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ENGL 349 - Revision

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Giving It All Away:

The Revealing Spatial Digressions of Le Guin's *Lathe of Heaven*

The opening vignette detailed in the first two pages of Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lathe of Heaven*, is packed with imagery and symbolism that creates a small, impressionistic scene. This narrative contains a plot filled with many spatial digressions, both in terms of time and reality. I contend, that these devices, having been combined in this fashion, were purposefully constructed to provide the plot of the novel in one brief passage. With its plot hidden among these metaphoric lines, there is much to unpack from this small narrative scene:

“Current-borne, wave-flung, tugged hugely by the whole might of ocean, the jellyfish drifts in the tidal abyss. The light shines through it, and the dark enters it. Borne, flung, tugged from anywhere to anywhere, for in the deep sea there is no compass but nearer and farther, higher and lower, the jellyfish hangs and sways; pulses move slight and quick within it, as the vast diurnal pulses beat in the moon-driven sea. Hanging, swaying, pulsing, the most vulnerable and insubstantial creature, it has for its defense the violence and power of the whole ocean, to which it has entrusted its being, its going, and its will” (Le Guin 3).

There are subtle bits of poetry, of dystopian and kinesthetic imagery, and the introduction of an inciting incident that propels our tragic hero, George Orr, into the forefront of the novel. It is also important to note that this opening passage can be read as a double entendre, not only serving to present the plot of the story, but as an ironic commentary on the evolutionary patterns of mankind and its undoing. This meaning is equally valid and important in understanding how the

narrative connects to themes of environmental dystopias, post-apocalyptic worlds, and the choices mankind takes to get to such realities.

The symbols of importance in the opening passage are the jellyfish, the sea, the rocks (cliffs and concrete). Seen later in the passage are the dandelion, radiation, and the key to the door of dreams, as well as the turtle and outer space which are relevant much later in the plot. Detailing the specific symbolic meanings for these evidentiary pieces alone would likely seem confusing and abstract at this point. It is instead necessary to walk through the plot points of this novel in tandem to the opening scene's elements.

The introductory paragraph opens with Kenning like phrasing, which is a technique derived from Norse and Anglo-Saxon poetry. "It is a stylistic device that can be defined as a two-word phrase that describes an object through metaphors" (LiteraryDevices). Poems with this style may only contain a few Kenning styled words or many. Le Guin's opening lines (and a few others throughout the novel) opt for the former: "*Current-borne, wave-flung*, tugged hugely by the whole might of ocean, the jellyfish drifts in the tidal abyss. The light shines through it, and the dark enters it" (Le Guin, 3). There is also the jellyfish now drifting in this tidal abyss, representative of our tragic hero George Orr as discussed in the next paragraph. This is where the world of dreams shines itself through his mind's filter, before darkness and manipulation enter by way of Dr. Haber. It continues with, "...flung ... in the deep sea there is no compass but nearer and farther, higher and lower, the jellyfish hangs and sways; pulses move slight and quick within it, as the vast diurnal pulses beat in the moon-driven sea" (3). Through this vivid and kinetic prose there emerges a deep-sea – a milky, evolutionary origin to push creatures into higher states of being and knowledge; as well as, currents and seadrift, the humanity that crawls out of the primordial soup. This jellyfish is flung into that deep-sea with no compass. A literary

compass is often representative of morality, a guiding tool of right and wrong. Moral choices are a reoccurring issue for George in the narrative, and are demonstrated by way of his dreams and their ethical implications.

The combination of the jellyfish and its moral struggle are directly likened to George: “You have no social conscience, no altruism. You're a moral jellyfish. I have to instill social responsibility in you hypnotically, every time. And every time it's thwarted, spoiled” (150). Like the jellyfish, our hero is a “vulnerable creature,” and “has for its defense the violence and power of the whole ocean” (3). This idea of wholeness culminates towards the end of the novel, when George finally understands the power behind his mind and creations: “...then the whole world as it now is should be on my side; because I dreamed a lot of it up, too. Well, after all, it is on my side. That is, I'm a part of it. Not separate from it. I walk on the ground and the ground's walked on by me, I breathe the air and change it, I am entirely interconnected with the world” (157).

The opening continues by constructing the next transformative phase on Earth:

“But here rise the stubborn continents. The shelves of gravel and the cliffs of rock break from water baldly into air, that dry, terrible outerspace of radiance and instability, where there is no support for life. And now, now the currents mislead and the waves betray, breaking their endless circle, to leap up in loud foam against rock and air, breaking....

What will the creature made all of seadrift do on the dry sand of daylight; what will the mind do, each morning, waking?” (3).

There is out of the ocean a rise of continents, rocky landmasses that are surrounded by a bubble of silent and lonely outer space. Then suddenly there is a change as the seas of humanity foam into rocky formations, then shift about innovating, betraying and destroying. At this point, the opening scene begins to split further into distinct parts – the evolutionary portion that outlines how things are on Earth currently, and the journey that George Orr takes in order to find peace.

The author plants two interesting questions directly in-between these passages, “What will the creature made all of seadrift do on the dry sand of daylight; what will the mind do, each morning, waking?” (3). In other words, what next must our jellyfish Orr do with his knowledge and ability? What will he choose to do, knowing the consequences that come from his waking dreams? For Orr, this “dry sand of daylight” provides a fresh day or template for him to dream and shape repeatedly, and what he allows to take shape is greatly dependent on the influences he permits into his psyche through Dr. Haber, Heather, and other environmental and political influences. This connects to an overreaching theme found in most post-apocalyptic narratives – if one had it within their ability to change the future, to provide a better outcome, what cost would they be willing to pay for that ‘brighter’ future free of pollution, destruction, and devastation? Le Guin makes a point to draw our attention to the carelessness of quick and easy solutions without considering the greater consequences of change.

The scene continues to speak of the “seadrift creature” who has been affected by this manmade chaos of radiation sickness and chemical burns (3). After all, like many apocalyptic narratives, mankind is often the tool of its own undoing. Mankind here has warped and twisted the Earth into an uninhabitable state leaving George Orr struggling for survival:

“His eyelids had been burned away, so that he could not close his eyes, and the light entered into his brain, searing. He could not turn his head, for blocks of fallen concrete pinned him down and the steel rods projecting from their cores held his head in a vise. When these were gone he could move again; he sat up. He was on the cement steps; a dandelion flowered by his hand, growing from a little cracked place in the steps. After a while he stood up, but as soon as he was on his feet he felt deathly sick, and knew it was the radiation sickness. The door was only two feet from him, for the balloonbed when inflated half filled his room. He got to the door and opened it and went through it. There stretched the endless linoleum corridor, heaving slightly up and down for miles, and far down it, very far, the men's room. He started out toward it, trying to hold on to the wall, but there was nothing to hold on to, and the wall turned into the floor” (3-4).

Mankind in the *Lathe of Heaven* is painted as emotionless and destructive in this portion of the opening passage. More importantly, our hero's cursed gift is hinted at once again, "the light entered into his brain, searing" (3). This dreaming light is ever present, there is no way to shut the door to this terrible, and searing responsibility of morality. George's puppet-stringed dreams and their effects on humanity and the rocky Earth are also shown to be static in some form. No matter how Orr is instructed to manipulate the world through his dreams, some parts of the rock-solid humanity will also remain ever present: "Geography remained perfectly steady: the continents were where they were (128). Other passages that mention rocks, continue to convey both human like personification and the dreaming consequences that our protagonists and those around him experience: "Rocks have their dreams, and the earth changes. ... but when the mind becomes conscious, when the rate of evolution speeds up, then you have to be careful ... A conscious mind must be part of the whole, intentionally and carefully—as the rock is part of the whole unconsciously" (169).

Orr also cannot turn his head while its pinned down with steel rods that hold his head in a 'vise'. This is similar to the Augmentor machine that Dr. Haber uses to regulate the dream state, "Haber at once started attaching the little things on wires to his head ..." (163). The vise or the Augmentor controls the dream state and pins Orr to a fate outside of his own hands, however, there is hope in this trapped state – a "dandelion flowered by his hand" (3). This flower, or Heather Lelache, is the one thing that comes into George's life and seems to finally bring him some peace and a desire for a happier life. Heather is characterized as bold and colorful, just like the stubborn yellow flower, qualities that Orr is aware he lacks. Even when the human world is turned concrete grey, to Orr Heather is a burst of color in his world. She is the vibrant and

tenacious growth that George needs to push himself out of the concrete and steel vice and foster his selfish side so he can finally stand up to Dr. Haber.

There is also an important scene with Heather where he recounts his actions from parts of the opening passage. This conversation is what allows the reader to understand Orr's own awareness to the digressions he's created, the thousands of dreams and spaces his mind has manipulated in and out of existence:

"I was trying to get out of the city. I wanted to get into Forest Park. I was sick, I couldn't go on walking and I sat down on the steps of this house up in the west hills, the houses were all burnt out but the steps were cement, I remember there were some dandelions flowering in a crack between the steps. I sat there and I couldn't get up again and I knew I couldn't. I kept thinking that I was standing up and going on, getting out of the city, but it was just delirium, I'd come to and see the dandelions again and know I was dying. And that everything else was dying. And then I had the—I had this dream." His voice had hoarsened; now it choked off.

I was all right," he said at last. "I dreamed about being home. I woke up and I was all right. I was in bed at home. Only it wasn't any home I'd ever had, the other time, the first time. The bad time. Oh God, I wish I didn't remember it. I mostly don't. I can't. I've told myself ever since that it was a dream. That it was a dream! But it wasn't. This is. This isn't real. This world isn't even probable. It was the truth. It was what happened. We are all dead, and we spoiled the world before we died. There is nothing left. Nothing but dreams" (109).

Going back to the ending of the opening paragraph it predicts a few new reality altering events that will affect Orr, as he loses his newly found strength with Heather briefly, "... as soon as he was on his feet he felt deathly sick ... he started out towards it ... but there was nothing to hold on to" (4). After all, a dandelion is also an invasive weed, and Heather is an unwanted intrusion in Dr. Haber's experiment that he's happy to see removed: "She's dead," Orr said. "Good. She was a destructive influence on you. Irresponsible" (150). At this point it's revealed Orr has lost his hope, he is ill and has no one to guide him. Heather is gone and Orr is rapidly losing his grip on reality and control over his life. At around the same time, just like the aliens

suddenly appear to guide him, so too does the “guard” Mannie appear to talk with George, to work out what must be done in order to continue moving forward (4):

"Easy now. Easy there."

The elevator guard's face was hanging above him like a paper lantern, pallid, fringed with graying hair.

"It's the radiation," he said, but Mannie didn't seem to understand, saying only, "Take it easy."

He was back on his bed in his room.

"You drunk?"

"No."

"High on something?"

"Sick."

"What you been taking?"

"Couldn't find the fit," he said, meaning that he had been trying to lock the door through which the dreams came, but none of the keys had fit the lock" (4).

It is also this end of the scene and the conversation with Mannie, that provides another major plot device, the key. The novel's progression is very much focused on Orr's desire to obtain the key to his dream door, to block out the searing light of change. Yet, the novel shows us the grave consequences that come from trying to ignore our responsibilities with power. For George, the irresponsibility is in his refusal to stand up to Dr. Haber, and his reluctance to work out the important moral questions and consequences of his dreams till after-the-fact. Dr. Haber ultimately loses his mind and nearly destroys the world several times over by disregarding the effects of a dream-shifted world. Whereas George desires the key to lock the door, Haber wants to unlock the power of the mind: "The creative and therapeutic resources of the brain — whether waking or sleeping or dreaming—are practically infinite. If we can just find the keys to all the locks. The power of dreaming alone is quite undreamt of! (33). Haber reinforces his ideal once

more, during an almost god-gone-mad like speech, “so long as it was locked into the brain of a single man, (the e-state) was no more use to humanity than a key locked inside a room ... But I'll have the means of getting the key out of that room. And that 'key' will be as great a milestone in human evolution as the development of the reasoning brain itself!” (150-151).

There is one final hidden symbol in the opening passage not yet touched on, the aliens. There is but a brief mentioning of space in the second paragraph. “terrible outer space of radiance and instability, where there is no support for life” (3). The aliens that Orr creates are terrifying at first, mysterious and quiet, as they float along the edges of the atmosphere. These aliens are described as turtle like, another ocean dwelling creature made of seadrift dream material. Dr. Haber describes them as an “emotionless horror,” whereas George seems to find them aesthetically pleasing in a way, “like a sea turtle, yet ... it possessed a strange, large beauty, a serener beauty than that of any dweller, in sunlight, any walker on the earth” (143). These creatures are not only visually different to both men, much like their differences of opinion on what a utopian Earth should look like, but to George the turtled aliens provide an answer where Haber could not. That the answer is not in removing or changing the currents of humanity, but that we must learn to swim “with heavy inexhaustible grace through the depths,” in our own element. Orr’s dreams when not rubbing against humanity can finally be, “profound and harmless, ... changing nothing” (180).

Le Guin utilizes a deceptive template that appears at first to be a rather traditional narrative in origin. However as shown, much of the book is filled with these spatial digressions, that contain religious, moral, and political messages intended to foster a higher state of consciousness when thinking about dystopian societies and our choices that lead to these many possible worldly outcomes. The reluctant hero George Orr, is living in a world without hope or

peace, within a sick and overpopulated dystopic future where totalitarian governments reign. Mankind has de-evolved and destroyed all that the Earth has provided, leaving a radiated and doomed future for its inhabitants. Orr is then thrust into a journey of self-exploration and growth, another typical theme of dystopic narratives. Only when he finds love, self-worth, and a willingness to fight for control over his own humanistic existence does the key to George's greatest desire finally appear. Le Guin through her narrative urges readers to avoid becoming a 'Dr. Haber' that is ruled by disillusioned desires of utopia and control. She also warns that the opposite of this, a 'George Orr', is equally dangerous by way of passive and morally conflicted personalities. Personalities that will stand on the sidelines letting those in power make the ethical and environmental choices for them even when it seems inhumane to do so. She argues for thoughtful action and discourse that considers all possible digressions of reality, so that the world at large can find optimal peace and stability without destroying itself first in the process. That as citizens of Earth, it is better to dream a thousand outcomes that end in intangible happiness, than to risk the chance of creating a doomed planet with one careless and irreversible action.

Works Cited

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