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Navigating Utopian Waters: Dreams, Power, and Consequences in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* and Octavia E. Butler's "The Book of Martha"

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ABSTRACT: This article aims to delve into the thematic intersections of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* and Octavia E. Butler's "The Book of Martha", within the realms of dreams and their importance for utopianism. To achieve this goal, crucial and relevant scenes in both works are analysed and compared against each other. Firstly, there is an exploration of the fact that the existence of a perfect world for everyone is impossible. Secondly, it scrutinizes how each narrative grapples with the ethical and moral implications of wielding extraordinary power. Thirdly, it reflects on the characters' agency and free will. Lastly, it examines how the characters deal with the consequences of their actions as well as their sense of guilt. Other aspects are also explored such as race, utilitarianism, and the ambiguity of utopia.

KEYWORDS: Dream, Utopia, *The Lathe of Heaven*, "The Book of Martha", Power

RESUMO: Este artigo tem como objetivo aprofundar as intersecções temáticas entre *The Lathe of Heaven*, de Ursula K. Le Guin, e "The Book of Martha", de Octavia E. Butler, no domínio dos sonhos e da sua importância para a utopia. Para o efeito, são analisadas cenas cruciais e relevantes de ambas as obras e depois comparadas entre si. Em primeiro lugar, explora-se o facto da existência de um mundo perfeito para todos ser impossível. Em segundo lugar, analisa-se a forma como cada narrativa lida com as implicações éticas e morais do uso de um poder extraordinário. Em terceiro lugar, reflete-se sobre a agência e o livre arbítrio das personagens. Por último, examina-se a forma como as personagens lidam com as consequências das suas ações e com o seu sentimento de culpa. Outros aspetos são também explorados tais como raça, utilitarismo, e a ambiguidade da utopia.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Sonho, Utopia, *The Lathe of Heaven*, "The Book of Martha", Poder

INTRODUCTION

Both “The Book of Martha” (2003), a short story by Octavia E. Butler, and *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971), a novel by Ursula K. Le Guin, explore the dichotomy Dreams/Nightmares in connection with Utopia/Dystopia. “The Book of Martha” starts with Martha Bes, the protagonist, having a conversation with God, in which He asks her to find a way to help humankind “survive its greedy, murderous, wasteful adolescence [, and] help it to find less destructive, more peaceful, sustainable ways to live”(Butler 192). *The Lathe of Heaven’s* focuses on George Orr, a man who has the ability to transform the world around him with his so-called “effective” dreams. Later, upon learning of this ability, William Haber, Orr’s psychiatrist, cannot resist using George’s powers for his personal gain and his own view of a perfect world. Despite being different pieces of literature, both focus on similar aspects, which are essential to analyse. Therefore, this article will delve into and compare not only the aforementioned dichotomies, but also themes such as “playing God”, agency and the consequences of our actions, guilt and the various moral implications, and finally the question of race.

THERE IS NO PERFECT WORLD FOR EVERYONE

The idea of the impossibility of a perfect world for everyone has been explored for a while now, even before the publication of both texts.

One great example is the feminist separatist utopias of the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Feminist utopian writers of this time wanted to write worlds where women were front and centre. One of these utopias is Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose novel *Herland* describes an island with a society that consists solely of women. Another similar case is *Mizora, A Prophecy* by Mary Bradley Lane, which also explores an all-female community. In this novel, the Mizorans promote eugenics by only having blonde, white women in their society as well as despising those with darker skin tones. In these works, women often wrote of places where they were free from patriarchal oppression, and therefore independent, with no real need for men. Despite not being aware of this at the time, these writers, being largely upper-middle white women, were perpetuating eugenicist ideas, which often lead to both racism and misandry. Having this in mind, it is clear that some contemporary readers would not find

these feminist separatist utopias very eutopian. This example shows that even if a world may appear perfect to a group of people, there is always a minority that may be harmed by it, therefore there is always a dystopian aspect in the seemingly eutopia. Lucy Sargisson gives us another important example in which the idea of perfection is disputed:

Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) is a further example of a Utopian text in which the concept of perfection is challenged. *The Dispossessed* privileges harmony and unity and represents an ambiguous utopia that has perhaps more links with ecology movements than with feminism. None the less, Le Guin is clearly wary of the stagnation of process . . . (Sargisson 1996, 24)

Additionally, it is relevant to mention that, historically, eutopias, or “ideal cities”, have not exactly been perfect for every reader, particularly those who are racialized. E. K. Chan corroborates this by stating:

[The] early texts that define the Western tradition such as Plato's *Republic* (360 BCE), about which at least one scholar presumes that the inhabitants of the ideal city are all one “race”—that is, Greek, to the extent that people from different national groupings are racialized. (Chan 2022, 360)

In Butler's “The Book of Martha”, Martha, upon being given this huge responsibility by God, says: “What, exactly, do you want? A utopia? Because I don't believe in them. I don't believe it's possible to arrange a society so that everyone is content, everyone has what he or she wants” (Butler 202). Despite wanting to make the world a better place, Martha does not believe in the possibility of making a world where everyone is fully satisfied with their lives. This idea inevitably reminds us of another work by Le Guin titled “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1973). In this short story, there is a depiction of the utopian city of Omelas, whose prosperity depends on the eternal misery and suffering of a single child. As a paradigmatic example of a new utopianism, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” might validate Martha's belief.

In *The Lathe of Heaven*, Dr Haber is driven by the belief that it is a man's duty to forge a utopia, aiming to mend what he perceives as a fractured world. As he enquires: “But in fact, isn't that man's very purpose on earth – to do things, change things, run things, make a better world?” (Le Guin 81). On the contrary, George Orr is reluctant to shoulder the immense responsibility that accompanies the task of reshaping the world and is hesitant to be the catalyst for such alterations, stating: “Who am I to meddle with the way

things go?“ (Le Guin 13) and “I can’t be the only one [to dream effectively]; maybe I just happened to become aware of it. But I don’t want to do it.” (Le Guin 86)

This paradox is further explored in another of Le Guin’s texts, “Utopiyan, Utopiyang” (2015), in which she states:

Every utopia since *Utopia* has also been . . . both a good place and a bad one. Every eutopia contains a dystopia, every dystopia contains a eutopia. In the yang-yin symbol each half contains within it a portion of the other, signifying their complete interdependence and continual intermutability . . . The symbol represents not a stasis but a process. (Le Guin 2017, 97)¹

The powerful negotiation between utopia and dystopia led to a new understanding of utopianism and a break with traditional utopias. Hence, the eruption of "critical" utopias and dystopias. Tom Moylan describes the “critical utopia” as:

A central concern in the critical utopia is the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as dream. Furthermore, [it] dwell[s] on the conflict between the originary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated. Finally, [it] focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within utopian society itself and thus render more recognizable and dynamic alternatives. (Moylan 2014, 10)

Additionally, when it comes to “blueprint” utopias, Lucy Sargisson points out:

One component of the commonly held view of what constitutes a utopia that is particularly puzzling is the assumption that utopias are blueprints for the perfect polity . . . This blueprint is an image of a future that is idyllic and perfect in all senses . . . To perfect is to make complete. On a superficial level, the equation of perfection with finality and death can be read as expressing fears that utopianism has traditionally evoked . . . This book advances a critique of utopianism as perfection-seeking that is different from those mentioned above. It hinges on a critique of the equation of perfection with closure . . . (Sargisson 1996, 2-3)

“The Book of Martha” and *The Lathe of Heaven*, by emphasizing the idea that a perfect world for everyone is impossible, cut with the “blueprint” tradition of utopian/dystopian writing, and introduced - especially Le Guin's works - a new way of perceiving the utopian impulse: as a path.

As far as utopia is concerned, Fátima Vieira explains it best:

The best definition of utopia, in this sense, I have ever come across has been offered by the Argentinian film director Fernando Birri, who famously said that utopia is something that we set on your horizon: we know that we will never reach it, that every time we take ten steps forward, it will walk ten steps away; but we need it to proceed, as it forces us to walk. Utopian thinking inspires us to be ambitious while asking the inaugural utopian question “what do we want for our society?” (Vieira 2016, 28)

Utopia is thus the process of making the world a better place, and not the “perfect place” itself. Lucy Sargisson reiterates this idea: “Perfection, I suggest, symbolizes death: the death of movement, the death of progress and process, development, and change; the death, in other words, of politics. To strive for perfection is to strive for death.” (Sargisson 1996, 37)

The shift within utopianism - from the classical idea that utopia is a perfect place to this notion of utopia as a path towards a horizon, implying constant renewal - makes clear how dreams - as utopian impulses - are key to literary utopias..

IMPORTANCE OF DREAMS IN UTOPIAN THINKING

In “The Book of Martha”, when confronted with God’s task, Martha suggests the following:

‘Dreams,’ she said. ‘Powerful, unavoidable, realistic dreams that come every time people sleep.’ . . . ‘I want them to have the only possible utopia.’ Martha thought for a moment. ‘Each person will have a private, perfect utopia every night – or an imperfect one. If they crave conflict and struggle, they get that. If they want peace and love, they get that. Whatever they want or need comes to them. I think if people go to a ... well, a private heaven every night, it might take the edge off their willingness to spend their waking hours trying to dominate or destroy one another’ She hesitated. ‘Won’t it?’ (Butler 203,204)

Martha believes that the power of dreams will help guide humanity not to a perfect future, but to a better one: “None of this will make them perfect, Martha’ . . . ‘But this will help?’ She said. ‘It will help more than it will hurt.’ ‘Yes, it will probably do that.’” (Butler 211) It is thus clear that Martha considers dreams to be a powerful tool for social change in the real world.

In *The Lathe of Heaven*, dreams literally do change reality when it comes to George Orr: “ I have had dreams that... that affected the... non-dream world. The real world . . . I dreamed something, and it came true . . . I simply change things . . . the dream really did

change reality. It made a different reality, retroactively” (Le Guin 10, 12). However, these dreams are powered by his unconscious mind, which means that they are “incoherent, selfish, irrational – immoral”.

Despite both being given this power to change reality, Martha and George react differently. Martha, on the one hand, decides to do the best she can help humanity, by giving them realistic dreams. On the other hand, George, having “effective dreams”, cannot wait to be free from this burden, as he believes them to be more harmful than good. Dr Haber, as has been said before, uses Orr’s power to change the world as he seems fit. Nevertheless, because Orr’s dreams are unpredictable, his wishes do not always come to fruition, even with the use of hypnotic suggestion.

Both works present the idea of the importance of dreams in utopian thinking, since they force the characters to question their present reality and plan for a better, and different, future. Therefore, dreams and utopian thinking are indeed driving forces for change.

“PLAYING GOD” AND HANDLING POWER

Prior to discussing how these characters “play God”, it is important to describe the state of their respective worlds before they decided/ were forced to change it.

Despite being published thirty years apart, both works present worlds with similar issues. In “The Book of Martha”, both her and God mention that the world is struggling with overpopulation, environmental destruction, and “famines, epidemics, floods, fires, greed, slavery, revenge, stupid, stupid wars...” (Butler 202). In *The Lathe of Heaven*, they mention undernourishment, climate change, “overpopulation . . . cancer as the major killer . . . the color problem, racial hatred . . . war . . . species deterioration . . . poverty, economic inequality, the class war” (Le Guin 146). While Martha’s solution for these issues is dreams, Haber’s, and consequently Orr’s, solutions are various, depending on the problem, and Haber’s intentions did not exactly match the outcomes.

After God stated His proposal, Martha’s reaction is one of fear and rejection. She does not “want to hurt people, not even by accident” (Butler 196). Later, God tells her that if she cannot do it, “there are millions of human beings who would give anything to do this work” (Butler 200). Considering this, Martha must ponder between two possibilities, both flawed. On the one hand, she can choose to give up the responsibility that comes with this

job and give it to someone else. On the other hand, she knows that there are cruel, tyrannical, hateful people that could be chosen if she refuses to perform the task. For a brief time, she is torn between her own comfortable and guilt-free life, and billions of people that could potentially suffer if she declines God's task. Despite the impossibility of making every human happy with her decision, she knows the other option would be too risky and, possibly, much worse:

And instantly, she thought of some of these – people who would be happy to wipe out whole segments of the population whom they hated and feared, or people who would set up vast tyrannies that forced everyone into a single mold, no matter how much suffering that created. And what about those who would treat the work as fun – as nothing more than a good-guys-versus-bad-guys computer game, and damn the consequences. There were people like that. Martha knew people like that. (Butler 200, 201)

Her intersectional identity as a Black woman that grew up poor, made Martha much more empathetic to others' suffering, in comparison to many other people who could possibly thrive or profit from such suffering. Despite thinking that no one should have the right to "play God", Martha still chooses the path she thinks might help the vast majority of people. Martha appears to be the typical "chosen one" character who is afraid of the burden but reluctantly accepts the responsibility. Wondering whether there had been other people who had helped Him to do tasks such as these, Martha asks:

'But there have been a number of people who've had to deal with smaller disasters.' 'People you ordered to save a few and let the rest die?' 'Yes', God said . . . 'Some [of them] took refuge in madness, some in drunkenness, some in sexual license. Some killed themselves. Some survived and lived long, fruitful lives.' . . . 'I don't do that any longer', God said. No, Martha thought. Now, he had found a different amusement . . . 'What will please you and cause you to let me go and not bring in someone else to replace me?' 'I don't know', God said, and he smiled. He rested his head back against the tree. 'Because I don't know what you will do. That's a lovely sensation – anticipating, not knowing' 'Not from my point of view', Martha said bitterly . . . 'Because I don't know what to do. I really don't.' (Butler 201, 202)

It is almost ironic that God Himself doesn't want to "play God" – not even God wants that responsibility. Instead, He forces that responsibility onto His subjects, His "children". At the same time, Martha believes that God is doing this for His own amusement, as if He is having fun by gambling people's lives away.

After everything has been done, Martha states that the ways of God scare her, and she wants to go home. In response, God said:

‘No, they don’t’, she said. ‘You’re beginning to like my ways.’ After a time, Martha nodded. ‘You’re right. It did scare me at first, and now it doesn’t. I’ve gotten used to it. In just the short time that I’ve been here, I’ve gotten used to it, and I’m starting to like it. That’s what scares me.’(Butler 212)

Martha, here, shows exactly what this amount of power can do to a person if given free rein to it.

Unlike Martha, Dr Haber immediately thinks himself the man for the task of making the world greater. Upon learning about Orr’s reality-changing ability, the doctor uses it for his own gain, manipulating awake-George, along with dream-George, by telling him that what they were doing was for the greater good of humanity. By using hypnotic suggestions during Orr’s “d-state”, Haber tries to create his own idea of a perfect world. Despite all the change they were able to achieve, William Haber still blames Orr for the bad outcomes, and rejoices in his own hubris for the ones that turned out as he desired initially: “Orr’s irresponsibility was the cause of death of many innocent people, the wreckage and panic loose in the city: he must face up to what he had done” (Le Guin 117), which in comparison to “‘To a better world!’ Dr. Haber said, raising his glass to his creation . . .” (Le Guin 71), really show the difference between Haber’s attitudes.

Even Heather Lelache states that “[He’s] power-hungry. He’s found a great way to run the world without taking any responsibility for it” (Le Guin 100): It is clear that Haber rejoices in the power of “playing God” but rejects the responsibility (and guilt) that comes with it.

“Playing God”, thus, reflects exactly on how the characters handle power. It is not a coincidence that “with great power comes great responsibility” is an adage so vastly used.

In her thesis, *Dreams, Power, and Community: An Analysis of Balance in Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Word for World is Forest and The Lathe of Heaven*, Brittany Pickering notes:

George does not seek to exercise and master his powers, because he would rather not have them at all; Dr Haber, on the other hand, thinks it is a waste not to utilise such a promising faculty and seeks to harness the powers of effective dreaming. George Orr admires balance and is himself a balanced man, but his ability to change reality by dreaming up whole new realities threatens his sense of balance and his moral code . . . Haber, on the other hand, isn’t discouraged by the dangers of trying to harness such powers; he is intrigued and accepts the



challenge to make the world a better place. Along with a benevolence that causes Haber to want to fix the world's issues, he is ambitious, and he uses George's power to his own benefit. (Pickering 2014, 10-11)

George himself, reflecting on his psychiatrist's choices, understands that even though his intentions might be good, he is corrupted by his desire to "play God":

It's not that he's evil. He's right, one ought to try to help other people . . . You have to help another person. But it's not right to play God with masses of people. To be God you have to know what you're doing. And to do any good at all, just believing you're right and your motives are good isn't enough. You have to... be in touch. He isn't in touch. No one else, no thing even, has an existence of its own, for him; he sees the world only as a means to his end. It doesn't make any difference if his end is good; means are all we've got... He can't accept, he can't let be, he can't let go . . . He could take us all with him, out of touch, if he did manage to dream as I do. (Le Guin 155)

This eagerness to change the world for the better drives Haber to try and, eventually, succeed in giving himself the ability to "effective dream", as he believes that George is too weak a man to have this amount of power. Ironically, this unstoppable hubris of his is what will doom him in the end. Evidently, the power to change reality cannot be brandished by just anyone, as Dr Haber nearly destroys, not only his own brain, but also the whole world.

AGENCY AND FREE WILL

The "tests they gave [George Orr] . . . Personality inventories, IQ, TAT, and some simulated encounter situations" (Le Guin 136) showed that George is the epitome of an average person: "Both, neither. Either, or. Where there's an opposed pair, a polarity, you're in the middle; where there's a scale, you're at the balance point. You cancel out so thoroughly that, in a sense, nothing is left." (Le Guin 137) Despite this being the case, it's also true that Orr was used, manipulated, and a passive bystander of what was happening in his life and in his own dreams. Since the beginning of the novel, Haber has seen Orr as someone he could use, as someone he thought was inferior to him (Le Guin 17).

George himself, all throughout the novel, reflects on how passive he has been. He feels trapped and cannot imagine a way to break the shackles of Haber's manipulation:

I haven't any strength, I haven't any character, I'm a born tool. I haven't any destiny. All I have is dreams. And now other people run them . . . I must get away from Haber, he thought, trying to be firm and decisive, but even as he thought it he knew he wouldn't. Haber had him hooked, and with more than one hook. (Le Guin 73)

The only option he can envision to free himself from both Haber and his "effective dreams" is to end his own life. As he admits, "The only solution I really can see,' he said, 'is to kill myself. But I don't want to . . . But I have to stop it somehow. I have to be stopped'" (Le Guin 96). When it comes to George Orr, the question of agency and free will is, thus, a complex one for he is self-aware of his condition, but he cannot seem to escape Haber and his power-hungry attitude.

In "The Book of Martha", however, agency is dealt with in a completely different way, and that is manifested in the representations of God throughout the story. At the beginning, Martha sees God as a "twice-live-sized, bearded white man" (Butler 190), and upon asking God the reason why she saw him in that manner, God answered "[y]ou see what your life has prepared you to see" (Butler 191). As the story progresses, Martha sees God as a black man, and finally "she saw that God had, in fact, become a woman . . . 'I think you look a little like me. We look like sisters.'" (Butler 209). After realising she is the one deciding the appearance of God, she becomes frustrated:

'It does bother me. If I'm doing it, why did it take so long for me to see you as a black woman – since that's no more true than seeing you as a white or black man?' 'As I've told you, you see what your life has prepared you to see.' . . . 'I believe you. I just thought I had already broken out of the mental cage I was born and raised in – a human God, a white God, a male God...' 'If it were truly a cage', God said, 'you would still be in it, and I would still look the way I did when you first saw me.' (Butler 209, 210)

Despite being put in this situation against her will, she still makes the unconscious choice of deciding how God appears to her. Throughout her whole life she has been conditioned to believe that God was a white man, for not only the paintings depicted God that way, but also because, in her experience, power was always held by white men, not anyone else. Nevertheless, as the story developed, Martha went through a process of deconstruction of her own ideas of power and of who could possess it. Indeed, she went through a process of "deculturation", dismantling the preconceptions she had been put through her whole life. Precisely because she was "playing God" and had this unimaginable amount of power in her hands, she started seeing God as a reflection of herself – as a Black woman. Martha,



therefore, reclaimed her agency and her free will. Even if, per the terms of her agreement with God, she must go back and live on “the bottom level of society” (Butler 193), her experience as a Black woman has been brought to the centre of the conversation standing equal to God. T. L. Stanley, perfectly complements this idea by saying:

Martha’s life has prepared her to envision a world that considers the consequences for everyone who occupies it, not just the elite. The “bottom” becomes the center, the margins become the lens, and they expose the bias in the oppositional positions as a way of framing a more nuanced critique . . . This is further evidenced by the evolution of God. By the time Martha decides on the change she wants to take place in the world, God has morphed from a 12-foot-tall white man, to an average white man, to a Black woman—who looks like Martha. Martha’s conception of utopia is formed as a direct challenge to the traditional Eurocentric expressions of civilization, evolving until divinity can also be found inside her own female, brown, previously poor and homeless, writer’s body. (Stanley 2019, 251-252)

CONSEQUENCES OF OUR ACTIONS: INTENTIONS VERSUS OUTCOMES

Both in “The Book of Martha” and *The Lathe of Heaven*, the characters must deal with the consequences of their actions. In the former, the consequences are manifest in the sacrifice Martha is forced to make at the end of the story to ensure the betterment of the world. It is a bittersweet decision, since she ends up asking God for forgetfulness, as it will negatively impact her passion and profession – writing fiction. In the latter, however, there is a great difference between their intentions and its outcomes.

Due to George Orr's frustration with the overcrowding of the city, Dr Haber hypothesized him to dream of a world less populated. The outcome is shocking, as billions of people disappeared in the blink of an eye: “My God, [Haber] thought, what has Orr done? Six billion people. Where are they?” (Le Guin 64). Orr had dreamt a new reality where there had been a carcinogenic plague which killed six billion people:

‘Do you remember the Plague Years?’ . . . ‘They took care of the overpopulation problem, didn’t they?’ . . . ‘There is no overpopulation now. Was there any other solution, besides nuclear war? There is now no perpetual famine in South America, Africa, and Asia . . . There are no floods now in the Ganges caused by the piling up of corpses of people dead of starvation.’ (Le Guin 67)

Although Haber's intentions seem to be good, since ending overpopulation would eventually end famine, pollution, and floods, the outcome virtually the extinction of humankind. As Orr's dreams are unpredictable, so is the ability to control them. Haber, however, is blind by power, and continuing his self-proclaimed mission, he tries to solve yet another problem of their civilization – War –, by commanding Orr to dream about peace:

No more mass killing of humans by other humans. No fighting in Iran and Arabia and Israel. No more genocides in Africa. No stockpiles of nuclear and biological weapons, ready to use against other nations. No more research on ways and means of killing people. A world at peace with itself. Peace as a universal life-style on Earth. You will dream of that world at peace with itself. (Le Guin 84)

Interestingly, George's subconscious mind is unable to imagine a world without war. Being at war seems to be a part of the human condition:

But I guess I can't, or my subconscious can't, even imagine a warless world. The best it can do is substitute one kind of war for another. You said, no killing of humans by other humans. So I dreamed up Aliens . . . Maybe rationally I could conceive of the human species not trying to kill each other off by nations, in fact rationally it's easier to conceive of than the motives of war. But you're handling something outside reason. You're trying to reach progressive, humanitarian goals with a tool that isn't suited to the job. Who has humanitarian dreams? (Le Guin 85)

As a psychiatrist and a dream specialist, Haber knows how impossible to predict dreams is, and yet he does not care whether the outcomes of his hypnotic suggestions are not exactly what was desired, because for him all that matters is the results. As George constantly mentions, everything is a means to an end to Haber.

Lastly, it is important to mention how Haber's intention to end racism had an outcome that completely erased any kind of diversity: "No black people, no white, no yellow, no red . . . underneath the clothes they were all the same color. They were gray . . . Dr. Haber had been delighted when that happened" (Le Guin 128). It is both curious and



sad that the only non-racist world that Orr's subconscious could conjure was a world where there was no colour difference whatsoever.² Successful in solving racial prejudice, they also end diversity and inevitably destroyed entire cultural and social experiences. George thinks immediately of Heather Lelache, his love interest. As a bi-racial woman, her identity had been moulded by her experiences as such. Her attitudes, her obstacles, and her boundaries were all conditioned by her life as a mixed-race woman. In a "gray world", could such a person have been born?

That's why she's not here, he thought. She could not have been born gray. Her color, her color of brown, was an essential part of her, not an accident. Her anger, timidity, brashness, gentleness, all were elements of her mixed being, her mixed nature, dark and clear right through, like Baltic amber. She could exist in the gray people's world. She had not been born. (Le Guin 129)

Although George himself could tolerate a gray people's world (Le Guin 129) – he could not tolerate the fact that Heather would not have been born, which shows precisely where his loyalties lie – with his beloved and not with the end of racial discrimination.

In the light of these examples, is it possible to understand Haber's attitudes? Although the outcomes of his actions are not exactly what he intended, he still believes that it is worthwhile if it leads to a better world.

Simply put, utilitarianism is the belief that the morality of an action is determined by its impact on the happiness of the majority. The goal is to maximize overall happiness or well-being for the greatest number of people. Bearing this in mind, it is interesting to note that the building where William Haber has his office has the following inscription: "THE GREATEST GOOD FOR THE GREATEST NUMBER" (Le Guin 135).³ However, this line of thought inevitably leads to eugenics, as George encounters a person being euthanized for having cancer. As he discusses this occurrence with Haber, he discovers that the doctor simply does not care about these people, as they "threaten" society, in his opinion: ". . . the future will justify it. We need health. We simply have no room for the incurables, the gene-damaged who degrade the species; we have no time for wasted, useless suffering" (Le Guin 140). As it happens in the separatist utopias mentioned in the section, "There is no perfect world for everyone", Haber's utilitarian ways also lead to eugenics. For him, the means justify the end, even if the means are cruel and vile. Moreover, following the theories of Fátima Vieira in her essay "The four modes of thinking

framed by utopian discursivity; Or why we need Utopia”, in a pluralistic society, there cannot be simple solutions to complex issues, which is exactly what Haber is trying to achieve.

In “The Book of Martha”, the consequences of Martha Bes’ actions have quite a different outcome. Her decision to give all humans vivid, realistic dreams, affects people’s need for fiction negatively:

‘Reading will suffer, won’t it – pleasure reading, anyway?’ ‘It will – for a while, anyway. People will read for information and for ideas, but they’ll create their own fantasies. Did you think of that before you made your decision?’ Martha sighed. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I did.’ (Butler 212)

To make the world a slightly better place, she sacrificed her passion and her profession. Unlike Haber who, with the help of Orr’s powers, gets himself a better office, a better position in his field, Martha gives up her life-long passion so that humanity might have a better chance at survival. It is important to mention that Martha, being a black woman, is part of two groups of people often discriminated against. Her background definitely shapes her decisions in the story, as she is clearly more empathetic and altruist than the selfish and cruel Dr Haber.

The characters in both stories exhibit contrasting reactions and attitudes towards the consequences of their actions. This disparity can be attributed to the distinct genres of the works: one being a dystopia and the other a philosophical utopia.

GUILT AND MORAL IMPLICATIONS

Mentioning guilt (or the lack of it) is unavoidable when we discuss how people deal with the consequences of their actions. As previously mentioned, George desires to free himself from the weight of guilt associated with altering the world, as he believes that influencing the world in the way he does is not within anyone’s rightful authority. Dr Haber, however, appears to show no guilt whatsoever. As long as he achieves his goals, he believes every action, harmful or not, is justified. Brittany Pickering adds that:

Le Guin juxtaposes George’s virtuousness and balance with his psychiatrist Dr. Haber’s strange mix of benevolence and power envy. While George struggles to maintain his own balance as well as that of the world he lives in, Haber fiddles with it and throws things more and more into disorder. (Pickering 2014, 2)



At the end of “The Book of Martha”, Martha is so consumed by guilt that she asks God to make her forget her decision:

‘Do you want to remember being here?’ God asked. ‘No.’ . . . ‘I’m afraid of the unintended damage that dreams might do.’ ‘Even though in the long run they’ll almost certainly do more good than harm?’ God asked. ‘Even so,’ Martha said. ‘I’m afraid the time might come when I won’t be able to stand knowing that I’m the one who caused not only the harm, but the end of the only career I’ve ever cared about. I’m afraid knowing all that might drive me out of my mind someday.’ . . . ‘I want to forget.’ (Butler 212, 213)

She is afraid for both her and the whole of humanity’s future. She is torn between the pain she might cause others and the pain she might cause herself – the self versus the social. In the end, she chooses to not know. In this situation, for Martha, ignorance is bliss. Although, just like Dr Haber, she believes that good for most is better than good for none, her approach is completely different, and that reflects on how distinct she is from him, despite having mostly the same powers.

Again, T. L. Stanley perfectly complements this by stating:

However, as God points out, to so powerfully satisfy people’s fantasy lives in dreams will negate the need for many other past times—including the reading of fiction. Though immensely saddened, Martha sees this as a worthy sacrifice. She understands utopia not as perfect, but as better, and “the good place” as good for most instead of good for all. She is able to exercise God-power for a day, all the while recognizing her continued humanity. So, knowing she will lose her livelihood, she asks God to erase her memory. She doesn’t want to recall that this new world was her idea. Martha also doesn’t want to be [aware] of her responsibility for whatever subsequent fallout will come from this society she has conceived. (Stanley 2019, 254)

CONCLUSION

Lyman Tower Sargent defines utopianism as: “social dreaming – the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live” (Sargent).

Sargent's definition reflects exactly why both works studied and analysed in this article are widely considered utopian. "The Book of Martha" explores the philosophical question of: "if we had Martha's power, what would we do to make the world better than it currently is?", for which there is no clear answer. As both texts studied demonstrate so differently, "better" is utterly subjective. Martha's decision to give everyone vivid and satisfying dreams further proves that for her, and for utopian texts in general, dreams, and hope, are powerful tools for change, as they force us to walk towards a better world. In *The Lathe of Heaven*, George's "effective" dreams, Haber's abuse of power, and the consequences of their actions, function as a cautionary tale by warning the reader that no one has the right to "play God" with other people's lives. Their story reflects not only the idea that dreams, when imposed, become nightmares, but also how one's eutopia could be another's dystopia.

In conclusion, dreams, along with the hope they bring, prompt dreamers to yearn for a better world. This desire for change, combined with our own agency, compels us to move forward. The essence of utopia is in the process of attempting to achieve a better world.

ENDNOTES

¹ All the other citations by Ursula K. Le Guin are from *The Lathe of Heaven*, except this one.

² As Orr reflects: "I suppose that you suggested that there be no more color problems. No question of race' 'Precisely. And of course I was envisaging a political and ethical solution. Instead of which, your primary thinking processes took the usual short cut . . . this time they went to the root. Made the change biological and absolute. There never has been a racial problem . . . Nobody was ever outcaste in India – nobody was ever lynched in Alabama – nobody was massacred in Johannesburg! War's a problem we've outgrown and race is a problem we never even had! Nobody in the entire history of the human race has suffered for the color of his skin'" (Le Guin 128,129).

³ Ironically, "the greatest good for the greatest number" that Haber so fiercely wanted to achieve lead to the genocide of millions of people.



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