

A Comparison of Ursula K. Le Guin and Ken Kesey's Response to the Counterculture Movement of the Sixties



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Introduction

While *The Left Hand of Darkness* was published in 1969, the 1960s were one of the most tumultuous and divisive decades in American history. These were the years of the Civil Rights Movement, of the prejudice against gays, and even international turmoil with the Vietnam war. It brought the rise of amazing, righteous leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., but it also brought the tragic fall of public figures such as President Kennedy. Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first ever humans on the moon, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 sprung the country into uncharted territory. It was a decade dominated by war and plagued with conflict. Gay bars were raided, African Americans were shot and killed, and the idea of reform and difference was improbable. This set the stage for public figures to steer society towards justice and good and eliminate discrimination and inequity. The works of authors like Le Guin and Ken Kesey are not only reflections of their individual courage and honor, but also of massive ideological changes in society.

Research Question

After examining the primary sources that were available to us, we produced a broad question that explored Le Guin's changing stances and how those shifted between publication and writing the introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*. We also originally wanted to examine what outside events may have influenced that shift. Though we realized that this question was much too broad and after some discussion, we decided to focus on how the events of the 1960s influenced Le Guin's work and we decided to compare this to how another author, Ken Kesey, was affected by these events as well. We decided to compare these two authors because further research revealed that Ken Kesey wrote *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* in 1959 and Le Guin wrote *The Left Hand of Darkness* in 1969, thus we had two different authors at different ends of the 1960s. Since the 1960s was such a tumultuous decade in America, we wanted to compare how the works of these two authors were affected by the current events of the time.

How was Kesey and Le Guin's work affected by the counterculture movements of the 1960s?

Methods

Research for this project was conducted by analyzing primary source materials in the University of Oregon Special Collections and comparing the ideas presented by both Kesey and Le Guin to the primary cultural movements of the sixties. Research began by reading *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, which was published in 1959, and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which was published in 1969. These books focused on different aspects of the sixties; however, both prominently displayed a reaction to the counterculture movement of the sixties and a refutation of post war ideals. A variety of secondary sources were then utilized, including reputable media and news articles and peer-edited scholarly articles. Comparing Le Guin and Kesey's personal manuscripts and letters provided insight into how they personally reacted to the events of the sixties, and these reactions were then compared to the context of when the books were published.



11/8/1960
JFK elected



10/16/1962
Cuban Missile Crisis



8/28/1963
"I Have a Dream" speech



March 1965
Vietnam War



March 1969
Left Hand published



5/1/1961
Peace Corp established



11/22/1962
JFK assassinated



7/2/1964
Civil Rights Act



11/5/1968
Moon Landing



6/28/1969
Stonewall Riots

Le Guin's Response

Ursula K. Le Guin's work is a direct response to counterculture movements that began and developed during the 1960's. The sixties were a time of change, marked by a shift away from the post-war nuclear family and towards equal rights, peace, and freedom, and Le Guin's work represents this idea very well. Her philosophy of fiction supports the idea that her work is a reflection of her time. In the manuscript of her introduction for the reissue of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin says that "the science fiction writer is supposed to take a trend or phenomenon of the here and now, purify and intensify it for dramatic effect, and extend it into the future." Indeed, her entire introduction expands on the idea that science fiction, even fiction in general, is an extrapolation of ideas and philosophies present in the time in which they were written. *The Left Hand of Darkness* displays Le Guin's reaction to the counterculture movements in the sixties, most overtly the gay rights movement and the civil rights movement. Le Guin frequently made her main characters people of color, as Genly Ai is in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. She also extrapolated upon the idea of androgyny and gender. During the sixties, the gay rights movement was making strides towards recognition and acceptance. Le Guin explores the idea of androgyny in a thought experiment that became *The Left Hand of Darkness*. As she says in her introduction draft, "the purpose of a thought experiment... is not to predict the future... but to describe reality, the present world." The special collection at the University of Oregon shows that Le Guin consciously used her work to reflect upon the social and cultural movements at the time.

Science fiction is often described, and even defined, as extrapolative. The science fiction writer is supposed to take a trend or phenomenon of the here-and-now, purify and intensify it for dramatic effect, and extend it into the future. "If this goes on, this is what will happen."



Conclusion

The 1960s marked one of the most divisive and revolutionary decades since America's inception. African Americans demanded civil rights, the gay community sought equality, and international turmoil sent the public into a dissonant, conflicting split. The entire nation fought a constant battle with conformity and harmony. This hora of conflict and tension set the stage for public figures to spark change and steer the countercultural movement towards freedom and equality. Authors Ken Kesey and Ursula Le Guin are representative of this change and illustrate the counterculture movement in their respective books, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

In a time plagued with oppression and conformity, not only did Ken Kesey's novel steer revolution but his character did too. Kesey was the living embodiment of uniqueness and the objection to conformity. His use with drugs demonstrates his pursuit of autonomy as he spread the concept of freedom through the open use of LSD. His novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, attacked the danger of conformity through his description of a mental hospital, and he opened the public eye to the reality of society.

Le Guin shared similar beliefs as she, too, promoted individuality and difference but from a different angle. Guin focused on the gay rights movement and the civil rights movement. Her description of an androgynous society underscored the value of the *individual* and the elimination of conforming to traditional roles. Her inclusion of an African American character illustrated the equal capabilities of minorities.

Ursula Le Guin and Ken Kesey were very different people. Le Guin was an avid feminist and civil rights activist, whereas Kesey was a masculine, adventurous, drug using thrill-seeker. Nevertheless, they shared a common goal to eliminate conformity and promote equality and freedom. The 1960s offered a chance for change and revolution, and these two Oregonian authors flourished with the opportunity.

Kesey's Response

Author, Ken Kesey, was a huge catalyst of the hippie movement in the 60s and is considered to be the leading counterculture figure of the 60s. He has written some of the era's most popular books, being *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes a Great Notion*. Ken Kesey was first introduced to LSD in 1960 when he volunteered to participate in a United States government experiment that tested a mind-altering drug and soon popularized the use of LSD in the 1960s. A few months later, Kesey began working in a mental ward and thus found the inspiration for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, published in 1962. Most of Ken Kesey's actions and work is a response to the counterculture movement. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Kesey emphasizes the oppressiveness of society and explores the effects of conformity and institutional processes. Throughout the book, Kesey opposes mainstream cultural values by establishing an opposition to "the system" (society). Kesey uses the mental ward in the novel as a metaphor for the oppressive society of the late 1950s. Most of the character's experiences and thoughts come from Kesey's own experiences of the world as well as his use of drugs. Kesey also hints in the book that repression of sexuality leads to insanity and thus people should be able to healthily express their sexuality with no oppression. This is most likely a reaction to the gay rights movement of the time.

While Kesey was writing *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, he and his group of friends began calling themselves the Merry Pranksters and formulated a reputation that supported the open use of psychoactive drugs and bizarre attire. In 1964, Kesey finished, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, and headed to New York in a former school bus called "Further". On this road trip to New York, Kesey and the Merry Pranksters regularly used LSD. The road trip was filmed to try and spread the doctrine of freedom through the open use of LSD and is thought to be the beginning of the psychedelic 60s. Wherever they went, they inspired locals with their crazy drug-induced parties and jaunty lifestyle. Kesey and the Merry Pranksters provided an alternative way of life for those that were wanting to rebel against the outdated conventions thrown on them by society

It's you. The drug is a key. Take it. Learn. Dig. Swing.

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Further Readings

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