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The Taoist Myths of Winter: Mythopoesis in *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Abstract

An analysis of the Taoist elements woven in the five myths presented in the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, examining how philosophical principles such as yin-yang and wu wei (non-action or inaction) inform all myths, their themes, and their representation of Gethenian moral and spiritual conflicts.

Additional Keywords

Taoism; *The Left Hand of Darkness*; Yin-yang; Mythopoesis; Literature and Philosophy



THE TAOIST MYTHS OF WINTER:
MYTHOPOESIS IN
THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS

DERANCE A. ROLICO FILHO

IN THE MIDDLE OF AN ICE AGE ON THE PLANET WINTER, we come to know the ancient myths of the Gethenian people: myths about the creation of the world, about their moral conflicts, about who they are and who they strive to be. Though the overarching Taoist presence in the novel might be fairly well known, how profoundly intertwined is Taoism really with the five myths the author Ursula K. Le Guin wove within *The Left Hand of Darkness*?

The short answer is very much. But that Taoism goes beyond mere dualities might be a bit more enticing. The *how* and the *what* are at the core of this question, and we are going to carefully grasp at the very words of the novel and of the *Tao Te Ching*, the foundational Taoist text, all through mythopoeic lenses. First, we need a working comprehension of Taoism and the Taoist yin-yang principle that will guide us throughout.

The conventional beginning of Taoism is the writing of the *Tao Te Ching* by the legendary sage Lao Tzu, the first philosophical Taoist, more than two millennia ago in Ancient China. The text would come to encompass many fundamental Chinese worldviews and philosophical conceptions that inform the very cosmology of Taoism. Chief among them are the principles of Yin and Yang, two aspects of the Tao (or Dao) that generate the cosmos and give birth to all things material and spiritual. The eternal interplay of yin and yang, represented by the well-known symbol of a black curve with a white spot nestled into a white curve with a black spot, makes the cosmos everchanging, perpetually in motion.

Etymologically of the words Yin and Yang are tied to the imagery of darkness and light. Yin and Yang have also become a representation for several known dualities in the Chinese culture, such as femininity and masculinity, passivity and activity, low and high. These aspects, Yin and Yang, are not static or immutable; on the contrary, each one transforms into the other, each has the seed of its opposite. As day and night, they follow each other ceaselessly. Thus it is that their nature is not of absolute opposition, like a plastered binary paradigm, but rather of complementarity within a unity: two forces that are one. As Jean C. Cooper states, “they are at one and the same time a division and a reunion, and if they are spoken of as contending forces, they are also co-

operating powers and the tension in which they are held is that of harmony, of the mutual play of creation, not of conflict" (20). Harmony is key to the Taoist perspective of balance, to the observance of the Way, and it shows up often throughout the myths of the novel.

As a philosophy, Taoism is less concerned with humankind than with the workings of the universe, of the world, of nature in general. Unusual as it might seem, that is what Joseph Needham expounds when he writes that "for the Taoists the Tao or Way was not the right way of life within the human society, but the way in which the universe worked; in other words, the *Order of Nature*" (36).

The Taoist understanding of the fundamental forces of the universe embraced both micro and macro perspectives, an all-encompassing worldview. "[T]he Tao was thought of not only as vaguely informing all things, but as being the naturalness, the very structure, of particular and individual types of things" writes Needham (45). From the small, mundane thing in our corner of the world to the cosmological comprehension of the universe, there is the Tao, the Way.

Le Guin came about the writings of Lao Tzu in her teenage years—those incredibly formative years of a reader when she read everything she could, especially nineteenth-century writers such as Tolstoy, Woolf, Dickens, Austen, the Brontës, Hardy, and Turgenev (Le Guin, "Chronology" 1068). The *Tao Te Ching* had such a deep impact on her that, as she said, "it is hard for me to articulate" (Le Guin and Naimon 44). She has even gone as far as describing herself as "an inconsistent Taoist and a consistent unChristian" (Wood 8).

As just one example, she explicitly credits Lao Tzu as one of the main seeds for her novel *The Dispossessed* (Le Guin, "A Response, by Ansible" 307), since she finds the roots of anarchism, as the novel and the short story "The Day Before the Revolution" explore it, "in the early Taoist thought" ("Day Before" 285). This influence is evident across her fictional body of work and pointed out in many writings of literary research and criticism.

In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the element of gender is deeply entwined with the core aspects of the novel, which, as we are going to attest soon, includes the Taoist vein. Le Guin's perspective on gender comes from a feminist stance, which was stirred up in the 1960's by the feminist movement in the United States. "I began to want to define and understand the meaning of sexuality and the meaning of gender, in my life and in our society," she writes, adding that *The Left Hand of Darkness* "is the record of my consciousness, the process of my thinking" (Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" 1033-1034). Her thinking and her imagining ultimately led her to the elimination of gender, "to find out what was left. Whatever was left would be, presumably, simply human" (1036).

Thus, the Gethenians, a race of androgynous people whose bodies change during a few days every month—a period called kemmer—such that

they assume the physiology of a male or of a female for that brief time only. Gender plays no roles in Gethenian society. Because of the absence of such roles on the planet Gethen, we—and Genly Ai, the protagonist, a human male—are able to confront our realities with theirs. “Le Guin’s most famous and influential novel provides an inevitable place to start to think about the ways in which gender works,” writes Wendy Gay Pearson (186).

Gethenians reflect the interrelationship of Yin and Yang: each Gethenian contains both physiologies, they can be both male and female. Such duality acts not as an internal contradiction but as a complementarity of their parts as a unity, as a whole that is not solely defined by any of its parts. As a philosophy, there is no favoring of one aspect over the other in Taoism, although there surely can be an alternating prevalence between them—after all, change is inevitable. “Taoism is sometimes said to favor the female principle because of the importance it gives to the Yin principle, but this is not entirely correct. On the one hand, the image of the mother is venerated, but on the other, the image of the woman—like that of the Yin principle—is ambiguous,” writes Catherine Despeux (171). Such ambiguity, ambivalence, ambisexuality—as Le Guin names it—makes the interconnections between Taoism and the author’s exploration of gender in the novel the more fascinating and stimulating.¹

The Left Hand of Darkness recounts the mission of Genly Ai, the Envoy of the Ekumen to planet Gethen, or Winter. His mission is to convince the planet’s inhabitants, the Gethenians, to join the Ekumen of Known Worlds and to make Gethen its eighty-fourth member. Ai finds himself in the midst of a perilous political conflict between the planet’s two biggest nations, Karhide and Orgoreyn. He is surrounded by many enemies and has few allies, Estraven, the prime-minister of Karhide, being the greatest among the latter. Estraven’s support of Ai’s mission causes Estraven’s own political downfall and exile.

The main criticism Le Guin received for the novel was regarding her use of “he” as the generic pronoun for the Gethenians. She later agreed it was a mistake, recognizing that the pronouns she used “shaped, directed, controlled” her thinking (Le Guin, “Gender” 1042). “I rewrote a chapter of *Left Hand of Darkness* making everybody ‘she’ instead of ‘he,’ and it is interesting to read it after having read the ‘he’ version. But it’s not right either. They aren’t ‘she.’ They’re ‘they’” (Le Guin and Naimon 27-30).

That the Gethenians are neither solely “he” nor “she” is an understanding that the novel’s protagonist himself struggles with, only achieving it towards the end. Pearson writes, “Genly’s attempt to come to terms

¹ For more on the topic of Taoism and gender, see *Gender, Power, and Talent: The Journey of Daoist Priestesses in Tang China* by Jinhua Jia, mainly the first section “The Rise of Daoist Priestesses as a Gendered Religio-Social Group.”

with a world without permanent or essential gender roles is the true centre of the novel, illuminated primarily through his relationship with a single Gethenian, Estraven" (188). Gethenians are neither men nor women, neither Yin nor Yang—they are both.

These considerations are essential to bear in mind as we dive into the novel's five myths.

Thus, we begin with a myth that deals with a beginning: "An Orgota Creation Myth" (chapter 17). It is a pre-historical myth that starts with "In the beginning there was nothing but ice and the sun" (*Left Hand* 237). And it soon follows that from the sun melting the ice, three ice-shapes spring to life—they become sentient, they speak. These three ice-shapes, then, go on to create the world and all the living beings, including humans, who only wake after the melting of the ice-shapes themselves.

This tale bears a rather striking resemblance to the mythology of Taoism, as written in the *Tao Te Ching*, in its chapter 42. Now, Le Guin herself, along with Jerome P. Seaton, published a "rendition," as she puts it, of Lao Tzu's book; in her interpretation the chapter comes with a title, "Children of the Way," and it begins, "The Way bears one. / The one bears two. / The two bear three. / The three bear the ten thousand things" (Lao Tzu, *Lao Tzu* 57). The well-respected Arthur Waley translation does not differ so much: "Tao gave birth to the One; the One gave birth successively to two things, three things, up to ten thousand" (Lao Tzu, *Way* 195). The Orgota creation myth follows most of these stages of creation, starting with the two things—ice and sun—that create the three things—the three ice-shapes—that, in turn, create the ten thousand things, which means everything in the world—all living beings, humanity included, as the myth goes. The parallel between these mythologies is clear.

Incidentally, chapter 42 of the *Tao Te Ching* is also where yin-yang appears in the ancient text. After the creation of the ten thousand things by the three, the chapter follows, "The ten thousand things / carry the yin on their shoulders / and hold in their arms the yang, / whose interplay of energy / makes harmony" (Lao Tzu, *Lao Tzu* 57). Here we are told that yin-yang is in everything, and that harmony depends on its interplay of energy. Yin-Yang assumes a rather central role in the presented cosmology, which the Orgota myth echoes when it says about humanity's ancestors, Edondurath and the nameless one's children, "Each of the children born to them had a piece of darkness that followed him about wherever he went by daylight" (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 239). Here the piece of darkness evokes the representation of mortality: "Because they were born in the house of flesh, therefore death follows at their heels" (239). The sun—the light—is the source of life alongside the ice, which is water; when the sun is gone, so is life, and only shadow—death—remains. This is how the Orgota creation myth ends: "In the beginning there was the sun and the ice, and there

was no shadow. In the end when we are done, the sun will devour itself and shadow will eat light, and there will be nothing left but the ice and the darkness” (*Left Hand* 239). Water, here in the form of ice, is traditionally associated with yin, since it is passive and yielding, running to the lowest points, and thus represents darkness. In the Orgota myth, only when light and darkness—the sun and the ice—are balanced there can be life.

Beyond the thematic imagery of light and darkness, explicit throughout the whole novel, the Orgota creation myth touches upon the fear of the other. This fear is a crucial theme for the *The Left Hand of Darkness*, its main characters, the plot, and the setting, for it is said in the myth that the nations of men in Winter are born of Edondurath, the one who killed almost all their brothers before those others could wake solely because Edondurath was afraid of them. That fear, as the events of the novel illustrate, endures. Gethenians struggle with fear of their brothers, hence the many conflicts between, for instance, the people of Karhide and Orgoreyn. Genly Ai, the protagonist, has to face this fear, which has possessed the king of Karhide, in order to accomplish his mission, and that proves to be a great challenge—one he takes the entire novel to surmount, and not alone, but with another: Estraven.

Another theme that is briefly mentioned in this myth is that of presence, of living in the present. It comes right after the mention of darkness and mortality: “Because they were born in the house of flesh, therefore death follows at their heels. They are in the middle of time” (*Left Hand* 239). Gethenians’ worries are neither in the past nor in the future, but in the present, in the now, in the middle of time. They even position themselves in the middle of their counting of years: it is always the Year One; past and future years, therefore, adjust themselves accordingly. As the narrator Ai tells us, “The people of Winter, who always live in the Year One, feel that progress is less important than presence” (*Left Hand* 50). This observation comes as a reflection on the speed of Gethenian vehicles, too slow for the Terran narrator, whose people tend to go fast in order “to get ahead, make progress” (*Left Hand* 50). This notion of living in the now and fully grasping life as it happens is very well seeded in Taoist philosophy, a concern met, for example, in chapter 14, Celebrating mystery: “Holding fast to the old Way / we can live in the present” (Lao Tzu, *Lao Tzu* 18). In Waley’s translation: “Yet by seizing on the Way that was / You can ride the things that are now” (Lao Tzu, *Way* 159).

Not only does the Orgota creation myth makes room for this theme of living in the present, but chapter 12, “On Time and Darkness,” the Yomesh myth, also relies heavily on it. The first paragraph of the Yomesh religious text states:

Meshe is the Center of Time. That moment of his life when he saw all things clearly came when he had lived on earth thirty years, and after it he lived on earth again thirty years, so that the Seeing befell in the center of his life. And all the ages up until the Seeing were as long as the ages will be after the Seeing, which befell in the Center of Time. And in the Center there is no time past and no time to come. In all time past it is. In all time to come it is. It has not been nor yet will it be. It is. It is all. (*Left Hand* 161)

The center of time is the moment in which all things are, past and future; the present is the only time when all things can be, there is only now: "There is neither source nor end, for all things are in the Center of Time" (*Left Hand* 163). Meshe, the myth states, "saw not what was, nor what will be, but what is. The stars that flee and take away their light were all present in his Eye, and all their light shone presently" (163). The moment of Meshe's realization that the present is all there is, that it is when all things past and all things to come are, are paramount to the Yomesh mythology and philosophy.

Although the Yomesh cult shares this aspect with Taoism, it is the Handdara that Taoism is mostly associated with. And it is not so stark a contradiction, since Meshe himself is of the Handdara. The Yomesh is a religious cult centered around the figure of Meshe who, it is said, lived around two millennia ago; the Handdara, on the other hand, is a tradition much older, and it is referred to, much like Taoism, as the Old Way: "Lord Meshe was born 2,202 years-ago, but the Old Way of the Handdara goes back ten thousand years before that. You have to go back to the Old Land if you're after the Old Way" (*Left Hand* 47). The Handdara, as Ai puts it, "is a religion without institution, without priests, without hierarchy, without vows, without creed; I am still unable to say whether it has a God or not. It is elusive. It is always somewhere else" (*Left Hand* 54). The Handdarata even practice a discipline they call Presence, some sort of trance—or "untrance," as Ai notes; he also describes it as "self-loss (self-augmentation?) through extreme sensual receptiveness and awareness" (57). As well as Taoism, the Handdara is "given to negatives" (57) and uses expressions such as "untrance" and "unlearn." Whereas the Handdara is traditionally practiced in Karhide, the Yomesh cult is sponsored by the government of Orgoreyn; both, however, are greatly present in the cultural landscapes of Gethen.

The two practices are so thoroughly integrated into the Gethenian culture that they cannot be disassociated from the overall themes of the novel and its myths. The Yomesh myth "On Time and Darkness" contains the mention of Meshe's life-changing event as a Handdarata, the Question of the Lord of Shorth, which is "the moment of Seeing," and throughout its sayings it establishes plenty of dialog—if in counterpoints—with the Handdara, specially

with the Handdara's fundamental element, the darkness. The myth of Meshe exalts the light and scorns the darkness. It is a stage for the relishing of yin-yang. Towards the end of the myth, we read, "In the Eye of Meshe are all the stars, and the darkneses between the stars: and all are bright" (*Left Hand* 162); "Meshe saw all the sky as if it were all one sun" (163); "all the sphere of the sky was bright as the sun's surface" (163). All of these passages reinforce light and that which is bright, like the sun, while negating darkness: "Darkness is only in the mortal eye, that thinks it sees, but sees not. In the Sight of Meshe there is no darkness. Therefore those that call upon the darkness are made fools of and spat out from the mouth of Meshe, for they name what is not, calling it Source and End" (163).

"On Time and Darkness," it is interesting to note, is positioned right in the center of the narrative, in chapter 12, after which the story shifts, as if in a change of movement in a musical piece, telling of Genly Ai's imprisonment, his escape, and the long trek across the ice with Estraven—the latter half of the novel. Since the novel is organized by Ai himself, the placement of this myth in the middle of it is intentional, and it shows that Ai has acquired some Gethenian aesthetic sensibilities or, at least, made a deliberate acknowledgement of them.

This Yomesh myth is in direct counterpoint to the Handdara's "The Nineteenth Day," which is Chapter 4. This Karhidish myth recounts the tale of Lord Berosty rem ir Ipe and their folly in consulting the Foretellers, asking when they would die. The Foretellers perform a ritual and reach into the darkness to provide an answer to the asker. That is the darkness that Meshe speaks ill of, having been a Handdarata Weaver himself. Lord Berosty gets an answer to the question—the nineteenth day of the month—but this answer is not complete, in that it does not reveal which month or year. In despair, Lore Berosty shuts himself away from family and friends.

This unfortunate turn of events propels Berosty's love and kemmering Herbor to seek another answer of the Foretellers so that the knowledge would lessen Berosty's suffering, but Herbor is poor and has no means to pay. The Weaver of Thangering Fastness warns, "there is always a price. The asker pays what he has to pay" (*Left Hand* 45). Herbor offers their life as payment, though that life has no value to the Foretellers. Out of pity, however, the Foretellers agree to seek a second answer to Berosty's question; the answer is that Berosty will live longer than Herbor. Berosty murders Herbor in a fit of rage over still another imprecise answer, fulfilling the foretelling. The price was thus paid.

"The Nineteenth Day" strikes a chord in the moral core of the Gethenians. They have the power of premonition at their disposal at the hands of the Foretellers of the Handdara; but the myth questions: should they use it? The Karhidish myth is indeed a cautionary tale representing the moral dilemma

of using such power or not—of, in fact, possibly interfering in the future by knowing the outcomes. The consequences of such interference may be severe.

That is very much in line with the Taoist concept of *wu wei*, the principle of non-action or inaction, of non-interference. About *wu wei*, Livia Kohn explains:

Wuwei or “non-action” means to do things the natural way, by not interfering with the patterns, rhythms, and structures of nature, without imposing one’s own intentions upon the organization of the world. [...] [N]on-action means retaining an inner core of quietude and letting the world move along as it naturally proceeds. (Kohn 1067)

However, *wu wei* is not to be confused with apathy. It is also not the same as absence of action, passivity, or omission. Non-action is spontaneous, involuntary, harmonious with the natural world; it does not mean inertia or lethargy. It is, as Cooper writes, “an action which is so unforced and natural that it loses the ordinary meaning of action with its accompanying deliberation and weighing up, and is so in harmony with the natural that it simply *is*, without having to think about it” (51). This principle is often mentioned in the *Tao Te Ching* and informs all of it (chapters 2 and 3 are good examples). As non-interference, it is explicitly mentioned in chapters 48 and 57.

“The Nineteenth Day” hits heavily on the misfortunes caused by interference. Tragedy happens not once, but twice, to both persons who ask the Foretellers questions which affect the natural state of things. Persistence will not fare well, and good intention is of no avail. Common anxiety over existential doubts will probably not be placated, and certainly not wholly dissipated. The Handdarata know this; their philosophy is about learning what questions not to ask and their practice of Foretelling is, as Faxe the Weaver explains, the ultimate demonstration of “the perfect uselessness of knowing the answer to the wrong question” (*Left Hand* 70), since there is only one true certainty in life—death—and uncertainty is fundamentally unavoidable. This Handdara story incites deep moral reflection while bringing about the wisdom of *wu wei*. As Sandra J. Lindow argues, “from her first published fiction, Le Guin has included scenes that evidence the effectiveness of not doing, not posturing, not pushing, not drawing lines in the sand” (255). Along these lines, she also states that, “[t]hroughout her fiction, Le Guin’s concept of moral development is tightly knotted in the Taoist wisdom of not doing” (Lindow 249).

The Karhidish myth reveals a process of mythopoesis that weaves together many of the novel’s themes; two of them being the Taoist principles of non-action (non-interference) and yin-yang. The latter comes, in one instance, as balance. The inevitable price that is always paid for reaching out to the darkness in the Foretelling is a token to the universe’s tendency to find balance in the

everchanging primordial cycle of existence. Even in the Yomesh myth, “On Time and Darkness,” the ultimate balance is seen through the Eye of Meshe: Meshe does as asked and helps a poor person to find a treasure long buried, but that treasure will be the ruin of another person ten thousand years in the future. It may seem like an aspect of no concern, yet for a Yomeshta, a believer of Meshe, there is only one time, one moment of existence and it is in the now, in the present: everything is happening at once, even though only Meshe can see this everything. Meshe himself, as a former Handdarata, is a manifestation of yin-yang, since each aspect has the seed of the other: from the darkness (yin) of the Handdara, the light (yang) of Meshe was created.

These two myths’ themes of balance and the consequences of acting upon or altering it, are famously present in other works by Le Guin, but perhaps most of all in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the first novel of the high fantasy Earthsea Cycle, where the main character Ged, through the use of his power, brings a creature of shadow into the world, thus altering the Equilibrium. Ged’s reckoning with the creature is a reckoning with himself, with his darkness and his folly. The lesson he struggles to learn is that of consequences to every action, that of the shadow that comes with every light. Such is the lesson one of his teachers tells him: “To light a candle is to cast a shadow . . .” (*Wizard* 3.44).² In discussing this sentence and Ged’s growth, Elizabeth Cummins writes, “an increase in knowledge (light) is accompanied by the realization of further ignorance. [...] [E]very act (‘to light’) has consequences for which the actor is responsible; all existence is interconnected; therefore, the individual must exercise freedom carefully” (38).

These two myths, “On Time and Darkness” and “The Nineteenth Day,” reflect the interplay of yin-yang in *The Left Hand of Darkness* through many dualities—Handdara and Yomesh, Karhide and Orgoreyn, ignorance and knowledge, life and death, creation and destruction, acceptance and rejection—but the remaining two myths do even more so, at least regarding the latter dualities.

“The Place Inside the Blizzard” (chapter 2) is another Karhidish myth, and it deals with the novel’s reoccurring themes of incest, exile, and suicide. It does all this while portraying two journeys: the literal, physical journey of Getheren, the myth’s main character, from their home, the Domain of Shath, to the Ice and then back to civilization in northern Karhide; and Getheren’s overall life journey. Both are representations of them finding balance in their life—representations, in fact, of the perpetual change of yin-yang and the balancing of its complementary forces.

² Because there are many editions of the *Earthsea* books, citations are given in the format *chapter.page*.

Getheren of Shath, at the start of the tale, had their prestige, their honor, their pride, and their social status—what Gethenians called *shifgrethor*, an old word for shadow. One who has *shifgrethor* casts long shadows. However, Getheren is blamed for the suicide of their brother and kemmering, and soon found themselves deep in disgrace, suffering the rejection of everyone everywhere they went. They lose their shadow, their *shifgrethor*, and, being no longer welcome anywhere in the Domain of Shath, they depart north, toward the Karhidish glacial land called the Pering Ice—but not before laying their name as a curse upon their home: “Getheren is my name. That name I lay on this Hearth as a curse, and with it my shame. Keep that for me. Now nameless I will go seek my death” (*Left Hand* 22). Getheren seeks their death in the Pering Ice and ends up finding it in the mythical Place Inside the Blizzard, a region of calm amid the merciless snowstorms that sweep the Ice. They find the place wherein that which was dead endures, in a region in which the living cannot live. The description of the Ice is in accordance with this idea: “On the Ice nothing grows and no beasts run” (22). White, the myth states, dominates all in the Place Inside the Blizzard: “As far as he could see lay fields of the snowgrass, white and shining. There were groves of white trees, with white leaves growing on them. The sun shone, and it was windless, and everything was white” (23). Getheren has come to the whitest of places.

After being in a place of shadow and then losing it, Getheren moves toward the brightness of light, toward the whiteness of the Ice. They have gone fully on to the opposite direction. They seek death in the Ice, because people usually do not survive there, even more so during snowstorms. The Ice is too white, too unbalanced for life to thrive or even survive. There needs to be both light and darkness for life to exist; the Orgota know this truth very well, as expounded in their creation myth: “In the beginning there was the sun and the ice, and there was no shadow. In the end when we are done, the sun will devour itself and shadow will eat light, and there will be nothing left but the ice and the darkness” (*Left Hand* 239).

Now, Getheren is in a strange state in a strange place. According to the myth, they “felt no pain, and no cold, and no hunger” and their hands are “white as snow” (*Left Hand* 23), suggesting they are dead or in a death-like state. Besides, they have been told that The Place Inside the Blizzard is where the dead dwell. They meet a wholly white figure who identifies themselves as their dead brother and kemmering Hode, the one who committed suicide for not being allowed by the law of the country to keep their vow with Getheren for life. Hode’s description corresponds with characteristics of the dead: “his skin was all white, and his hair was all white” (23-24) and “there was no longer any life in his belly, and his voice sounded thin like the creaking of ice” (24). As we can see, the icy nature of Hode comes to show their lifelessness. Hode tells Getheren,

"This is the place inside the blizzard. We who kill ourselves dwell here. Here you and I shall keep our vow" (24).

At this point in their journey, in the extremes of white existence, Getheren can choose death and remain in the Place Inside the Blizzard. They are bare: devoid of bodily needs and desires, stripped of all but their core being, in a state Taoists call the Uncarved Block (Le Guin and Seaton translated the term as "uncut wood"). Arthur Waley explains it as "the symbol of the primal undifferentiated unity underlying the apparent complexity of the universe" (Lao Tzu, *Way* 167), and Le Guin comments on its qualities of naturalness and honesty. The Uncarved Block has its roots exposed; its true, untouched, unpolished core is revealed in its primal nature. Only in such a state can Getheren find their truth, their self, their fundamental desires.

Hode approaches and takes Getheren's left hand—remember the first verse of Tormer's *Lay*, from which comes the title of the novel: "*Light is the left hand of darkness*" (*Left Hand* 233). Getheren, however, flees from their dead brother, away from the Place Inside the Blizzard and back into the snowstorm southward. Once in the land of the dead, Getheren has discovered they wish to live. Touched by the dead, they return to life: light as the seed of darkness. Getheren goes from yin to the extremes of yang, and then back again.

In *The Farthest Shore*, the third novel in the Earthsea Cycle, the main character Arren also endeavors a journey to the land of the dead and returns—changed, strengthened, determined, wiser. He then better understands his role among his people, his greater community of Earthsea, his role in the Equilibrium. "Crossing the mountains of pain symbolizes Arren's acceptance of pain and mortality as elements of the personal, social, and cosmic life he has come to understand," writes Cummins (55). Something similar happens with Getheren in the myth.

Now back in the land of the living, since they left their name home as a curse, they are nameless. When they are found in another Domain by the Orhoch Hearth, they even deny being Getheren of Shath. People take care of them and they survive with no lasting harm except the loss of their frozen left hand. They then depart to the southern lands and adopt another name: Ennoch.

As it happens, Ennoch is similar to the name of a biblical figure (Enoch) who is said to have walked with God—or to have entered heaven—while alive, which parallels Getheren's experience in the Place Inside the Blizzard.

Under the name of Ennoch, Getheren finds a new place in the world. They are finally accepted again, become part of a new community, and grow old. Eventually, they meet a traveler from Shath, who, upon being asked, says the Domain is ill. Getheren reveals their identity to the traveler, and says, "Tell them at Shath that I take back my name and my shadow" (*Left Hand* 25). They

die soon after. Shath, receiving their words, prospers again. The Domain's rejection of Getheren has caused only harm and destruction.

Getheren undertakes an entire journey to the Ice and back and has to find acceptance and balance elsewhere in order to live. Reclaiming their name and regaining their shadow, they undo their curse, and achieve balance of yin-yang, leaving no lasting ill will in the world, being in peace, in perfect balance, and not interfering anymore. And so Getheren dies, having undergone all the changes of light and darkness, to extremes and back to equilibrium, throughout their whole life, their whole myth.

Elizabeth Cummins comments on the five myths present in *The Left Hand of Darkness*: "The five myths that Ai has selected all deal with the problem of dualities and the individuals' acceptance or refusal of that which is different. Acceptance leads to acts which are creative; denial leads to acts which are destructive" (81). Acceptance of that which is different is crucial for the balancing of yin-yang: the two aspects can only be complementary and seamlessly change and be creative once they accept each other as they are: both and one.

The one myth that most highlights these dualities of acceptance/rejection and creation/destruction is the one that has heretofore remained unaddressed: "Estraven the Traitor" (chapter 9). This myth is centered around a feud for land between two Domains: Estre and Stok. The mythopoeic Taoist backbone of the myth is once more informed by yin-yang, wherein two families and two Domains find no peace until they recognize their sameness, rather than focusing only on their differences. The consequences of such realization and movement ripple through time, space, and, in fact, the whole novel.

The first key moment in the myth is the fortuitous meeting between the heirs of both families: Arek of Estre and Therem of Stok. Therem, without knowing who Arek is, saves them from freezing to death after a fall on a lake near their hut. After finding out their identities as mortal enemies, Therem of Stok says they have no intention of killing Arek. The two touch hands and realize they are the same: "their hands were the same in length and form, finger by finger, matching like the two hands of one man laid palm to palm" (*Left Hand* 125). They swear kemmering and spend days together. Eventually people from Stok find them and kill Arek, enacting once again more violence, causing more death and destruction.

Therem of Stok, nonetheless, has discovered peace with the late heir of Estre and continues to act constructively. They give birth to Arek's child, and leave the child with the Lord of Estre, naming the child Therem after themselves. Eventually, the child grows up and is named heir of Estre by the will of the old Lord, who can see in them the likeness of their late offspring. This act awakens jealousy in the Domain, and Therem of Estre is ambushed, surviving although

seriously hurt. They end up in a hut near a lake and are tended to by, seemingly, a stranger: Therem of Stok. The two came to know their names, their non-violent intentions, and the likeness of their hands: “and finger by finger their two hands matched, like the two hands of one man” (*Left Hand* 128). After recognizing their sameness in their differences, Therem of Stok proposes peace between their houses and Therem of Estre agrees. When they came to power in place of the old Lord of Estre, they divide the disputed land between the two Domains equally, and there is finally peace between Estre and Stok.

The feud between Estre and Stok mirrors that of Karhide and Orgoreyn over the Sinoth Valley, as well as the solution: the recognition of unity in that which was also two. The acceptance of each other—Therem of Stok and Arek (and later Therem) of Estre; Karhide and Orgoreyn—is transformative toward balance and creation in a scenario where outright rejection of the different generates only pain, death, and destruction. The myth of Estraven the Traitor is a reminder of conflicts Gethenians still deal with: their division, their discrimination, their treatment of their neighbors and brothers.

Moreover, this particular tale establishes a deep and broad dialogue with the conflicts, challenges, and transformations that the novel’s main characters—Genly Ai and Therem Harth rem ir Estraven—experience throughout the narrative. True bond through acceptance of the other is what makes Ai and Estraven successful, as it does Therem and Arek in the myth, and later Therem with their own child Therem, who ultimately ends the conflict. This acceptance and bond makes possible the success of Arren and Ged’s journey together in *The Farthest Shore*, which Cummins acknowledges: “the success of this quest depends on the bond relationship of Ged and Arren. Arren and Ged begin and end a long journey together; and Arren moves from a naive, unquestioned fealty to Ged, through despair and alienation from him, to a mature acceptance of himself and Ged” (50).

Let us be reminded of Therem and Arek in the hut near the lake, of Genly and Estraven in the tent in the Ice, of Arren and Ged in the land of the dead, as we read *Former’s Lay*:

*Light is the left hand of darkness
and darkness the right hand of light.
Two are one, life and death, lying
together like lovers in kemmer,
like hands joined together,
like the end and the way. (Left Hand 233)*

The lay is a perfect representation of the myth “Estraven the Traitor” and, truly, of the whole novel, and it even resonates far and away with other works by Le Guin.

In conclusion, the five myths of *The Left Hand of Darkness* all share immense relevance to the moral and spiritual life of the Gethenian people, informing the characters' outlook on fundamental questions and dilemmas as well as reinforcing the main themes of the novel as a whole, which characterize a masterful work of mythopoesis. And woven in their midst, there is yin-yang—light and darkness—and there is *wu wei*; there is, after all, the Tao—the Way.

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