchic and largely peaceful, Russ seems to break away from the male/female binary more than Le Guin does. Because Le Guin attempts to balance her society by pitting masculine and feminine qualities against each other, she is not able to escape this binary dialectic. Russ is more resistant to this and largely manages to “reconfigure cultural contradictions and apparent binaries” through using characters who are capable of talking their way out of “confining gender categories” (Martins 407).

Once again, comparing Tiptree’s “Houston, Houston, Do You Read?” to the texts above seems productive, considering its similar subject matter. However, I will also briefly touch on another of Tiptree’s stories, as it might be relevant to the discussion of “Houston”. The futuristic Earth depicted in “Houston” bears a striking resemblance to Russ’ Whileaway. Like Whileaway, the planet’s scarce population is all-female, and reproduction occurs through the use of advanced technology. Furthermore, as with Gethen and Whileaway, this version of Earth is essentially anarchic, without a central government or “formal structure” (Tiptree
As on Whileaway, everyone works, and childcare is a group effort concentrated in crèches. Just like on Gethen, there is no anxious drive towards progress, and one of the women declares that “we change slowly” (Tiptree 184). According to Steffen-Fluhr, Tiptree “stresses that the term ‘progress’ has merely been redefined, with ‘symbiosis’ replacing ‘conquest’ as the operative term” (207). Indeed, as on Whileaway and Gethen, there is no war on this version of Earth. More than that, as mentioned in the previous chapter, there is no aggression. When Lorimer, one of the time-travelling men, states that “everyone has aggressive fantasies” (Tiptree 215) and that his fellow astronauts should not be judged by this, the women’s response is sheer astonishment: “they gaze at him in silence. ‘But nobody does,’ Connie says finally. ‘I mean, the fantasies’” (Tiptree 215). This shows that aggressive thoughts are alien to these women. Much more than on Russ’ Whileaway, they seem to have distanced themselves from the “brutal, dominance/submission system which characterized the old patriarchy” (Steffen-Fluhr 207). This all-female society also seems to have stepped away from religion. On Gethen, there is the Handarra, a Taoist form of religion, and the women of Whileaway believe in a God as well, with the one difference that she is female rather than male. The lack of religion in “Houston” unleashes the devoutly religious Dave’s fury: “Dave preaches against matriarchal unnaturalness (…), justifying patriarchal reassertion as his Christian duty because these women are ‘lost children’ who ‘have forgotten He who made them’” (Murphy 286). More than Gethen and Whileaway, this futuristic version of Earth is both alien and dangerous to men. As Lefanu writes: “the conclusion is uncompromising: in a world of women there is no place for men with their innately aggressive sexual drive” (108), and this is why the women (ironically) eventually see themselves forced to kill the men once their aggression begins to manifest. Although they commit violence in this instance, their behavior is not aggressive; the men are killed in a completely detached way. In many ways, Tiptree’s version of Earth is that of Gethen and especially Whileaway drawn to an extreme.
Once again, this depiction of an all-female planet raises some questions as well. By consistently characterizing the women as peaceful, caring and non-violent, Tiptree may be upholding traditional gender roles even in the absence of men. However, it is also clear that their society is not quite perfect: the women kill in cold blood when their way of living is threatened, and the situation is exacerbated by the women’s cool assertion at this point in the story that they are “the human race” (Tiptree 218). Thus, although Tiptree initially depicts the women as non-violent, they have no qualms about killing anyone who poses a threat to their society, providing something of a paradox that may make the reader question the foundations of the story. Is it possible that these women are in fact just as ‘bad’ at being in power as the men were back on the earlier version of Earth? The women are no longer the ‘Other’, instead, this position has now been taken up by the three men in the story, who are perceived as dangerous aliens, for whom there is simply no place in society. Thus, rather than presenting a solution for gender difference and alienation, Tiptree reverses the roles and puts the women in a position of power, making men the undesirable aliens.

Tiptree’s “The Screwfly Solution” makes for an interesting companion to “Houston” since it expands on the notion that men are not fit for female society because of their “innately aggressive sexual drive”, described by Lefanu above. Although this story is rather different from the others discussed here, I think a brief consideration of it may prove useful in light of the extremes described in “Houston”. In “Screwfly”, alien beings infect the men of Earth with something that brings out this aggressive sexual drive, causing them to turn against the women in an increasingly violent fashion. This eventually causes the destruction of society, freeing the planet up for the aliens to move in. In the early stages of the infection, the men form into a cult called the Sons of Adam, which is devoted to the eradication of women:

Some people raise the question of how can man reproduce without women, but such people miss the point. The point is that as long as man depends on the old filthy
animal way, God won’t help him. When man gets rid of his animal part which is woman, this is the signal God is awaiting. Then God will reveal the new true clean way (…) (Tiptree 18)

As Lefanu points out, “this might be laughable were it not a justification for the wholesale massacre of women” (111). As the infection spreads, the men rapidly begin killing off the women out of sexual aggression. Curiously, it is only at the point of extinction that the female gender truly becomes visible and identifiable. As one of the female characters in the story states: “Do you know I never said ‘we’ meaning women before? (…) Being killed selectively encourages group identification …” (Tiptree 29). However, this group identification only comes into being when it is already too late, and the women are a “toothless race” (Tiptree 29) easily exterminated by the men. Although the male aggression described in this story is brought on involuntarily and unnaturally, it is easy to see how this notion might give rise to a story such as “Houston”, in which men are deemed too dangerous to live. Barr writes that “Tiptree’s work implies that women’s lot will improve only after the human race becomes a new ‘something’ – something other than two separate genders which temporarily merge to reproduce before separating” (Alien 36), and it is possible that the all-female society in “Houston” is precisely such a new ‘something’, even if it comes at the cost of a role-reversal that is damaging to men. This, perhaps, is also why the Earth of “Houston” is more extreme than Le Guin’s Gethen and Russ’ Whileaway. The world depicted in “Screwfly” is closer to Russ’ description of Jael’s world, which is torn apart by a sex war and is divided up into Womanland and Manland. However, unlike Jael’s planet, the women in “Screwfly” go down without a fight, and the conflict is more of an extermination than a war. These violent societies offer an intriguing counterpoint to the peaceful utopian-like worlds described above, and they suggest that reaching such a utopia is impossible without shedding a great deal of blood.
Chapter Three: Narrative

The science fiction novels discussed here often possess a problematic narrative. In the cases of Le Guin and Tiptree, the narrators are often male, and sometimes have a prejudiced or stereotypical outlook on gender issues. For critics of Le Guin this is often a point of contention. According to Marcellino, “the most common criticism of Le Guin is that her works are insufficiently feminist” (208), which he believes is caused by the fact that *The Left Hand of Darkness* is remarkably devoid of women – “how can a feminist utopian work not have women?” (208). There is only one female narrator in the book, and her observations only take up a single chapter, a kind of scientific aside. It has been suggested that this lack of women would not have been an issue if Le Guin’s androgynous characters had truly been that – androgynous – and if they had not “seem[ed] like men, instead of menwomen” (Le Guin, *Language* 145). The Gethenian protagonist, Estraven, has often been accused of appearing “in almost exclusively ‘male’ roles” (Lefanu 138) such as “a prime minister, a political schemer, a fugitive, a prison-breaker, a sledge-hauler” (Le Guin, *Language* 145). Thus, by depicting her androgynous characters in stereotypically masculine roles, Le Guin may be said to neglect their ‘female’ side. Le Guin acknowledges this criticism, writing that “one does not see Estraven as a mother, with his children, in any role which we automatically perceive as ‘female’” (Language 145).

Although criticism has mostly focused on the negative consequences of this portrayal, to me it seems a double-edged sword; on the one hand, Le Guin may be said to reinforce existing stereotypical notions of gender roles, on the other hand she can also be argued to break away from them, precisely by apparently conforming to them. After all, by depicting a ‘manwoman’ in such stereotypical masculine roles, Le Guin might be giving us a glimpse of a world in which a woman – or a manwoman – is capable of doing just that, to do everything a man might do without being burdened by any supposedly ‘feminine’ roles. But once again,
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the question comes back to whether Le Guin’s characters can truly be considered androgynous, or if it is indeed “not the case that there are no men on Gethen; it is, rather, as Joanna Russ and others have pointed out, that there are no women” (Lefanu 137).

Furthermore, Attebery argues that androgynous portrayals of characters may in fact be complicit in fixing gender traits in position: “how can you say you are mingling the masculine and the feminine unless you are sure you know what it is to be feminine or masculine?” (133).

Thus, in trying to dissolve these gender differences, Le Guin may in fact be bringing them to the forefront, especially since she has a tendency to categorize traits as exclusively masculine or feminine.

This discussion is further complicated by the problematic narrative. The human male Genly Ai narrates the better part of the book, and although “he is, apparently, a trained anthropological observer, (...) his preconceptions of and prejudices towards women are positively prehistorical” (Lefanu 137). Furthermore, and perhaps even more problematically, Genly Ai is unable to perceive the Gethenians as truly androgynous:

Though I had been nearly two years on Winter I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes. I tried to, but my efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own. (Le Guin 12)

This problem is perhaps brought on by the fact that Genly Ai sees ‘feminine’ qualities as negative. Genly Ai wonders about Estraven: “was it perhaps this soft supple femininity that I disliked and distrusted in him?” (Le Guin 13), and it is precisely this distrust of Estraven’s double-sided nature that prevents Genly from believing in Estraven as the latter believes in him. The problem is exaggerated by the fact that Le Guin chooses to use masculine pronouns to describe the Gethenians, a difficulty that is explicated by the one female narrator in the book: “the very use of the pronoun in my thoughts leads me continually to forget that the
Karhider I am with is not a man, but a manwoman” (Le Guin 101). Consider, for instance, one of the first descriptions Genly Ai ever provides of Estraven: “wiping sweat from his dark forehead the man – man I must say, having said he and his – the man answers (...)” (Le Guin 5). Given this continuous use of masculine pronouns, it is perhaps not surprising that it is difficult, both for Genly and for the reader, to perceive the Gethenians as androgynous rather than male. For Lisa Hammond Rashley, this “outweigh[s] one of the most truly revolutionary aspects of the novel” (23), namely the supposedly androgynous nature of the Gethenians. On a different but related topic, John Pennington wonders: “how can Le Guin create a genderless society when the writer (female) is writing to readers (male and female) using a shared language that is by nature gender charged?” (352) and this seems to be central to the issue. The question is whether Le Guin should have stepped beyond this boundary of language, perhaps by inventing some new pronouns of her own. Science fiction is uniquely suited to invention and exploration, and perhaps it is valid for the reader to criticize Le Guin for not quite venturing far enough, for remaining chained to restrictive language use. Indeed, Le Guin herself later reconsidered her stance on the subject of pronouns, writing that the generic singular pronoun they/them/their should be “restored to the written language” (Language 145), and noting that she invented completely new pronouns for a screenplay of Left Hand. However, it took her some time to gain insight into “how the pronouns [she] used shaped, directed, controlled [her] own thinking” and she initially dismissed the issue as “not very important” (Language 145).

Still, some of the problematic aspects of the book could also be viewed in a positive light. For instance, it has been argued that Genly Ai’s prejudiced narrative is actually helpful in bringing out the feminist aspects of the book. As Attebery writes: “Genly Ai, a man of good will but not particularly acute perceptions, is able to articulate all the reader’s objections – These people are freaks, How can I trust a woman who is also a man, Where do I fit into all
“men are often more willing to identify with poor, confused, defensive Genly, the Earthman, and therefore to participate in his painful and gradual discovery of love” (*Language* 146). Indeed, Genly eventually comes to realize that he has to accept both sides of Estraven:

> And I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man. Any need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with the fear; what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. (Le Guin 267)

Thus, Genly Ai, prejudiced and narrow-minded as he starts out, eventually finds his way towards enlightenment and becomes able to see Estraven as he truly is: androgynous, man *and* woman. In many senses, Genly’s journey appears to be one of increasing visibility and gender awareness, and finally acceptance of that which is different and Other. This could cautiously be viewed as a male reader’s journey towards a greater acceptance of women and feminism. Indeed, Attebery notes that some critics have given the novel “limited approval as ‘feminism for men’” (131), and writes that “if the controlling consciousness of the book had been either a Gethenian or a female Terran, the book would probably not have been so well received by the largely male SF readership (and literary establishment) of 1969” (131). However, this reading naturally comes with its own set of problems, the most obvious of which is whether this ‘feminism for men’ is a desirable approach to the issue. Is Le Guin right in toning down the feminist aspects of the book, in taking male readers by the hand by giving them a narrator to identify with, or should she have gone further and written a more radically feminist novel, one aimed at women too? And what, indeed, is ‘feminism for men’? Should it be assumed that men are not ready for ‘real’ and ‘complete’ feminism? One might instead conclude that either the novel or Le Guin herself was not ready for ‘complete’ feminism, especially given her later comments:
Men were inclined to be satisfied with the book, which allowed them a safe trip into androgyny and back, from a conventionally male viewpoint. But many women wanted it to go further, to dare more. (...) I think women were justified in asking more courage of me and a more rigorous thinking-through of implications. (*Language* 146).

The fact remains that Le Guin’s novel is probably the least overtly feminist of the works discussed here, but at the same time it is also the most popular in terms of readership. It is possible to wonder whether the fact that Le Guin’s novel has toned down its feminist aspects is responsible for its remarkable popularity amongst men as well as women.

At this point it might be useful to turn to Russ’ *The Female Man*, a novel that takes up a position at almost the opposite end of the spectrum. Russ’ book is very clearly feminist, and apart from some small asides does not contain any narration by a man. This does not make the narration any less problematic than that of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, although its difficulties are located in an entirely different area. The novel has four different female narrators, each of which are actually the same person, only from another ‘world’ or probability. According to Judith Gardiner, Russ employs this technique to “dramatize how different any one might be if raised in a different society” (93). However, Russ’ book is purposefully confusing, “break[ing] all formal rules of narrative fiction” and containing “no beginning-middle-end, no clear relationship between author and characters and, indeed, no clear relationship between text and meaning” (Lefanu 186). Because of these frequent changes in narrative, it is often not clear which of the women is speaking. Consider, for instance, the fragment below:

> We got up and paid our quintuple bill; then we went out into the street. I said goodbye and went off with Laur, I, Janet; I also watched them go, I Joanna; moreover I went off to show Jael the city, I Jeannine, I Jael, I myself. (Russ 206)

Russ’ novel is at times so confusing that it is impossible to say with certainty who is narrating. According to Susan Ayres, “these narrative shifts not only displace the reader, but
on another level they raise the question of the identity of the subjective self” (23). This technique also enforces the fact that these women are essentially the same person, only their societies differ due to one main factor: that of gender. Joanna’s world is close to our own world in the 70s, Jeannine’s world is one in which the Great Depression never happened and women’s rights lag behind, Janet’s world does not have any men and is populated solely by women, and Jael’s world is caught up in a huge war between the sexes. By blurring the boundaries between the narrators Russ is showing how similar and yet different these women are. Cortiel writes:

With its genre mixing and changing narrators, The Female Man does not provide a monologic critique\(^2\) of patriarchal society, but links its clear political position (…) with the destabilization of identity itself. (175-6)

This destabilization of identity is directly linked to the question of gender. In order to escape a female identity, Russ’ protagonists are forced to take drastic measures. Janet’s life is not dictated by gender because there are no men on her planet, and thus there are no stereotypical roles to constrict her. Joanna, another character in the book, seeks the same kind of freedom, but due to the nature of her own world she is forced to go about it in a different way; to be free and to become visible, she must become not a woman, but a female man. “To resolve contrarieties, unite them in your own person” (Russ 134), Joanna says, and thus she becomes a man, because it is the “one and only way to possess that in which we are defective, therefore that which we need, therefore that which we want” (Russ 135). Joanna argues that ‘Man’ is “the proper study of Mankind” (Russ 135), and because she is human, she can say “I too am a Man and not at all a Woman, for honestly now, whoever heard of Java Woman and existential Woman and the values of Western Woman (…)?” (Russ 135-6). Thus, “a woman reaches ‘manhood’ by appropriating language” (Ayres 26). This is perhaps the very opposite of what

\(^2\) Cortiel is emphasizing the monologic part here; the novel is in fact critical of patriarchy. In Cortiel's own words, the text is “grounded in a scathing critique of women’s position in patriarchal societies” (173).
Le Guin does in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Whereas Le Guin’s characters are constricted by conventional language and are therefore forced into stereotypical gender roles, Russ frees her narrators by reinventing language and using it to create a new identity.

Russ’ book is significantly more political and more outspokenly feminist than Le Guin’s, and therefore perhaps more prone to criticism. Russ anticipates this by breaking the fourth wall and providing “an ironic pseudo-critique of the novel, a criticism that encapsulates and parodies centuries of men’s criticism of women’s writing, men’s criticism of women themselves” (Hogeland 45):

We should gladly have listened to her (they said) *if only she had spoken like a lady.*

But they are liars and the truth is not in them.

Shrill … vituperative … no concern for the future of society … maunderings of antiquated feminism … selfish femlib … needs a good lay … this shapeless book …

of course a calm and objective discussion is beyond … (Russ 136)

The above is just a small part of the ‘reviews’ Russ invents. According to Lefanu, they “illustrate a wide spectrum of response to the speaking, or writing, woman, their very variety showing the absurd and ludicrous position into which women are forced, one in which they can *never* be plausible” (19). By turning these reviews “into a torrent of abuse, and using that torrent to exorcise the patriarchal critical responses it contains” (Hogeland 45), Russ is able to escape being defined as “another shrill polemic” (Russ 136). Like her characters, Russ avoids being caged by someone else’s definitions. Her book blurs the boundaries between different genres and narrative styles, and is therefore able to dictate its own identity rather than conform to an existing role. This is ultimately the feminist message that her novel appears to convey as well; to escape stereotypical gender roles by creating a wholly new identity.

Tiptree employs a technique similar to Le Guin’s in “The Women Men Don’t See”, as her narrator there is also a flawed man caught up in gender stereotypes. The story tells the tale
of four people who crash in the wilderness with their plane; a male pilot, a mother and her
daughter, and the narrator, Don Fenton, himself. From the start of the story, it is clear that
Fenton does not attach much significance to the women; he describes them as “a double
female blur” (Tiptree 115). For Fenton, “women exist only in relation to himself, and only
sexually” (Lefanu 125), and he is unable to perceive the women beyond a shallow observation
of their appearance. Ruth, the mother, escapes Fenton’s classifications, although he “tries
repeatedly to understand her by setting her into sexist stereotypes” (Hogeland 136). This is
also what happens just after the plane has crashed:

But something is irritating me. The damn women haven’t complained once, you
understand. Not a peep, not a quaver, no personal manifestations whatever. They’re
like something out of a manual. (Tiptree 120)

In Fenton’s vision, women are supposed to be nervous and fragile, and he is surprised that
they show none of the “hysteria” (Tiptree 118) he expects to see. Worse, “the narrator’s
assumptions about how women should behave override his observations of how these two do
behave” (Lefanu 124), and he repeatedly misconstrues their motivations. After Ruth
volunteers to accompany Fenton on a mission to get some fresh water, he assumes that she is
worried about her daughter Althea staying behind with the male pilot, Mayan Captain
Estéban, while in reality she is pleased about the situation. Halfway through a conversation
with Ruth, Fenton finally realizes what is really going on:

“The Mayas seem to be a very fine type of people. I believe you said so to Althea.”
The implications fall on me with the rain. Type. As in breeding, bloodline, sire. Am I
supposed to have certified Estéban not only as a stud but as a genetic donor? (Tiptree
131)

Fenton realizes that “not only have the women refused [his] definition of them as sexual
objects, they have objectified Estéban and himself solely in terms of their potential
progenitive qualities” (Lefanu 125), turning the tables on his expectations. In the presence of Ruth, Fenton is constantly forced to adjust his worldview. He finally concludes that since she refuses to stay confined to the role (masculine) society has ordained for her, she must hate men, perhaps trying to reassert his masculine importance to her worldview. Ruth laughingly responds that she does not hate men, since “that would be as silly as – as hating the weather” (Tiptree 133). Just like Russ’ characters, who must either live on an all-female planet or become ‘female men’ in order to gain their freedom, Ruth is essentially invisible while she is still a woman in a man’s world:

“What women do is survive. We live by ones and twos in the chinks of your world-machine.”

“Sounds like a guerrilla operation.” (…)

“Guerillas have something to hope for.” Suddenly she switches on a jolly smile.

“Think of us as opossums, Don. Did you know there are opossums living all over? Even in New York City.” (Tiptree 134)

The implication is clear: women “live all over”, and yet they are not visible. Russ makes the same observation in The Female Man, when she writes that most public roles are occupied by men: “I think it’s a legend that half the population of the world is female; where on Earth are they keeping them all?” (198). According to Barr:

Tiptree, like Russ, also uses humor to exemplify the distinction between women and people. She seems to say, Okay, if women aren’t people, we should call them something else. So she invents science fiction’s invisible female human opossum.

(Lost 62)

Like Russ’ protagonists, Ruth and her daughter Althea are ultimately forced to take drastic measures in order to be ‘seen’. While out in the wilderness, Ruth and Fenton spot some mysterious visitors, and Ruth quickly appears to realize that they are aliens. She steals a piece
of technology from them, and bargains with them when they return in order to be allowed to accompany them back to their home world. Fenton is outraged; Ruth’s response to him is both funny and painful:

“For Christ’s sake, Ruth, they’re aliens!”

“I’m used to it,” she says absently. (Tiptree 140)

Ruth is used to being seen as the Other in her own patriarchal society; after all, to Fenton, “she’s as alien as they, there in the twilight” (Tiptree 138). Ruth’s gender makes her an alien on her own world, so she seizes the first opportunity to escape, even though she cannot be certain of what another planet might have to offer her. Fenton, blinded by his masculine stereotypical views of women, cannot understand: “he wonders, ‘How could a woman choose to live among unknown monsters, to say good-bye to her home, her world?’ and cannot see that he is the unknown monster, and that Earth was never her home, her world” (Hogeland 137). Ruth is as much of an alien to Fenton as the extraterrestrial strangers are, which is why she is not afraid of them. The parallels to both Le Guin’s novel and Russ’ are clear. As in Left Hand, Tiptree’s story shows a biased male narrator who is incapable of seeing others as they truly are, without being confined by stereotypical gender notions. This in turn makes it impossible for these characters to truly be seen, unless they take drastic measures; Russ’ Joanna becomes a female man, and Tiptree’s Ruth escapes to the stars. All of these texts seem to be playing off the same question: whether “‘human’ is synonymous with ‘male’, not female” (Barr, Alien 30). Le Guin sets out to depict what is “simply human” (Language 138), but arguably fails by making her androgynous characters too masculine, perhaps illustrating that in our own perception there can be no humanity, or identity, without gender. Russ’ female characters seek to escape this forced identity by appropriating manhood for themselves, arguing that since ‘man’ is ‘humanity’, they must be ‘man’ too. Finally, Tiptree
questions whether women are ‘human’ by consistently portraying them as alien from the male viewpoint. Lefanu argues that:

In Tiptree’s work aliens serve as a metaphor for women in relation to men and for men in relation to women; they are also a metaphor for the alienated part of the self and, in particular, the divided self forced on women by a male hegemony. (127)

Thus, the reader might consider whether patriarchal society is responsible for forcing stereotypical gender notions on women to such an extent that they become thoroughly alienated; so alienated, in fact, that the question arises whether they are even human. But what feminist advice is one to take away from this interpretation? Russ’ and Tiptree’s women escape by living on a female-only planet or by venturing to the stars, but according to Barr, “reality is more sobering than the texts” (Lost 65), since in our world women cannot escape by removing themselves to a different planet. Barr continues by saying that “real women have but one alternative: they must remain and fight to widen their particular chink in the male world-machine” (Lost 66), and thus the only viable option left seems Joanna’s way out: to escape gendered definition by becoming a female man. Perhaps that is the feminist message Russ’ text attempts to convey: that women should resist being defined by gender and attempt to carve out their own identity, difficult as this may be in a society ruled by men.
Conclusion

I have already touched on some of the significant differences in the way the three writers handle various feminist topics inspired by the social developments in the 60s and 70s. As mentioned, Le Guin is the least political but the most popular, Russ is very outspokenly political and is mostly read for her thoughts on feminism rather than her fiction, and Tiptree walks a middle road, but has largely faded into obscurity. Throughout this thesis I have toyed with the notion that there may be a correlation between how political and how popular these works appear to be; the more political, the less attractive a text seems to be to general audiences. Whether this is actually true might be an interesting topic for further research. It also begs the question of which is more desirable; a more clearly feminist message at the cost of missing out on a larger audience, or a less political text with a greater outreach? I cannot readily present an answer to this question, although I am doubtful whether it is a good idea to give such books as The Left Hand of Darkness “limited approval as ‘feminism for men’” (Attebery 131) as some critics have done. This is even more so because Le Guin herself now regrets the way in which she handled this issue. Still, she notes that she “was feeling (…) resentful that critics of the book insisted upon talking only about its ‘gender problems’, as if it were an essay not a novel” (Language 136), and maintains that there are other things to the book than sex and gender. Even so, the book is clearly impacted by for example Le Guin’s choice of (a male) narrator and her use of masculine pronouns, as described in Chapter Three. Still, given that the book is clearly a work of fiction, meant to entertain, it is perhaps less useful to evaluate how feminist this book truly is. In books like these, where fiction mingles with political agendas, it is at times nearly impossible to draw a clear dividing line between political message and artistic license.

It is equally difficult to determine what to take away from these books. What is the feminist message the authors are trying to impart? I will briefly discuss some of the possible
themes and ‘solutions’ these books may suggest in order to try to determine the answer to this question. One recurrent theme is that of mono-gendered societies that come into being either through the existence of androgynous humans, or through the eradication of men. This is accomplished by various technological and biological means, as described in Chapter One. These mono-gendered societies appear to be relatively happy and successful in their reversion or rejection of traditional gender roles. As mentioned in Chapter Two, these societies are not perfect, nor are they free from violence, but they largely manage to eradicate the oppression of certain groups and mostly eliminate sexual violence. However, the crux of the matter is that reaching such a society is both difficult and possibly undesirable. Current technology does not allow for the existence of true androgynes, and it may not for a long time. Female only-societies are marginally more attainable, but would still require the extinction of the male race, either through disease or through warfare. So, what is the implication? Can such a utopia only be reached through the shedding of copious amounts of blood? In that case, it might not be an option at all. A further consideration is whether these utopias would then truly be utopias, since their foundations (in the case of warfare against men) lie in violence. What other options do these texts present? Tiptree’s Ruth escapes with aliens to the stars, but such a thing is impossible for us. The only remaining option appears to be to redefine our definitions of gender, sexuality and identity. Butler suggests that “gender is a performance” (Second Wave 312), and this is indeed the attitude that some of the characters in these novels convey as well. Russ’s novel in particular takes up this notion, when Joanna becomes a ‘female man’ by manipulating language, by suggesting that she is a man because she is part of ‘mankind’. This is how she manages to become ‘visible’ and escape from the status of ‘female opossum’ described in Tiptree’s “The Women Men Don’t See”, as discussed in Chapter Three. That this problem of visibility is a significant one is clear even just from examining Le Guin’s Left Hand, of which it has been said that it is “not the case that there are no men on Gethen; it is,
rather, (...) that there are no women” (Lefanu 137). Even in a world that tries to do away with gender, women still become invisible. According to some second wave theorists, it might be possible to break away from the gender binary by re-evaluating traditional gender roles and the normative nature of heterosexuality. Incorporating less rigidly defined structures of gender might eliminate inequality, although it is not very clear from these books how one might go about this. Science fiction is an excellent means of pushing the boundaries of language, so such an approach might be more readily employed there than in real life. Still, these works of fiction are of course just that: fiction. In Le Guin’s words:

Finally, the question arises, Is the book a Utopia? It seems to me that it is quite clearly not; it poses no practicable alternative to contemporary society, since it is based on an imaginary, radical change in human anatomy. All it tries to do is open up an alternative viewpoint, to widen the imagination, without making any very definite suggestions as to what might be seen from that new viewpoint. (Language 146)

Le Guin feels that her novel cannot be a utopia because it provides no practicable alternative, but of course, many of the utopias depicted in literature are not practicable as such. Still, her point is clear enough: these books offer no solution to the problem of gender in real life, nor should we expect them to. However, they do function to make their readers more aware of gender and identity, making these issues visible and discussable.

Finally, I would like to discuss the current state of feminist science fiction. The true heyday of the genre appears to have been in the 60s and 70s, and besides Le Guin, Russ and Tiptree such writers as Marge Piercy, Vonda McIntyre, Anne McCaffrey and Samuel Delany wrote about issues linked to feminism, gender and sexuality. Such science fiction continued to be produced into the 80s and 90s by writers like Suzette Haden Elgin, Gwyneth Jones and Octavia Butler. In recent years, the popularity of feminist science fiction appears to have decreased, especially after around 2005. It would not be accurate to say the genre has
disappeared; the James Tiptree Jr. award, for instance, is still in existence and provides a list of books each year that enrich our understanding of gender. Similarly, the oldest feminist science fiction convention, Wiscon, is still active and convenes yearly. However, apart from these events, it seems that feminist science fiction has become somehow less known, and the authors currently operating in the field do not appear to have acquired as much fame as their predecessors. Here, again, there are of course exceptions. Lois McMaster Bujold, who has been writing since the 80s, released a new novel only this year called *Gentleman Jole and the Red Queen*, which explores gender roles and issues of reproduction. Still, awareness of these books appears to have decreased, and I have personally noticed that many people do not even know of the existence of the genre of feminist science fiction. When it comes to criticism regarding these works there has been a noticeable decline in productivity, too; most of the important anthologies date from the 90s at the latest. It is perhaps not surprising that feminist science fiction was a popular genre in the 70s, 80s and 90s, given the emergence of second wave feminism. Now that the second wave is over, it seems that interest in these topics is perhaps decreasing. A 2013 poll conducted by the Huffington Post among 1,000 Americans states that while 82% of respondents believe men and women should be social, political and economic equals, only 20% consider themselves feminist (Swanson), which might indicate that the term has become unpopular.\(^3\) This is also what actress and UN Women Goodwill Ambassador Emma Watson notes in a 2014 speech: “feminism has become an unpopular word”. If there is indeed such a decrease in interest in feminism, then it stands to reason that feminist science fiction is also becoming less popular. Or perhaps it is simply that these issues are felt less keenly by many in Western society than they were in the 70s. However, if the

\(^3\) Sadly many of these surveys have a small pool of respondents, which makes them less reliable. There are also large differences among polls. The Washington Post, for instance, conducted a 2016 poll among 1,600 Americans that states that 60% of female respondents and 33% of male respondents identify themselves as feminist (Cai & Clement). Of course, many of these surveys also do not document the differences over time, which means that it is difficult to determine how much the popularity of feminism has changed.
genre truly is on the decline, I think there is much to be lost. To return to Barr’s description of why feminist science fiction is important, which I also quoted in the introduction:

Speculative fiction in the best cases makes the patriarchal structures which constrain women obvious and perceptible. This is why these texts are so important. Speculative fiction is thus a powerful educational tool which uses exaggeration to make women’s lack of power visible and discussable. (Alien xx)

According to Barr, fiction can play an important role in increasing awareness of gender and power relations. Perhaps feminist fiction is, to take a leaf from Tiptree’s book, a ‘chink’ in the male ‘world-machine’, a way to explore issues of gender away from the restrictions of reality and make them visible. Thus, if fewer works are written that explore gender relations, awareness of the issues that still exist might be decreased, which in turn might hamper progress towards equality. Still, although the current situation is a far cry from the elimination or deconstruction of gender, perhaps at some point the issues addressed in these books will become truly visible and be resolved, even though the books themselves cannot yet find a viable solution. I will thus end this thesis with Joanna Russ’ hopeful wish for her book:

Do not get glum when you are no longer understood, little book. Do not curse your fate. Do not reach up from readers’ laps and punch the readers’ noses.

Rejoice, little book!

For on that day, we will be free. (207)
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