EXPANDING NARRATIVE EMPATHY

Exploring "Dynamic" Empathy in *The Left Hand of Darkness*

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Abstract

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Abstract: Narrative empathy, the sharing of a feeling between a reader and characters, is often thought of as a 'static' phenomenon; either it is present, or not in a given story. Yet, on scrutiny, narrative empathy seems quite fluid, its connective strength ebbing and flowing throughout a story. This paper looks at three major factors involved in this process: immersion, empathy itself, and emotion, and how they relate to one another in forming the phenomenon: "*Dynamic Narrative Empathy.*" Once defined, the paper utilizes the theory to analyze Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness.* The analysis focuses on the two main narrators and their relationship between one other and to the readers. This approach, while unusual for this novel, is very fruitful in explaining why character ambiguities develop and how the novel affects readers to such a degree that it influence their actual world thinking. It is hoped that Le Guin scholars will not only find this approach refreshing and insightful, but find dynamic narrative empathy to be a useful narratological tool when applied to any novel or story with dynamic reader/ character relationships present.

Keywords: Narrative Empathy, Narrative Emotion, Reader Immersion, Ursula K. Le Guin, The Left Hand of Darkness, Dynamic Narrative Empathy.

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1. Introduction

In her book *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen describes empathy as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, [which] can be provoked … even by reading" (Keen, 4). As a narratologist, Keen is primarily interested in the *narrative* form of empathy, and narrows her definition by including the readers' "spontaneous, responsive sharing of an *appropriate feeling*" (my emphasis, ibid).

As a student of narratology, I investigated the first part of Keen's definition in my bachelor essay, considering narrative empathy in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The study determined, among other things, how the plot and the narrative structure collude to create reader empathies strong enough to make the justifiable killing of the murderous Macbeth "tragic." While these findings were fruitful, the study was "static" in its approach; it looked at one character and a singular reader trajectory; empathy is developed, drawing the readers into the story and deepens to a point where the ending is seen as tragic.

This static approach limits our understanding of more complex and ambiguously emotional storylines; those leading to a "dynamic" form of narrative empathy; storylines that create an ebb and flow to our empathetic connection with the characters. One thing that seems missing from the static study is Keen's notion of *appropriate feeling;* the idea that empathy is a link to a specific emotion. Keen does not dwell on this emotional connection, or whether it is necessary for empathy. Therefore, while Keen's insight and discussion is paramount, empathies' relationship to emotion and dynamic action is not fully satisfied. In order to thoroughly understand dynamic narrative empathy, finding the link between empathy and emotion is critical. This narratological study will draw on material from a variety of other fields; such as cognitive psychology, philosophy, reader response theory, and cognitive narratology. This essays aim is to weave key points made in these differing areas together, to fully define the phenomenon of dynamic narrative empathy, which will then be applied to Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, highlighting how the dynamic relationship between the two main characters affects, among other things, how readers come to accept characters that are vastly different than

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themselves, how dynamic empathies create ambiguities, and how our pre-conceived notions change during a reading, potentially modifying our actual world thinking.

A notable narratological study relevant to understanding dynamic empathy is Marie-Laurie Ryan's book *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2,* because she discusses the concept of immersion and its relationship to emotion. Yet, while she speaks at length of reader immersion, transportation, and emotion, all important concepts leading towards an understanding of dynamic empathy, she too does not connect emotion and empathy in a way that sufficiently describes this dynamic relationship as being considered here. In fact, few researchers seem to consider this dynamic reader interaction at all. However, it is very specific, and emotion has been marginalized as a serious subject until rather recently. Contemplating psychology, David S. Miall, considers that while cognitive science has [now] researched this area, "psychological studies of reader responses to narrative have … paid little attention to the role of emotions" (Miall, 323). This may be due to what Jeffrey Pence thinks, that "emotional responses are often seen as less rational and mature than other responses" (Pence, 273). This indicates a certain stigma surrounding emotion may have caused a traditional gap in the research. While this is changing, the dynamic between empathy and emotion still remains rather unexplored, and this paper intends to help fill this gap.

In initially defining dynamic narrative empathy, it becomes clear that certain complexities exist, including the notion that emotion and empathy are not in a one-to-one relationship. It is well worth considering that a reader can have a strong emotional reaction to a character that they absolutely do not empathize with, for example, Shakespeare's Iago in *Othello;* while contrarily, one can have empathy with little emotional investment, or extreme emotional investment, causing a reader to "hold their breath" for the resolution. Since this fluidity between empathy and emotion is what dynamic empathy is based on, weaving them together with reader immersion will help to resolve these complexities. This relationship will be disambiguated during the analysis of *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

I have chosen Le Guin's novel for a variety of reasons. For one, its science fiction genre highlights how immersion works, showing how it occurs even with situations and characters that are literally "alien" to the reader. It also has two main first-person narrators, causing a reader to form empathetic bonds with both, which affect empathies and emotions in profound ways. Finally, the plot is sufficiently complex to show a full range of dynamic empathies, with

immersion, empathy, and emotion ebbing and flowing throughout.

This paper will next discuss the theoretical background and then specifically review literature pertinent to conceptualizing *dynamic narrative empathy*. This section will conclude with a working definition of dynamic narrative empathy, which will then be applied, in an analysis section, to Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. This will display its use as a tool in answering questions such as those considered earlier. Finally, the paper will conclude with some thoughts on dynamic narrative empathies' use as a critical narratological tool, and its implications for future studies.

2. Theory and Literature Review

a. Background and previous research

In my BA project on narrative empathy I explored various ways in which the plot and narrative help the reader develop empathy for characters. I call this a "static" study because I assumed a certain (undefined) level of empathy would be created, and showed how the reader would maintain that empathetic connection throughout a story. Most of the basic theories on plot and character development highlighted in that study will be implicitly shown in my analysis of *The Left Hand of Darkness;*[1] however, there is one theory that will need reiteration, not being discernible otherwise: It is the way a reader suspends disbelief. The notion comes from cognitive psychologists Richard J. Gerrig and David N. Rapp, where they determine, through an empirical study, that, regarding fiction, the assumption is that we "ordinarily would disbelieve a work of literature … but … suspend that ordinary impulse as not to undermine their narrative experience" (Gerrig and Rapp 268). Yet actually, "one of the basic facts is that readers must construct disbelief: literature will have an impact unless readers expend specific effort to forestall that consequence" (Gerrig and Rapp 280). Of course, to *forestall it* is to consider *after the fact* that it is only a fiction. To back up this premise, another study, done in the Netherlands by P. Matthijs Bal and Martijn Veltkamp, suggested that "readers accept assertions from a fictional narrative unless the reader is highly motivated to reject the assertion and is able to reject the assertion based on available knowledge" (Bal 3).

The reasons why this is important to this study are that it highlights a different approach to understanding fiction as a form of *reality* to a reader. Also significant is that, "the probability that readers will construct disbelief is affected by the extent to which they are transported to narrative worlds" (ibid); this assertion, conceptually, is endorsed in this paper: the deeper the dynamic narrative empathy a reader experiences, the more profound the impact the story will

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1   For example, when this paper speaks of "situational empathy," it is a more detailed look at how plot draws a reader in, and "immersion," here, takes a much deeper look at character development and its effect on a readers empathies.

have.

b. Suzanne Keen and Empathy

In Suzanne Keen's *Empathy and the Novel*, the intent was to connect a reader's empathy, the sharing of affect with a character, to its effect on the readers altruistic behaviors in the actual world (Keen vii). This paper, in assuming that empathy creation for fictional characters is identical to empathy creation in the actual world, utilizes much of Keen's theory in defining empathy and its relationship to emotion.

Keen is very careful to distinguish between empathy and sympathy, and while both bespeak emotion, they differ in how readers' emotions will relate directly or indirectly towards a character. In order to have empathy, "reading must invoke cognition," because reading is a "complex cognitive operation" (Keen 28). With sympathy we may be unable to relate at a level that invokes complex cognition. Keen differentiates between cognition that creates "cautious reasoning that may inhibit empathy in the real world," and a more uninhibited freedom of imagination that would, "disarm readers of some of the protective layers," allowing for greater empathy towards a fictional world (Keen 30). This explains how fictional worlds may have more fluidity in empathy than the actual world, because of this less guarded mental state allowed by freedom in imagining.

Contemplating whether these emotional elements are the same phenomenon in the actual world and a fictional one, Keen considers how a realistically depicted character would "disarm suspicion of [the character] and open the possibility for an emotional response … with a compelling relation to contemporary reality" (Keen 32). Keen takes this further and notes that readers also seem to identify with characters "even when the character and reader differ from each other in all sorts of practical and obvious ways" (Keen 70). This has implications for this study regarding readers' empathetic connection with the alien race in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

Connecting this notion to empathy, Keen attributes to Richard Gerrig the idea that, "a theory of suspense must include with it a theory of empathy," which manifests itself as caring for what happens to a character caught up in a given situation, regardless of whether the character is

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relatable or not;   this is called, "situational empathy" (Keen 79).   This type of empathy readily relates to dynamic action; Keen states, "empathy with plot situation gravitates towards *middles* of plots" as "empathy with situations tends to zero in on episodes" (ibid). Episodic empathy is one way a reader moves in and out of empathetic states. She indicates a difference between this type of plot driven empathy and character driven empathy in how there can be "huge character-reader differences" between their worlds but that the empathy is created none the less (ibid). This distinction has a strong relationship to dynamic empathy and will be elaborated on in the analysis section.

Keen identifies certain characteristics of reader response to fiction that are likely to create empathy. "Character identification," is one, which in simplest terms, is a readers' direct relationship with a character, understanding their motivations, recognizing traits, even in how real the character seems to them (Keen 94). Other, more self-explanatory characteristics include: the pace, the sequence of the narrative, nested narrative levels, secondary plots, and repetition (Keen 94). Curiously, Keen's research reveals a negative result regarding the narrative structure. Keen attributes to cognitive narratologists W. van Peer and H. Pander Maat a study that expected first person narrative roles to create "better fusion with the world of the character," yet found it did not. Ultimately, they stated that "it remains unclear why point of view has no more powerful and no more overall effect on readers" (Keen 97). This idea will be addressed in the analysis section of this paper.

While Keen's writing does address emotion, it mostly focuses on empathy, which while very important and useful to this study, is only one element in the dynamic narrative empathy chain. Thus, I will now turn to a more specific study of narrative emotion and its connection to empathy, in Martha C. Nussbaum's *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotion.*

c. Martha C. Nussbaum and Emotion

Martha C. Nussbaum's intention is to show that emotions are part of our cognitive thinking processes, and theorizes that emotions can be applied to ethical judgements whereas in previous studies, emotions were traditionally "sidelined in accounts of ethical judgements, as so

often they have been in the history of philosophy" (Nussbaum 1). After careful consideration, she defines emotions as "appraisals or value judgements, which ascribe things and persons outside the person's own control great importance for that person's own flourishing" (Nussbaum 4). Nussbaum creates a division between emotion and empathy in saying that "emotions include in their content judgements that can be true or false, and good or bad guides to ethical choice" (Nussbaum 1). Empathy seems to guide us towards emotion, but doesn't seem to have the capacity for judgement. It is helpful to consider emotion in a scenario where empathy is simply absent, such as love for a sunset. Certainly a sunset can be emotional, and can be judged as good or bad[2], perhaps due to cloud cover, etc. yet we make no empathetic connection with a sunset. Therefore we must consider emotion and empathy separately, with empathy as more of a link than an outright emotion. This notion will be thoroughly scrutinized in the analysis section of this paper.

In order for Nussbaum to consider emotion as a thinking process, as opposed to an irrational reaction to a stimulation, she comes up with a very interesting proposition: That in order to have an emotion, we must have a "narrative structure" (Nussbaum 234). This narrative structure can be considered as a sort of backstory, or in Nussbaum's words as "emotion-histories" (ibid). As Nussbaum develops this narrative theory, the lines between emotion and empathy blur. She writes "The 'subtle interplay' between baby and parent is crucially mediated by play with narratives … [enabling the child] ... to imagine another person's experience" (Nussbaum 235). Given a particular narrative context, this is either sympathetic or empathetic. Via the psychologist D. W. Winnicott, Nussbaum considers the notion of "potential space," an imaginative space where we create a differentiation between ourselves and the world around us, this reflection allows us to "imagine the experience [of another] and … respond appropriately" (Nussbaum 234). This sounds exactly like Keen's *appropriate feeling* in her description of empathy. The difference is that Nussbaum utilizes this idea of *appropriate* feelings in describing emotion. She points out that while literature can be "rich in emotionally expressive content" it must be "appropriately perceived … with those emotions" (Nussbaum 237). Literature only becomes empathetic if readers identify with the characters, allowing them to experience their emotions (Nussbaum 238). Keen and Nussbaum divide in how these emotions are perceived and thus have

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2   In so far as sunsets go.

a somewhat differing sense of empathy.

Keen considers that a conception of empathy exists that is perhaps not true empathy, but a derivative form, a selfish view (Keen 80). On the other hand, Nussbaum makes the claim that readers make a "eudaimonistic judgement," which is a way of thinking in which we care about the characters through *our own* wishes for a happy conclusion, for our own "well being" (Nussbaum 238). She believes that we see narratives as possibilities for *our own lives*, if we "see events as general human possibilities … [we] see them as possibilities for [ourselves]" (Nussbaum 239). The critical difference is that Keen considers empathy as directed towards the character, Nussbaum, towards the self.

Nussbaum's insistence that the reader continually directs empathy at the self becomes problematic. At first, her basic definition: "empathy [is] an imaginative reconstruction of the experience of the sufferer," seems reasonable, but that the reader, "must also be aware of one's own qualitative difference from the sufferer," becomes questionable (Nussbaum 324,325). Why this insistence on self-reflection? Keen's notion, and the one I prescribe to, is that we *share* an emotional space with a character, but do not replace the character. Nussbaum seems to be worrying here about delusional thinking, which is understandable, if a bit unnecessary for merely impassioned readers. However, she also acknowledges that her "account of empathy makes it clear that empathy may be inaccurate" (Nussbaum 325). It is unclear how empathy can have this quality. Empathy is not necessarily an emotion at all, considering it is possible to have empathy without an emotional connection. This will be illustrated in the analysis of *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

Nussbaum goes on to say that empathy may be a mechanism that draws our attention to someone: "I have concern for her simply because my attention has now been directed to her," and attributes to Heinz Kohurt the idea that empathy is "an informer of appropriate actions" (Nussbaum 328). This can be reasoned out to mean that empathy is a link to emotion. It also seems that this link must lead to an appropriate emotion. Perhaps Nussbaum's claim that empathy can be inaccurate is more to do with the emotional response it points to; is it a reliable informer? It isn't that empathy-in-itself is wrong, but the wrong type of emotional response might be. Yet, even at risk of being led down the wrong path, empathy is extremely important in Nussbaum's opinion, and without it a person would seem quite psychopathic, and similar to my example of

*Othello'*s Iago, she points out that "something is worse than the empathetic villain" namely, the villain without it (Nussbaum 331).

Narrative empathy then, is a link that points us towards a particular character, preliminarily setting us up for a certain emotional connection. We may have the empathy with little emotional investment, or not really empathize yet be deeply affected emotionally. However, while this empathy is towards the character, Nussbaum asserts that emotion is essentially *towards* the reader. She proposes a reader will have stronger emotional reactions if the plot is, "the sort of thing that might happen" to them (Nussbaum 243). Choosing to analyze a science fiction novel will contest the notion that this is necessarily true.

Even though this paper contends certain claims Nussbaum makes in emotional/empathetic theory, others are very useful for the understanding of dynamic empathy. For example, it stands to reason that narrative emotion is typically drawn towards things that might occur in the actual world, that as a reader identifies with the situation, their emotional attention will be deepened, and Nussbaum makes a strong point about how emotional connections can completely disregard any empathy. Nussbaum elaborates: If a reader experiences a novel in a self-reflective way, identifying with the characters, perhaps empathetically, but certainly emotionally, then they also can identify with the antagonist, without empathy (Nussbaum 330). This endorses empathy as a linking tool, which wouldn't be directed towards an antagonist, regardless of our emotional depth towards them. It also makes it even clearer how the emotional/empathetic relationship is likely to cause a dynamic action in the reader as the story unfolds. It is left to see how this linking tool strengthens and weakens in theories of immersion. The paper will now turn to Marie-Laure Ryan to look at immersion in depth, and its relationship to empathy and emotion in defining dynamic narrative empathy.

d. Marie-Laure Ryan and Immersion

Marie-Laure Ryan's book *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2* looks at virtual reality fiction, considering narrative fiction as such, and its abilities to immerse the reader. Therefore, it is of interest to this paper to understand what Ryan has to say about this immersive experience, in

order to link it with empathy and emotion. Ryan begins defining immersion by quoting a few famous authors' conceptions of it, and while there are some differences, Charlotte Brontë, Joseph Conrad, and Italo Calvino all have one thing in common: The reader should go to, or enter into, that story-world. (Ryan 61,62). Thus, immersion is the phenomenon of a reader entering into the story-world. Ryan explains how a text can not entirely build the story-world, and therefore, a reader "constructs in imagination a set of language-independent objects, using as a guide the textual declarations" (Ryan 63). We do this using a combination of past knowledge and experience, "including knowledge from other texts" (ibid), which indicates that even highly fictionalized worlds, inclusive of science fiction worlds, such as the one being analyzed in this paper, become part of our experiences, which we do not necessarily disentangle from our actual world experiences. Ryan explains this: "since … mimetic texts [aka: narrative worlds] include fiction and nonfiction, the notion of textual world does not distinguish the worlds that actually exist … from those created" (Ryan 64). The most important aspect of this is in how the text and reader interact in such a way as to "animate characters and settings – in short, to conjure their presence to the imagination" (ibid). This "conjuring" thus creates the fictional world in a reader's mind.

For immersion, or "transportation," which Ryan uses intermittently to describe steps a reader takes to move into a textual world, she is careful to remark that a reader does not distinguish between narrative fiction and nonfiction[3], and that it does not matter how well or poorly written it is for this transportation to occur (Ryan 66). Ryan does however, assume a "minimum form of transportation" (Ryan 67) must be present for immersion. This differentiates between a detached thinking about a text, considering it from the actual world, which would not be immersive, to moving towards relating to it directly, from *within* the textual world. These immersive 'levels' create. "a continued limited awareness … that what is perceived as real is in some sense not real" (Ryan 68)[4]. These levels, from no immersion to full, are: "Concentration:" texts that are "non immersive" due to reader difficulty in comprehension; "Imaginative involvement:" where a reader remains detached yet aware of the "textual world"; and

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3   Which further endorses Gerrig and Rapp's suspension of disbelief theory, readers must take in the story first, then consider it against the actual world.
4   This, perhaps, is similar to Nussbaum's theory about being aware we are not the character, nor *really* in the story-world.

"Entrancement:" a fully engaged stage, where a reader is immersed as if in the story-world. Ryan adds "however, this reader remains aware in the back of her mind that she has nothing to fear, because the textual world is not reality" (Ryan 69). Nussbaum makes a similar sounding claim in readers' being aware of their *qualitative difference*[5] from the characters. But the reason I cried when Helen Burns died in *Jane Eyre* is not because I thought I was an emaciated schoolgirl in Victorian England, but, that I felt emotionally what it must have been like for Jane to lose such a friend. The difference between Nussbaum's and Ryan's conceptions lies in the readers' physicality; Ryan indicates that as immersed in the story as we may be, we have an awareness that our physical presence is not in the story-world. This is understandable, but Nussbaum extends this awareness to a reflection on emotion, which is difficult to accept, as it would ultimately undo any emotional connection a reader could develop towards a character in any fictional story. It is not a problem to put the novel *Jane Eyre* down and hop on a 21st century bus, but not as easy to leave your emotions at the door.

While Ryan discusses a physical space and time in her immersion theories, she does not disregard the empathetic/ emotional. She considers emotion when she talks about "simulation theory" which is "a form of counterfactual reasoning by which the subject places himself in another person's mind" (Ryan 80). Thus, we make the move from projecting ourselves into the story-world to "project[ing] ourselves into these characters" (ibid). Ryan states that "accessible minds are certainly a source for immersion;" this type of immersion allows for an understanding of a character's mindset, which "scaffold[s] the logic of narrative action" (ibid). Simulation differs from imagination in the same way story-world physicality differs from emotional immersion: imagination is the "representation of static objects," while simulation is "the mental images of dynamic objects" (Ryan 82). This gives Ryan two distinct areas of immersion, representation and simulation, or "description imagery and enactment imagery" (Ryan 83). The former is more involved[6] with the physical story-world, the latter, the emotional/ empathetic one.

When Ryan discusses "spatio-temporal" immersion, it is more directly emotional/empathetic. This is where simulation is directed at character interaction vis-a-vis object interaction. The main difference is in how the reader begins to "represent [...] characters as

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5   Nussbaum 325.
6   Of course it should be understood that there will be a certain amount of crossover.

subjects" as opposed to "looking at characters as objects" (Ryan 95). This is how a reader begins to be able to relate to a character, as we do not typically relate to objects, even if we can imagine them in such a way as to feel them or be in-their-space. Ryan also considers, "temporal immersion" (Ryan 99), which is how a reader experiences time when reading. When this involves "the readers' interest in the hero's fate" (ibid), temporal dynamics can play a strong role in narrative empathy. "Reader interest" can also constitute a form of shared emotion. Ryan categorizes shareable emotions based on "affective intensities," in how they affect immersion. These groups include simple "subjective reactions," such as judging characters or experiencing *schadenfreude*, and "empathetic emotions," like feeling happiness or sadness for a character (Ryan 108). Both are present in *The Left Hand of Darkness,* and examples will be cited in the analysis section. The main takeaway here is the dynamic interplay between emotion, empathy, and immersion.

While Ryan satisfies the question of immersion's role in dynamic narrative empathy she exposes a conundrum; she considers the question of whether emotions felt towards fiction are phenomenologically real; how can we have real emotions for fictional characters? It is called *the paradox of fiction and emotion,*[7] and for dynamic narrative empathy to be valuable as a critical narratological tool, showing that emotions and empathy towards fiction are real is of considerable importance. Ryan alludes to a possible solution based on Noël Carroll's theories, in that our simulated minds don't regard truth or falseness but "simulation makes it temporarily true and present" (Ryan 114). However, philosopher Jeanne Deslandes has a much more comprehensive response to this paradox, and utilizes a phenomenological approach to explore how empathy and emotion come into being through reading; therefore, turning to her arguments will both answer the paradox and solidify a definition of dynamic narrative empathy.

e. Jeanne Deslandes and the Phenomenology of Dynamic Empathy

Jeanne Deslandes paper "A Philosophy of Emoting," "examines the experience of stirring up emotion in reaction to fiction" (Deslandes 335). Her phenomenological approach solidifies the

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7   This term is in wide use. It is cited in Deslandes from this paper 339.

definition of dynamic narrative empathy and addresses the paradox of fiction and emotion. She defines "phenomenon" as, that which is "manifest." When emotions, "manifest while being involved in fiction - the truth of a possible genuine emotion reveals itself" (Deslandes 341). This "genuine emotion" confronts the paradox itself, which is essentially: how can emotion in reaction to fiction be real, if the cause of the emotion, fiction, is not real? (Deslandes 339).

Deslandes focuses her defense against philosophers such as Kendall Walton who "develops the concept of 'quasi-emotion,' " essentially the idea that the reader is aware she is experiencing a "make believe" or "second-order belief" (Deslandes 342). A strong argument for quasi-emotion is that emotions from fiction do not cause physical reactions. Deslandes initially contends this with findings from multiple psychological researchers that determined "emotions are tributary to the automatic nervous system, and do not need a voluntary large muscle reaction to be genuine" (Deslandes 346). She then asserts that, "emotion is stirred up to focus attention," and further, "emotions initiate a decision-making process" (Deslandes 250, 351). She holds that emotion and reason work together in determining *how* to deal with a situation. She shares with Nussbaum the theory that reason, or logic, still functions through emotion, that "emotion does not mute reason," and that, "successfully or unsuccessfully, emotion joins with reason in the search for the proper subjective response" (ibid). "Reason" makes it unlikely to physically react to a story without muting emotion. Reason works with empathy as well; a reader's empathy *towards* a character does not necessarily involve physically helping them, the reader reasoning that they are powerless to change anything. This empathetic link becomes more evident when Deslandes challenges Walton's claim that, "quasi-emotion … is different in intensity from real life emotion" (Deslandes 352). His example is that we don't have the depth of fear we would have facing an actual lion when facing a painting of one. Deslandes' rebuff refers to how we understand our world in such a way as to perceive the threat from a painting as not as immediate as one from an actual large predatory cat. She could have used empathy here: even if an image of a person hanging off a precipice, for example, gives a viewer "vertigo," it is not because they believe they are about to fall, but is directed towards the person or people in the image, exactly as empathy towards a character works in a novel. Empathy directs real emotion towards the *other*. In the case of Walton's lion, the viewer only has themselves to consider, and there is no perceived threat. With these counterarguments in place, Deslandes turns to applying phenomenology to fiction.

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Deslandes proposes that there is a sort of "contract" between the reader and the fiction, one that requires a passive state, "in order to arrive at the outcome of the narrative." This passive state actually makes the strength of the emotion higher, "wedged by the symptom, trapped in the narrative … we are conscious that we have no power over the outcome whatsoever" (Deslandes 355). We perceive the threat as towards the character, our emotions aimed towards their well-being. There is a communication between the reader and the character in this emotion. Just as in the actual world, "emotions are 'transsubjective entities' that pass on between people" (Deslandes 359). This makes emotion "necessarily communicative" as readers interpret the emotional states of characters (ibid). This *necessary communication* between a character and reader must be directed in some way, and it could be considered an empathetic link, especially considering this communication is "never [felt] for [our] own sake but rather … on someone else's account" (Deslandes 360). Regarding emotion, both fiction and reality require "my thoughts and imagination in order to fill the gaps in my understanding of the other" (Deslandes 361). This parallel between the world of fiction and actuality shows them to be "not so very different" and thus it is no stretch to assume our minds discern no difference, especially in emotional content. Deslandes states the only difference is that, "the world proper exhibits an appresentation [sic] of the other," the fictional world, a "representation" (Deslandes 363). In other words, in the actual world we first consider *others* as objects in the world, then, consider their implied meaning, followed by any potentially emotional status; while in the fiction we move directly to the implied meaning, then any potentially emotional state. Once readers move into this potentially emotional state, they move from "observ[ing] … the affective texture of the text – in the third-person," to, "also feel[ing] … the characters consciousness" in the first-person (Deslandes 364). As we make this first-person connection "our identity is compromised," in being connected to a character that may or may not share our values; the deeper we immerse, the more we "become the other by assuming the other's decision and the consequences of these decisions" (Deslandes 364). Deslandes considers that "the fictional characters can only exist by virtue of the emoter's investment" (Deslandes 365). This *investment* is where dynamic narrative empathy plays a strong role: in order to have a deep first-person understanding of a character, the reader needs to have an emotional connection, usually signposted by empathy, and at least a minimal amount of immersion. The less invested in a narrative, the more we slip into a third-person objective view.

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Slipping from first to third person and back is not binary, but dynamic. Metaphorically, "Fiction is … very similar to memory. Memory can … trouble us emotively," neither can be changed or altered, and thus "at times, an obsessive remembrance [and a fictional text] will overpower us emotively" (Deslandes 366). Both can be seen as having dynamic action; memories are relative in strength, as are fictional narratives. Deslandes takes this to its logical limit, arguing that fiction "can … inflict emotional harm" (Deslandes 367). A reader may experience this, willingly or unexpectedly.   This endorses my disagreement with Ryan's claim, that, "an explanation of empathy based on a full emotional identification … is not satisfactory ... because it would in many cases make … reading fiction into an unpleasant experience" (Ryan 108). It seems that sometimes it *is* an unpleasant experience, like having to put the book down for a while because it is so intense. Even though we interact physically in the actual world, emotion is "hidden" in the "world of the impenetrable other" (Deslandes 367); therefore, there really is no difference between the actual world and fiction, in how we access emotional information. Similarly, while we technically are fully immersed in the actual world, we are not always invested in others; thus, once we have immersion in a fictive world, the dynamic action of the actual world is identical to that of the world of fiction (Deslanded 360).

By applying phenomenology to reader reactions to fiction, Deslandes has both addressed the paradox of fiction and emotion, and helps in defining dynamic narrative empathy. By adding elements of Keen's theories on empathy, Nussbaum's theories on emotion, and Ryan's theories on immersion, a definition of dynamic narrative empathy materializes: *Dynamic Narrative Empathy* is the naturally occurring fluctuation in intensity of emotion, and/ or empathetic connection, occurring between a reader and a fictional character, contingent on a level of immersion where a reader can accept the story as feasible, bearing in mind that immersion also fluctuates throughout a story.

To put this theory to practical use, the paper will now analyze Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* utilizing dynamic narrative empathy as a narratological tool to show how it can help in answering questions about readers' response to fiction, such as why readers' care for characters with different values than their own, how ambiguities can form, and why certain stories affect our actual lives more than others.

3. Analysis and Discussion

a. Dynamic Narrative Empathy in The Left Hand of Darkness

At the start of Christine Cornell's study on Ursula K. Le Guin's novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness,* she cites a survey that indicates that it is the most widely used novel in science fiction college courses (Cornell 317). Yet despite this, and Cornell's own insistence that the "novel[s] critical response remains bewilderingly diverse" (ibid), most of the research tends to focus on gender,[8] including Cornell's. On the other hand, theoretical approaches utilizing narrative empathy and emotion are virtually non-existent; thus, this narratological study may be unique in that respect. None the less it is not surprising that Le Guin's novel is generally approached from a gender perspective, as the main story-line is about an envoy, the human male, Genly Ai, from an interplanetary peace organization, the Ekumen, who visits Gethen, an icy planet of essentially human, but gender neuter people, (who only "become" a gender during their sexual cycle, called Kemmer), in order to share in a peaceful exchange of technology and knowledge. As his relationship deepens with the other protagonist in the novel, Estraven, gender, and what it means to be human, are increasingly highlighted; this is clearly a rich subject matter for gender studies. However, I have chosen to focus on the two main narrators, Genly Ai and Estraven (sans gender), showing the extraordinary dynamic of their relationship through the application of dynamic narrative empathy. Doing this will help answer broader questions about readers' relationships with fictional texts that have been discussed.

Using Le Guin's novel has unique implications for immersion, empathy, and emotion. Because Le Guin's novel is a science fiction, it does not make immersion a straightforward endeavor. In a study of fantasy (science fiction) world-building, Stefan Ekman and Audrey Taylor endorse Mark Wolfe's idea of "secondary worlds," which, like Le Guin's novel, are

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8   This can be seen clearly in database searches such as Literature Online (LION), Literature Online (Chadwyck-Healy), and Literature Online (Proquest). The vast majority are gender studies, among with a handful of linguistic and anthropological studies, while virtually none explore empathy.

"fantasy worlds that are different than our own," that take more effort to immerse into than "primary worlds" (Ekman and Taylor 9), which, resemble our own, and would be easier to immerse into. Le Guin's novel also has two main narrators, which introduces a more complex reader relationship to empathy. Finally, the story is emotionally complex enough to "conceivably contradict our own preconceptions to such a degree that it calls for drastic reactions, such as throwing the book away … or being compelled to revise those preconceptions" (Cornell 319, referring to Wolfgang Iser).

Since immersion, empathy, and emotion, are relatively subjective, and we enter into a text with preconceived notions, especially as critics, "a reader who attempts to maintain too great a distance from the narrator may miss the experience offered by the novel" (Cornell 317). Similarly, Wolfgang Iser, in his own phenomenological study, thinks "it is only when we have outstripped our preconceptions and left the shelter of the familiar that we are in a position to gather new experiences" (Iser 295), and further, readers are "open to the immediate experience of the text," once immersion is deep enough (ibid). These *experiences* imply a shared, objective truth within the novel, limiting interpretive variance. This paper will assume this common experiential stance, and approximate a typical reader response to the novels' stimuli. However, even with large cultural and individual interpretive variances, the phenomenon of dynamic empathy will still occur in all but a few readers.

b. Dynamic Immersion

The theory has shown that immersion is key to any sort of empathy or emotion to develop in a readers relationship to fiction. It also seems that immersion-in-itself is rather fluid, and thus, even if a reader has, at one point, immersed enough to accept a story as feasible, they could, at another point, conceivably lose the ability to connect empathetically or emotionally due to an inadequate amount of immersion. Therefore, it is sensible to begin the analysis of *The Left Hand of Darkness* with conceptions of immersion.

Le Guin's science fiction story-world does not immediately relate to our own, so our initial immersive points of departure are character driven. As Keen notes, readers will relate with

characters even with huge personal differences, as long as they are realistically depicted (Keen 32). Therefore, even though the story takes place on an alien planet, when Genly Ai, describing Estraven, says "one feels the man's power … he cannot … say a word that is not listened to. He knows it, and the knowledge gives him more reality than most people own … a human grandeur" (Le Guin 7), and furthermore, "I'm not much taller than the Gethenian norm, but the difference is most notable in a crowd …" (Le Guin 8), a reader is given a sense of human rather than alien. Because Gethenians are shown to have complex human social characteristics, when Genly Ai refers to himself as alien, "so [Estraven] often speaks, frank yet cautious, ironic, as if always aware that I see and judge as an alien" (Le Guin 4), this indicates more a cultural than physical alienation, as if the Gethenians are foreigners, not actual aliens.

While readers gather story-world information, they are in Ryan's *concentration state*[9] of immersion, gaining a sympathetic relationship with Genly Ai. Alone on an alien planet, he, "longed for anonymity … I craved to be like everyone else" (Le Guin 8). Readers relate, but identification with Genly Ai is not deep enough for empathy, especially when combined with the low story-world immersion at this early stage. However, readers move towards an *imaginative involvement*[10] in the story-world as details of the main plot are revealed. When Genly Ai says "I was cold, unconfident, obsessed by perfidy, and solitude, and fear" (Le Guin 20), readers can relate to the cold, even the unconfident, as awareness of the textual world deepens,[11] having been lead to believe there is some intrigue happening. This conscious awareness slips into the background as immersion in the story-world slowly deepens. By the time a reader reads about a kind of mystical ceremony Genly Ai is part of, immersion is notably deepening into an *entrancement*[12] state; while the ceremonies' physical aspects, including, "zanies, perverts, and a kemmerer," cannot be connected in a real world context, readers accept it as truth without detaching from the novel. When Genly Ai, "was made very uneasy by that silent electric tension, by the sense of being drawn in … in the web," and then, "I lost my balance, I was falling... If I could not shut out this chaos … I would go mad," his mental panic is shared; readers want him to focus his mind, get out of the "web" (Le Guin 64, 65). This intensity is enabled by an

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9   Ryan 69.
10 Ryan 68.
11 Ryan 69.
12 Ryan 69.

entrancement immersion in the story-world. Notably, this scene has very few points of reference to the actual world; this is a good example of how minimal textual elements (e.g., "silent tension," and "losing balance"), still create such a deep state of immersion.

Entrancement depths of immersion only require small signposts, physical feelings or common thoughts, to keep readers in the story-world. This involves keeping the characters relatable; readers typically share the feeling Genly Ai may be getting 'played' by Shusgis, a particularly untrustworthy politician, when he thinks, "what Shusgis had not said on the subject might have meant nothing at all to a man from Hain, … but I was born on Earth" (Le Guin 143). Readers, so deep in the story-world, agree that that is how it works *back on Earth*. None the less, the dialogue sometimes kicks the reader back out towards a more imaginative involvement state. When Genly Ai ends up in prison, the dialogue becomes mainly descriptive: "much of the work would have been pleasant, but we were too hungry and cold most of the time for any pleasure," with some sympathy creating sections: "Prisoners who had been there for several years were psychologically and … physically adapted to this chemical castration … without shame and without desire, like the angels. But it is not human to be without shame and without desire" (Le Guin 177). Without any emotional or empathetic attachment to the prisoners, readers can only offer sympathy, unable to link to them empathetically. This is interesting, as an observer role, with relatively low immersion, does not seem to allow for an empathetic connection, making readers' at most, sympathetic. This displays Keen's distinction between empathy and sympathy; in empathy, "we feel what we believe to be the emotion of others," and in sympathy we "feel a supportive emotion about your feelings" (Keen 5). If we don't have access to the humanity of the characters, we can't engage empathetically[13].

This may more specifically show where immersion needs to be in order to form empathetic connections; namely, at the point where sympathy can become empathy. This access point isn't emotional, because the presence of emotion itself does not automatically imply an empathetic connection. When Genly Ai is being drugged in prison, and says, "I don't know what drugs they used. I don't know the purpose … I have no idea what questions they asked … but after the third or fourth of these examinations I was unable to get up" (Le Guin 178), readers are

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13 Curiously, this lack of empathy could be due to the objective narration here, but it is not necessarily true in all cases, and in other examples in this study, it will be shown that narrative objectivity is not a clear indicator of whether a reader will be empathetic or *merely* sympathetic.

locked in an immersive observer role, surely sympathetic, hoping he gets out of the situation, but empathy needs a reliable narrator here[14], so most readers are detached, just imaginatively involved; immersion itself not quite deep enough for empathy creation.

Contrarily, a deep entrancement level, even without emotion or empathy, can change a sense of reader reality. Speaking of climate change on Gethen, Estraven explains that due to certain pollutive qualities of the volcanoes, "the average world temperature … would in the end be raised by some thirty degrees." Genly Ai claims similar theories for Earth, readers concurring, perhaps not even realizing they are sharing perspective with someone on another planet. This is an example of Gerrig and Rapp's suspension of disbelief theory, only considering the facts of the matter afterwards, if at all.

It seems clear that immersion is on a continuum, and thus dynamic in its own right, without any particular need for empathy or emotion. However, both come into play once a relative level of immersion is reached. Sympathy only requires a limited cognitive understanding, thus, limits our need for particularly deep immersion; however, empathy may require a more solid imaginative involvement (Keen 28). Once this is in place, empathy plays a key role in dynamic narrative empathy, thus the paper will now explore empathies' role in this dynamic relationship.

c. Dynamic Empathy

Suzanne Keen proposes "that empathy for fictional characters may require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling" (Keen 69). So once an imaginative involvement level of immersion is reached, empathy may form quite easily. This empathetic connection begins to form while readers process Genly Ai's relationship with Estraven. When Estraven suddenly stops helping Genly Ai, his feeling of betrayal are *shared*: Estraven was "selling me out … and I was a fool to have trusted him" (Le Guin 16). This seed, once planted, becomes a *situational empathy*[15] when readers are informed that others with Genly Ai's job had been killed or "locked up with

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14 It is my belief that mentally unstable characters, such as those with psychoses or having drug induced hallucinations, are unreliable, thus readers' cannot be expected to be empathetic (in *sharing with* the characters') situation or feelings.
15 Keen 79.

madmen" (Le Guin 27); this makes the loss of Estraven a grave matter, so when Genly Ai finds out Estraven has been deemed a traitor: "I cut off the radio … scuttled to the door … stopped … went back to the table … I was no longer calm or resolute" (Le Guin 30), readers share his panic, linked by this *secondary plot element*.[16]

A more subtle, but stronger *character empathy*[17] begins forming as readers come to understand Genly Ai's mindset more;[18] when Genly Ai muses, "Traffic … all moves along … at a rate of 25 miles per hour,"(which could go faster), he adds, "I wanted to get out and run" (Le Guin 50). This is easily relatable, and aligns the reader with Genly Ai. It is this kind of shared realism that Keen means by character empathy. While situational empathy is rather straightforward, character empathy is more subtle, forming a much deeper bond. When Genly Ai travels to a village of "foretellers" (Le Guin 55) (to engage in the "mystical ceremony" cited in the immersion section of this paper), he meets the leader, Faxe, who asks him a question that he answers with, "I'm not sure. I'm exceedingly ignorant-" only to realize he had made a social *faux pas*, and tries to fix it with, "I mean, I don't know anything about the foretellers-" this is met with a sarcastic answer, and he does not know how to proceed (Le Guin 56). Readers' share his uncertainty. These types of empathetic connection are nearly unconscious, which may relate to Keen's theory that we disarm suspicion as characters are more realistically depicted.

This disarmed state is maintained through character consistency. Gerrig and Rapp assert, it is "consistency that allows readers to believe" (Gerrig and Rapp 272), which Keen also cites as a key component in readers' empathy[19]. When Genly Ai, visiting Mr. Shusgis, the untrustworthy politician sited earlier, suspiciously asks him if he is comfortable, uncharacteristically says "with emotion, 'I feel perfectly at home' "(Le Guin 116), something seems wrong, but, when he follows with, Mr. Shusgis's "acts of kindness served his interest and whose interest was himself. … I had met him on earth … I expect to meet him in Hell" (ibid), it strengthens our empathetic faith, his reaction being more consistent with our expectations. This consistency allows a reader to empathize even when a character is wrong. When Genly Ai considers, "it crossed my mind, though I dismissed the idea as baseless, that I had not come to Mishnory …. of my own free will;

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16 Keen 94.
17 Keen 79.
18 Ryan 80.
19 Keen 94.

nor had they brought me here. [Estraven] had" (Le Guin 121), he consistently chooses logic over gut instinct, and thus, makes his error understandable. Without this empathetic understanding, a reader might dismiss Genly Ai as arrogant, or unfeeling, instead of one using logic as a self-preserving tool. This logically based empathy can draw a reader back into an imaginative involvement state, one where readers share situational empathies, *just looking* at the situation. When Genly Ai incorrectly "felt that the truck was going east," and uses logic to explain his error: "when the intellect won't or can't compensate for the wrongness, the result is a profound bewilderment, a feeling that everything, literally, has come loose" (Le Guin 168), readers are academically empathetic in 'getting it,' but it is not very deep.

A more powerful blending of situational and character empathy occurs when Genly Ai, imprisoned in a truck with several other Gethenian citizens, "saw a girl, … smiling timidly, looking for solace" (Le Guin 171). Readers simultaneously sympathize with the girl, and empathetically share Genly Ai's detached position, knowing she is an alien, yet see her need for human compassion. Noël Carroll conceptualizes this, saying, "the audience's psychological state, … diverges from … the characters in respect of belief, but converge on that of the characters with respect to the way in which the properties of said [aliens] are emotively assessed" (Carroll 53). Precisely because he sees her as alien, it is "the one time any one of them asked anything of me, and I couldn't give it" (Le Guin 171). Our empathies do not let us detach[20], so we share Genly AI's logical decision when, "I was unable to do anything about any of this suffering, and therefore accepted it, as they did, placidly" (Le Guin 173). Since readers empathize with Genly Ai's logical reasoning to remain detached, both remain merely sympathetic to the suffering aliens. However, the book has two main narrators, and they generate reader empathies in different ways.

While readers empathize with the guarded logic of Genly Ai, they come to empathize with Estraven through his impassioned resolve and hopefulness. Thus, after Estraven risks everything to break Genly Ai out of prison, readers understand Genly Ai's: "I don't understand what you did this all for," and empathize with Estraven's: "at that my temper broke … so I said to myself that he was an ignorant man, a foreigner, ill-used and frightened" (Le Guin 196). Genly Ai's logic cannot access Estraven's impassioned thinking. This makes readers empathetic to both, but for

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20 It is beyond the scope of this paper, yet interesting to consider that empathy does not seem to be a "choice." While we seem to have some re-directive control over our emotions, we may not have the capacity to say no to empathy.

different reasons. When Estraven says, "Mr. Ai, we've seen the same events with different eyes" (Le Guin 197), it helps to answer Keen's concern about first-person narratives not generating more empathy towards that character (Keen 94); because regardless of who is narrating, there are two entirely different empathetic connections to consider. When Genly Ai tries to justify his logical approach to Estraven, saying, "I don't mean to be unjust," Estraven answers, "yet you are. It is strange. I am the only man in all Gethen that has trusted you entirely, and I am the only man in Gethen that you have refused to trust." Genly Ai finally recognizes Estraven's impassioned nature, and says, "I'm sorry, Estraven" (Le Guin 199). This recognition deepens readers' empathetic relationship to Genly Ai, which affects the overall level of immersion. When Genly Ai is once again narrating, even in his descriptive, logical manner, readers remain in an entrancement state of immersion.

This depth of immersion can make it seem like the narrative anticipates our thoughts by subliminally answering our own questions. As Genly Ai is being helped escape prison across the ice, he considers, "on a usual day we would have pulled for eleven or twelve hours, and made between twelve and eighteen miles." A reader may calculate that to be around one mile per hour, and think "that is it?" The text responds with, "it does not seem a very good rate, but then conditions were a bit adverse" (Le Guin 245). This engagement creates an unfiltered empathetic understanding that allows us to read between the lines. For example, when Genly Ai says, "I resented my companion's methodical, … insistence that we do everything … correctly and thoroughly." "I hated the harsh, intricate, obstinate demands that he made on me in the name of life" (Le Guin 246), most readers interpret this as more than about regimented survival methods, but, that these "obstinate demands" are being asked out of love.

Of course, love is an emotion, and up to this point the focus has been specifically on empathy. It has been shown how readers move between various empathetic strengths and immersive levels throughout the story. Understanding how immersion and empathy work together in this dynamic way was necessary before considering emotion, which adds another layer of complexity. For example, if empathy is a link between reader and character, than Nussbaum's *appropriate response*,[21] and Keen's *appropriate feeling*[22], are describing emotions,

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21 Nussbaum 234.
22 Keen 4.

and to understand what is meant by *appropriate,* how empathy is formed must be understood first. The paper will now look at emotion in Le Guin's novel, showing its pivotal role in the relationship between Genly Ai and Estraven and its importance to dynamic narrative empathy.

d. Emotion's Effect on Immersion and Empathy

In accordance with Nussbaum, emotion is a thinking process, allowing for true and false judgements,[23]   and require a narrative to form. But emotion should not be mistaken for logic, which is clear in how empathy towards Genly Ai initially forms, through a logical understanding, with limited emotional content. However, this is not what happens with Estraven. When Estraven narrates, readers find him different than Genly Ai, quite rational, but more emotional. It is emotion that draws readers to his character, which comes quite suddenly through the account of an unexpected meeting with his former lover, Ashe: "seeing his face in the twilight under the arch of stone I felt the old habit of our love as if it had been broken yesterday." In order to keep Ashe safe, he must reject him, hiding his true feelings. It is the most emotional part of the book up to this point, and readers are captivated by it. "As I spoke my anger and bitterness turned from Ashe against myself and my own life, which lay behind me like a broken promise … I had done ill to speak to him. I had done ill in all things" (Le Guin 73, 74). The emotion both deepens immersion and forms an empathetic link to his character.

With Genly Ai, readers are mainly empathetic to his choices through shared logical sensibilities. Estraven communicates with the readers differently; when the main plot takes a turn and Estraven becomes aware that his life is in peril, "[he] had been busy with pain and rage, but not with fear, till now; I had not thought that the Order of Exile might be mere pretext for my execution" (Le Guin 75), his rhetoric is more emotional than factual, creating a situational empathy based on emotion. His emotional characteristics are no less realistically depicted than for Genly Ai; when Estraven thinks, "some rise to present danger, not I … I grow stupid," readers empathize, sharing in Estraven's emotional frustration. When he worries about Genly Ai, "I am afraid for him; he seems not to understand his danger" (Le Guin 86), readers share this fear with

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23 Nussbaum 1.

him, knowing this to be true of Genly Ai. These shared feelings are emotion based, but equally valid to Genly Ai's more logical approach.

Once Genly Ai narrates again, the reader is in an entrancement state, with a strong emotion based empathetic connection with Estraven. Therefore, when Genly Ai encounters Estraven's former lover Ashe, and misreads him, we side with Estraven even though it is Genly Ai's narrative; this is another example of how a first person narrative does not necessarily create a closer bond with a character. However, emotion itself seems to play a strong role in focusing readers' empathetic connections. When Ashe says, "Estraven – he believed you came here to do good ... He believed it very strongly," Genly Ai senses Ashe's love, realizing, "there was nothing in this world for this man outside Estraven. He was one of those who are damned to love once" (Le Guin 104). This show of emotional understanding from Genly Ai allows reader empathy towards him to grow. When Ashe leaves, saying "quietly, 'Nusuth, no matter' "(ibid), his emotional pain is understandable, and readers share Genly Ai's own empathy towards him, a sort of nested narrative empathy, and it is quite powerful.

Being emotionally involved with both characters, a certain tension is introduced, especially regarding miscommunication. This tension seems to go beyond Nussbaum's eudaimonistic judgement;[24] it is not for our sake that we want them to understand each other, but for the well being of the characters[25]. When Estraven comes to warn Genly Ai of the critical danger he is in, Genly Ai completely misreads the situation, thinking, "I was glad to get this confrontation over with at once. It was plain that no tolerable relationship could exist between Estraven and myself … he had made neither his acts nor his motives clear to me in Erhenrang, and I could not trust the fellow" (Le Guin 129). Readers empathetically understand, realizing he does not know Estraven is on his side, but since readers know he is, it creates an emotional tension that drives immersion deeper still.

Emotion is not always clearly directed, and when Estraven is once again narrating, and thinks, "Genly Ai demands of us an inordinate trustfulness. To him evidently it is not inordinate" (Le Guin 148). Readers are empathetic with this conundrum, yet not directed towards a particular emotion. This helps explain Nussbaum's theory claiming that empathy can be inaccurate; but

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24 Nussbaum 238.
25 In a sense it is more of a selfless non reflective care that emerges here than the more self reflective eudaimonistic one Nussbaum speaks of.

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empathy isn't the problem, it is accessing which emotion to use. This could be due to having two equally empathetic characters to consider simultaneously, with differing emotion states. For example, Estraven's narrative makes readers feel fear for Genly Ai, whose own seems tinged with childlike curiosity. This is evident in: "The Envoy spoke well … There is an innocence in him that I have found merely foreign and foolish … yet in another moment … [he] reveals a discipline of knowledge and largeness of purpose that awes me" (Le Guin 155). Readers share Genly Ai's innocence and purpose, often without emotion, while simultaneously sharing Estraven's more emotional mindset even when it is not specifically directed. As emotion slides along the scale from being somewhat unspecific to intensely focused, it effects the dynamic in reader empathies in similar fashion. This dynamic is sometimes welcome, as emotional empathy is not always pleasant for the reader; when readers are aware that Genly Ai will not heed Estraven's warning of impending danger, saying, "what good is it, Mr. Harth? You know that I can't rely on what you say," we share in Estraven's frustration, "It is too late … they look at the man from another world and see what? A spy from Karhide, a pervert, an agent … It is my fault. I have done nothing right" (Le Guin 159), emotions allow readers to share Estraven's genuine concern, while non-emotional empathies allow an understanding of Genly Ai's over-cautious logical reaction; this split in empathies opens up ambiguities, an uncertainty of who is right and who is wrong, which serves to immerse readers to the deepest level. Yet, deep immersion alone is not able to sustain empathy, and when Genly Ai is being drugged in prison, readers' lose their empathetic connection as he becomes an unreliable narrator for a time[26]. When Genly Ai is lucid again, emotion is the main catalyst in our empathetic reconnection. This is evident in Genly Ai's conversation with a dying prisoner (Astra): " 'is [the Earth] a place of reward, then? Or a place of punishment?' 'I don't know Astra. Which is this world?' 'Neither, child. This here is just the world … you get born into it … things are as they are.' 'I wasn't born into it. I came to it. I chose it.' 'Ah well … Ah well, … We none of us choose' " (Le Guin 182). The emotional realism in this passage reconnects readers to Genly Ai, and puts a human face on the aliens.

    With stable immersion, emotion creates a fluctuation between an observer's role and an empathetic one. When Estraven factually explains the escape plan, readers interestingly take in

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26 As previously explained, when Genly Ai is being drugged and the dialog is mainly descriptive, there is no
    "character" for empathy to link to, most likely a reader is sympathetic to Genly Ai's situation.

the information, but when it becomes personal, readers are empathetic. When Estraven, "settled [his] plans, and began to ready my will and body to enter dothe" (Le Guin 190), readers don't need to know what "dothe" is to identify with his nervous anticipation. It also seems evident that emotion can deepen existing empathies as well. When the story moves from the descriptive, "I got Ai up over my shoulders … went northeast … clambered up over the dead fence … and made off as fast as I could towards the river," to the more intense "I was not far from the fence when the whistle began to shriek and the floodlights went on … it snowed … but not hard enough to cover my tracks … " (Le Guin 191), readers dip from an empathetic observer state to a deeper emotionally empathetic one, holding their breaths along with Estraven.

In Le Guin's novel, emotion plays a strong role in reader ambiguities; taking an empathetic "side" is made all the more difficult by our emotional investment in both characters. Dynamically, we rarely react to the characters as a unit, but mostly as individuals, creating a natural push and pull throughout the story-line. In their escape across the ice, Genly Ai gets sick, and Estraven stops out of concern, yet Genly Ai claims, "I'm not sick, you know," and Estraven responds, "No. I don't know. If you won't say frankly, I must go by your looks" (Le Guin 218). Readers understand Genly Ai being "galled by his patronizing," his stoic wish to forge ahead, but align more with Estraven's sensibilities. When Genly Ai reflects, "perhaps I could dispense with the more competitive elements of my masculine self- respect, which he certainly understood as little as I understood shifgrethor[27]..." (Le Guin 219), readers once again, align with both. This functions to keep readers entranced in the story-world, so when the pace takes one back into an observer position, even the landscape has an emotional effect: when Genly Ai describes, with, "Estraven … besides me looking at the magnificent and unspeakable desolation. 'I'm glad I have lived to see this,' he said" (Le Guin 220), readers see this not just vividly, but emotionally, empathetically sharing the scene with the characters.

Emotional empathy for one character can help draw our empathies towards another. When Estraven ponders, "while [Genly Ai] has lived a few hours in one of those unimaginable ships … everyone he had left behind him at home grew old and died, and their children grew old … I said at last, 'I thought myself an exile' " (Le Guin 222), readers come to understand, through Estraven's emotional revelation, Genly Ai's sacrifice, deepening our emotionally empathic bond

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27 The Gethenian version of social etiquette.

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with him.

This shows how readers can gain empathies either directly or indirectly through emotional connections with characters. But emotion also affects and is affected by immersion in the story-world. This interplay not only happens within a novel, but can effectively change a reader's way of thinking in their real lives.

e. Dynamic Narrative Empathies' Effect in the Actual World

Virtually all of the researchers this paper has cited in developing the theory of dynamic narrative empathy endorse the idea that narratives have real world effects on readers. Demonstrating the possibility of this is also one of the aims of this paper. By putting all the components of dynamic narrative empathy together and applying them to the novel, the affect of the narrative on readers' actual lives can be shown. Deep into their ordeal on the ice, with readers fully entranced in the narrative, Estraven goes into kemmer, the Gethenian sexual phase, and he, "was afraid [Genly Ai] would laugh at me." Yet, when, "rather he spoke with a gentleness that I did not know was in him. After a while he too came to speak of isolation, of loneliness" (Le Guin 232), this natural feature within the story-world creates a situational empathy that is full of emotion, deepening the readers' character empathy towards Genly Ai more than any other point in the story. This depth of reader emotion mixes with empathy in such a way that a readers personal biases begin disarming. It is what Christine Cornell called revising our preconceptions[28].

As their relationship grows, Genly Ai thinks, "until then I had rejected him … he had been quite right to say … the only person on Gethen that trusted me, was the only Gethenian I distrusted." "He was the only one who had entirely accepted me as a human being." And then, "it was from that sexual tension between us … admitted … but not assuaged, that the great and sudden assurance of friendship between us rose … so well proved … that it might as well be called, now as later, love" (Le Guin 249). With the reader so deeply immersed and emotionally empathetic, when they decide against a sexual relationship, keeping it profoundly mental, "we had touched, in the only way we could touch. We left it at that. I do not know if we were right"

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28 Cornell 319.

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(ibid), the reader is also unsure; all notions of alien and heteronormativity become lost to the deeper matter of love. This is a good example of Keen's theory that we may have shed our "protective layers" to accept characters different in such "practical and obvious ways" (Keen 30, 70). Readers make a move from a mentally passive state to a more active one[29], sharing in the protective bond the characters have formed with one another.

This protective bond may lead many readers to prioritize the relationship over the mission. Therefore, they strongly empathize with Genly Ai, after having made it across the ice, in showing difficulty choosing between the mission and his relationship; "depressed by the prospect of … Estraven [going] back into exile, leaving me alone"(Le Guin 275). Without this emotionally empathetic connection, a reader may wonder if the story is off track, returning to an imaginative involvement state, but Le Guin balances the priority between the relationship and the mission by making the descriptive dialogue more emotional. When Estraven is recounting their trip across the ice in a local tavern, Genly Ai thinks, "I listened as fascinated as all the rest, my gaze on my friend's dark face" (Le Guin 276). Even when he is doing business for the mission, he "constantly missed Estraven's presence beside me" (Le Guin 279). Being torn between the mission and what it may mean for their friendship, Genly Ai signals his ship with quiet resolve, "I did not know if I had done right to send it. I had come to accept such uncertainties with a quiet heart" (Le Guin 280). This question reflects back on the reader, also being torn between the resolution of the main plot, and worry over what it will cost the relationship.

Most readers have chosen the relationship by the time Genly Ai forecasts Estraven's fate, "I realized what my selfishness and Estraven's silence had kept from me, … what he was getting into." It confirms what readers have already suspected, and Genly Ai confirms, that, "they shot to kill [Estraven]. He was dying when I got to him … I took his head in my arms and spoke to him … only in a way answered my love for him, crying out … once, clearly 'Arek!' Then no more[30]" (Le Guin 283, 284). This is particularly devastating because all the components of dynamic narrative empathy: immersion, empathy, and emotion, are at their deepest at the time of Estraven's death.

Le Guin, demonstrating a mastery of storytelling, does not allow this moment to kill the

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29 While a reader must remain passive to see the story through, they can change their focal point, investing in what parts of a story matter the most to them.
30 Arek, the name of Estraven's late brother whom he was close to.

story along with Estraven[31]. Readers are still deeply empathetic to Genly Ai, who, overcome with emotion, considers why he never cried: "it was not shame so much as fear," "Now I went on … through the evening of his death … [and] found you can weep all you like, but there's no good in it" (Le Guin 285). Readers' know he is trying to be stoic, perhaps themselves weeping; this, a challenge to Walton's *quasi-emotion*,[32] in questioning how this emotion can be quantified as something less than real. None the less, in assuming these emotions are real, this scenario shows how readers can be genuinely effected in their actual lives by fictional events.

     Within the story, both Genly Ai and the reader have changed. When he returns to the King and is no longer afraid of the confrontation, readers share this feeling, satisfied when he says of Estraven, " 'he loved his country very dearly, sir, but he did not serve it, or you. He served the master I serve.' 'Mankind' " (Le Guin 293). Even the King is redeemed, when he says, "Estraven would be a good man to pull with, on a crazy trek like that … I'm sorry he's dead" (Le Guin 294). Because readers share the emotional loss of Estraven with Genly Ai, it is bittersweet when the ship comes down and Genly Ai considers Faxe's remark, " 'I'm glad I have lived to see this' … as Estraven had said when he looked at the ice … so he should have seen this night. To get away from the bitter regret that beset me I started to walk … towards the ship" (Le Guin 295). The emotion is not only too overwhelming for Genly Ai, but is shared by the readers. Both need to change focus, take a logical approach. This is empathy at its deepest, deep enough to actually have a real world effect. When Genly Ai's attending doctor says, " 'this is a marvelous thing, the coming of men from the stars. And in my lifetime' " (Le Guin 296), readers' share in Genly Ai's response: " 'it is a marvelous thing indeed for them [the Ekuman] as well, the coming to a new world, a new mankind' " (Le Guin 296, 297). A marvelous thing for the readers as well, having assimilated the Gethenians through sharing in Genly Ai's journey. This is a potential learning experience for the readers, in how to approach other cultures in their real lives.

     Dynamic narrative empathy can also explain how the story itself lives on; seeking closure, Genly Ai visits Estraven's home. He still struggles with logic over heart, thinking "I have come on a fool's errand to Estre, hoping for solace," arguing that "nothing could be changed now"

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31 When a character is taken out of a story, (usually suddenly), that a reader has a deep empathetic connection with, it can also take a reader out of the story, unless there is some other compelling reason for that reader to continue with it.
32 Deslandes 342.

(LeGuin 299). But readers are beyond simply sharing experiences with Genly Ai, now able to disagree while remaining deeply empathetic, knowing it necessary for him to take this journey. Estraven, although absent, has been assimilated by the readers. This allows readers to see Estraven in his son, who asks, " 'will you tell us how he died? - Will you tell us about the other worlds … the other men … the other lives?' "(Le Guin 300), assuring the story will go on. Even more interesting is Cornell's suggestion that, "the story of Genly and Estraven is destined to take its place among the legends of the domain[33]" (Cornell 324).   Not only does the story-world continue on 'by itself,' but, in ending with dynamic narrative empathy at its deepest level,[34] *The Left Hand of Darkness* continues on in the reader as well.

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33 Throughout the novel there are several chapters dedicated to explaining lore and cultural histories, thus the idea here, that this story-in-itself will become part of that canon.

34 This is of considerable importance. If a story ends without at least a moderate empathetic connection to any character or similar situational empathy, then it may pass into oblivion in a readers mind. However, the more powerful the dynamic empathetic bond is at the end, the more likely the story will live on in the reader.

4. Conclusion

By blending theories involving narrative empathy, emotion, immersion, and readers' phenomenological relationship with a text, this paper defines *Dynamic Narrative Empathy* as the naturally occurring fluctuation in emotion, empathy, and immersion a reader has when interacting with a fictional text, dependent on at least a minimal level of immersion. This minimum level of immersion manifests when a reader begins imagining the story-world and characters as feasibly realistic. Once this occurs, these three elements combine to form a fluid relationship between a reader and a text. With emotion, empathy, and immersion at their strongest, readers' conceptions and principles can effectively change in the actual world.

By applying dynamic narrative empathy to Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* the paper has aimed to show its use as a critical analytical tool. The narratological study revealed, among other things, how reader ambiguities form; as the dynamic empathy between characters ebbs and flows, readers' preconceived notions are challenged by alternative interpretations regarding which actions and characters are right and wrong, despite a reader's actual world beliefs. Regarding actual world beliefs, the paper shows that once readers' switch from focusing on the main plot to caring more for the characters, they begin acknowledging character ideologies that may be completely unlike their own. Once readers come to accept these alternatives in the characters, it challenges their actual world thinking. At the end of Le Guin's novel, not only do the characters live on in the story-world, but in readers' imaginations as well. The depth of dynamic empathy effects the intensity and longevity of this phenomenon. This depth also explains why some stories do not have this effect on readers: in the dynamic empathy not being deep enough for readers to imagine the characters as part of their lives on the story's completion. The analysis shows that this is all on a scale that is quite fluid, with each component part affecting another. By applying dynamic narrative empathy to Le Guin's novel, my analysis tempted to disambiguate this interplay, by, for example, showing how even when enough immersion is present for empathy or emotion to form, neither necessarily does. However, with either present, immersion can deepen considerably. This is also shown in the relationship

between emotion and empathy: one can appear without the other, but together can deepen the overall dynamic narrative empathy in readers.

All fictional narratives with sufficient complexity have dynamic narrative empathy present in them. Therefore its use as a narratological tool is evident. It could be a useful in explaining such things as why certain narratives fail to remain memorable, or certain stories remain ambiguous or dissatisfying. This is not limited to novels, and could be extended to analyze film and even video games; any fictional narrative able to produce enough immersion can be examined. It would be very interesting to apply dynamic narrative empathy to a narrative with equally empathetic characters with opposing moral views, to determine how a reader may modify or change their own way of thinking to accommodate for this discrepancy.

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