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**VYUŽITÍ „POLITENESS THEORY“ K ANALÝZE
DÍLA THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS**

Bakalařská práce

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**USING POLITENESS THEORY TO READ
URSULA K. LE GUIN'S LEFT HAND OF
DARKNESS**

Bachelor thesis

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Prohlašuji, že jsem práci vypracovala samostatně s použitím uvedené literatury a zdrojů informací.

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ABSTRACT

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This bachelor thesis deals with the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin. The science-fiction novel is set on the planet Gethen, which is inhabited by ambisexual humans who do not have a set gender. The goal of this thesis is to explore the importance of cultural themes in the novel and describe the impact of cross-cultural misunderstanding on the plot. Le Guin was born into the family of an anthropologist Alfred Kroeber and a writer Theodora Kroeber; these factors have greatly influenced her work and the themes she explored in her novel. She worked with anthropological and sociological concepts, both real and made up, such as *shifgrethor*, which can be likened to the concept of 'face'. The thesis uses Brown and Levinson's politeness theory; context, as it was described by Hall and Livermore; and Leung and Cohen's framework of 'dignity/face/honour' to identify cross-cultural differences and communication barriers in the novel.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. UNDERSTANDING THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS	3
Plot of <i>The Left Hand of Darkness</i>	4
Important characters of <i>The Left Hand of Darkness</i>	5
Themes of <i>The Left Hand of Darkness</i>	6
III. FACE AND POLITENESS IN THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS	10
Politeness Theory	10
Context	12
Dignity, Face, and Honour	13
Shifgrethor.....	15
IV. SCENE ANALYSIS	17
The Supper Scene.....	17
The Mishnory Reunion Scene	24
V. CONCLUSION	28
REFERENCES.....	31
SHRNUTÍ	33

I. INTRODUCTION

This thesis focuses on the importance of cross-cultural misunderstanding as a theme of the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin. Le Guin is an American author of science-fiction and fantasy novels; *The Left Hand of Darkness* is her most groundbreaking work. Le Guin has anthropological background which has influenced her unique way of world-building and creating characters. The thesis uses the framework of politeness theory, developed in 1978 by Penelope Brown and Steven C. Levinson, and focuses on its concept of face. It also focuses on high and low context, described by Edward T. Hall and subsequently, David Livermore; and the Culture x Person x Situation (CuPS) approach and its dimensions of dignity, face, and honour, developed by Angela K.-Y. Leung and Dov Cohen in 2011. These theories are used to analyse interactions between characters of the novel and determine how misunderstanding influences the plot and their relationship.

The main focus of the thesis is on the central relationship of two main characters, Genly Ai and Therem Harth rem ir Estraven. The goal of the thesis is to determine the factors which influence the relationship of Ai and Estraven, and explain their importance to the plot. The thesis argues that the miscommunication between the two characters, which is central to the plot, is a direct result of the fact that each of them is native to a different culture and their notions of politeness and the rules of social interactions differ significantly. The concept of *shifgrethor*, the Gethenian word for face, functions as a barrier between the two characters, together with their perceptions of each other, which are influenced by the fact that Ai cannot comprehend Gethenian ambisexuality and Estraven does not understand the concept of ‘masculinity’, as we know it. Gender comes into play as a powerful factor of misunderstanding.

The first chapter of this thesis introduces Le Guin and her background in anthropology; it explains Le Guin’s approach to writing science-fiction as a thought-experiment—science-fiction describes the present, rather than predicts the future; comments on *The Left Hand of Darkness*, its characters, plot and themes (mainly gender, betrayal and fidelity) and the author’s opinion on them. The chapter mentions relevant points made by Le Guin in relation to these themes and their reception by the critics.

Chapter two is divided in four parts. The first part focuses on the concept of face from the politeness theory. It comments on the theory and its basic principles, explains the

concept of face, and introduces face threatening acts, which are vital for understanding politeness. The second part of the chapter focuses on politeness in the cultures of the fictional planet Gethen from the novel. It uses the cultural dimension of high and low context to explain the differences between Genly Ai and Gethenians, and how they influence their perceptions of one another. The third part refers to the Culture x Person x Situation approach to define Gethenian cultures in the framework of dignity/face/honour cultures. The fourth part focuses on *shifgrethor*; it explains the meaning of the term and demonstrates how it influences the social behaviour of Gethenians. It notes *shifgrethor* as one of the primary reasons why Ai fails to understand Gethenians.

Chapter three focuses on two scenes from the novel and offers a detailed analysis of the conversation of the two main characters and their interactions. These two scenes are noted as central to the development of the relationship of Ai and Estraven and therefore are considered important for the furthering of the plot. Each scene is analysed using the previously explored frameworks and theories, and commented on from the point of view of cross-cultural interaction and misunderstanding.

The thesis aims to show how cultural differences shape the way the two main characters interact with each other. Various factors of misunderstanding are revealed and commented on; it is highlighted how each of the described culture theories brings unique insight into the relationship of Ai and Estraven and bears significant influence on their interactions.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS

Ursula K. Le Guin, born Ursula Kroeber, was an American author. She was born in 1929 in California and died in 2018 in Oregon (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, n.d.). She wrote mainly in the genres of fantasy and science-fiction, although her bibliography also includes non-fiction as well as poetry (White, 1999). Her first published piece of writing was a book review in 1958, followed by a short story in 1961 and a commercial story in 1962 (Cummins, 1990). Le Guin's first novel, *Rocannon's World*, was published in 1966. It introduced the Hainish Cycle, her famous series of science-fiction works, which includes nine novels and several additional works. Le Guin's most famous work in the genre of fantasy is *The Wizard of the Earthsea*, which was written for children. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, n.d.)

Le Guin wrote science fiction as a thought-experiment, rather than considering it to be extrapolative. According to Le Guin (1993), extrapolative science-fiction works with the concept of how the world might develop from what it is now; a thought-experiment is based on creating a situation or a setting and imagining what it could be like. In her introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin expresses her opinion that '[s]cience-fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive' (Le Guin, 1993, p. 151); the purpose of thought-experiments is not to try to predict the future, but to describe the present. She uses Schrödinger's famous thought-experiment with the cat in the box as an example that, in fact, future cannot be predicted (Le Guin, 1993). Le Guin created thought-experiments which deal with exploring the nature and possibilities of culture, language or gender.

Le Guin's previous experience with anthropology has presented a significant advantage for her; her father, A. L. Kroeber, was a world-renowned anthropologist (Cummins, 1990) who, alongside C. Kluckhohn, developed the pattern theory of culture. This is a theory which argues that recurrent elements of culture (patterns) should be understood apart from social structure—patterns are independent on individuals (Jenks, 1993). Le Guin herself stated that through her parents' work, she had discovered many cultures they had examined and written about; her mother Theodora Kroeber was a writer who concerned herself with Native American tales and culture (Cummins, 1990). Anthropology influenced Le Guin in terms of the themes she used in her writing, but it also bore an influence on her choice of protagonists for some of her novels. In the Hainish Cycle novels, several protagonists are anthropologists or ethnologists who explore new worlds (Cummins, 1990).

The Left Hand of Darkness is a science-fiction novel published in 1969 by Ace and Walker as the fourth novel of the Hainish Cycle (Ursula K. Le Guin—Bibliography, n.d.). It won the Hugo and Nebula Awards and became one of the most critically acclaimed works in the field of science-fiction. (Ursula K. Le Guin—*The Left Hand of Darkness*, n.d.). The Hainish Cycle is a series of novels about worlds which are a part of the Ekumen of Known Worlds, an alliance of planets colonized by humans, the main purpose of which is to coordinate contact between the worlds and oversee the exchange of knowledge and goods (Cummins, 1990).

Many critics consider gender to be the central theme of the novel; Le Guin herself had originally stated that she regarded betrayal and fidelity to be the most important themes (Le Guin, 1993), though in the years following the first publication of the novel, she changed her mind and attributed gender its importance as a theme of the book (Cummins, 1990; Le Guin, 1993). We can further say that culture, miscommunication, misunderstanding and social relations are also important themes of the novel.

Plot of *The Left Hand of Darkness*

The plot of the novel is centred around an Ekumen ambassador, Genly Ai, who arrives on the planet Gethen to convince its inhabitants to join the Ekumen of Known Worlds. Gethen has previously been visited by Investigators who gathered information on the planet and its inhabitants, naming it Winter because of the Ice Age the world is in. Ai lands in the country of Karhide, where he commences his efforts. His main supporter and aide is the prime minister of Karhide, Therem Harth rem ir Estraven, who is in favour of joining the Ekumen and opening trade with other planets. Despite his/her help, Ai does not trust Estraven, because of the cultural gap between them.

The story itself begins one day before Ai's long-anticipated audience with the king of Karhide. However, due to Estraven's fall from the king's grace, the audience does not end well for Ai and the Ekumen. Ai then travels to the neighbouring land, Orgoreyn, where he resumes his efforts; subsequently, it is revealed that Estraven have planned for this to happen, because s/he believes that Ai has got a chance of succeeding in Orgoreyn, and Karhide will have to follow Orgoreyn and join the Ekumen too. However, Orgoreyn is a country where things are not what they seem to be, and Ai is arrested and imprisoned on a work farm. He is saved by Estraven who have come to Orgoreyn in his/her exile. Together, they undergo a long journey over the ice sheet back to Karhide; during this journey, Ai

learns to understand the people of Gethen and their culture and forms a relationship of trust with Estraven. After their return to Karhide, Estraven sacrifices his/her life to aid Ai's cause and Ai returns to the capital. The novel ends with Gethen joining the Ekumen. (Le Guin, 1969)

The plot of *The Left Hand of Darkness* is heavily influenced by paradoxes. Le Guin turns around the trope of human versus alien, and puts one lone human on a planet of aliens, therefore making him the 'alien' of the story. Ai is the source of another paradox – he is a diplomat sent to Gethen, but he cannot act diplomatically, because he does not understand the way diplomacy works in a society foreign to him. A third paradox is presented in Ai's and Estraven's relationship; Estraven is Ai's best friend on Gethen, the one who puts the most trust in him and his mission; despite this, Ai considers him/her to be an enemy who deceived and betrayed him.

Important characters of *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Genly Ai. Genly Ai is a male born on Earth, who has been sent to the planet Gethen as the First Mobile by the Ekumen. His purpose is to convince the Gethenians to join the Ekumen. He is described as tall and dark-skinned. Since he was born and raised in a bisexual society, he does not understand the ambisexual Gethenians. Because of his permanent male gender, Gethenians consider Ai to be a 'pervert', which is a term they use for Gethenians who only have one gender at all times. Ai values qualities traditionally associated with the masculine gender—directness, strength, and courage; he continuously tries to attribute gender to the Gethenians he meets, dividing them into 'masculine' and 'feminine'. When he is not influenced by his prejudices, he is a curious and caring person.

Therem Harth rem ir Estraven. Estraven is a Gethenian, therefore ambisexual. S/he is the prime minister of Karhide and lord of the Domain of Estre. Estraven cares for the good of all people of Karhide, and in a wider sense, Gethen; therefore, s/he wants Gethen to join the Ekumen to establish trade with other planets of the universe. Estraven is determined, brave, curious, and interested in what Ai has to say about the world outside of Gethen.

Argaven XV. Argaven XV or Argaven Harge is the king of Karhide. S/he is described by both Estraven and Ai as insane, fears that his/her power is threatened by the Ekumen, and dwells on his/her personal pride and honour. Argaven does not believe that Ai is genuine in his claims about the Ekumen and does not show any interest in joining it. When

Karhide eventually joins the Ekumen, Argaven is more elevated by the fact that his/her nation was the first to do so.

Pemmer Harge rem ir Tibe. Tibe is the king's cousin and replaces Estraven in the position of the prime minister after Estraven is sent to exile. Tibe is a nationalist and wants to increase the nationalist feeling in all Karhidiers to start a war with Orgoreyn. As such, the idea of joining the Ekumen works against his/her plans.

Ashe Foreth rem ir Osboth. Ashe Foreth is Estraven's old kemmering (sexual partner) who remains loyal to him/her after s/he is sent to exile. Foreth gives Genly Ai money to bring to Estraven, so that s/he is not left completely without resources.

Obsle, Yegey and Shusgis. They are Commensals of Orgoreyn, three of the Thirty-Three who rule the country. Obsle and Yegey are a part of the Open Trade faction which is the least secretive part of the Orgota government. Shusgis is an agent of the secret police, the Sarf, which monitors all communication and activity in Orgoreyn.

Themes of *The Left Hand of Darkness*

As mentioned above, Le Guin had originally stated that betrayal and fidelity are the central themes of the novel (Le Guin, 1993). I maintain that this remains true, albeit the theme of gender plays an equally important role. It is also the theme which has generated most discussion and analysis. Le Guin herself has commented on gender in *The Left Hand of Darkness* on many instances. It plays an essential role in identifying the cause of miscommunication between Ai and Estraven, because Ai consistently sees Estraven as a man, while s/he is not. This impedes his conversation with Estraven, because he has got certain expectations of how Estraven should react. Brown and Levinson (1978) have conducted a research within the politeness theory of how people use politeness strategies in different conversations (both same-sex and cross-sex); they have discovered the following:

[There is] overall for women a pattern of high negative politeness and high positive politeness, [because their social world is divided] into two categories of people, men and women, each of which requires different strategies of politeness. [. . .] men treat everyone regardless of sex relatively bald on record¹. (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 252)

Therefore, while we can conclude that Gethenian society is familiar with no such division and similar politeness strategies can be assumed between all conversation

¹ Without using politeness strategies.

participants, Genly Ai expects behaviour similar to what Brown and Levinson have discovered—since he views Estraven as a man, he expects him/her to talk openly and directly; furthermore, he connects Estraven’s feminine side with deception and lack of resolve. Estraven, on the other hand, is not used to Ai’s straightforwardness. It is here where the matter of gender on Gethen gains such importance for both the plot of the novel and this thesis and must therefore be explained in more detail.

Gethenians do not have fixed gender like humans on Earth do. Instead, they have a sexual cycle of twenty-six days which consists of two phases—somer and kemmer. Somer occupies the larger part of the cycle, twenty-one or twenty-two days, and during this time, the individual is sexually inactive, without distinctive sexual characteristics. Around the end of somer, the individual enters kemmer. During the first phase of kemmer, s/he remains androgynous, and only when s/he finds a sexual partner, s/he enters the second phase of kemmer and establishes a male or female hormonal dominance, according to the dynamics between him/her and his/her partners. Gethenians have no predisposition towards one gender; they can become male in one case and female in another, even after they have given birth to a child. The last phase of kemmer lasts from two to five days and when it ends, the individuals return to the androgynous state. If one of the partners became pregnant, s/he remains in the female role until the end of lactation period (Le Guin, 1969).

Le Guin has been criticised by some for her portrayal of Gethenians in primarily male roles—a politician or a ruler. These critics argued that Le Guin failed to show the feminine side of Gethenians (Le Guin, 1993), and Le Guin herself has admitted this failure in her essay *Is Gender Necessary?*, writing that she had failed to show Estraven how she saw him/her, as a mother, not only a politician (Le Guin, 1993). In part, this was caused by the use of the pronoun ‘he/him//his’ for Gethenians, which Le Guin later criticised, stating that it ‘excluded women’ (Le Guin, 1993). Nevertheless, Pearson (2007) notes that despite the influence of the choice of pronoun, the monthly nature of the Gethenians’ oestrous cycle links their experience to that of a woman’s menstrual cycle.

Le Guin’s essay on *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which she titled *Is Gender Necessary?*, was written in 1976. In this essay, Le Guin argued that even though the novel was considered to be a feminist work, gender, feminism, and sexuality were only secondary themes and she considered loyalty and fidelity to be the most important ones. However, she still described the process of developing her thought-experiment of *The Left Hand of Darkness* as one with the goal to determine whether or not there was anything that truly differentiated men and women and what would a society developed without the influence

of gender look like (Le Guin, 1993). Le Guin herself described the process as such: ‘I eliminated gender, to find out what was left. Whatever was left would be, presumably, simply human.’ (Le Guin, 1993, p. 160). Among the results, Le Guin found three she considered interesting (Le Guin, 1993), and she stated them as such:

First: There is no war on Gethen. Quarrels between people exist but they have never developed into a war or an invasion. Gethenian societies haven’t formed large states; instead their most common social structure is a hearth, which is a unit of two hundred to eight hundred people. Even though hearths eventually gathered into larger state units, these tend to be decentralized, with authority enforced by *shifgrethor* (Le Guin, 1993). Quarrels between hearths and individuals are also solved through *shifgrethor*, which is described as ‘a conflict without physical violence, involving one-upmanship, the saving and losing of face—conflict ritualized, stylized, controlled’ (Le Guin, 1993, p. 162). This is a description parallel to that of face negotiation, which forms an essential part of politeness theory. *Shifgrethor* can therefore be seen as Le Guin’s version of politeness, as PT understands it—as a phenomenon which causes people to speak indirectly in order to ‘save face’ (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Worth mentioning is the fact that *The Left Hand of Darkness* was published before Brown and Levinson’s *Politeness*, meaning that Le Guin developed the sociological concepts of her novel on her own.

Second: There is no exploitation on Gethen. The development of industry and technology on Gethen was slow and it didn’t overwhelm the society. Le Guin has written that through this phenomenon, she was trying to show the balance between the ‘male’ principle of pushing forward to the limit and the ‘female’ principle of patience and practicality (Le Guin, 1993). As a result, the society on Gethen is spread over the land in smaller communities and lives in accordance with the world around them.

Third: Sexuality is not a social factor on Gethen. Most of the time, sexuality plays no part in the life of Gethenians; for the kemmer phase, it dominates their lives, because Gethenians in kemmer must find a partner. Therefore, there is no rape on Gethen, since both sexual partners always have to consent. This also led Le Guin to the idea that there would be less fear and guilt about sex than there is in our society; however, sex would still be a problem for Gethenians because of the imperativeness of kemmer. (Le Guin, 1993)

Considering the above points, we can argue that Le Guin had always thought gender to be one of the themes central to her work, although she might not have realized it at the time she wrote *Is Gender Necessary?* She herself later confirmed that she might have intentionally steered the readers’ attention away from gender—in *Language of the Night*,

Le Guin wrote: 'I had opened a can of worms and was trying very hard to shut it.' (Le Guin, 1993, p. 157).

In 1979, Le Guin decided to revisit some of her works, mostly for corrections of issues she had come to be unsatisfied with, for example, the universal pronoun 'he'. In the preface to the collection of her essays *The Language of the Night*, Le Guin stated that she was embarrassed by her views in *Is Gender Necessary?*, especially by how others had quoted it, and even though it would be unethical to rewrite the essay, there were some points she wanted to comment on and explain her change of opinions. She noted how she used to diminish the importance of gender and feminism in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and she explained the importance of these themes to the full understanding of her thought experiment (Le Guin, 1979).

Cummins (1990) remarked that the theme of betrayal and fidelity and the theme of gender in the novel complemented each other. It is Ai's scepticism about the Gethenian ambisexuality which does not allow him to form personal bonds based on trust with Gethenians. His face is threatened by the lack of respect for his masculinity, which he is used to, and Gethenians cannot understand; similarly, he does not know how to attend to the Gethenians face, because he is unable to place them in his own vision of the world. Only when Ai accepts and understands Gethenian ambisexuality, he can develop trust bonds (Cummins, 1990). Cummins (1990) also noted that the more Ai understood Gethenians, the more he embraced their values. Therefore, we conclude that both central themes of the novel work together to create the conflict in the story and further the development of Genly Ai's character.

III. FACE AND POLITENESS IN THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS

Politeness Theory

Politeness theory (PT) was created by Penelope Brown and Steven C. Levinson; their work on PT was first published in 1978. Its aim was to examine the parallelism of utterances related to politeness in different languages; the authors believed that the patterns of message construction formed crucial parts of the expression of social relations. They stated that discovering the principles of language usage may be coincident with discovering the principles out of which social relationships are constructed (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In the authors' own words, the politeness theory is 'a tool for describing the quality of social relationships' (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 55).

The underlying concept of PT is that humans often do not say what they mean; instead, there are linguistic and other clues pointing to the real meaning of an utterance—as 'Look, I'm terribly sorry to bother you, would it be awfully inconvenient if...' (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 57) is likely to be interpreted as a request by anyone who understands the language. The reason for using such means to convey one's wants or intentions is largely connected to the notion of 'saving face'; Brown and Levinson assume that all individuals want to maintain their and each other's face and therefore avoid utterances which threaten the face of either one or both participants of the conversation (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

In accordance with the above, Cutting (2008) described politeness as a set of choices made in language use, emphasising that in this instance, politeness does not refer to social rules of behaviour, but rather to the linguistic expressions people choose to use to give others space or show their friendship. As such, politeness can be understood as the desirable strategy for upholding harmony in social relations (Cutting, 2008).

The sociological notion of 'face' in the PT is derived from the work of Goffman (1967) and from the English folk term 'losing face' which conveys being embarrassed or humiliated. Therefore, face is defined as something that can be either lost or enhanced. People are subconsciously aware of this and they cooperate and expect the other's cooperation in maintaining face in interaction. The notion of face may vary in different cultures, but the PT assumes that the instinct to maintain each other's face is universal (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

PT considers face to be a set of fundamental wants of an individual member of the society, and defines two basic components of face: negative face, and positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The negative face is defined as: ‘the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his actions be unimpeded by others’ (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 62), and the positive face as: ‘the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others’ (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 62). Negative face can thus be understood as the primary notion the term ‘politeness’ conjures in the human mind; positive politeness might be less obvious and it includes the desire to be understood, approved of, liked or admired.

Both positive and negative face of an individual can be threatened by face-threatening acts (FTAs) (Brown and Levinson, 1987). FTAs are speech acts which threaten wants of an individual and therefore threaten his or her face. There are acts which threaten the negative face: orders, requests, suggestions, reminders, threats, offers, promises, expressions of strong emotions toward hearer, and so on; or those that threaten the positive face: expressions of disapproval, criticism or contempt; accusations, insults, expressions of violent emotions, mentions of taboo topics, bad news, raising of divisive topics, and so on (Brown & Levinson, 1987). From the previously noted fact that the participants of a conversation want to maintain each other’s face arises the natural need to avoid doing FTAs, or minimize their impact. The participant of a communication then has to take three wants into consideration: the want to communicate the content of the FTA, the want to be efficient, and the want to maintain H’s face to some degree (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

I maintain that although both the Earth culture Ai represents in the novel, and the Gethenian culture, mostly represented by Estraven, show characteristic values of both positive and negative face and employ both strategies for dealing with FTAs, the ways in which politeness is represented in these two cultures differ greatly. I find the reason for this difference to be caused by the distinction of high and low context in these cultures, as it was described by Hall (1989) and Livermore (2013), though he labelled it ‘directness’ and ‘indirectness’. Low context (directness), which is more familiar to Ai, can be assumed to be connected to positive politeness more strongly; high context (indirectness), which is more familiar to Gethenians, can similarly be assumed to be connected to negative politeness more strongly.

Another aspect which influences our understanding of Gethenians and their culture is our notion of the concept of a ‘face culture’ as we know it from East Asia. By examining Karhidian and Orgota cultures through the framework of dignity/face/honour, further characteristics which they do not share with the East Asian cultures are discovered.

Therefore, these two cultures cannot only be seen as face-cultures, though they are largely concerned with *shifgrethor*, but must be understood as more complex and influenced by different elements than face cultures of East Asia are.

Context

Livermore (2013) defines a low context society as one where people are clear with their words and they explicitly explain what they mean. A high context culture, on the other hand, relies on implied meaning and expects the listener to find the real meaning ‘between the lines’ (Livermore, 2013, p. 50). Hall (1989) mentions that high context cultures make distinctions between outsiders and insiders, working with the assumption that insiders will know what is on the speaker’s mind without having to hear it directly. Therefore, a high context speaker does not mention his or her point directly, but talks around it (Hall, 1989). Livermore (2013) remarks on this point as well, noting that low context cultures’ openness to outsiders makes them consist of people from different places in the world, who therefore do not share the cultural background for understanding context and need more explicit information.

Tendencies connected to these findings can be found in both the Gethenian cultures and Genly Ai. Ai comes from Earth which is a member of the Ekumen. Ai himself is trained to be the First Mobile, and he can therefore be expected to be a very low context person, used to meeting many ‘outsiders’ to his native culture (though we may not truly consider them outsiders, as the cultures of the Ekumen must have been influenced heavily by others at the time of the story). Gethenians, on the other hand, have not met an outsider before Ai’s arrival, and their culture is therefore an extremely high context one, where the circumstances and situation of the conversation matter more than words themselves and the context is implicit (Livermore, 2013).

Additionally, Livermore (2013) notes that individualistic cultures are usually oriented towards low context, whereas collectivist cultures are oriented towards high context. Taking into consideration how Livermore defines individualistic and collectivist cultures – he describes their key characteristic to be ‘the degree to which personal identity is defined in terms of personal, individual characteristics versus group, collective characteristics’ (Livermore, 2013, p. 17)—we can further deduce that Ai’s culture is closer to individualistic values, while the cultures of Karhide and Orgoreyn are closer to collectivist values, thus securing the perceived division of high and low context between them.

Such differences in context between Gethenians and Ai create a difficulty in understanding the other – Gethenians are used to alluding to their meaning indirectly, using situational and contextual clues to understand, while Ai is used to direct, clear messages, delivered without ‘talking around’ the subject. Therefore, context must be taken into consideration when thinking about the interactions of the characters and the principles of politeness on Gethen.

Dignity, Face, and Honour

The framework of the dignity/face/honour culture division has developed from the work of Leung and Cohen (2011), who have worked with the CuPS approach to culture (Culture x Person x Situation). Their work established dignity, face, and honour cultures as three ideal types of culture and examined how different societies have created differing concepts of morality, reciprocity, punishment, or the worth of an individual (Leung & Cohen, 2011). Below are the basic characteristics of the three cultural types.

Dignity cultures. The underlying concept of a dignity culture is that each person has his or her inherent worth which does not depend on the judgment of other members of the society (Leung & Cohen, 2011). The worth of a person is based on self-assessment, rather than conferred by others, and therefore unalienable (Aslani et al., 2016). Due to this, people from dignity cultures are not very strongly affected by insults and threats (Leung & Cohen, 2011). Guilt is considered a more important motivation for self-control than shame in dignity cultures (Leung & Cohen, 2011) and a wide acceptance of autonomy and self-interest is common (Aslani et al., 2016). Dignity cultures are egalitarian (Leung & Cohen, 2011) and therefore correspond with the characteristics of modern Western societies (Yao, Ramirez-Marin, Brett, Aslani, & Semnani-Azad 2017).

Honour cultures. Unlike dignity, honour is both an internal and external quality; it is the value a person has in his or her own eyes but also in the eyes of the society (Leung & Cohen, 2011). Honour cultures emerge in hostile environments where the social conditions force people to protect themselves and punish the guilty without the supervision of a law body (Leung & Cohen, 2011). Reciprocity, both positive (returning favours) and negative (punishing offenses) is important for honour cultures; insults play an essential role too, because they establish the level to which a person can be pushed (Leung & Cohen, 2011). Unlike the unalienable worth in dignity cultures, honour can be gained or taken away

(Leung & Cohen, 2011). Honour cultures can be found in the Middle East, Northern Africa and Latin America (Yao, Ramirez-Marin, Brett, Aslani, & Semnani-Azad 2017).

Face cultures. Face is based on the assessment of others; therefore, face is an external quality (Aslani et al., 2016). Face cultures are similar to honour ones in the extrinsic assessment of self-worth and the need for prestige; however, unlike the competitive environment of honour cultures, they form in settled hierarchies (Leung & Cohen, 2011). Overall, face cultures are largely concerned with hierarchies and people's position in them; it is expected that people in a hierarchy work together to preserve each other's face (Leung & Cohen, 2011). People are not expected to punish others on their own, the society does so, and the three major aspects of these cultures are hierarchy, humility, and harmony (Leung & Cohen, 2011). This entails that individuals are supposed to act in accordance with preserving these values in the society, therefore not in their self-interest, but in the general interest of the entire hierarchy (Aslani et al., 2016). Shame is the punishment for inappropriate behaviour in face cultures (Leung & Cohen, 2011).

From the above, we conclude that Genly Ai displays characteristics of a dignity culture. Although he is affected by the Gethenians' perception of him as a 'pervert', it does not influence his own feeling of internal worth. He is an autonomous person and treats everyone relatively similarly, regardless of their power and status. Ai's values are linkable to members of modern Western societies, making it easier for English readers to understand him and identify with him. He serves as the 'guide' for readers who share similar values.

Concerning Gethenians, both the characteristics of an honour culture and a face culture can be observed. That the cultures on Gethen are face cultures is discernible from their very nature; the cooperative structure of hearths, the near absence of direct conflicts in favour of *shifgrethor*, and the necessity of playing *shifgrethor* with other members of the society in order for nobody to 'lose face' clearly mark Gethenian cultures as face cultures. Moreover, Orgoreyn is a socialistic, therefore collectivist culture; a link can be found between Orgoreyn and East Asian cultures, which are collectivist (Livermore, 2013) and face-based. The stable hierarchy and centralization of Orgoreyn mark it as a face culture.

However, characteristics of an honour culture can also be found among Gethenians. Given that honour cultures are often found in hostile environments with either insufficient or no centralised governing system (Leung & Cohen, 2011), Karhide can be seen as displaying honour culture qualities. Due to the Ice Age on Gethen, the environment is hostile enough to provide conditions for the development of an honour culture. Moreover,

the state structure of Karhide is a kingdom, but it is not centralized, divided into domains and hearths (Le Guin, 1969). Karhide has also got old legends of blood feuds and murder for lordship²—these are characteristic of an honour culture as well, since in a face culture, the hierarchy is stable and not changed by actions of individuals.

Nevertheless, I argue that face-culture dominates in Karhide, mostly because of the importance of *shifgrethor*, the purpose of which is to eliminate direct conflict. However, honour characteristics are still discernible in the behaviour and attitudes of some characters—Estraven, after being exiled and proclaimed a traitor, does not lose all of his/her self-worth in his/her own eyes and s/he continues to work on the plan of bringing Gethen into the Ekumen.

Shifgrethor

Shifgrethor is one of the central aspects of the Gethenian social relations. In the novel, we can see that in both Karhide and Orgoreyn *shifgrethor* plays an important role in conversations and interactions, and self-perceptions of the characters. Le Guin describes *shifgrethor* as follows:

Very roughly translated as honour. The basic principle is the maintenance of one's own pride by maintaining the other's pride. 'I am not admirable unless my admirer is admirable.' This delicate balance may devolve into a contest for superior prestige rather than a mutual pact; in such degraded competitions one's pride is maintained at the expense of the other's pride. The rules of behaviour controlled by *shifgrethor* are complex, elaborate, and unspoken. The word derives from *ifegre*, an old word [from Karhidish] meaning 'shadow'. (Le Guin, 2009, p. 267)³

Here, we learn that Le Guin thinks of *shifgrethor* as of 'pride' or 'honour'. Moreover, the way she describes *shifgrethor* as the process of maintaining 'one's own pride by maintaining the other's pride' (Le Guin, 2009, p. 267) connects to the way politeness is described in the PT, where Brown and Levinson (1978) assume that participants of a conversation want to maintain both their own face and the face of the other. We can therefore consider *shifgrethor* and face negotiation to be synonymous to a certain extent. Furthermore, connecting *shifgrethor* with a 'shadow' subtly emphasizes its connection to face. It invokes the feeling of one's reputation as one's second-self—wherever the person

² Described in chapter 9: 'Estraven the Traitor' (Le Guin, 1969).

³ This definition is added in the 2009 edition of the novel, printed for the 40th anniversary of *The Left Hand of Darkness*. It is not included in the original text.

goes, his or her reputation follows him/her; the connotation is similar as with face, which is also something people always carry with them.

In the novel, *shifgrethor* is a complication for Genly Ai and impedes his efforts to communicate with Gethenians, especially Estraven, who is well-versed in the ways of *shifgrethor*, as Commensal Obsle remarks in Mishnory, the capital of Orgoreyn: ‘if there was ever a man [Obsle] thought unable to err in the timing of an act or the weighing of *shifgrethor*, that man was [Estraven]’ (61)⁴. Ai himself describes *shifgrethor* as: ‘prestige, face, place, the pride-relationship, the untranslatable and all-important principle of social authority in Karhide and all civilizations of Gethen’ (10). It is safe to assume that if politeness theory had been developed at the time when Le Guin wrote her novel, she would have connected it to *shifgrethor* too.

Shifgrethor causes Gethenians to speak unclearly, avoid direct messages and talk around the issue rather than get to the pith of a conversation. Ai further notes that nobody in Karhide openly gives advice and Estraven later confirms this by saying: ‘I am not used to giving, or accepting, advice or blame.’ (143). Considering that during the time Ai spends in Karhide with Estraven as a prime minister, Estraven ‘listen[s] to him, answer[s] all [his] questions’ (9), Ai must have expected Estraven to give him advice or at least hoped s/he might do so.

Therefore, despite the fact that the primary obstacle for developing a trust relationship between Ai and Estraven exists because of Ai’s inability to understand Gethenian ambisexuality and Estraven inability to understand Ai’s male pride, *shifgrethor* is the tool which creates the communicative obstacles between them. In the following chapter, I explore two instances where such communicative obstacles come into play.

⁴ As a primary source, *The Left Hand of Darkness* is cited only by page numbers.

IV. SCENE ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I examine two scenes where Genly Ai and Therem Harth rem ir Estraven interact. I examine the conversations of the main characters and search for their underlying motives and opinions. I investigate the points at which the conversations have steered from their intended course because of the misunderstanding between the characters and affected the future nature of the main characters' relationship.

The first examined scene takes place at the beginning of the novel in the Karhidian capital of Erhenrang, the second, midway through the novel, takes place in the Orgota capital of Mishnory. I maintain that these two scenes are central to the development of the relationship of the main characters and therefore to the plot of *The Left Hand of Darkness* in general.

The Supper Scene

Here, I examine the last scene from chapter 1: 'A Parade In Erhenrang'. In this scene, Estraven has invited Ai for supper to his/her house to inform him that s/he has lost the king's trust and therefore cannot help Ai's case anymore. However, because of their individual backgrounds and their communicative habits, Ai and Estraven fail to understand one another. Contrary to Estraven's expectation of making amends with Ai, Ai arrives at the conclusion that Estraven is not trustworthy.

The scene begins with Ai and Estraven eating; once they finish, Ai's attention is drawn to Estraven's ambisexuality. We understand, from his phrasing, that this is not the first time he has been thinking about this. We know, from scenes prior and subsequent to this one, that Ai finds the feminine side of Gethenian personalities untrustworthy, and he links most of the qualities which he dislikes in Gethenians with women. Hence, we must be aware that he enters the scene with prejudices against Estraven's personality, which further impedes mutual understanding.

Estraven is the one to begin the conversation; s/he says: 'I'm sorry [. . .] that I've had to forestall for so long this pleasure of having you in my house; and to that extent at least I'm glad there is no longer any question of patronage between us.' (9) From these words we understand that *shifgrethor* might prohibit friendly relations with those on whose behalf the person is acting, and therefore Estraven could only invite Ai to his/her house once s/he had to stop supporting his case in front of the king. However, Ai, who has little insight into *shifgrethor*, does not understand Estraven's intentions and demands further clarification.

Estraven explains that his/her statement means that '[he's] no longer acting on [Ai's] behalf with the king' (Le Guin, 1969, p. 9). At the moment, Ai is not aware of the related circumstances of the border dispute with Orgoreyn—therefore, his first conclusion is that '[he] had been right all along not to trust Estraven' (9). He reminisces of the aid Estraven has provided and surmises that now, when Estraven has secured the dangerous audience with the king, s/he has decided to withdraw.

Ai accuses Estraven of leading him to rely on him/her and Estraven remarks that '[i]t was ill done' (10). Hereupon, Ai inquires whether Estraven has not spoken in favour of Ai's mission with the king and Estraven answers that '[he] can't' (10). Ai demands to know the reason and Estraven reminds him that earlier that day, at a parade, the king had not spoken once to him/her. Ai writes in his report: 'I saw at last that I was missing another signal. Damning his effeminate deviousness, I said, 'Are you trying to tell me, Lord Estraven, that you're out of favour with the king?'' (10)

In this quote we can clearly see that Ai does not understand *shifgrethor*, because this is the message Estraven has believed to be conveying since the beginning of the conversation. It also reveals Ai's attitude towards the feminine side of Gethenian nature; he considers it 'devious'. Ai reads the Gethenians through his gendered lens and he views them either as men or as women, failing to comprehend their complexity and the differences between them and him. Furthermore, he considers those of Gethenian characteristics which he attributes to women 'worse' than those he attributes to men.

Ai's direct question about the king displeases Estraven as it is in opposition to the principles of *shifgrethor*. S/he answers that '[he is] not trying to tell [Ai] anything' (10), presumably in an attempt to uphold *shifgrethor* and save both of their faces. Ai's following exclamation 'By God, I wish you would!' (10) then seems to surprise Estraven. We do not know the true nature of this surprise as the chapter is narrated by Ai, but judging from an excerpt from Estraven's narrative in chapter 11: 'Soliloquies in Mishnory', we can assume that Estraven does not realize Ai has difficulties trying to understand *shifgrethor*. In chapter 11, Estraven writes:

Is it possible that all along in Erhenrang he was seeking my advice, not knowing how to tell me that he sought it? [. . .] he must have misunderstood half and not understood the rest of what I told him by my fireside [. . .] (108)

Despite his/her unawareness of Ai's struggle, Estraven explains the mood of the royal court where many people who are in the king's favour do not support Ai's case. Ai

suspects Estraven from wanting to join these people, and thinks to himself that ‘face-saving [is] more important than honesty [to Estraven]’ (11).

Estraven explains the problem of the border dispute to Ai, who understands neither its gravity and its connection to his mission on Gethen, nor the fact that war would be especially devastating to Gethen, because of the Ice Age the planet is in (Cummins, 1990). He notes that ‘[he] might still get some use of [Estraven]’ (11), and quickly returns to the topic of his audience with the king. He says that ‘[t]here’s more at stake than a few miles of national boundary’ (11). At the moment, Ai is aware of neither the intentions and ambitions of Pemmer Harge rem ir Tibe, nor the fact that the border dispute may lead to a war between Karhide and Orgoreyn. Estraven, on the other hand, knows and understands this, and thus s/he answers: ‘Yes. Much more.’ (11)

From Ai’s narration, we cannot be certain whether Estraven believes Ai to have sufficient insight to understand the threat of the war. However, from one of Estraven’s first lines of the entire conversation – ‘I m no longer acting on your behalf with the king’ (9) – we can deduce that s/he does, because s/he expects Ai to understand the problem without any explanation. However, this means that Estraven and Ai are each leading a significantly different conversation. While Ai believes the matter they are discussing is his audience with the king and his mission, Estraven is likely trying to mainly indirectly offer his/her apology to Ai for failing to secure the success of his mission, and advise Ai on how to continue this mission, similarly indirectly. His/her effort, however, is veiled with *shifgrethor*, and as such remains undecipherable to Ai.

In the next section of the conversation, Estraven expresses his/her hope for the patience of the Ekumen considering Gethen; Ai confirms the Ekumen is patient, but admits that he personally was expecting to achieve better results, especially with Estraven’s support. To this, Estraven says:

You came to my country [. . .] at a strange time. Things are changing; we are taking a new turning. No, not so much that, as following too far on the way we’ve been going. I thought that your presence, your mission, might prevent our going wrong, give us a new option entirely. But at the right moment—in the right place. It is all exceedingly chancy, Mr. Ai. (12)

Here, Estraven refers to the conflict with Orgoreyn and for the first time expresses his/her concern about the impending change of the nature of Karhidian society, which s/he correctly expects Tibe to prompt. With the line ‘I thought that your presence, your mission,

might prevent our going wrong, give us a new option entirely' (12), Estraven indirectly admits that while s/he had hoped Ai's presence could change the course of the Karhidian political game, s/he was wrong. S/he also hints at his/her future plans—'at the right moment—in the right place' (12)—of manipulating Ai to travel to Orgoreyn to attempt to achieve what has proven to be impossible in Karhide, to bring Gethen into the Ekumen. Therefore, in this statement, Estraven hints at what s/he has planned for Ai so that Ai can succeed with his mission – and s/he believes Ai comprehends this to a certain extent.

However, Ai, who does not understand the message coated with complex layers of *shifgrethor*, considers Estraven's statement to be a 'generality' (12). It is likely he sees it as Estraven's attempt to steer Ai from the topic of the conversation, or even somehow placate him. He asks, 'You imply that this isn't the right moment. Would you advise me to cancel my audience?' (12), and despite his inexperience with Karhidian manners, he immediately recognizes that it was not the ideal thing to say, concerning the decorum. Estraven answers that '[. . .] only the king has that privilege' (12) and Ai apologizes. He writes on the event:

Brought up in the wide-open freewheeling society of Earth, I would never master the protocol, or the impassivity, so valued by Karhidiers. I knew what a king was, Earth's own history is full of them, but I had no experiential feel for privilege – no tact. (12)

Here, a gap between how Ai and the reader perceive the situation becomes obvious. Readers of Le Guin's novel are from Earth like Ai, however, their experience differs from Ai's, because he lives in a world which has changed and integrated into a larger interplanetary structure. Therefore, when we look at Ai's actions, we should not judge them with our own experience in mind, since we can be expected to be much more understanding of the workings of a hereditary hierarchy than Ai is. Despite the fact that the modern Western society has distanced from the feudal systems, Ai's life experience is even more in contrast to the Karhidian one. Moreover, privilege, as Ai understand the word in this scene, is a characteristic of either a face or honour culture. Ai, brought up in a dignity culture, is used to living in an egalitarian world.

Moving on, Ai says 'Well, I'll say less to the king that I intended to, when I could count on you' (12). The wording of his statement can be interpreted as an attempt to consciously offend Estraven for his/her sudden lack of support. Nevertheless, it is possible that this is not Ai's intention, as he occasionally tends to speak rather bluntly (as seen in the above statements, especially in '[w]ould you advise me to cancel my audience?'). Estraven merely remarks: '[g]ood' (12), which surprises Ai. Estraven explains:

[. . .] neither of us is a king, [. . .] I suppose that you intended to tell Argaven, rationally, that your mission here is to attempt to bring about an alliance between Gethen and the Ekumen. [. . .] he knows that already; [. . .] I told him. I urged your case with him, tried to interest him in you. It was ill done, ill timed. I forgot, being too interested myself, that he's a king, and does not see things rationally, but as a king. All I've told him means to him simply that his power is threatened, his kingdom is a dustmote in space, his kingship is a joke to men who rule a hundred worlds. (12)

In this statement, Estraven explains another reason (aside from the impending conflict) why Ai's audience with the king will not be successful. S/he calls the arrival of the Ekumen on Gethen a 'threat'. Estraven describes it as a threat to the king's power, but it can also be understood as a threat to his/her *shifgrethor*, his/her face. The king's worth in both the eyes of his/her people and his/her own is determined by his/her power over the events in Karhide, and with the arrival of an interplanetary power structure, this power could diminish greatly. Estraven returns to the topic of losing the king's favour once more, in chapter 6: 'One Way Into Orgoreyn', when s/he talks to Obsle and Yegey. S/he says: 'I had my eyes on the stars and didn't watch the mud I walked in' (63). From this, we understand that Estraven was too focused on the goal of convincing the king to join the Ekumen to realize the dangers of making him/her feel threatened.

Ai disagrees with the mention of a threat. He says that the Ekumen 'doesn't rule, it coordinates' (12) and that by forming an alliance with the Ekumen 'Karhide will become infinitely less threatened and more important than it's ever been' (12). Estraven considers this and says:

I believe you. [. . .] I'm afraid that Argaven also believes you. But he does not trust you. In part because he no longer trusts me. I have made mistakes, been careless. I cannot ask for your trust any longer, either, having put you in jeopardy. I forgot what a king is, forgot that the king in his own eyes *is* Karhide. (13)

In this section, Estraven expresses his/her regret for putting Ai in danger and tampering with the success of his mission. S/he once more alludes to the king's *shifgrethor* and his/her own perception of his/her position and importance. The king 'is Karhide' and to him/her, the arrival of the Ekumen feels like the eradication of Karhidian sovereignty and therefore also his/her own. Karhide, being a stable hierarchy and a high context culture, is not used to outsiders, especially those who come from outer space.

The question of outsiders and insiders of a nation might be on Estraven's mind during the conversation too; s/he asks Ai if he knows what patriotism is and Ai asks in return if Estraven means 'the love of one's homeland'. Estraven answers:

No, [. . .] I mean fear. The fear of the other. And its expressions are political, not poetical: hate, rivalry, aggression. It grows in us, that fear. It grows in us year by year. We've followed our road too far. [. . .] It's because of fear that I refuse to urge your cause with the king, now. But not fear for myself, Mr. Ai. I'm not acting patriotically. There are, after all, other nations on Gethen. (14)

The concept of 'the other' is a well-known one in culture theory and Le Guin herself comments on it in *Language of the Night*. She describes 'the other' as someone 'different from yourself [. . .] in its sex; or its annual income; or in its ways of speaking and dressing and doing things; or in the color of its skin, or the number of its legs and heads' (Le Guin, 1993, p. 93). Le Guin offers an interesting take on patriotism, which is usually defined as Ai defines it, 'the love of one's homeland' (13). Here, Estraven links patriotism not with loving what people have in their country, but fearing what is outside of it, which is, in Estraven's case, Orgoreyn, and in the king's case, outer space. With the statement 'We've followed the road too far' (14) Estraven tells Ai that there is nothing that could stand in the way of Tibe's rise to power and the commencement of his/her vision of transforming Karhide into a nation resembling Orgoreyn.

Estraven further says that '[he's] not acting patriotically' (14). In our sense of understanding patriotism, which we can assume is the same sense in which Ai subconsciously understands the word, this statement would mean that Estraven is not loyal to Karhide. However, Estraven him/herself links patriotism with fear of the other, and therefore, by saying s/he is not acting patriotically, s/he tells Ai that s/he's not afraid of Orgoreyn or the threat of the war which Tibe embraces – possibly because s/he still believes that Ai's mission can succeed in Orgoreyn. Estraven closes his/her speech with: 'There are, after all, other nations on Gethen,' (14) by which s/he means that Ai should continue his efforts in Orgoreyn, where the people might be more welcoming of the alliance with the Ekumen. Estraven has also, at this point, already realized that when Orgoreyn joins the Ekumen, so will Karhide.

Ai does not understand any of what Estraven intends for him to understand, and he records it in his report. He writes that '[o]f all the dark, obstructive, enigmatic souls [he] had met in [the] bleak city, [Estraven's] was the darkest' (14). He thinks Estraven is

playing mind games with him and refuses to participate, not replying to his/her statement in any manner. This causes Estraven to continue and say:

[Y]our Ekumen is devoted essentially to the general interest of mankind. [. . .] the Orgota have experience in subordinating local interests to a general interest, while Karhide has almost none. And the Commensals of Orgoreyn are mostly sane men, if unintelligent, while the king of Karhide is not only insane but rather stupid. (14)

We can assume that when Ai made no reply to his/her previous statement, Estraven has chosen to emphasise the idea of Ai's going to Orgoreyn to persuade him to do so. S/he also hints that the Commensals might be open to the idea of interplanetary alliance by contrasting them to king Argaven. S/he knows that Ai will meet the king on the following day and he will likely find him/her 'not only insane but rather stupid' (14) so s/he wants Ai to have hope that he might find the Commensals to be more profitable negotiation partners.

Ai is disgusted by this statement and thinks that 'Estraven ha[s] no loyalties at all' (14). Therefore, he does not only fail to understand Estraven's suggestion that he might go to Orgoreyn, but he also further alienates from Estraven, thinking that s/he is working against the interests of both Karhide and the Ekumen. He remarks that if Estraven considers the king insane, then '[i]t must have been difficult to serve [him]' (14).

Estraven answers that '[he's] not sure [he's] ever served the king' (14) and that '[he's] not anyone's servant' (14). S/he adds that '[a] man must cast his own shadow' (14). Here, Estraven reveals to Ai that s/he only serves the people and his/her loyalty is to what is best for the country and its inhabitants. The mention of 'shadow' is interesting, because *shifgrethor* comes from the word 'shadow' in Karhidish, and it is possible that either Estraven or Le Guin hint at how Estraven's personal pride and honour is linked to his/her service to Karhide rather than anything else.

Following this, Ai begins to leave, and Estraven mentions there are many things s/he would like to learn from him, particularly mindspeech. S/he further says that s/he believes s/he will get a chance to ask these question in the future 'for [he] suppose[s] [Ai will] be leaving Erhenrang' (14).

Ai writes: '[w]hy did he suppose so?' (14), and demonstrates that he did not understand anything of what Estraven was trying to convey to him about Orgoreyn, his/her worries and the king. After a brief mention of weather, the conversation ends, and Ai leaves Estraven's house.

To sum up, in this scene, Estraven invites Ai to his/her house to both convey his/her apologies for not being able to support Ai's case with the king, and to prompt Ai to travel to Orgoreyn, where he might stand a better chance at convincing the government to join the Ekumen. Unfortunately, the very nature of the meeting, which only happened because Estraven can no longer aid Ai's cause, is misunderstood by Ai, who does not comprehend the social rules in Karhide. Estraven's effort to illuminate the current situation in Karhide to Ai, convince him to continue his mission in Orgoreyn, and explain his/her own treason therefore result in Ai coming to the conclusion that Estraven did not betray only Karhide but also Ai himself. Ai does not understand either Estraven's implicit advice or his/her explanation of the treason, which he only comprehends on the next day, when he hears about it on the radio. He associates Estraven's treason his/her feminine side, which he sees as deceptive—due to this, he develops further misconceptions about Gethenians, Estraven in particular.

This scene is crucial for the subsequent development of Ai's and Estraven's relationship, because in this scene, the foundation of Ai's distrust is laid. This distrust further influences both his attitude to Estraven, but also his own actions, because it causes him to be unwilling to act according to Estraven's advice.

The Mishnory Reunion Scene

The scene takes place at the beginning of chapter 10: 'Conversations in Mishnory'. Estraven visits Ai in the suite where the Orgota Commensal Shusgis has accommodated him; s/he has come to receive the money Ashe Foreth has sent to him/her to aid him/her in exile. Ai has told Estraven about the money in the previous evening during a formal dinner where they have met for the first time since they both left Karhide.

Ai lets Estraven into the building, has him/her sit down and offers him/her ale, which Estraven refuses. Ai notes that Estraven's behaviour is restrained and tentative, and that s/he looks older than the last time they met. Then, Ai gives Estraven the packet with the money without further delay, and Estraven takes it and thanks him. Ai remains standing and says nothing else. When Estraven stands up too, Ai writes that '[his] conscience itched a little, but [he] did not scratch it. [He] wanted to discourage [Estraven] from coming to [him]. That this involved humiliating [Estraven] was unfortunate.' (95)

From this piece of Ai's writing, we learn that his opinion of Estraven has already changed slightly. He still does not want to be associated with Estraven but now recognizes

his/her intentions and his/her contribution to Ai's coming to Orgoreyn. He even feels remorse for his treatment of Estraven; however, he does not trust Estraven enough to express it. If Ai was a member of a face culture, he would not behave in such way; however, we observe that Ai's reaction to the situation is guilt, a mark of a member of a dignity culture.

This prompts Estraven to say that '[o]ne can't believe everything one hears on [the] radio, [in Orgoreyn]' (95). Unlike Ai, s/he is aware of the hidden nature of the Orgota political system and the activities of the secret police, the Sarf. S/he informs Ai that 'in Mishnory [he is] going to be in some need of information, and advice' (95). Such actions (open offering of advice) are not in accordance with the principles of *shifgrethor*, therefore in this instance, Estraven is not being polite, rather the opposite. S/he mentions it him/herself in his/her writings, in chapter 11: 'Soliloquies in Mishnory'. S/he writes that '[Ai] gave [him] Ashe's money as one would give a hired assassin his fee. [He] had not often been so angry, and [he] insulted [Ai] deliberately' (108).

Here, we understand that Estraven considers giving open advice an insult. Ai is not aware of that, so we can assume he believes Estraven's advice to be genuine, yet he discards it and informs Estraven that in Mishnory '[t]here seems to be a number of people quite ready to supply [advice]' (95). Estraven answers:

And there's safety in numbers, eh? Ten are more trustworthy than one. [. . .] I have the right to thank you. [. . .] My thanks take the form of advice. [. . .] You are the tool of a faction. I advise you to be careful how you let them use you. I advise you to find out what the enemy faction is, and who they are, and never to let them use you, for they will not use you well. (95)

This is the first open advice Estraven ever gives Ai, and even though s/he does it with the intention to insult him, s/he does provide valuable information about Orgoreyn and the Orgota. S/he draws Ai's attention to the power of the government factions and the danger Ai is in, and s/he also mentions the struggle for power the factions engage in and that they would not hesitate to use any means to achieve their ends.

Unfortunately, Ai does not believe Estraven enough to let these claims affect his choices. Nevertheless, he is still unsettled by both Estraven's words and behaviour. He remarks that '[he] had never heard [Estraven] use this sort of harsh, elaborate courtesy, and had no idea what it signified' (95). The reason for this is that Estraven has never spoken

openly, waiving *shifgrethor*. Ai wants to ask for further clarification, but Estraven takes his/her leave and departs, leaving Ai feeling disagreeable and homesick.

Estraven later writes about this meeting in chapter 11: ‘Soliloquies in Mishnory’; s/he is surprised that Ai accepted his/her advice despite the manner in which it was given and s/he expresses worry that s/he has misunderstood Ai’s behaviour the entire time. S/he remarks:

[W]hen I thought myself most blunt and frank with him he may have found me most subtle and unclear. His obtuseness is ignorance. His arrogance is ignorance. He is ignorant of us; we of him. He is infinitely a stranger, and I a fool, to let my shadow cross the light of the hope he brings us. (108)

It is apparent from this excerpt that Estraven has not realized at all how differently Ai perceives communication and social situations. When Estraven notes that s/he ‘let [his] shadow cross the light of hope’ (108), s/he finally realises that it was *shifgrethor* which stood in the way of mutual understanding. At present, s/he fathoms that most of his/her conversations with Ai have likely been misunderstood on both sides and that all advice Estraven has given Ai so far was not seen as such. Accepting this, Estraven decides to ‘keep out of [Ai’s] way’ (108).

To sum up, in this scene Estraven visits Ai in his suite to receive the money from his/her kemmering, Ashe Foreth. Still affected by his distrust for Estraven, which he has developed in the previously discussed scene, Ai does not want to spend more time than necessary with Estraven. He gives him/her the money and expects Estraven to leave. Estraven, however, is insulted by Ai’s behaviour and decides to insult him in return; however, by the rules of *shifgrethor*, his/her insult takes the form of a direct advice, which is unacceptable in Karhide. Ai is not aware of this and understands Estraven’s advice as nothing more than advice.

The importance of this scene lies in the fact that it is here when Estraven commences to understand the vast difference between Ai and Gethenians. As such, the scene is crucial to the plot, because Estraven begins to question his/her previous conversations with Ai and realizes the different nature of Ai’s *shifgrethor*, his personal pride. Ai’s *shifgrethor* is completely different from Estraven’s, as Ai is a male from a low context dignity culture, and Estraven is ambisexual, a manwoman, in Le Guin’s terms (Le Guin, 1993), from a high context culture based on face and, to some extent, honour. Ai’s high regard of traditionally masculine traits is foreign to Estraven; however, Estraven realizes that his/her

traits and behaviour must be foreign and unfathomable to Ai as well. While s/he decides to keep out of Ai's way, Estraven's realizations help her/him understand that Ai cannot navigate the Gethenian face game on his own and needs Estraven's aid to succeed in his mission.

V. CONCLUSION

Ursula K. Le Guin was a science-fiction author with family background in anthropology, which allowed her to create unique realistic worlds in her writing. She worked with science-fiction as with a thought-experiment, considering it to be a description of the present, rather than a prediction of the future. This thesis focused on the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin's most groundbreaking work, which has established her as an expert on creating alien societies based on realistic elements of Earth's cultures. The novel features an Earth ambassador, Genly Ai, who struggles with connecting to the ambisexual humans of Gethen and forming relationships of trust with them. Le Guin has created a new sociological concept for her novel, the concept of *shifgrethor*, which has been revealed to share key features with what we know as 'face negotiation', and which prohibits Ai from understanding Gethenian interactions and motives.

Politeness theory serves as a great tool for understanding *shifgrethor*. It was developed as a means of describing social relationships and it is based on negative and positive face—an individual's desire to be admired and respected, as well as have his or her actions unimpeded by others. PT revolves around the idea that conversation participants work together to maintain one another's face, which is the base concept of *shifgrethor* as well. For Gethenians, who live in harsh environmental conditions, *shifgrethor* presents a way to engage in conflict without using physical violence; their politeness is very indirect and does not allow them to, for example, openly give or accept advice, or take blame. Concerning context, it is a very high context strategy, filled with allusions and implications, and as such, it is incomprehensible to outsiders, who lack the necessary knowledge to understand what certain statements denote. Genly Ai, who comes from a low context culture, has problems navigating this 'face game' of the Gethenians.

Ai's relationship with Estraven is not only influenced by *shifgrethor*, but also by Ai's misconceptions about Gethenians, mostly in terms of gender. Ai comes from Earth, his view of the society is gendered, and he divides people into men and women, each of whom he treats differently. For someone trained to interact with other cultures, his views of women—to whom he had been acquainted for his entire life—seem slightly alarming; he considers women to be deceptive and devious, and he links femininity with lack of resolve and betrayal. His views on women impede his understanding of Estraven, who is a manwoman, but Ai continues to see him/her as a man until the last part of the novel.

Estraven displays qualities we traditionally connect with both men and women, but Ai fails to understand that Estraven's personality is formed by all these qualities together, and he sees Estraven as someone s/he is not. He only understands and accepts Estraven's ambisexuality during their solitary journey across the ice sheet, when he witnesses Estraven entering kemmer and finally admits to himself the idea of a manwoman. Ai's and Estraven's relationship develops afterwards, and they form deep friendship, which can even be seen as love for one another.

Ai and Estraven's journey across the ice sheet therefore does what no amount of Envoy training could do—it allows Ai to fully understand Gethenian culture and the principles of their society, bringing him to the realization that in order to succeed in his mission, he must have personal interest in it, not only approach it as a task given to him. By coming to trust and love Estraven, Ai adopts his/her goal of improving the life in Karhide by securing the alliance between Gethen and the Ekumen. Estraven's death leaves Ai as the sole missionary of this alliance, but it also aids him with disposing of Tibe, who would impede the process. Before Estraven's death, during their journey, Ai promises him/her he will clear his/her name as a traitor before Karhide joins Ekumen. However, since Ai finds it necessary to call his ship to the planet before speaking to king Argaven, he does not keep this promise. Such action shows that while in the beginning of the story, Ai acted only by his moral compass, as a member of a dignity culture, now he has come to change. By the end of the novel, he is more like Estraven—he foregoes his personal interest and wishes and acts in the interest of Karhide and the Ekumen. He has been acculturated in the Gethenian society and he understands the world differently.

Despite not being able to clear Estraven's name before bringing Karhide in the Ekumen, Ai secures face restoration for Estraven in his/her home, the Domain of Estre. At the very end of the novel, Ai travels to Estre where he meets Estraven's father Esvans, and his/her son Sorve. He tells Estraven's family that Estraven was not a traitor and those who call him such are fools; it is implied at the end of the text that he will tell Esvans and Sorve the tale of how Estraven and he crossed the ice sheet together. Therefore, while Estraven's face is not restored by the king by the end of the novel, s/he receives a more important restoration, in the eyes of his/her family. Due to the decentralization of Karhide, it can be expected that the local and personal opinions matter more to people than the words of the king, and as Estraven did not have much respect for the king's authority, his/her father may be similarly inclined—interested more in the accomplishments of his/her child than the king's opinion.

Esvans' learning about Estraven's honourable actions can also be understood as a parallel to the change which we observe in Genly Ai's character. While Ai has become more like Gethenians and he forewent clearing Estraven's name in favour of bringing Karhide into the Ekumen, Estraven's face is restored not publicly, by the king, but in private, to his/her family. A private, internal source of pride is a mark of a dignity culture. This can be understood in two ways. One: As Ai has become more like Estraven, Estraven has become more like Ai—therefore his/her face restoration happens in a way which strongly links Estraven to Ai and connects their life experience. Or two: As Ai brings the Ekumen ship on the surface, Gethen—a culture of high context insiders—begins its journey to become a part of the Ekumen, a culture of low context outsiders. Therefore, the private nature of Estraven's face restoration predicts the future of Gethenian cultures, which will be influenced by other nations of the universe and will gradually come to lose their high context character.

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SHRNUTÍ

Román *The Left Hand of Darkness* (česky *Levá ruka tmy*) je jedním z nejvýznamnějších děl americké autorky Ursuly K. Le Guinové. Jedná se o vědecko-fantastické dílo, které se odehrává na planetě Gethen, jejíž obyvatelé jsou ambisexuální — nemají stálé pohlaví. Hlavní postavou díla je Genly Ai, vyslanec meziplanetární organizace Ekumen, jehož úkolem je přesvědčit Gethen, aby se k této organizace připojil. Le Guinová se narodila do rodiny antropologa Alfreda Kroebera a spisovatelky Theodory Kroeberové, což silně ovlivnilo její budoucí zaměření a její díla; ve své tvorbě využívá koncepty z antropologie a sociologie, například „face“ (česky „tvář“, tak jak je pojem chápan ve spojení „ztratit tvář“), stejně jako vytváří své vlastní. V případě *Levé ruky tmy* se jedná o „shifgrethor“, u něhož nacházíme mnoho společných rysů se sociologickým konceptem „tváře“. Le Guinová „shifgrethor“ využívá jako bariéru v mezikulturních vztazích dvou hlavních postav díla, Genlyho Ai a Estravena, obyvatel/ky Gethenu, který/á Genlymu Ai pomáhá dosáhnout jeho cíle. Tato práce se zabývá analýzou interakcí v díle a rozebírá faktory, které ovlivňují nedorozumění a vytváří překážky v komunikaci. K tomu práce využívá „politeness theory“ Penelope Brownové a Stevena C. Levinsona, kteří zkoumali strategie, které lidé využívají v komunikaci, aby se vyhnuli ohrožení něčí „tváře“; dále kontext („high and low context“), tak jak ho popsal Edward T. Hall a později David Livermore; a „dignity/face/honour“ (česky „důstojnost/tvář/čest“), což je nástroj pro dělení kultur v závislosti na jejich klíčových hodnotách, vyvinutý Angelou K.-Y. Leungovou a Dovem Cohenem. Práce využívá tyto tři nástroje k identifikaci mezikulturních rozdílů a komunikačních bariér a zhodnocení vývoje vztahu hlavních postav.