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The Oswald Review

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The Oswald Review
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in the Discipline of English

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CONTENTS:

Descended from Cain: The Biopolitics in *Beowulf* ................. 8

Jia-Ying Liu
National Taiwan University

Living “Long in a Cold Land”: Ecofeminist Perspectives on Environment, Culture, and “Othering” in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* ......................................................... 27

Bethany Pineda
Utah Valley University

*Robinson Crusoe* Crusades Against Traditional Ideas of Heroism ................................................................. 53

Sabrina Hess
Appalachian State University, NC

Submission Guidelines .......................................................... 68
Descended from Cain: The Biopolitics in *Beowulf*

Jia-Ying Liu

Grendel and his mother are especially noticeable for their notorious ancestry, which can be traced back to the biblical figure of Cain. To be specific, Grendel is referred to as “Caines cynne” [Cain’s clan], only a few lines after his name is first mentioned (Heaney l. 107). Later, Cain’s lineage is mentioned again when Grendel’s mother takes revenge for her son. Readers of *Beowulf* may be puzzled by the emphasis on Cain’s kinship to Grendel, and biblical allusions concerning Cain’s sin have received a significant amount of scholarly attention. Many studies examine the reference to Cain from a religious perspective. J.R.R. Tolkien, for example, notes that *Beowulf* is a blend of Norse tradition and Christianity, while James Phillips emphasizes the significance of Cain to the Christian tradition and mentions that, like their ancestor, Cain’s descendants represent a “dismemberment of the fraternal bond in which they come to stand over against human beings” (41). From Phillips’s perspective, the fractured bodies of victims and riven communities, which result from the violence of Grendel and his mother, could be associated with Cain’s sin of fratricide. Robert Stevick also examines references to Cain, arguing that “God gave requital for their strife against Him” to Cain’s descendants (85). Since Cain committed the sin of fratricide, Stevick deems that the curse on Cain and his clan is retaliation for their departure from God.
While the lineage of Cain has been interpreted from religious perspectives by many scholars, there has been little discussion concerning the performance of biopower in this poem. Biopolitical theories offer an explanation of Grendel and his mother’s marginalized status in Danish society and the political tension between them and the sovereign power. Such a reading also explains why Hrothgar needs to banish and even pursue the elimination of Grendel and his mother. The rivalry between the Grendelkin and the Danes is examined from the theory of biopolitics by Adam Miyashiro, who applies Giorgio Agamben’s concept of *homo sacer*, which refers to a person expelled from society and deprived of civil rights, to the poem. From Miyashiro’s perspective, the Grendelkin are *homo sacer* in a biopolitical settler colonial context since they are presented as “‘proto’-Indigenous people,” who threaten settler sovereignty (385). As Miyashiro parses *Beowulf* from a biopolitical perspective, he elaborates how the settler sovereignty of the Danes expands through violent actions that target marginalized and abnormal individuals, exemplified by the Grendelkin. However, Miyashiro makes no direct mention of Cain in his discussion of *Beowulf.* Instead, Miyashiro confines his discussion to the runic character ᚴ [eþel], which refers to an ancestral homeland and indicates “a cultural identity, one rooted in specific foundational narratives, and also defined by genealogy[,]” the suspension of which is a biopolitical state of exception that situates the Grendelkin as a threat to sovereignty (386-87). In this paper, I will extend Miyashiro’s

1 Miyashiro indirectly mentions Grendel’s relation to Cain within a citation of Peter Clemoes, who argues that Grendel is simultaneously presented as a cursed spirit “descended from Cain, who had been outlawed by God for fratricide,” and a “hateful savage outcast” (qtd. in Miyashiro 386).
biopolitical approach to *Beowulf* by relating the significance of Cain’s lineage to the theme of biopolitics and biopolitical colonialism.

Although there are biblical approaches to Cain’s lineage and studies on biopolitical themes in *Beowulf*, the significance of Cain regarding biopolitics is rarely analyzed. In light of the limitation of previous studies, this paper, by employing the theories of biopolitics and biopolitical colonialism, examines Cain and his posterity with the concept of *homo sacer*. I first argue that due to their blood relation with Cain, Grendel and his mother are innate *homo sacer*, born without protection from God or a sovereign. Next, this paper argues that Cain’s descendants not only innately embody *homo sacer*, but also are reduced to bare lives under Danish sovereignty because of biopolitical settler colonialism and Cain’s transgression against the patriarchal order. The formula from ancient Roman law in which Agamben locates the origin of biopolitics, *vitae necisque potestas*, denotes the father and the sovereign’s power of life and death over sons and citizens respectively. I propose that Cain’s fratricide is a usurpation of a father’s *potestas*, since the authority of killing sons is only granted to fathers, and due to the close relationship between the *potestas* of the father and sovereign in ancient Roman law, Cain also transgresses the sovereign’s authority. Consequently, Cain’s descendants deviate from both a patriarchal and a sovereign order. These deviations shed light on why his progeny are reduced to a state of bare existence, revealing the underlying political tension between *homo sacer* and Danish sovereignty. Furthermore, this paper extends the biopolitical theme to the whole poem, providing an explanation for the near total absence of a culture of feuding between Cain’s descendants and the Danes, whereas feud
is a recurrent theme of Scandinavian history as shown in other parts of the poem. This paper concludes that, similar to *homo sacer*, who are deprived of political and social lives, Cain’s descendants exist in a liminal space between the Danes and the non-human monster—the dragon—at the end of the poem.

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben takes up Michel Foucault’s theory of biopolitics and focuses on how lives are exposed to sovereign power with biopolitical means. He proposes that *homo sacer*, a concept borrowed from Roman law, is someone present within a society but paradoxically excluded and reduced to a bare life, which is, as Agamben puts it, a life “excluded […] from all political life” to the extent that “anyone can kill him without committing homicide” (183). Nevertheless, a person being excluded from the political realm does not result in his or her peripheral relation to the sovereign authority. Instead, *homo sacer* is included in the realm of the sovereign by existing “in a continuous relationship with the power that banished him precisely insofar as he is at every instant exposed to an unconditioned threat of death” (183). In other words, being reduced to a bare life, *homo sacer* is still vulnerable to the violence of sovereignty.

Within this framework, Cain’s descendants are *homo sacer*. After relating Grendel to Cain, *Beowulf* briefly brings up Cain’s sin, “þæs þe he Abel slog” [the killing of Abel] (Heaney l. 108), and God’s punishment for

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2 In Agamben’s discussion, the concept of bare life is derived from the two terms used by the ancient Greeks to denote life. The ancient Greeks made a distinction between bios, referring to the mode, manner, and existence of life, and *zōē*, pertaining to the biological dimension of life. Agamben’s concept of “bare life” presents a life stripped of all positive attributes that connect it to a social existence, existing solely as bios.
him, namely his exile. Cain’s situation makes him similar to the expelled and restless homo sacer. However, God’s mark upon Cain protects him from people’s homicide lest they suffer sevenfold vengeance, while homo sacer may be killed with impunity by anyone. Thus, although being outlawed by God and set apart from His land, Cain is essentially not homo sacer.

Cain’s descendants, nonetheless, carry the characteristics of homo sacer. The “geosceæft-gasta” [misbegotten spirits] (l. 1266) descended from Cain are innate homo sacer as they are born without protection from anyone, neither God nor Danish sovereignty. Being referred to as “heoro-wearh hetelic” [the banished and accursed] (l. 1267), Grendel serves as an example. Moreover, similar to homo sacer, Grendel and his mother are isolated from Danish society yet at the same time subject to its sovereign power. On the one hand, Grendel and his mother are presented as outcasts occupying marginalized roles in Danish society; on the other hand, they are significant enemies of the sovereign and victims of political violence. Thus, Grendel’s incursion into Heorot, a place that “embodies the achievement of civilization” (Halverson 600), not only troubles the Danish kingship and jeopardizes people’s lives, but also represents homo sacer’s transgression of sovereignty and civilization. The clash between the Danes and Grendel also resembles the expulsion and banishment of homo sacer by biopower.

As Agamben states, homo sacer lives in a “zone of indistinction and continuous transition between man and beast, nature and culture” (109). Similarly, Grendel and his mother also simultaneously exhibit animalistic, monstrous, and human-like characteristics. Grendel’s remarkable brutality and bestial strength are fully shown during his fight with Beowulf in Heorot,
where he kills people in a monstrous and primitive way, such as grabbing, mauling, and gorging on the Danes in lumps and limbs (Heaney l. 740-45). While Grendel’s ruthless and maniacal behavior makes him similar to a menacing beast, another notable and aberrant feature is his invulnerability to weapons, which makes him even more monster-like: “þone syn-scæðan / ænig ofer eorþan irenna cyst, / guð-billa nan gretan nolde, / ac he sige-wæp-num forsworen hæfde, / ecga gehwylcre” [that no blade on earth, no blacksmith’s art / could ever damage their demon opponent. / He had conjured the harm from the cutting edge / of every weapon] (l. 801-05). Grendel’s formidable and unnatural ability contributes to his monstrous and fiendish attributes. Similarly, Grendel’s mother could not be harmed by Unferth’s sword as it “bitan nolde” [refused to bite] (l. 1523) and fails Beowulf.

Nonetheless, Grendel and his mother by no means manifest pure bestiality and inhuman power. Grendel and his mother bear certain human traits and can be loosely identified as a male and female entity, respectively: “ðæra oðer wæs, þæs þe hie gewislicost gewitan meahton, / idese onlicnæs; oðer earm-sceapen / on weres wæstmum wræc-lastas træd, / næfne he wæs mara þonne ænig man oðer; / þone on gear-dagum ‘Grendel’ nemdon / fold-buende” [One of these things, as far as anyone ever can discern, looks like a woman; the other, warped / in the shape of a man, moves beyond the pale / bigger than any man, an unnatural birth / called Grendel by the country people / in the former days] (Heaney l. 1349-55). Moreover, Joseph Baird states that due to Grendel’s consanguinity with human society, Grendel is related to humans, yet to the most sinful part of humanity because he is Cain’s offspring (381). Thus, Cain’s descendants are also described as
marginalized and woeful beings. For example, Grendel suffers from enforced isolation: “Đa se ellen-gæst earfoðlice / þrage geþolode, se þe in þystrum bad, / þæt he dogora gehwam dream gehyrde / hludne in healle” [Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark, / nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him / to hear the din of the loud banquet / every day in the hall] (Heaney l. 86-89). Since Grendel is unable to join the feasts like the Danes, who are not excluded from political life as he is, the bustling Heorot distresses Grendel and he is consumed with “envy of the happiness and mirth” that presides there (Storms 428). The lonesome state of Grendel evokes a sense of his societal abandonment, positioning him as an outcast. Grendel’s mother also appears to possess human-like features as she is referred to as “ides, aglæc-wif” [monstrous hell-bride] (Heaney l. 1259) and “Wif unhyre” [ghastly dam] (l. 2120), indicating her deviant status within the human community rather than her being completely disconnected from social contexts.

Although Cain’s clan possesses contradictory and ambiguous characteristics that make them resemble not only beasts and monsters but also humans, they are separated from Danish sovereignty, and this separation is reflected in their dwelling and Grendel’s exclusion from the throne. The dwelling of Cain’s descendants, namely “mistige moras” [misty moors] (Heaney l. 162), reflects that Grendel and his mother are creatures who are left out and segregated from Danish society. Despite the presence of symbols of civilization within their abode, exemplified by “fyr-leoht” [firelight] (l. 1516) and “maðm-æhta” [treasure] (l. 1613), their dwelling starkly contrasts with the illustrious Heorot, which stands as a symbol of human achieve-
ment. Moreover, even after Grendel brutally intrudes into Heorot, “no he þone gif-stol gretan moste, / maþðum for Metode” [the throne itself, the treasure-seat, / he was kept from approaching] (l. 168-69). Grendel’s exclusion reflects the fact that he is God’s outlaw as well as a marginalized figure banished from the political center.

Apart from the physical segregation and restriction, there is a social demarcation between Cain’s clan and the Danes. Dale Spencer approaches the inclusion and exclusion of homo sacer with regard to one’s biological existence and social, political, and legal standing within a community. In Spencer’s words, even though a bare life is “physically in the community,” it is “constituted as not of the community” (223). In Beowulf, similarly, Grendel is treated as an outcast physically and socially. Being homo sacer, who must be banished from the political realm, Grendel has to be repelled once he violently enters into Heorot since this encroachment, besides imperiling the Danes’ lives, is a transgression of the domain of sovereignty and a disturbance of the boundary between people within the community and outcasts. Thus, there is political tension between the biopower of the Danes and the marginalized homo sacer, and it is imperative that Grendel and his mother be banished or, if necessary, eliminated from society. This political struggle might also explain the “hynðo” [humiliations] (Heaney l. 475) that the Danish king faces when he fails to cast the monsters out because Grendel’s intrusion is a violation of his sovereignty. On the other hand, Beowulf’s triumph over Grendel and his mother is an exemplification not only of an ideal fighter, but, more significantly, an ideal sovereign.

I now turn to examine how Cain’s descendants are not only innate
*homo sacer* but are reduced to *homo sacer* under the dominion of settler sovereignty. According to Miyashiro, this poem is value-laden in ways that impact the Anglophone world’s understanding of itself and of its race and lineage: “*Beowulf* has been central to race-thinking in Anglo-settler-colonialism” (385). Miyashiro discusses the relationship between Grendel and Danish sovereignty through the biopolitics of settler colonialism, and the power relations between the Danes and Grendel can be translated into that of the settler and Indigenous people, so that Grendel and his mother are presented as *homo sacer* in Danish society (385). Apart from being marginalized and erased from the settler community, according to Tomonori Sugimoto, Indigeneity is also incorporated into settler narratives and the national imaginary. Sugimoto takes Taiwanese Indigenous peoples as an example for how the incorporation of Indigenous people “center[s] settler experience and naturalize[s] settler dominance” (284). To extend Sugimoto’s idea to the poem, similarly, Indigenous people are not wiped out from the Anglo-settler history but are incorporated in historical narratives, only to be subjugated by the Danes and serve as an enemy.

Cain’s sin is significant to both Miyashiro’s perspective, which considers the Indigenous Grendelkin as *homo sacer* reduced to bare lives, and Sugimoto’s concept of an incorporated Indigeneity reflected in the poem. From a colonist’s perspective, being Indigenous people, Grendel and his mother “unsettle the Danes’ territorial and political stability” (Miyashiro 385), yet it is through the lineage of Cain that the Grendelkin are described as fiendish, resulting in banishment and subsequent elimination. Thus, the Grendelkin’s existence as Indigenous people explains the Danes’ hateful and
demonic recounting of Grendel and his mother as well as their human-like and pitiful descriptions. On the one hand, they are vulnerable Indigenous people, exposed to sovereign violence. On the other hand, they are Cain’s offspring, and thus diabolic and pitiless, as when Grendel is referred to as a “feond on helle” [fiend out of hell…], a “fyrena hyrde” [captain of evil] (Heaney l. 101, 750).

The Grendelkin’s existence as *homo sacer* could be further extended through the significance of Cain’s sin with respect to an ancient Roman formula, *vitae necisque potestas*. In ancient Roman law, “the first time we encounter the expression ‘right over life and death’ in the history of law is […] the unconditional authority […] of the *pater* over his sons” (Agamben 87). In other words, fathers are endowed with absolute power regarding their sons’ lives. Moreover, Agamben states that “the registries of the *ius patrium* and of the sovereign power [are] tightly intertwined” (88). Thus, he asserts that there is such a close relationship between the patriarchal power and the sovereign power to the extent that “the magistrate’s *imperium* is nothing but the fathers[’] *vitae necisque potestas* extended to all citizens” (89). In this way, patriarchal consanguinity greatly influences and even shapes the political power of life and death.

This correlation explains the Danes’ hostility towards Grendel. Following the logic of Agamben’s argument, Grendel’s ancestor, Cain, violates a patriarchal order by killing his father’s son with a sword (Heaney l. 1261-63). As Agamben emphasizes, the power of life and death “follows immediately and solely from the father-son relation” (88), and Cain oversteps the authority granted only to fathers by murdering his brother. This
act of fratricide disrupts the traditional father-son relationship as he seizes a father’s authority over his sons’ lives and deaths. Given that the power of the sovereign derives from the father’s *vitae necisque potestas*, Cain’s violation of the father’s prerogative can be seen as an encroachment upon the authority of the sovereign to exercise the power of life and death over its citizens. This act of fratricide by Cain not only profoundly disrupts the established patriarchal order but also unsettles the very foundations of kingship. Furthermore, Cain’s transgression extends beyond his earthly father, Adam, as he also defies and disrespects God, who holds the position of Father to all within the Biblical framework. Notably, Cain’s defiance is primarily directed towards God’s admonition rather than Adam’s, and he is later punished and banished as a wanderer by God. Hence, Cain emerges as a defiant son to the divine Father, rendering him a figure of rebellion from a religious standpoint and a violator within the sovereign order. As descendants of Cain, the Grendelkin disrupt both paternal and religious order as well as sovereign power.

In addition, as stated in the text with the phrase “no hie fæder unnon” [they are fatherless creatures] (Heaney l. 1355), Grendel and his mother represent irksome consanguinity, deviating from patriarchal social norms. Thus, the descendants of Cain not only encapsulate the unsettling legacy of Cain as a defiant son but also emerge from his fatherless lineage, thereby posing a threat to Danish kingship. The expulsion and extermination of Cain’s progeny, in this context, assumes an additional layer of political significance. It becomes imperative for Danish sovereignty to confront and eliminate these sinful beings to prevent the Danes from deviating from the established patriarchal and sovereign order, and the failure to adhere to
these norms could result in a loss of citizenship, transformation into *homo sacer*, and becoming subject to the very same miseries inflicted upon Cain’s offspring.

The biopolitical approach may also be applied to the theme of blood feud, which plays a central role in the Scandinavian history contained in *Beowulf*. Hrothgar effectively resolves the feud between Ecgtheow and the Wulfings by adhering to the principle of wergild, commonly known as “man-price.” This is demonstrated by Hrothgar’s statement, “Siððan þa fæhðe feo þingode” [Finally I healed the feud by paying] (Heaney l. 470). In addition to the past and settled feud, the poem also alludes to a feud that will take place in the future. Although Hrothgar “þæt he mid ðy wife wæl-fæhða dæl, / sæcca gesette” [hopes this woman will heal old wounds / and grievous feuds] (l. 2028–29), *Beowulf* predicts that the marriage between Freawaru and Ingeld will be a futile attempt to end the feud between the Heathobards and the Shieldings.

While blood feud is a severe and indelible theme with reference to Scandinavian historical narratives, it loses its relevance regarding fights between Cain’s descendants and the Danes. Although Grendel’s mother, who is referred to as the “wrecend” [avenger] (Heaney l. 1256), seeks revenge for *Beowulf’s* killing of Grendel, the conflict between Cain’s descendants and the Danes does not end after the death of Grendel’s mother. How the Danes manage their relationship with Cain’s descendants is different from how they have attempted to end other feuds, exemplified by the “man-price” that Hrothgar pays for the Wulfings and the marriage between Freawaru and Ingeld. From the Danes’ perspective, they hold no
expectation of Grendel making peace with them and ending the retaliation, which is captured in the following line, “ne þær nænig witenæ wēnan þorfte / beorhtre bote to banan folmum” [no counsellor could ever expect / fair reparation from those rabid hands] (l. 157-58). One possible explanation is that the poem is composed of “two complementary frames of reference, one heroic and one cosmetic,” namely one Germanic world and one Christian world (Osborn 973). Thus, the theme of feuding only appears in Germanic and pagan history and is almost absent from stories of Cain’s descendants, who are related to Christian elements. Nonetheless, this inconsistency of feud can be explained from the perspective of biopolitics. As mentioned before, “anyone can kill [homo sacer] without committing homicide” (Agamben 183). As the killing of homo sacer does not fall under the category of murder, Beowulf’s acts of violence against Grendel do not constitute a transgression against another individual or community. Consequently, the conflict between Beowulf and Cain’s descendants cannot be translated into the culture of feuding, and the elimination of Cain’s lineage evokes little retaliation or vengeance. In other words, existing as homo sacer, Grendel and his mother are essentially different from other Danes so that the banishment of them, regardless of the means taken, is permitted in Scandinavian society. Moreover, the one who kills them is not deemed a murderer, but a hero, and any reparation for the death of Cain’s descendants is unnecessary.

Lastly, besides Grendel and his mother, there is another monster that Beowulf fights: the dragon. Interestingly, as in the case of Cain’s clan, the dragon is almost invulnerable to weapons, so Beowulf fails to mutilate him at once as “bat unswiðor / þonne his ðiod-cyning þearfe hæfde, /
bysigum gebæded” [the blow / was far less powerful than the hard-pressed
king / had need of at that moment] (Heaney l. 2578-80). Besides being a
monster, Jane Nitzsche notes that the dragon symbolizes “the avarice of the
evil gold-king” (288); thus, the dragon also carries human-like characteris-
tics akin to an antagonistic king in a Germanic context. Nonetheless, there
remain differences between the dragon and Cain’s descendants. Marijane
Osborn writes that among the three monsters, “each antagonist is more
nonhuman than the last” (973). Although the poet narrates a story of how
the dragon becomes the guardian of the treasure, there is little information
regarding the dragon’s lineage. While Grendel and his mother are constantly
linked with Cain, the dragon’s ancestry seems to be less important. Thus,
unlike the Danes and Cain’s descendants, who live inside or on the edge of
human society, the dragon is presented as a monster who is wholly separate
from humankind. Compared to the dragon, Grendel and his mother are still
human-like and could be vaguely recognized as man and woman respec-
tively (Heaney l. 1349-55). The dragon, on the other hand, is described as
a “wyrm” [serpent] (l. 2567) who shares little or no physical resemblance to
humans. The dragon also appears to be less human-like and more legendary
than Grendel and his mother, exemplified by his power of spouting “hilde-
leoman” [deadly fire] (l. 2583). Furthermore, while Grendel’s rage against
the Danes might result from his marginalized situation in the community,
the dragon takes no interest in the social lives of the Danes. Based on the
similarities and dissimilarities between the dragon and Cain’s descendants, it
could be argued that Grendel and his mother are in-betweens—they are nei-
ther people in the Danish society nor animalistic and marvelous figures like
the dragon. This peculiar situation of Cain’s descendants illustrates why they simultaneously possess elements of both human and monster, and more significantly, Grendel and his mother’s in-betweenness make them resemble the marginalized *homo sacer*, deprived of social and political lives, yearning for recognition from the society yet expelled and expunged by the sovereign as if they are non-humans.

In conclusion, this paper has explored the significance of Cain in *Beowulf* through the lens of biopolitics, shedding light on the characteristics of Grendel and his mother as well as the power dynamics between the Grendelkin and the Danes. Firstly, owing to his blood relation with Cain, Grendel is innate *homo sacer*, who needs to be expelled from Danish society by the sovereign, and there is thus a political struggle between him and the Danish king. Moreover, from a settler-colonial perspective, the biopower of sovereignty shapes an asymmetrical power relation between settlers and Indigenous people. Since Indigenous people threaten to disrupt and unsettle the authority of the settlers, figures like Grendel and his mother are related to Cain, and they are only included in settler narratives to be reduced to bare lives, excluded from society, and constantly threatened with elimination. Then, the role of paternal authority in ancient Roman law is discussed, and since there is an affinity between violations of patriarchal social order and sovereign order, Cain’s fratricide makes him defiant of his father and God, violating the paternal norms and threatening sovereignty. Having established a biopolitical framework through an exploration of the significance of Cain, this study has expanded the biopolitical theme to other parts of the poem, shedding light on the absence of blood feuds between
Cain’s lineage and the Danes. Lastly, Grendel and his mother are situated in relation to the last monster in the poem, the dragon. Existing in the liminal space between the Danes and the dragon, Cain’s descendants are treated as merely quasi-human. By approaching *Beowulf* through a biopolitical lens, the descendants of Cain emerge as *homo sacer*, both dangerous and vulnerable.
Works Cited


In 1969 Ursula K. Le Guin permanently altered the landscape of science fiction when she published *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Despite making immediate waves in the science fiction community, the novel has since received a somewhat mixed reception. Twenty years ago, Christine Cornell noted that “with this novel there is no agreement on central themes or even the basic trajectory of the plot” (317). To this day students, scholars, and critics alike are not quite sure what to make of the story, its unusual narrative style (and frustrating narrator), or its human aliens who are simultaneously neither men nor women, and yet both men and women. In fact, the issue of gender within the novel has provoked a near countless wealth of literary criticism and interpretations. In response to the critical buzz, Le Guin published an essay in 1976, intending to clarify and defend her writing choices. In 1987, however, “uncomfortable with some of the statements [she] made in it,” she revised and republished that essay (“Is Gender Necessary?” 7). In both versions she makes a bold statement about the real subject of the book: “as far as I can see, it is a book about betrayal and fidelity. That is why one of its two dominant sets of symbols is an extended metaphor of winter, of ice, snow, cold” (8). And indeed, snow is such a near-constant presence on the planet called Gethen, where her story takes place, that outsiders call it “Winter.”

However, a central conclusion of Le Guin’s revised essay is her
own acknowledgement that her initial insistence on downplaying the role of gender in the novel was overstated. As she notes, “I had opened a can of worms and was trying hard to shut it. ‘The fact is,’ however, that there are other aspects to the book, which are involved with its sex/gender aspects quite inextricably” (8). A complete reading of the novel must therefore take both central themes—physical environment and sex/gender—into account. Therefore, this paper proposes to take Le Guin at her word, analyzing the novel’s environmental issues while at the same time not ignoring the issues of gender; thus, in order to better understand their relation. A primary purpose of the 1987 redux of “Is Gender Necessary?” was for Le Guin to present her own changing ideas around gender and sex within the novel. Some of these shifts were quite significant, such as the perhaps begrudging recognition of the central role gender plays in the novel’s core themes. Another change in Le Guin’s assessment worth discussing for its bearing on the remainder of this paper concerns the use of pronouns. Throughout the novel Le Guin refers to Gethenians with the “so-called generic pronoun he/him/his,” a choice that was criticized both immediately and regularly after the book’s publication (14-15). Though she initially defended this decision in the 1976 version of her essay, nine years later her redux conveyed a very different conclusion noting that using he/him/his as the generic pronoun “does in fact exclude women from discourse” and therefore unintentionally obscured the inherent female aspects of Gethenians (15). Further, she argues, “until the sixteenth century the English generic singular pronoun was they/them/their […] It should be restored to the written language, and let the pedants and pundits squeak and gibber in the streets” (15). In light
of this ardent reconsideration on Le Guin’s part, though quotations from
the novel will preserve the use of he/him/his in reference to Gethenians,
my own discussion will use they/them/their as the singular, non-gendered
pronoun when referring to Gethenians.

The novel follows the character and main narrator Genly Ai,
originally of Earth (called Terra), who is a representative of an eighty-world
interplanetary alliance. When the book begins, Genly is on the planet
Gethen, where he has spent two frigid years attempting without success to
convince the paranoid king of Karhide to join the alliance. Consequently, he
seizes the opportunity of summer to travel, eventually coming to the neigh-
boring nation of Orgoreyn where he makes another attempt at securing an
alliance. There he reunites with Estraven, a disgraced politician of Karhide,
his only supporter thus far. When Genly fails to take Estraven’s advice, his
plans backfire and he is imprisoned on a remote work farm. Estraven rescues
him, but the two are forced to make a dangerous sled-trek across a great
glacier, the Gobrin Ice, plagued by volcanic eruptions, shrieking blizzards,
frostbite, and starvation. It is only by finally learning to understand and
trust one another that they are able to arrive back in Karhide and realize
Genly’s mission.

Le Guin has called *The Left Hand of Darkness* “a book about
betrayal and fidelity,” in which the trek across the Ice forms the central
metaphor for the chief characters’ emotional journey ("Is Gender Neces-
sary?" 8). In fact, I argue that this environmental symbolism is much more
than a metaphor: the physical aspects of Genly’s journey on this alien planet
become the hinge on which the story turns and around which he will either
break down and fail in his mission or come to accept and join Gethen and the Gethenians, enabling his success. Ultimately, the core arc of the story is not merely how Genly Ai, First Mobile of the interplanetary alliance, the Ekumen, attempts to build an alliance with Gethen; it is the story of how Genly Ai, as a human being, forges a deep connection to another human being, Estraven, and the world on which they both now live. Gethen’s stunning landscapes and harsh climate, and even the cities the Gethenians have carved out of those landscapes, shape Genly’s mindset and attitudes. At times, he is unnerved by the rich colors of Karhide and profoundly unsettled by the pale, dreamlike quality of Orgoreyn. And yet, over time, as he comes not only to accept but deeply love his companion, Estraven, the landscapes mirror this change of heart, at times seeming to actively push it along. Broken by his time in Pulefen Farm, pushed on by volcanic eruptions, and taught by the curious Unshadow, Genly not only learns to accept the physical world of Gethen—he embraces it and even becomes a part of it. In the first chapter of his story Genly recounts a ceremony for the placing of a keystone in a great stone arch; the metaphor is not subtle (he does not intend it to be), and at the end of their trek across the Ice both Genly and Estraven will embody this metaphor. Ultimately, Genly’s mission cannot succeed until he has learned to embrace all of Gethen—its people and its climate, its cultures and its landscapes. The two are inseparable, and if he is to make an alliance with the people, he must also come to terms with its environment.

Despite robust academic discussion on the role of the environment in several of Le Guin’s novels, there is little scholarship available on the role
the environment plays in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Therefore, to better understand the intersection between culture and environment on Gethen, this paper will read the novel through a critical lens almost as controversial as *The Left Hand of Darkness* itself: that of ecofeminism, which combines aspects of both ecocritical and feminist literary theory to explore the phenomenon of “othering” that so often leads to oppressive societies. This theoretical lens, though popularized several years after Le Guin’s novel was first published, enables a reading of the novel that explores both Le Guin’s assertion that “one of its two dominant sets of symbols is an extended metaphor of winter” and the more subtle impacts of the critical controversy around gender in the novel (“Is Gender Necessary?” 8). Le Guin herself implies that just such a reading is not only possible but necessary when she notes that the environmental themes “are involved with its sex/gender aspects quite inextricably” (8).

Ecofeminist philosophy posits that the ways in which many cultures think in hierarchical binaries—separating “us” and “them” while placing one group clearly above the other—can also be seen in the human tendency to separate nonhuman nature and human civilization, enabling us to exploit nature more comfortably. In other words, just as we “other” people who may be different from us, we also “other” the environment we live in. Therefore, exploring the way people interact with their physical environment can shed light on intracultural othering and oppression. Considering the nature of Genly’s mission and, being an alien on Gethen, his keen understanding of what it is to be the other in a society, ecofeminism is a prime lens for understanding the personal and conceptual transformations
Genly experiences and the process he must go through to dismantle his own binary thinking. Although this paper seeks to focus on the roles that nature plays in the novel more than the role of Gethenian sexuality and culture, as Genly himself comes to understand there is no way to truly separate a culture from its environment. This is true as much for the Ekumen as it is for the Gethenians, making the dissolution of the nature-culture boundary a crucial element of Genly’s success or failure in realizing alliances. Read through this lens The Left Hand of Darkness becomes a prime example of ecofeminist literature, as Genly’s personal journey functions as a potential roadmap for readers’ own personal and societal changes.

**Ecofeminism and Science Fiction**

Val Plumwood argues that ecofeminism is a school of thought that “results from the application of feminist perspectives to problems of ecology” leading to a theory that seeks “a society beyond militarism, hierarchy, and the destruction of nature” (10). As many ecofeminists have noted, it is an inherently political theory grounded in a desire to understand oppressive social systems with the explicit goal of steering human society toward what Douglas Vakoch terms “liberatory alternatives” and a more egalitarian future (12; see also Otto 15, Murphy 46). Put another way, most ecofeminist texts will have two core goals: “exploring patterns of domination and unhealthy social systems and their causes” and “propos[ing] alternative lifestyles based on an ethics of care and respectful practices towards the other” (Alonso 216). As Jeffrey Lockwood argues, by drawing on a plethora of academic fields, “ecofeminism is a unique synthesis—not merely an odd assemblage—of
perspectives from which emerges a new way of seeing and engaging the world” (168). As an example of the scholarly diversity within ecofeminism and present in this very paper, Lockwood is an entomologist and pragmatic philosopher, and Vakoch—who has edited three of the ecofeminist anthologies that have informed this paper—is an astrobiologist and psycholinguist.

The work of philosopher Amy Chan Kit-sze adds an additional dimension to ecofeminist theory, and one which presents important concepts regarding the core argument of this paper. In analyzing the wealth of scholarship on the use of Daoist philosophy in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and other of Le Guin’s novels, Kit-sze identifies a trend of surface-level readings focused on “the general Daoist ideals […] such as *yin-yang*, ecology, [and] balance” (126). She proposes that the Daoist ideals in the novel run far deeper than have previously been realized, and that the *yin*, or feminine, principle in particular is inextricably woven into the novel, such that the success of Genly’s mission only becomes possible because multiple characters learn to embrace the *yin* principle in their own lives and leadership style.

Though her work focuses more on the philosophical and gender elements of Le Guin’s writing than the environmental ones, when taken in conjunction with the more ecologically focused scholarship in this paper Kit-sze’s arguments help elucidate potential alternatives to the problematic cultural mindsets presented in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

A final and perhaps most important argument to understand is that of Barry Pegg, who, at the time of this writing, has put forward one of the only accessible papers on the use of the environment within *The Left Hand of Darkness* itself. Pegg argues that Le Guin’s novel presents “extremes of
terrain” designed, “by a kind of environmental exaggeration, to get at the fundamentals of the human condition” (491). In essence, he posits that the extreme environment on Gethen, and the ways Gethenians are forced to adapt to that extremity, highlights not only the aspects of society that are most intrinsic to humanity, but also the traits that give a society the best chances of long-term survival. Thus, for Pegg, when Le Guin suggests the superior viability of societies that are predicated on “not only a real relationship between the people and landscape, but among the people themselves” she is also suggesting that our society would also benefit from a more cooperative relationship with our own landscapes and neighbors (490).

In terms of the resonance between ecofeminism and science fiction, Irene Alonso claims “since science fiction allows the reader to experience alternative realities, writers can depict ecofeminist ethics in practice” and propose balanced societies that “may encourage people to make them possible in the real world” (220). In other words, she suggests—and both Eric Otto and Pegg agree—that the genre of science fiction is particularly well-suited to explorations of the themes of oppression and liberation that make up the core of ecofeminism (Otto 36-37, Pegg 482). Similarly, Otto asserts that the field of ecofeminism, despite being relatively young (only achieving prominence in the late 1970s), can still be an effective lens for books written before the theory was fully developed as “certain works of science fiction […] have engaged with central ecofeminist issues at the same time as, and in some cases before, such issues provoked theoretical deliberations in more academic setting” (14). I suggest that The Left Hand of Darkness, published nearly ten years before ecofeminism became widespread in the late 1970s, is
a particularly interesting manifestation of Otto’s point.

By carefully tracking the way the narrators interact with and describe the environment in the last third of the novel, readers can identify trends of environmental interaction that both mirror and even spark Genly’s changes over time, as well as identify the ways in which Le Guin may have been pushing into the ecofeminist realm nearly ten years before it rose to prominence. To better understand these changes, I will begin my reading at the hinge point of the novel, where Genly’s own emotional transformation begins: the work camp at Pulefen Farm. It is at Pulefen that, for the first time since coming to Gethen, Genly experiences greater tension with the people around him than with the physical world. From Pulefen, this paper will follow Genly and Estraven past the volcanoes Drumner and Dremegole—whose violent eruptions signal dramatic change for both the physical and political worlds of Gethen—and across the Gobrin Ice, where Genly will first learn to accept Estraven as an equal and partner and even comes to lean into rather than fight against the stormy weather of Gethen. When the two return to human society they are sufficiently changed by their experiences to actualize Genly’s mission and bridge the cultural gap between the Ekumen and Gethen, embodying the red arches of Karhide with which Genly opens his report.

**Farms and Fences**

Discussion of the plot of *The Left Hand of Darkness* is often broken into three main “sections,” each based on Genly’s location: the Karhide chapters (one to five), the Orgoreyn chapters (six to thirteen), and the Ice
chapters (fourteen to twenty). This paper argues that the changes Genly undergoes in each region are not just a result of the people he encounters there; his relationship to the natural environment plays a significant role in his development. Each region is packed with details about the landscape, weather, and architecture that offer insight into Genly’s mindsets and current understanding of the people who live there. This paper will focus on the later events of the book, beginning at Pulefen Farm on the border of Orgoreyn and following Genly and Estraven onto the Ice.

The reason for this decision is simple: despite being more than two years into his mission at that point, Pulefen Farm is where the ecofeminist undertones of the novel—and, consequently, Genly’s own transformation—begin to make themselves known. Prior to Pulefen, Genly frequently shows himself in conflict with the world around him, both physically and culturally. For example, in the opening pages of his report, Genly mentions that he is dressed too warmly for the parade, as the weather is unusually hot ([Left Hand] 4-8). The Karhide chapters are rife with images of red stone, red buildings, even red trees, which contrast sharply against the white snows and create an almost constant feeling of tension. In Orgoreyn, with its “yellowish-white stone” buildings and grey thore-tree forests, Genly often remarks that the country feels strange and unreal (123). And although he claims it is a relief to be free of Karhide’s “color, choler, and passion,” it is in Orgoreyn that he first reveals his ability with Farfetching—a learned skill among the Ekumen which Genly describes as essentially “highflown speculation” and “the intuitive perception of a moral entirety” which readers might better recognize by the idiom “trusting your gut”; in Orgoreyn
Farfetching manifests as Genly’s intuitive realization that, despite outward appearances of peace and comfort, something is not quite right there (122, 157-58).

In these sections, Genly’s deep separation from his physical environment displays a mindset that Alonso terms “oppositional value dualism,” in which two connected concepts, such as human culture and nonhuman nature, are perceived as being in conflict with one another rather than being complementary (216). In short, the tension between Genly and the natural environment, particularly in Karhide, stems from his Ekumenical perception of nature as something to be fought against and domesticated. I say “Ekumenical” rather than “Terran” or simply “his” because the report of the Ekumen’s Investigator, “a woman of peaceful Chiffewar,” contained in chapter seven displays a similar mindset made explicit when she observes that “the dominant factor on Gethenian life is not sex or any other human thing; it is their environment, their cold world. Here man has a crueler enemy even than himself” (Left Hand 103, emphasis mine). Hence Genly’s almost childlike excitement when he arrives in Orgoreyn’s capital city to find the Orgota have beaten back this enemy with well-heated apartments, heavy blankets, and hot showers, leading to his exuberant declaration “Long live comfort!” (128).

Chapter thirteen, therefore, detailing the Pulefen Commensality Third Voluntary Farm and Resettlement Agency, forms the hinge of Genly’s report. It is here that he reaches his lowest moments, physically and mentally. And it is here that his fragile state begins to be reflected in the landscape, signalling the gradual modification of Genly’s oppositional,
dualistic mindset. For the first time since coming to Gethen, Genly records seeing fences. He is aware of the border fence in a contested region between Karhide and Orgoreyn, but he deliberately avoids going to see it himself (Left Hand 115). By contrast, at Pulefen Farm he is surrounded by fences. As a somewhat conspicuous alien on Gethen, Genly has been keenly aware of his status as “other” on the planet; but at Pulefen Farm, for the first time his brand of “other” also means “dangerous” and “less than,” resulting in the first instances of Genly being deliberately and inhumanely mistreated. Thus, the activity at Pulefen reflects a key attribute of ecofeminist theory: identifying a clear connection between the undue domination of nature and the “othered” group (Vakoch 2, Plumwood 12).

Despite the fences, Genly records that the forest is “carefully husbanded” at the Farm, so that it is not wasted or needlessly destroyed (Left Hand 189). Though a small detail, Genly’s use of the highly patriarchal term “husbanded” is itself significant from an ecofeminist perspective; it indicates Genly’s own understanding of Orgoreyn’s relationship with the environment at Pulefen as uniquely hierarchical on Gethen, and further characterizes the Orgota in a distinctly masculine way in relation to the freshly-feminized forest. At the same time, the Farm guards, “seldom harsh and never cruel,” ensure that the prisoners are not overworked either, adopting a similar mindset toward their workers as they take with the forest: “punitive, but not destructive” (189, 191). And yet, as Genly is put to work subjugating the thore-forest (as grey as his own new uniform), the doctor sets about subjugating Genly with drugs designed to make him mindless. Considered a political threat to the Commensality of Orgoreyn, Genly has been so thor-
oughly “othered” by the Orgota that they have created what Alonso terms a “logic of domination” (217). Which is to say, Orgoreyn’s leadership comes to see Genly (and the other prisoners) as so different from, and potentially dangerous to, themselves that they are no longer fully human; therefore, the forced use of mind-altering and other drugs—which effectively halt the Gethenian sexual cycle, the non-consensual use of which arguably constitutes the first known form of sexual violence in Gethenian history—become acceptable to Commensals and guards alike (Left Hand 190). Is it any wonder that Pulefen becomes the hinge point of his story? Here, for the first time, Genly is not unsettled by the forest, nor does he struggle against the snow; he is disturbed by the fences, drugs, and the realization that Gethenic-an culture can take the same dangerously inhumane turns that other worlds have.

It is fortunate, then, that Genly does not stay on the Farm for long. In chapter fourteen readers learn that Estraven has followed him to Pulefen and immediately works to break Genly out. Following their luck, Estraven succeeds in dragging a near-dead Genly off the Farm and, fortuitously, nature itself aids their escape in the form of a snowstorm that helps cover their tracks. After a few days of hiding out and recovering, the pair set off for the Gobrin Ice, hoping to return to Karhide and finish Genly’s mission. Before they can reach the Ice, however, they must pass through a natural barrier that acts as a kind of gate between the settled world of Orgoreyn and the wild, shifting glacier to the north: the twin volcanoes, Drumner and Dremelegole.
The Volcanoes’ Eruption

After the turn in Genly’s character arc at the Farm, his interactions with the environment also shift; once a source of tension and reflective of his own psychological state in Pulefen, as Genly and Estraven flee to the Ice the natural world begins to foreshadow and even instigate the next stages of Genly’s emotional development. It is here, in the true wilderness of Gethen, that *The Left Hand of Darkness* begins to fulfill the second key function of an ecofeminist text: exploring potential societies and behaviors that challenge patriarchal and/or dominating cultures and model what Murphy describes as “a process of radical transformation of the human connection, from the interpersonal to the political, [...] to end all forms of oppression” (42). Put another way, if we accept *The Left Hand of Darkness* as an ecofeminist text, then chapters one to thirteen present explorations of the harm inherent in oppositional value dualism, patriarchal thinking, and the tendency to “other” that plagues human societies today. Chapters fourteen to twenty use Genly’s personal transformation to explore potential methods of change for oppressive societies. In effect, Genly’s personal journey, reflected in his changing relationship to both Estraven and Gethenian nature, serves as a theoretical roadmap for our own personal and societal changes.

This transformation becomes clear as readers follow Genly and Estraven to and across the Gobrin Ice in perhaps the most well-known arc of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, recognizable enough that in 2021—more than fifty years after the novel was first published—the US Postal Service included it on their stamp honoring Le Guin. In this final third of the story, Genly and Estraven take turns narrating, each detailing their harrowing experi-
ences and the ways in which they were finally able, perhaps forced, to come together as equal partners and dear friends. For Genly in particular this journey is transformative, and he is finally able to see and accept Estraven for who they are. By extension, he comes to realize what he has misunderstood about his mission. He is not merely on Gethen to convince them to accept the Ekumen; he is on Gethen to learn to accept the Gethenians and their world. When he can finally do that, he will be ready to bring both Gethen and the Ekumen together, serving as a cultural bridge or keystone between them. Part and parcel of this process of becoming the keystone is Genly's learning to accept the planet as much as the people on its surface. What better place to do that than in its most extreme climates?

Shortly into their journey, as they seek a way onto the Ice, Estraven twice records a simple sentence in their journal: “Drumner is in eruption” (Left Hand 242, 243). The fact that Estraven not only records but repeats this sentence makes it clear that they place great significance on the eruption. Further, the fact that they are writing in a journal they intend for their child to one day read indicates that they expect their child to find it significant as well. These repeated sentences cannot be coincidence any more than the eruption itself can. If Genly and Estraven wish to climb up to the Gobrin Ice, they must first pass the gates of Drumner and Dremegole. By working their way past the volcanoes and onto the ice, Genly and Estraven pass a point of no return; from here on out, they deliberately work toward a change in Gethenian society, knowing that without change they will likely die, and possibly leaving Gethen to follow the path of other human societies into nationalism and oppressive totalitarianism. For several days of
their journey, Estraven notes daily in their journal the effects of the eruption, including that Dremegole has joined in “Drumner’s labor,” detailing the noxious fumes, raining ash and cinders, and the way larger debris melts the ice as it lands around them (243-245). I suggest that Estraven’s care in describing the volcanoes eruption is not simply a coincidence; there is something in this violent act of nature that resonates with their understanding of the mission they and Genly are on.

After their explosive destruction, volcanoes often leave behind lands rich for new life. They build islands, grow mountains, and can even melt glaciers. It is this last idea that Estraven latches onto, explaining a theory they once heard: “Eskichwe rem ir Her hypothesized that the volcanic activity in N.W. Orgoreyn and the Archipelago has been increasing during the last ten or twenty millennia and presages the end of the Ice, or at least a recession of it and an interglacial period” (Left Hand 242, emphasis mine). That Estraven chooses to include so much detail about the eruption indicates their tenacious hope that change is coming to Gethen. But it is more than mere hope. Like the prediction Genly once received from a group of seers back in Karhide, Drumner and Dremegole—Gethenian nature itself—offer a dramatic testimony of Genly’s mission and the impact the arrival of the Ekumen will have for Gethen. Thus, Estraven’s reference to the volcanoes is as “the dirty chaos of a world in the process of making itself. Praise then Creation unfinished!” (245). Later, Estraven’s actions will trigger an eruption in the political landscape, toppling the governments of Orgoreyn and Karhide within a matter of days. From the rubble, Genly is finally able to build the alliance he came for, creating new possibilities for both Gethenian
and Ekumenical culture. To do so, he must finally come to embrace the whole of Gethen—its people and the physical planet.

**A New Kind of Duality**

Another significant example of the way in which the environment mirrors, perhaps even spurs, Genly’s emotional transformation is the experience Genly and Estraven have in the Unshadow. In those days stuck in the strange “white weather,” the environment itself reinforces the idea that a new form of duality—not the oppositional, conflict-inducing dualism of both the Ekumen and Orgoreyn, but a more inclusive duality that embraces both sides of a perceived binary as necessary and co-dependent—is an ideal mode of being: a life embracing light with dark, sun with shadow. As Genly narrates the experience, “All brightness was gone, leaving nothing. […] Estraven stood beside me, but neither he nor I cast any shadow. […] The illusion was so complete I had trouble keeping my balance. […] I came to long for snow, for blizzard, for anything; but morning after morning we came out of the tent into the void, the white weather, what Estraven called the Unshadow” (*Left Hand* 280-281). Despite being softer and quieter than the howling blizzards that have besieged them on the Ice, the white weather is a no-less extreme environment produced by the complete absence of shadow; it is a world seemingly of pure light that results in an omnipresent dull brightness, a pale grey void that, for all its seeming unity, is a wearisome, unnatural place. It is so mentally and physically exhausting that even Genly comes to long for snow and blizzard, just to have a hint of shadow again.

This whiteness is exhausting to Genly because it is a world in
tension with the philosophical ideals that he has recently learned on this ice trek: he must reject the oppositional value dualism he has inherited from Terra and the Ekumen and instead embrace a more inclusive model of duality. The distinction is as crucial as it is subtle. According to Plumwood, “dualism is a way of construing difference in terms of the logic of hierarchy” where one side of the difference is seen as “alien to and of a different nature or order of being to the ‘lower’ side […] and each is treated as lacking in qualities which make possible overlap, kinship or continuity” (12). Therefore, in order to achieve a measure of kinship or continuity between Genly and Gethen, Genly must embrace a different model: duality, or difference without the need for hierarchy and confrontation. The way this model appears on Gethen is simply summed up by Estraven, who tells Genly “daylight’s not enough. We need the shadows, in order to walk” (Left Hand 286). This idea, which Kit-sze notes carries “a strong overtone of the yin-yang principle in Daoism,” is central to Gethenian philosophy and even provides the inspiration behind the title The Left Hand of Darkness (133). After Estraven rescues Genly and shortly before they arrive on the Ice, Genly and Estraven have a conversation about the yin-yang principle found in some of the Ekumen’s cultures and which appears—albeit without the black and white symbol readers will no doubt be familiar with—in the Handdara (Gethen’s philosophy-religion) beliefs. During this conversation, Estraven shares a poem that will eventually lend its opening lines to the very title of Genly’s report: “Light is the Left Hand of darkness / and darkness the right hand of light” (Left Hand 252). Later, in the aftermath of their time in the Unshadow, this poem prompts Genly to share the symbol of yin-yang
with Estraven (287). Building on Le Guin’s use of Daoist symbolism in this second scene of exchange, Kit-sze emphasizes how “the yin-yang principle aptly describes the sex of the Gethenians: they have both sexes in them. And when yin gets stronger, then the yang recedes, and vice versa. Nevertheless, they are dependent on each other” (133). Without this internal sexual duality in himself, Genly has held a world view based on oppositional and hierarchical dualism that has significantly hindered his ability to connect to the Gethenians. For Genly and Estraven’s mission to succeed, however, Genly must learn to accept and embrace not only both sides of the Gethenians, as male and female, but both aspects of himself as well. Within days of this philosophical realization, Gethenian weather itself, in the form of the Unshadow, reminds Genly that a life without both light and shadow is void.

Genly’s realization of this non-hierarchical dualism leads to perhaps one of the most moving passages in the novel as he describes his newfound understanding of Estraven’s nature: “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. [...] it was from the differences between us, not from the affinities and likenesses, but from the difference, that that love came: and it was itself the bridge, the only bridge, across what divided us” (Left Hand 266-267). This phrasing is strikingly similar to Alonso’s in her study of ecofeminist principles in science fiction, when she claims that “it is necessary to accept otherness as part of one’s identity if we truly want to embrace difference” (229). It is through Genly’s radical acceptance of Gethenian ambisexuality, culture, and even the weather he once hated that The Left Hand of Darkness fulfills the second goal of an ecofeminist
text: identifying and exploring potential solutions for the societal problems identified within the text. In short, Genly’s problematic Terran mindset of oppositional dualism can only be “fixed” by embracing a healthier, complementary form of duality in which difference is respected and embraced without placing preference on one side or the other. This second ecofeminist goal is reinforced by the final events of the novel, when Genly and Estraven make it off the Ice and back to civilization in Karhide.

**Placing the Keystone**

With Genly and Estraven’s newfound love providing insight into one another and, in Genly’s case, Gethen as a whole, he is finally ready to fill the role he came to Gethen for: to act as a true go-between for Gethen and the Ekumen, and to become the cultural keystone that will hold the arch of their alliance in place. I suggest that Kit-sze’s argument surrounding the *yin* principle goes deeper than the discussion of sexual duality, such that Genly cannot hope to establish an alliance with Gethen by remaining wholly Terran but must learn to embrace and embody the cultures of both the Ekumen and Gethen. In fact, Genly himself suggests that he was sent alone to Gethen for this very reason: “Alone, I cannot change your world. But I can be changed by it. Alone, I must listen, as well as speak. Alone, the relationship I finally make, if I make one, is not impersonal and not only political: it is individual, it is personal, it is both more and less than political” (*Left Hand* 279). If that phrasing sounds familiar, recall Murphy’s argument regarding the purpose of ecofeminist theory: “ecofeminism focuses on the future. […] Resistance [to oppressive systems] is not an end in itself but
part of a process of radical transformation of the human condition, from the interpersonal to the political […] to end all forms of oppression” (42, emphasis mine). That is to say, after all that Estraven and Genly have been through together, Genly has created that personal relationship with Estraven and now must create political bonds with Gethen.

Yet, from the outset of his report, Genly tells readers that the keystone will not be easy to place. It will require patience, discomfort, and sacrifice. This is best seen at the very start of his story when, bored by how methodically the king is setting the keystone, Genly asks Estraven about the red cement the king is using. Their answer is almost frustratingly concise: “Very-long-ago a keystone was always set in with a mortar of ground bones mixed with blood. Without the blood bond the arch would fall, you see” (Left Hand 5). Although Genly is not very subtle in setting up his metaphor, readers might be forgiven for hoping it will be just that: a metaphor for personal sacrifice, perhaps some suffering, but nothing the mortar-figure cannot come back from. Instead, in a heart wrenching moment that, in Genly’s narration, seems to arrive from nowhere, his ability to function as a cultural keystone is set with a more literal mortar: Estraven’s blood. In the end, it is their death that sets off the political eruption, clearing the way for Genly to build an alliance between Gethen and the Ekumen, and acting as a blood bond to cement the new cultural arch.

**Conclusion: No Longer Cold**

Otto observes “how certain works of science fiction […] have engaged with central ecofeminist issues at the same time as, and in some
cases even before, such issues provoked deliberations in more academic settings” (14). Despite the lack of ecofeminist critical attention it has thus far received, Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Left Hand of Darkness is precisely this kind of text. Although the novel was first published in 1969, nearly ten years before the ascendance of ecofeminism as a viable critical theory, Le Guin herself emphatically claimed that Gethen’s extreme environment was a conscious, metaphoric choice (“Is Gender Necessary?” 8). Genly’s journey is inextricably tied to his experiences with Gethenian nature, and through that relationship the novel explores, according to Pegg’s ecocritical reading of it, “which human systems are viable and which are not” (489). Genly’s personal transformation functions as a possible roadmap for our own personal and societal changes. Before the term “ecoﬁnism” was coined, Le Guin’s novel offers a thought experiment, claiming “the purpose of a thought experiment [...] is not to predict the future [...] but to describe reality, the present world” (Left Hand, xvii).

In sum, therefore, consider a final example of the ways in which Genly has changed, coming closer to not only Gethenian culture but to its climate, revealed only when he travels to Estre and the family of his dear friend. When Genly first shares a meal with Estraven, as one might expect, he is reluctant to walk out into the cold evening afterward, telling Estraven that “[he’s] been cold ever since [he] came to this world” (Left Hand 21). At several points throughout his account Genly notes the bitter cold, and the people he meets are often quick to note that he is more sensitive to it than they are. It is what prompts Commensal Shusgis of Orgoreyn to “treat him as if he were pregnant,” and what spurs an unspoken act of kindness
on the truck to Pulefen Farm, when the Orgota—prisoners themselves—are always sure to tuck him into the center of their warmth-huddle (125, 182-83). And yet, after their travels on the Ice and the death of Estraven cements him as the alliance’s keystone, Genly does not mention feeling cold again. In fact, when he travels to Estre and feels the wind coming off the Ice, Genly notes “I did not feel cold as I used to, my first two years on Winter” (321).

Once at odds with the climate of Gethen as much as with its people, over the course of his report Genly reinforces his changing opinions of Gethenians with his changing experiences with the environment. Freed from the confines of Pulefen’s fences and the subjugation of its doctors, Genly accepts the dramatic parallels Estraven saw between their journey and Drumner’s eruption by folding them into his narrative. Finally, atop the Ice, he learns from the weather itself the importance of inclusive duality, adapts to the harsh cold, and even becomes a part of the landscape itself when, upon their return to society, they come to embody the keystone and blood mortar that once so unnerved him. By establishing the metaphor of the keystone, Genly makes clear his real task: not to ingratiate oneself with political leaders, but to embrace the world on which they stand. Culture and climate are inextricable, on Genly’s Terra as much as Gethen or any other Ekumenical world; to understand and embrace the first, one must accept the latter.
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Otto, Eric C. “Ecofeminist Theories of Liberation in the Science Fiction of Sally Miller Gearhart, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Joan Sloncze-


In Daniel Defoe’s 1719 novel *Robinson Crusoe*, the eponymous character is shipwrecked on an isolated island for 28 years. While on the island, Crusoe farms on unfamiliar terrain, interacts with cannibals, allies himself with prisoners of uncertain loyalties, and confronts other harrowing obstacles to survive. Yet Crusoe is an ordinary man—he is not a superhero, he is not a god, and he does not have special powers. Could Crusoe still be considered heroic for braving obstacles on the island? Or is he simply an ordinary man? The question of Crusoe’s heroism, as well as heroism in general, has historically been a subject of debate. In western literature, heroism and ordinariness have historically been in tension with one another, for the male heroes of western literature were intentionally meant to be elevated above the ‘ordinary’ state of man. Heroes were fictionalized, idealistic, and fantastical; ordinary people, on the other hand, were real, lowly, and common.

In determining whether the character Crusoe is a hero or not, it is important to first consider what ‘heroism’ and its opposite, ‘ordinariness,’ even are. *The Salem Press Encyclopedia of Literature* defines a hero as an “ideal person (usually male),” who holds extraordinary qualities “meant to be admired and imitated, such as courage, leadership, noble sentiments, self-sacrifice, bravery, and strength” (Mercadal). When examining classic male heroes in western literature, the answer to the question of Crusoe’s heroism...
(or lack thereof) is not necessarily answered. For instance, within the *Labors of Hercules* and *The Iliad*, the main heroes, Hercules and Achilles, respectively, both display the heroic qualities of strength and bravery (Bernard 51; Homer 655). Additionally, both are made of extraordinary stock, for they are demigods (Bernard 17; Homer 903). As Hercules and Achilles demonstrate, a hero must have heroic qualities and come from divine or royal stock (Mercadal). Crusoe does not fit the classical understanding of heroism because he does not come from extraordinary stock.

Nonetheless, I assert that Crusoe is a hero. Crusoe shows that, when prompted, ordinary people can rise to the occasion and display heroic qualities. Suggesting that an ordinary person could be a hero was a radical departure from the thinking of the time. According to Elizabeth K. Leverington, during the early eighteenth-century historical heroes were seen as laughingstocks, and they were frequently the object of ridicule in western literature because they threatened the ideals of middle-class culture. At the time, there was a greater interest in characters within literature who reflected the British middle-class values of prudence, order, and careful management (48). Conversely, characters who displayed traits associated with historical heroes, such as ambition, pride, and a desire to fight/conquer, were less appealing to British readers. In fact, in early eighteenth-century Britain, the exaggerated, hyper-masculinized historical hero was more than just a joke—the hero was seen as harmful to the very core of British society itself (147–48).

This negative view of heroism was even seen in the works of eighteenth-century writers. For example, English poet and satirist Alexander
Pope criticized the historical male hero archetype in his 1733 *Essay on Man* by warning readers of the dangers that exist in trying to rise above or below one’s station in life (lines 128-131). Sticking to the ‘middle state’ of life (which I interpret as referring to the middle-class) was seen as preferable to the “low ambition” of the lower state and the “pride of kings” of the higher state (lines 1-2). Another popular writer, English novelist Henry Fielding, satirized the historical male hero archetype in his 1743 novel *The Life of Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great*. Jonathan Wild was a criminal who led a variety of thieves and extortionists, yet Fielding referred to Wild as an admirable “hero” in the novel (4). *Robinson Crusoe* made the hero a common, ordinary person, in sharp contrast to the typical depiction of heroes in British literature.

With texts such as *Robinson Crusoe*, the idea of heroism began to evolve during the eighteenth-century to include the ordinary man as a part of its new definition. Here, I am defining “ordinary” based on what it meant to the readers of *Robinson Crusoe*. To these readers, being ordinary meant to be English, male, and middle-class (Leverington 59-60). At the same time, the British reading public was rapidly expanding to include people who weren’t just upper-class. This expansion was the result of a growing print culture (Downing 53); thus, literature needed to evolve to appeal to a growing middle-class readership. Crusoe filled in this gap through displaying middle-class values and through being an ordinary man. Crusoe was not the classic traditional hero of ancient western mythology, which would not have been well-received in eighteenth-century Britain. Crusoe showed that heroism could be found within ordinariness by illustrating *who* can be
a hero, *when* a person can be a hero, *how* a person can be a hero, and, most importantly, *why* being a hero is significant.

**Who can be a hero?**

*Robinson Crusoe* was able to undermine contemporary, negative thinking about heroism by showing that anyone can be a hero, regardless of one’s background. Crusoe dispels the traditional notion that a hero has to come from extraordinary stock. He grows up with middle-class, ‘ordinary’ parents and lives in the “middle state” of life (Defoe 7). Crusoe does not display extraordinary intelligence or an extraordinary aptitude for anything. He instead has merely a “competent share of learning” (7) and is not trained in any particular field. Crusoe is a regular man, not particularly outstanding or special at anything. Crusoe even takes care to emphasize his innate Englishness—any parts of his identity that could potentially suggest a non-English link are dropped. For example, Crusoe tells the reader that his family’s name used to be Kreutznaer, but “by the usual corruption of words in England,” the name evolved to become Crusoe (7). Crusoe’s surname has been anglicized, making him even more of an ‘ordinary’ Englishman. Thus, Crusoe dispels the traditional idea of heroes being aristocratic, mythological, and highly skilled.

Crusoe also shows that anyone can be a hero, regardless of one’s gender. Crusoe uses femininity to cut through the classical idea that a hero has to be male. To curate specific definitions for terms such as masculinity and femininity, I have drawn inspiration from Toril Moi’s essay, “Feminist, Female, Feminine,” in which Moi defines femininity as “‘a set of cultur-
ally defined characteristics’’ (117). When I use the terms ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity,’ then, I am referring to the culturally defined characteristics that were applied to males and females in eighteenth-century Britain. At that time, tasks outside of the home, such as farming, harvesting, and so on, were considered masculine tasks. Tasks inside the home, such as cooking, organizing food, and cleaning, were considered feminine tasks. Essentially, it was “women’s responsibility for housewifery and men’s for husbandry” (Harvey 529). The physical boundary of the home served both as a physical divider for gendered tasks and as a metaphorical divider between the genders.

By taking on traditional female behaviors, Crusoe is not only able to undermine eighteenth-century thinking of heroes as hyper-masculine, but also to demonstrate heroism itself. While on the island, Crusoe develops the habit of organizing and storing food for the future, a task that was traditionally feminine for the time (Leverington 156). While organizing and storing food, Crusoe demonstrates the heroic qualities of strength and perseverance when he decides to save his rice and barley crop for the future so that he can achieve the more long-term goal of providing for himself. Accordingly, Crusoe demonstrates that one doesn’t have to engage in extremely masculine behaviors to be heroic; one can adopt traditionally feminine behaviors and still be a hero.

Yet Crusoe doesn’t just take on traditionally feminine behaviors—he also takes on traditionally masculine behaviors. For example, when Xury (Crusoe’s fellow slave at the beginning of the novel) and Crusoe are under attack, the pair rely upon traditionally masculine tasks to help them
survive—namely, shooting and skinning (Harvey 529). Facing off against
dangerous animals, Crusoe displays great bravery and strength as he musters
up the courage to shoot and kill (Defoe 28). George E. Haggerty argues that
it is Xury’s unwavering faith in Crusoe’s ability to succeed that allows Cru-
soe to “assume the masculine role to which he aspires” (79). Yet Xury’s faith
in Crusoe not only helps Crusoe assert his masculinity—Xury’s faith also
allows Crusoe to become braver and stronger. With the aid of a fellow slave
and by taking on behaviors traditional to both males and females, Crusoe
shows that heroism can be performed by slaves and by taking on behaviors
traditional to both males and females. Thus, Crusoe shows that heroism is
not the exclusive domain of aristocrats, free persons, or those of a specific
gender; anyone can be a hero.

**When can a person be heroic?**

In addition to establishing that anyone can be a hero, Crusoe dem-
onsrates that a person has the potential to be heroic when they are alone.
Ancient mythological heroes such as Hercules typically displayed heroism
with the help of others—either people/gods/animals would prompt Hercu-
les to perform heroic deeds (Bernard 23-24, 36), or people/creatures would
help Hercules overcome his obstacles with bravery and strength (Bernard
29, 55). Crusoe, on the other hand, demonstrates heroism on the island
in complete solitude. Food storage and organization, for instance, is done
in isolation with no one around; however, Crusoe still displays the heroic
quality of strength (Defoe 118). Crusoe’s solitary heroism shows that being
a hero is not conditional on other people being present, and shows that any
ordinary person can display heroism on their own.

Not only does Crusoe show that heroism can be displayed alone, he shows that heroism can be displayed internally, that a hero can face and overcome internal challenges. For instance, when Crusoe spots an English ship, the descriptive language of the novel allows him to articulate the nuanced complexity of his emotions: “I cannot express the confusion I was in, though the joy of seeing a ship, and one [...] manned by my own countrymen, and consequently friends [...] yet I had some secret doubts hung about me [...] bidding me keep upon my guard” (Defoe 212). Crusoe is simultaneously excited to see fellow Englishmen and fearful of the English ship because England didn’t conduct trade in the part of the world Crusoe is in. This moment of emotional confusion shows the reader that there can be times when a hero feels lost and unsure what to do; in essence, Crusoe shows that a hero can display the fears and worries of ordinariness at times. A hero does not have to be courageous and strong all of the time in order to be a hero. Instead, a hero can feel afraid and worried. The idea of a hero displaying confusion runs counter to the classical idea of heroism, which was founded upon the idea of always knowing exactly what to do—Goethals and Allison, for instance, describe the opposite of heroism with words such as mystery, the unknown, and incompleteness (8). Crusoe occupies a role of the unknown, showing that a hero does not have to be heroic all of the time—a person can experience the confusion and hesitation of ordinariness at times and still be a hero.

Crusoe is ultimately able to overcome his internal emotional struggle upon seeing the English ship by deciding to let his moral compass deter-
mine his actions. When the English ship lands on the island, Crusoe decides to launch a rescue mission to save a group of Englishmen imprisoned on the ship. Crusoe feels compassion for the prisoners and articulates his empathy when recalling his own frightening first day on the island: “This put me in mind of the first time when I came on shore […] what dreadful apprehensions I had; and how I lodged in the tree all night for fear of being devoured by wild beasts” (Defoe 213). Crusoe remembers his own intense fear upon arriving at the island, and by extension feels pity and understanding for the English prisoners. By following his moral compass, Crusoe successfully overcomes his fears and saves his fellow Englishmen. Crusoe demonstrates to readers that it is possible to display heroism, even when one is confused and lost. In fact, Crusoe reveals that heroism can be displayed through being unsure and scared—Crusoe conquers his fear to exhibit great bravery.

When saving the prisoners, Crusoe displays heroism both externally and internally. Heroism was typically displayed externally in western literature—Hercules and Achilles, for example, both display heroism in very external ways. Crusoe externally organizes an attack on the prisoners’ captors and helps the prisoners fight by providing them with weapons. Conversely, heroism was not displayed internally in the literary western tradition. Yet Crusoe internally overcomes his fears by following his moral compass, feeling pity and compassion, and mustering up the courage to save the prisoners (Defoe 217, 215). Through showing heroism both externally and internally, Crusoe demonstrates the temporal fluidity of heroism: heroism can occur with and also without people, heroism can occur with and also without emotional turmoil, and heroism can occur with and also
without external challenges.

**How can a person be a hero?**

Crusoe offers a nuanced guide to heroism for readers to follow when making difficult, emotionally confusing decisions, such as when Crusoe sees the English ship. When faced with situations that demand great bravery in choosing whether or not to save other people’s lives, Crusoe suggests that following one’s moral compass should be the appropriate strategy to use—this is seen when Crusoe makes the decision to save the English prisoners. On the other hand, with situations that demand great strength in choosing whether or *not* to kill people, Crusoe shows that following one’s sense of logic and reason rather than one’s moral compass should be the appropriate strategy. Crusoe illustrates a nuanced understanding of heroism when it comes to using one’s logic and reason; there are some instances when Crusoe decides to kill and other instances when he decides it is better not to kill. Thus, Crusoe demonstrates that a strategy of pure violence, commonly seen with traditional heroes, is not the only way to display heroism (Sugg 126-27).

Crusoe’s decision to follow his personal sense of rationality and logic is seen when he views the aftermath of cannibalism for the first time on the island. Crusoe initially experiences great shock and horror (Defoe 142) and leans into his animalistic, natural instincts—Karen Downing would call such instincts Crusoe’s ‘explorer’ side, the side of Crusoe that represents the natural urges and dreams/aspirations of the middle-class Englishman (173). Crusoe is at first entirely focused on violence, strategizing
how he might “destroy some of the monsters in their cruel, bloody enter-
tainment” (Defoe 144). However, as time progresses, Crusoe rationalizes the
event and leans into his more practical, logical side—what Downing would
call his ‘settler’ side (173)—“When I considered this a little, it followed nec-
essarily that I was certainly in the wrong; that these people were not mur-
derers […] any more than those Christians were murderers who often put
to death the prisoners taken in battle” (Defoe 147). Crusoe rationalizes and
adjusts how he perceives the event, which allows him to make the decision
to respect and leave the Indigenous people whom Crusoe assumes engaged
in cannibalism alone. Therefore, Crusoe uses morality when deciding if he
should save and rationality when deciding if he should kill.

Nonetheless, Crusoe’s choice to follow his sense of reason is compli-
cated. Later in the novel, Crusoe does eventually kill some Indigenous peo-
ple who are about to kill (and, assumedly, enact cannibalism) (Defoe 173).
Even so, this situation is not a reversal for Crusoe; in this instance, Crusoe
steps in to protect a young man, whom Crusoe comes to later call Friday,
from being killed. If Crusoe had gone on a murderous rampage when he
initially viewed the aftermath of cannibalism, there wasn’t anything he could
have done. Those people were already dead. It would have been a case of
outright revenge. When confronted with a situation where he has the ability
to protect someone’s life, Crusoe steps in and acts accordingly. In this latter
situation, Crusoe is not acting out of pure malice and revenge; rather, it is a
desire to help and protect. In this fashion, Crusoe offers a nuanced under-
standing of heroism that there is not necessarily a one-size-fits-all approach.
When Crusoe first views the aftermath of cannibalism, the more heroic
behavior is to leave the Native Americans alone. When Crusoe sees a young Indigenous man fleeing for his life, Crusoe steps in and saves him.

Crusoe also demonstrates heroism through his leadership, which is another quality identified as heroic (Mercadal). Crusoe’s approach to heroic leadership indicates that one does not have to know exactly what to do all the time—rather, heroism means being willing to listen to others so that one can make the best possible decision. When Crusoe is launching an attack on the mutineers, he listens to the Captain’s advice, which is that the group should not attack in small numbers because they would be overtaken by the mutineers. The Captain’s advice prompts Crusoe to lead his group in staying the mutineer’s boat, which weakens the mutineers’ ability to assist one another and allows Crusoe and his group to successfully fight the mutineers later in the novel. Further, when Crusoe wants to save the Spaniard’s shipmates, he listens to the Spaniard’s advice to wait half a year so that Crusoe and his companions can cultivate enough food for the increased number of people. However, Crusoe is not perfect at being a leader. For example, when the Captain disagrees with Crusoe’s decision in letting the mutineers stay on the island, Crusoe quickly reminds him that the prisoners are his, not the Captain’s (Defoe 207-32). Crusoe’s quick dismissal of the Captain’s concerns is not a very considerate and thoughtful way to listen to another’s opinion. Crusoe’s leadership is thus flawed—he is effective sometimes and ineffective at other times when it comes to leading.

In addition to demonstrating leadership through a willingness to hear different opinions, Crusoe demonstrates leadership through a willingness to concede power. Crusoe shows that heroic leadership means to
recognize other people’s talents and assign leadership positions accordingly. When fighting the mutineers, Crusoe dubs himself the “generalissimo” and Friday the “lieutenant-general” (Defoe 222), which speaks to Crusoe’s ability to grant others power. Further, after Crusoe has saved Friday’s father and the Spaniard, he decides to give each their own role in helping to run Crusoe’s home. Yet Crusoe does not always make the most logical decisions as a leader. When Crusoe places the Spaniard in charge of Friday and Friday’s father as they cut trees, it does not make the most logical sense. Crusoe knows Friday well and has reason to trust him. Making Friday the leader would make more sense. The Spaniard, on the other hand, is a stranger. It does not make sense to trust the Spaniard with such an important responsibility. Crusoe’s leadership in terms of giving others leadership roles, then, is also flawed—he makes logical decisions sometimes and illogical decisions at other times.

As a hero, Crusoe shows that one must be nuanced. When it comes to morality and rationality, Crusoe shows that a hero must know whether to use one’s sense of logic or one’s morals depending on the situation: morality should be used when deciding to save people and rationality should be used when deciding to kill people. Every situation, Crusoe illustrates, demands a unique response. Crusoe’s interest in pivoting between different approaches applies to his leadership as well. Crusoe takes on a leadership role in Robinson Crusoe and wields his power in such a way that he at times listens to different people’s opinions and at other times gives different people leadership positions. Crusoe, nevertheless, is ultimately an imperfect leader, showing that he is an ordinary man capable of heroism. Crusoe does not dis-
play heroism *all* of the time—when Crusoe is overwhelmed by emotion or when he lacks thoughtfulness and tact, he does not act like a hero. Crusoe’s nuanced approach to heroism—that it differs depending on the situation—offers a more flexible understanding of how to be a hero.

**Why is being a hero important?**

Crusoe expresses multifaceted heroism by expanding upon *who* can be a hero, when a person can be a hero, and how a person can be a hero. Crusoe develops who can be a hero further by broadening the background of a hero: a hero neither needs to be aristocratic/god-like nor free nor only masculine. Crusoe also develops *when* a person can be a hero: in solitude or in their performance—for example, when Crusoe saves English prisoners, he *externally* organizes an attack and *internally* overcomes his emotional turmoil. Crusoe also expands *how* a person can be a hero: morality should be used when deciding to save others, rationality should be used when deciding to kill, and leadership can be displayed by listening to others and also by giving others leadership roles. Crusoe pushes against traditional notions of heroism in western mythology in terms of who, when, and how. This allows Crusoe to serve as a map for readers to follow, empowering readers to assume the role of hero in their own lives.

By broadening the traditional definition of heroism seen in western mythology, Crusoe effectively carves out a new role in society for heroes to occupy. This new role is the contentious middle state, which Crusoe’s father had encouraged him to occupy at the beginning of the novel. Crusoe applies his father’s idea of the middle state to heroism rather than wealth and illus-
trates to readers that the ideals of the heroic ‘higher state’ and ambitions of the ordinary ‘lower state’ can successfully come together as one, despite the pair being seen as conflicting ideals to eighteenth-century readers. A middle state, as Crusoe defines it, refers to a state of being in which one is ordinary at times (the ‘lower state’) and heroic at other times (the ‘higher state’). Crusoe displays his newly-created middle state role of heroism through seemingly contradictory ideals: masculinity versus femininity, heroism occurring externally versus internally, heroism centering around morality versus rationality, and heroism occurring at some times and not at others. Crusoe displays heroism in all of the aforementioned ways, demonstrating that the middle state of heroism doesn’t result in a clash of competing ideals: rather, the middle state of heroism results in a co-existence, a concurrence, of competing ideals.

Crusoe makes the benefit of occupying such a middle state of heroism clear as the novel progresses. He starts to experience more and more peace as he displays more and more instances of heroism: “Thus I lived mighty comfortably, my mind being entirely composed” (Defoe 117). Crusoe is calmer and allows his ordinariness and heroism to work together, which lets Crusoe live up to his true potential. Crusoe empowers readers, making heroism less about power and exclusivity and more about ordinariness and inclusivity. Many of Crusoe’s eighteenth-century middle-class readers were experiencing a clash between their true, honest desires and what society expected of them (Downing 168). These readers were restless and sought solace in fiction. Through the form of fiction, Crusoe translates what was a primarily fictional, idealized hero archetype into a possible reality for
readers. Crusoe empowers and challenges his readers to carve out the role of the heroic middle state in their own lives. Such empowerment allows readers to align their ambitious desires with the rigid social expectations they face and live up to their true potential.

While heroism has expanded today to include people in real life (Harris 2) as well as people who do not fit the traditional, mythological trope of being straight, white men (Wendt 1), one important point Crusoe makes about heroism is largely forgotten today: there is a potential hero in all of us, in every single person. Today, while we have broadened who can be a hero in terms of race, sexuality, and gender (1), many people still only consider celebrities, major historical figures, and authority figures to be the ones capable of being real-life heroes. The idea that everyone has the potential to be heroic in their everyday life gets overlooked. If we were to think about this concept, that everyone has a potential hero inside them, people would be more encouraged to be kind, good, and heroic to one another. If everyone recognized their inner hero, the line between fiction and reality would become more blurred, allowing fictional concepts such as heroism to exist in everyday life. Perhaps one day, people will not need to turn to fiction to reconcile their own competing desires, as Crusoe’s readers did. Perhaps, one day, people will need to only look within.
Works Cited


Leverington, Elizabeth Kukorelly. “Domesticating the Hero: Normative Masculinity in ‘Robinson Crusoe’ and ‘Pamela, or Virtue Reward-


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