



CRITICAL WORKS

Feminist Narratives of Mid-Century America: Reading Aesthetics in Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* Through *Lolita's* Lens

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Abstract: The portrayal, or lack thereof, of feminine power in Ursula Le Guin's 1969 novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, is contentious: scholars either praise the text for portraying a feminist utopia or criticise it for a failed attempt at equalising genders. Using aestheticization in Nabokov's *Lolita* to illustrate that mass consumerism and female subjugation are inextricably linked in mid-century America, I argue that, in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the absence of aesthetics—from the material objects, atmosphere, and Gethenian attitudes toward sexuality—strengthens its reading as a feminist text.

Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* follows Genly Ai on his mission to Gethen, a perpetually ice-covered planet beyond Earth's solar system. He is sent on behalf of the Ekumen—an interplanetary organisation whose purpose is to facilitate trade, security, and harmonious relationships between members—to encourage Gethenian nations to join this coalition. During his time on the planet, Earthling Genly Ai builds political and interpersonal relationships with the indigenous peoples. Of the Gethenians he encounters, he becomes closely allied with Estraven—an influential political figure in Karhide, a nation on Gethen. The pair comes to protect and care for one another, despite their cultural differences. For example, gender is one of the many human concepts that is absent on Gethen as Gethenians are gender fluid. They only embody binary sexual characteristics

to reproduce during a biologically determined period of fertility, referred to as “kemmer;” and do not engage in non-reproductive sexual activity outside of this fertile window.

This unorthodox depiction of gender has resulted in disagreement among literary scholars about the acceptance of *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a feminist text. For William Marcellino, feminist fiction offers a “theoretical response to patriarchy” by imagining a society that is free from “dominant male power and focus” (203). He argues that Le Guin crafts a society which opposes patriarchy and instead depends upon the interdependence of genders: “just as we need light and dark to see, each gender needs the other to function” (206). The integration of male and female bodies into one unified and genderless form is the physical embodiment of gender interdependence; thus, he concludes that the novel is a feminist narrative (206). Marcellino engages with the opposition, acknowledging that some scholars—namely, Kathy Rudy, Joanna Russ, and Tim Libretti—critique Le Guin’s narrative, claiming that “her works are insufficiently feminist, even patriarchal” (208). They argue that the focalisation through a male narrator and the lack of feminine figures of power substantiate their reading of the novel as misogynistic (Marcellino 208). A feminist narrative, for these scholars, would require the deliberate representation and empowerment of female bodies and perspectives, qualifications that *The Left Hand of Darkness* fails to meet.

The controversy about Le Guin’s infamous line “The king is pregnant” exemplifies these diverging opinions (99). Critics of a feminist reading assert that the inherently feminine task of motherhood is displaced onto a character perceived as male, thereby erasing the necessity of females in society (Pennington 353). However, John Pennington refutes this claim, demonstrating that such an interpretation fails to appreciate the narrator’s human faults: Genly Ai projects his Earthly concept of gender as binary and male dominant onto genderless beings. As Pennington states: “this novel tempts us to misread it through our gendered

eyes, correcting us and reminding us of our limited perspectives” (354). Therefore, he contends that criticising Le Guin’s novel by claiming that Gethen fails to celebrate female bodies is a misunderstanding of the text. Despite fervent discourse regarding the feminist nature of Le Guin’s work, the conversation has yet to ponder the role of aesthetics—the appreciation and perception by the senses of that which is pleasurable or beautiful (“Aesthetics”). To do so, it is useful to consider how aestheticization functions in another mid-century American text: Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955).

In *Lolita*, readers are situated inside the mind of Humbert Humbert, a middle-aged man, as he lusts after and sexually abuses a school-aged girl named Dolores, who he calls Lolita. In *The Annotated Lolita*, Nabokov claims that his purpose in writing *Lolita* was “aesthetic bliss” (Nabokov and Appel 316); scholars have therefore studied the various instances of aesthetics in the text. Dana Brand notes that the sensational prose arises from the narrator “aestheticizing the objects he sees” (17). She argues that Humbert’s process of renaming characters in the novel, including himself, “is another paradigm of Humbert’s aesthetic process” (18). Likewise, Laura Byrne asserts that Humbert “attempts to portray [Lolita] as an aesthetic emanation of his own desire” (53). Ultimately, these scholars conclude that reducing the female body to an aesthetic object likens it to a consumer good and that this portrayal is underscored by depictions of mid-century mass consumerism (Brand 14–15; Byrne 51–53). Nabokov and Le Guin both contemplate American consumerism in their construction of fictitious worlds defined by, or inversely, devoid of, pleasurable consumption; therefore, the scholarship on aesthetics in *Lolita* is pertinent to Le Guin’s text.

To first situate Le Guin’s novel within its contemporary moment, I will consider the American zeitgeist in the mid-twentieth century. Next, I will demonstrate that the characterisation of Gethen—defined by pragmatism, the absence of sexual objectification, and a boundless barren environment—establishes a motif of utility replacing

aesthetics. Ultimately, I will argue that the omission of sensational elements from Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* bolsters its reading as a feminist text as it imagines a space devoid of consumer greed on both physical and sexual levels. Given the scholarly conversation surrounding Nabokov's *Lolita*, this motif becomes markedly apparent.

The Left Hand of Darkness, published in 1969, speaks directly to its historical context. In the years following the end of World War II, the American economy boomed: mass production brought consumerism to previously unthinkable levels as Americans purchased, used, and disposed of goods at unprecedented rates (Whiteley 5). Consequently, the marketing industry found innovative ways to fuel the shopping-obsessed machine newly synonymous with America (Mack 816, 830, 832). Beginning in the 1930s and continuing into the 1960s, advertisers capitalised upon the persuasiveness of gendered appeals, their logic founded in the "innate" differences between man and woman (Mack 821). Specifically, marketers exploited the tactic of sensationalising the marketplace; in doing so, aestheticization became inseparable from consumerism. Adam Mack notes that between the 1930s to 1950s, the world of marketing became "increasingly hyperaesthetic" (817). Eager to fuel consumer demand, marketers aimed to "engage as many senses as possible in the drive for [...] seduction of the consumer" (817). Importantly, Mack asserts that such tactics drew on the prevailing belief that "men's five senses are robust; women's are delicate" (821). Therefore, infusing the shopping experience with sensational appeal specifically targeted female shoppers. This new approach to advertising had one central goal: "[reinforce] the notion that middle-class women should look to the excitements of the homemaker role itself" and find satisfaction within "existing gender arrangements" (818). Evidently, the sensationalisation of the shopping experience served a larger purpose: the subjugation of the female shopper.

Lolita responds to its contemporary moment by accentuating its faults: imagery of hyper-abundance

and a lavish use of figurative language both imitate and exacerbate mid-century consumerism. For instance, readers of Nabokov's text are submerged in pages of superfluous paraphernalia:

In the gay town of Lepingville I bought her four books of comics, a box of candy, a box of sanitary pads, two cokes, a manicure set, a travel clock with a luminous dial, a ring with a real topaz, a tennis racket, roller skates with white high shoes, field glasses, a portable radio set, chewing gum, a transparent raincoat, sunglasses, some more garments—swooners, shorts, all kinds of summer frocks. (141–142)

This material excess epitomises the American mindset at the time of publication as needlessly wasteful. The sugar-filled candy and cokes evidence the fixation on food throughout the novel; Anastasia Tolstoy explains that gustatory metaphors in Nabokov's narratives "re-examine accepted notions of taste through the exploration of its antithesis: disgust" (224)—here being Humbert's perverse consumption of Dolores. For example, Humbert begins his narrative with a playful lick: "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta." (Nabokov 9). By way of the alliterative passage, the word 'Lolita' swirls around the mouth, back to front, and settles on the tongue, forcing readers to join Humbert in feeling, and *tasting*, 'Lolita' while reading her name. Additionally, Byrne attests that the sexual defilement of the titular character is an allegory for the rampantly growing consumption in mid-century America: "the Lolita he paints represents not only an America that is young and impressionable, but an ideal that is hollow and transient: the inescapable ephemerality of the material" (57). Brand takes a similar stance in her article: "in his decline from aestheticism to consumerism, Humbert no longer finds the source of his gratification in his imagination. He locates it, rather, in Lolita, an external commoditised object" (20). Similarly, Byrne attests: "the girl's rampant materialism harkens to her discursive ties

with matter, the very Aristotelean notion that she is matter to man's form" (51).

In Le Guin's novel, she creates Gethen in opposition to consumer-crazed America. For instance, there are no frivolous possessions on Gethen. Instead, functionality is paramount to the design of goods, as exemplified by the versatility of Estraven's Chabe stove:

The stove was one of those excellent and economical devices perfected by the Gethenians in their millennial effort to outwit cold. Only the use of a fusion-pack as power source could improve it. Its bionic-powered battery was good for fourteen months' continuous use, its heat output was intense, it was stove, heater, and lantern all in one, and it weighed about four pounds. (205)

This singular multifunctional gadget illustrates the Gethenian attitude towards consumption: design for use, not aesthetic appeal. This description emphasises the stove's functional elements and lacks sensory information: no colour or tactile qualities, such as texture or materials, are mentioned. Additionally, unlike Nabokov's waste-filled prose, the acquisition of natural resources on Gethen leaves no parts squandered: "though that forest had been logged for centuries there were no waste places in it, no desolations of stumps, no eroded slopes. It seemed that every tree in it was accounted for, and that not one grain of sawdust from our mill went unused" (175). Goods in Le Guin's text, described without sensational details, are useful and sustainable.

Likewise, Genly remarks that Gethenian food is detached from sensory modalities. For example, food is hearty yet tasteless: "most of the food he had laid in previously was 'hyper-food' rations, a fortified, dehydrated, compressed, cubed mixture of high-energy foods—the Orgota name for it is gichy-michy" (206). For humans, eating involves both physical consumption and sensory enjoyment as our perceptual organs for smell, sight, touch, and taste are all activated. The Gethenian approach to eating renders it pleasureless by stripping it of these fundamental attributes. Instead, it is optimised for function

as food is carefully rationed to minimise consumption and maximise nutritional value: “[Estraven] knew, as do many Gethenians, the caloric and nutritive value of each food; he knew his own requirements under various conditions, and how to estimate [Genly Ai’s] pretty closely” (206). In *Lolita*, gustation is directly linked to Humbert’s sexual pleasure (Tolstoy 224); conversely, Gethenians’ methodical and mathematical approach to eating reimagines it as nourishment without the seductive charm of consumption.

Just as the appliances and diet are without aesthetic appeal, the Gethenian climate is without sensory qualities: the planet is permanently encased in snow and ice (Le Guin 220-221). When Estraven and Genly Ai traverse a glacier, it is described as an empty expanse: “across those valleys a great wall stood, a wall of ice, and raising our eyes up and still up to the rim of the wall we saw the Ice itself, the Gorbin Glacier, blinding and horizonless to the utmost north, a white, a white the eyes could not look on” (220). Ice surrounds the duo, encompassing them in what can only be visualised as monotonous whiteness. Impaired vision is reiterated in this passage: Genly refers to the glacier as “blinding” and as his eyes trace the icy facade, its brightness makes it so his “eyes could not look on” (220). Interestingly, Genly Ai remarks that the ice sheet is also devoid of auditory features: “in all the vast hilly country there was no sound” (211). The landscape—which lacks visual and auditory appeal—is therefore equated to a sensory vacuum, a stark opposition to Nabokov’s aesthetic creation. In this way, material products on Gethen are pragmatic, unsensational, and lessen the need to consume, and the planet itself is similarly un-aestheticized—it is the antithesis of 1960s America.

Much like the physical characteristics of the environment, the Gethenian concept of sexuality is divorced from sensuality. Importantly, sex is not absent from the narrative and instead is ingrained in the culture: on Gethen “room is made for sex, plenty of room; but a room, as it were, apart” (93). Gethenians’ sexual cycles are optimised for conception and reproductive impulses are biologically

determined. A previous human envoy, sent to Gethen before Genly Ai, writes a report on Gethenian sex and gender which explains that ‘kemmer’, “the culminant phase [...] lasts from two to five days, during which sexual drive and capacity are at a maximum. It ends abruptly, and if conception has not taken place, the individual returns to the somer phase within a few hours” (91). The aforementioned motif of utility replacing aesthetics culminates in the absence of the sex object: “there is no unconsenting sex, no rape. As with most mammals other than man, coitus can be performed only by mutual invitation and consent; otherwise it is not possible” (Le Guin 94). They do not aestheticize bodies as objects granting sexual satisfaction; therefore, sex is predictable and unthreatening. Consequently, *The Left Hand of Darkness* defies the inalienable link between sex and consumerism which typifies mid-century American culture.

Both Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Nabokov’s *Lolita* contemplate the reality of the mid-twentieth century as a time defined by commodification. While Nabokov demonstrates how aestheticization of the female body reduces women to commodities themselves, Le Guin rejects aesthetics in her work. As a result, *The Left Hand of Darkness* envisions a non-patriarchal world without sensory appeals which, in *Lolita*, serve male pleasure. While Humbert of *Lolita* is inarguably misogynistic—specifically due to the sensationalisation and objectification of the female body for sexual gratification—Le Guin constructs a world where such injustices are inconceivable. Consequently, I believe that Le Guin’s novel should be acclaimed as a feminist text—one which disempowers the American zeitgeist of sensationalised materialism reinforcing the objectified feminine. Marcellino argues that the novel exemplifies a feminist theory of interdependence (206). Pennington eloquently asserts: “*The Left Hand of Darkness* resides in a no-(wo)man’s land—it is a simultaneously androcentric and feminist text” (353). However, I contend that a feminist reading of Le Guin’s novel is rooted, too, in the absence of aesthetics—a move that is in direct conversation with her historical moment. Her text points the finger at 1960s

consumer culture to warn readers about the dangers of falling prey to aesthetics, which are often used to belittle and harm women, in the modern marketplace and society at large.

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