Faraway Worlds and the Familiar: Characters and Setting in Ursula Le Guin's *The Word for*

World is Forest

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English Language & Culture, Utrecht University

Kai Bijnen 5966922

Supervisor: Dr. Mia You

Second Reader: Dr. Simon Cook

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Abstract

Faraway Worlds and the Familiar invites a closer examination of the impact of worldbuilding and setting on character portrayal in science fiction narratives, using the case study of *The Word for World is Forest* by Ursula Le Guin. The thesis reviews the main factors that make up the worldbuilding in the science fiction genre, and emphasises the significance of their interconnection and contribution to the narrative. The speculative nature and the plausibility of the narrative are also considered, and the thesis looks at the manner in which worldbuilding is made realistic even if the created world consists largely of unfamiliar elements. Through close reading, it focuses on the novel's main characters and their relation to their setting, arguing that setting plays a prominent role in shaping their actions, reactions and interactions. Each character experiences their surroundings differently, which influences their characterisation and narration. Finally, the reader's experience of the novel is touched on, and the potential of the novel to engage with its readers is discussed by considering the extent the novel can reflect reality. Using Le Guin's construction of setting as an example, this thesis argues that *The Word for World is Forest* illustrates the connection between character and setting, and encourages a reconsideration of their interrelatedness.

Introduction

In her essay "The Genre of Science Fiction" Virginia Bereit argues that science fiction can broadly be defined as literature that is based on "what is known and taken to the realm of the unknown" (897). Science fiction, Bereit argues, is speculative in nature: it uses familiar elements of the world people live in today, and adds unknown elements, creating an imaginary past or future (897). This broadness of range may be why the genre is difficult to define. The complexity of science fiction is also what makes it unique as a literary genre: it is able to project current understandings of the world to "a point of almost incomprehensibility" (897). It is, however, important for novels to retain elements of reality, argues Bereit: without it they would become implausible. This also reflects the unique structure of science fiction in that it must create a balance between what is known and what is unknown. This can be done through using elements such as character, setting or events to create either tension or calm (899-900).

This happens through and in narrative. In his book *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* Porter Abbot defines narrative as "the representation of events". This representation is expressed through story, the action, and narrative discourse, the way those events are recounted (16). I have taken these definitions as the basis of the concept of narrative or storytelling. Abbott also argues that there are two crucial factors in every novel, namely "the events and the entities involved in the events" (17). He adds to this that the component of setting or worldbuilding is not absolutely necessary for an event to be recounted. However, I would argue that setting absolutely can crucially affect the entities in a story, making for a more compelling narrative overall. Entities and their actions by themselves can appear complex and interesting, but their settings provide an opportunity to explore their personality through how they react to the world around them. This adds to the depth of their character and they can as a result be engaged with more deeply.

Indeed, according to Bereit, worldbuilding is of vital importance to the plot of a science fiction narrative. She argues that the author's use of "time, setting and scientific technology" determines the success of a science fiction narrative (899). I have taken these three components as the main structures that worldbuilding encompasses, and I believe science fiction as a genre allows, because of its special relation to time, setting and scientific technology, the author to construct a world and story in which they can portray characters in a way where their interaction with and within their surroundings adds meaning to their character. This provides an uniquely immersive experience for the reader. Though Bereit argues that these worldbuilding factors impact the characters in a narrative, she does not mention them in relation to the portraying of characters nor elaborate on the significance of the characters' interaction with the world. I will argue these worldbuilding factors crucially impact both the portrayal and characterisation of characters in science fiction novels, taking *The Word for World is Forest* by Ursula Le Guin as a case study.

Though Abbott indicates that it is possible to tell a story without setting, I will argue in this thesis that, for the genre of science fiction, story is inextricably entwined by setting, just as the imaginary world depicted by the narrative plays a crucial role in the narrative's progression. In other words, setting is not just a static and incidental foundation on which the story takes place, but it is a primary actor upon and shaper of it. I will specifically be looking at Le Guin's deliberate and effective employment of worldbuilding to portray the characters in her novel. The purpose of this thesis is to show that Le Guin's particular mode of worldbuilding provides an opportunity to rethink the relationship between character and setting. The environment a character is placed in may shape their language, behaviour, thoughts, actions, or even influence their personality.

I hope that this examination of Le Guin's novel will provide a foundation for interrogating more broadly the importance of worldbuilding in science fiction novels. In

Chapter 1, I will look at how the three elements of worldbuilding are interwoven with each other and the novel, and how they affect the characters in the novel. In Chapter 2, I will, through close reading, examine each of the characters' relation to their setting, and to which extent this influences their characterisation and interaction with their world and others. Finally, in Chapter 3 I will look at the relationship between the reader and the novel and how *The Word for World is Forest* is able to engage with its audience. Ultimately I hope that this thesis will make a case for considering how worldbuilding is a crucially important element in the construction of narrative, especially in regard to character portrayal.

Chapter 1: Time and Technology as Part of Setting

The novel takes place on the planet Athshe, which is largely covered by forest. The native people of the planet, the Athsheans, live here in peaceful harmony with their surroundings. When the story begins, humans have already arrived on the planet and started logging wood, which has become a valuable and scarce resource on Earth. Many Athsheans have been recruited as workers in their camps, kept drugged and enslaved in pens. Captain Don Davidson is one of the colonisers, and has a great dislike for the Athsheans. One Athshean in particular, Selver, has suffered at his hands especially when Davidson raped and killed Selver's wife Thele and beat Selver nearly to death when Selver attacked him in retaliation. It is Raj Lyubov, a scientist who has been studying the Athsheans, who prevents Selver from dying. Lyubov and Selver become friends, and through studying each other's language and culture they come to understand each other more. Lyubov recognises the mistreatment of the Athsheans and wants to help them, but does not know how he would be able to. As a result of his friendship with Selver, Lyubov is distrusted by his peers and superiors. Led by Selver, who teaches his people the act of murder, the Athsheans eventually revolt and attack the colonisers. In a meeting about these attacks, two emissaries from other planets are present as well. The emissaries, Lepennon and Or, inform the colonisers that the planet Athshe is now part of the newly formed League of Worlds: their new policy is to release all Athsheans immediately and avoid contact. Davidson disobeys these orders and continues to attack the Athsheans, and the Athsheans answer by attacking and capturing the entirety of the colonisers. In one of these attacks, Lyubov dies. Don Davidson escapes but is later caught by Selver, and sentenced to live on a solitary island for the rest of his life rather than be killed. Three years later all colonisers leave the planet, and Selver is promised that none will return, except as scientists to study the planet.

As Bereit points out, setting as well as time and scientific technology are essential elements in the genre of science fiction (899). Though setting in relation to the characters in *The Word for World is Forest* is the main focus of this thesis, time and scientific technology are interwoven with the spaces in which the narrative takes place, making them part of the setting. It is through the advanced technology of space travel that the planet Athshe can be visited at all, and other technologies enable the colonisers to use weapons and other arms to conquer the planet and the native people living there. As Don Davidson describes it, everything made possible on Athshe is all thanks to "the hugeness, the power, the golden precision and grandeur of the star-bridging technology of Earth" (23). Technological advancements clearly play a large role in the upper command, as well. When a machine called an ansible or ICD transmitter is introduced by Or and Lepennon, the emissaries who are visiting Athshe, commands from Earth are now directly delivered without the 27-year delay. This is an upgrade from technology that works on electro-magnetic fields. Moreover, when Lepennon and Or left for Athshe with the ansible, these were incredibly expensive and difficult to craft; now, they are made cheaply. The changes in Earth's setting affect the setting on Athshe: suddenly, the colonisers are held responsible for their actions which will likely lead them to treat the planet differently.

The technological advancement of the ansible immediately touches on the element of time. The fact that with the ansible it no longer takes 27 years to receive a message, means technological advancements have been taking place while the narrative was progressing. Lepennon explains: "The time-gap for bodies remains, but the information lag does not" (79). "A colony like this had to believe what passing shops and outdated radio-messages told them. Now you don't. You can verify" (80). In addition to this, the relativity of time causes a League of Worlds to have been formed now that instantaneous communication has been made possible while Or and Lepennon were travelling. They were named Emissaries, giving them

certain functions and authority they did not have before. Their relationship to the setting of Athshe is thus altered, as well as their relationship to the colonisers already present. Their responsibility for the welfare of the planet and its native inhabitants causes them to take different actions than they might have had they not been given a higher position. This directly affects the colonisers and their actions, because "[p]olicy was no longer static. A decision by the League of Worlds might now lead overnight to the colony's being limited to one Land, or forbidden to cut trees, or encouraged to kill natives—no telling" (125). Setting thus takes on a different meaning, directly related to time and technological advancements and changes. The colonisers may be instructed to treat their setting differently than they might have before because both Lepennon and Or and the ansible are now able to instruct them instantaneously. Time also influences setting in the sense that events take place in an imagined future. References are made to planet Earth as now being barren: wood is scarce and animal groups have gone extinct. Not only does this explain the undertaking of wood logging, it also inspires Lyubov on a personal level to want to prevent the same depletion of resources and life from happening on Athshe.

The speculative nature of the novel creates a specific unfamiliar context into which characters are put, and where their actions and interactions are then explored through the unique setting they find themselves in. The characters become the focus of the narrative: they are fully fleshed out and described in such a way that they are relatable. The narrative discourse that is used to do this, focalisation through Davidson, Selver, and Lyubov in alternating chapters, contributes to the reader being able to get in the head of the character. As a result the processes of their thinking and acting become clear and traceable. In combination with unrealistic elements like advanced space travel, *The Word for World is Forest* strikes a balanced tone and becomes plausible to the reader. This balance between realistic and unrealistic elements that is achieved in the novel reflects the contents of its questions about

harmony, balance, and change regarding the Athshean setting and society it portrays. What makes the novel exceptional is its ability to interweave the elements of worldbuilding – time, setting and technology – and the characters in such a way that the narrative revolves around their connection, interplay and extent of effect on each other. Both the characters and the world of the novel are constructed through the interplay of time, setting and technology – and through experiencing this construction the reader comes to see both as realistic, even if they are unreal.

Chapter 2: Characters and their Relation to Setting

The Word for World is Forest focuses on three main characters: Don Davidson, Raj Lyubov and Selver. Each of them has a different relationship to the planet Athshe, and each of these relationships is vitally important in how they are introduced to the reader as characters. The way the planet and the forest are experienced by each character is different, and so their narrative discourse, the way in which they relate surroundings to the reader, varies as well. The characters' personalities are reflected through their descriptions of the world around them.

Don Davidson

Don Davidson's personality traits are highlighted through the setting he is placed in. The environment of the planet Athshe stimulates the characteristics that make him appear as the self-presumed conqueror of the forest. He has come here, in this new strange world, "to tame it" (10). This sums up his relationship with the planet Athshe: he sees it as a place to exploit. Davidson divides the planet into either good or bad, "water and sunlight, or darkness and leaves" (16). He regards the forest only as a dangerous place in which he can get lost. When Davidson does get lost in the forest and is forcibly confronted with all the different sounds and smells, he is completely overwhelmed: "His brain was entirely occupied by the complex smells of rot and growth, dead leaves, decay, news shoots, fronds, flowers, the smells of night and spring rain" (177). He does not know where to put his feet, trips over roots and crashes into trees. Davidson becomes paranoid and panicked by all the potential enemies he cannot see or name, with "noises all around, water dripping, rustling, tiny noises, little things sneaking around in the darkness" (176). He relates that when the colonisers arrived on the planet, "there had been nothing. Trees. A dark huddle and jumble and tangle of trees, endless, meaningless" (15). The forest is only trees: Davidson does not see the branches,

leaves, or roots. He overlooks that the forest and the trees are the very essence of life to the Athsheans. The only meaning the trees have to him is in what they may become when logged: wooden planks that are extremely valuable on Earth.

Davidson positions himself as the all-powerful coloniser by saying that "men were here now to end the darkness" (16). This shows his wilful ignorance of the fact that the forest contains both light and darkness, and that the Athsheans who live in it are dependent on both. His unwillingness to understands the Athsheans can be seen in his fear and disgust. Davidson calls them "creechies" and "green monkeys" (21), and clearly considers them to be a race far inferior to him. He believes "they're lazy, they're dumb, they're treacherous, and they don't feel pain. You've got to be tough with 'em and stay tough with 'em" (20). In addition, Davidson complains the Athsheans are not loyal: "[T]hey were just about like snakes or rats, just smart enough to turn around and bite you as soon as you let 'em out of the cage" (94). Not only does he here compare the Athsheans to animals, considering them a life form beneath his own, he ignores the abuse and mistreatment the Athsheans have been subjected to. It angers him that when given the opportunity, the Athsheans leave the working camps, even though they have been forced to work during times that do not align with their natural sleep schedule, which causes them to become disoriented, female Athsheans have been raped sometimes to the point of their death, they have been kept locked up in animal pens and in general have been beaten into submission. His self-assumed supremacy allows himself to believe that they are lazy, that their sluggishness comes from being unwilling to work rather than bad living and working environments. Just as he does not see the complexity in the forest, Davidson only sees the Athsheans as simple beings.

Davidson's disregard for the possibility of complexity is reflected in how he views his peers, too. They are either with him or against him: loyal men or traitors to humankind. Davidson does not hesitate to put a gun to a fellow officer's head in order to get what he

wants, and dismisses his superiors' orders when he feels they do not align with his own beliefs. This manifests for example in Davidson's language. In the case of each main character the narrative discourse changes accordingly when they focalise. For Davidson, this means that in his chapter swears and name-calling are included. Examples are his superior, Colonel Dongh, being called Ding Dong, and Lyubov a "psycho" (90) and a "fart" (21). Colonel Dongh is old, stupid and "spla" (94), and any animosity that Davidson feels Lyubov harbors for him is explained away by reasoning that Lyubov is effeminate, jealous of Davidson's masculinity. The name-calling also suggests that Davidson only sees his setting and the people in it only in his terms, through a lens where he changes names until they fit his established perspective. Because Davidson believes the Athsheans are slow, lazy and treacherous that is how they appear to him. His relationships with the world and people around him are triggered by the setting the characters are placed in, and Davidson's manner of relating the narrative is influenced by his either-or mindset. There is no room for deeper meanings in his narrow, limited mind.

Davidson feels fear and disgust for Selver, and is ironically eventually named a god by him. Importantly this godhood is not associated with any reverence or power. Both Davidson and Selver have become translators, the transaction having been the act of killing and not-killing. The forest has in this manner changed Davidson's status in regard to the Athsheans – setting has created the opportunity for him to display violence. In the end, Selver declares that he cannot kill Davidson, and tells him: "You're a god. You must do it yourself" (181). After experiencing how much pain and suffering his godhood has brought him, Selver denounces it and Don Davidson the god is treated as a madman would: he is put on a solitary island so that he may not hurt anyone anymore. His future setting, a prospect of solitude, shows how alone Davidson is – disconnected from both his environment and his people, in stark contrast to the forest and its inhabitants where everything is linked. His aloneness also suggests that he has

not formed the healthy relationships and bonds with people that bring about the mental equilibrium the Athsheans possess. Cut off from his setting, Davidson emerges as an emotionally unstable, lonely figure.

Selver

Ian Watson argues that the harmony the Athsheans live in with their surroundings is what gives them their sanity, ultimately allowing them to experience and interpret the world both through dreaming and waking. Because the Athsheans are able to reflect on their conscious and unconscious thought processes, they achieve mental stability, in contrast to the colonisers who live with a divide between their dream-time and world-time (231). Watson even points out that the forest can be seen as a representation of the collective mind of the Athsheans (232). This implies that the connection between setting and character is even more deeply intertwined for the Athsheans. The setting is so important in their lives that the forest has become a part of them.

Their link with the forest is also in line with their psychological harmony: if Selver understands himself and his people to only be a small part of the forest, a component in the ecosystem of life, their actions will be in tune with the world around them. In the chapters focalised through Selver, the sentences are long and descriptive. The forest around him is described in detail, like the play of light, the different colours that blend into each other and the smell of the air. Colours are "rust and sunset, brown-reds and pale greens", the "roots of the copper willows, thick and ridged, were moss-green" and "[l]ittle paths ran under the branches, around the boles, over the roots; they did not go straight, but yielded to every obstacle, devious as nerves" (35). Selver remarks that "there was no seeing everything at once: no certainty"; after all, "[i]nto wind, water, sunlight, starlight, there always entered leaf and branch, bole and root, the shadowy, the complex" (35-36). Selver notices these complex

details in his surroundings and is attuned to the forest: he sees that life is not rigid, or divided into good and bad, but a complex ecosystem in which everything comes full circle.

Life and death collaborate to create the world that Selver and his people live in, "the living forest of which the town was one element" (51). The Athsheans understand and live by this principle: they are only one element of life and of their setting they live in, the forest. They are not the all-important, and not insignificant: they play their part in the system they belong to. "The view was never long" (36) may also suggest that the Athsheans live in the here and now in the forest, which stimulates mindfulness and awareness in regards to their setting. Creating a deeper and more intricate understanding of putative opposites, like light and dark and life and death, and implementing them in setting is a powerful tool used in the novel to create an environment that deeply affects the characters that live in it.

Selver is in mental equilibrium before the colonisers come. After his wife being raped and killed, however, and himself having been the subject of violent physical abuse, Selver becomes a god and a translator. He brings to his people the ability to kill. The light and shadows of the leaves that Selver lives under in his forest are always complex, and always changing – this may demonstrate the nature of his being able to become a god. Douglas Barbour argues that this ever-changing state of the forest reflects the complexity and flexibility of the Athsheans' nature, and that this is what allows Selver to shed his godhood at the end of the novel. Being a god brings Selver "pain, loss, and insanity", says Barbour, and it becomes a burden that he ultimately rejects (172). It is telling that both Selver's mental and physical stability and wellbeing decline in and after his godhood. It suggests that violence may not be natural to Selver and his people, a conclusion that Lyubov came to through his studies as well. Them being so closely linked to the forest, which is their world and home, may mean that the ability to kill one another does not originally have a place in their ecosystem. This implies that their setting, the forest, influenced the Athsheans to such an

extent that their very nature has become one of non-violence. Regardless, it shows that even though it is violence that saves the Athsheans from their attackers, the power to take a life only brings Selver suffering.

Selver's relationship with Lyubov changes throughout the novel. Selver feels gratitude towards Lyubov for having saved him, and appreciates that Lyubov tries to understand the Athsheans' way of life. The contested setting however drives them apart: the forest, its prized wood and its inhabitants remain under constant attack from the colonisers, and Selver tells Lyubov: "I don't know what you are. It would be better if I had never known you" (113). The violence that the colonisers inflict upon both the Athsheans and their world is too much connected to Lyubov, and as a result Selver cannot consider him as his equal anymore. Later however, Selver insists to his people that the colonisers "are men, men, like us, men" (155). He says this while being a god and having learned and taught murder. His proclamation can be seen as a growing understanding of how the capability of murder is both in Athsheans and the colonisers. Selver continues to consider Lyubov his friend, and Lyubov becomes part of Selver's setting in the sense that he is present in Selver's dream-time after his death.

Raj Lyubov

Raj Lyubov's relation to the forest is one of change in his beliefs. Though he is overwhelmed by and uncomfortable in the forest at first, with all its changing light and leaves and noises of all that lives there, he grows accustomed to it eventually and begins to like it. Watson points out that Lyubov comes to terms with what the forest and its "total vegetable indifference to the presence of mind" implicates (232). Though Watson does not elaborate on what this implication is, it can be interpreted as accepting what the Athsheans have always understood: they are not at the center of the world. Lyubov is confronted with how small the position he takes up in the grander scheme of the natural ecosystem is. Ultimately, he is able

to acknowledge his insignificance, and after spending much time in the forest he feels most at home under the trees. He is a part, but not the whole. This acceptance allows him to better understand the Atsheans, their culture and way of life. Lyubov comes to see that "[o]nly if you listened intently could you hear the rain": only by taking the effort to listen, to get to know the forest and everything that is part of it is it possible to see the forest for what it is (113). Setting in Lyubov's case thus triggers a shift in his attitude, and changes his perspective.

His concern and affinity for both the forest and its residents, however, make him deeply suspicious to all superiors, and they do not trust him. The forest thus changes his relationships with the other colonisers as well. Lyubov recognises the beauty of the forest and the importance of conserving it, and his research with Selver leads him to believe the Athsheans should be treated with respect. However, he is in a difficult position because his superiors and peers do not take him seriously. His colleague Gosse does not understand Lyubov's preoccupation with the Athsheans and tells him: "You know the people you're studying are going to get plowed under, and probably wiped out. It's the way things are. It's human nature, and you must know you can't change that" (122). In response Lyubov calls into question what human nature then is: does it mean leaving records of everything they have destroyed? Lyubov retaliates that Selver is his friend, his only friend, which upsets Gosse and creates a distance between the two men. Lyubov attempts to be the mediator between the Athsheans and the colonisers, but is ultimately unsuccessful. He is too afraid to create change, because Lyubov feels that if he is too forceful, he will lose whatever influence he has left and make matters worse.

Perhaps this constant mental tug of war is what gives Lyubov so many headaches throughout the novel. It reflects his mental wellbeing, which is in a constant state of conflict and unbalance. Despite his efforts and studies, Lyubov is unable to grasp the meaning behind

the dreaming of the Athsheans. This may explain the fact that he mistakenly assumes the Athsheans' nature to be inherently non-violent, and highly unlikely to change. Though Lyubov does mention the possibility of the Athsheans adapting to the hostile newcomers on their planet, he only considers this possibility after the fact, and his presumption that a peaceful species will not retaliate by means of violence in the face of being subjected to so much violence and having their home destroyed can even be seen as arrogant. Lyubov, torn between wanting to help Selver and his people and his cautious nature is not able to do anything in the end as he dies during the Athsheans' attack. Even so, Selver later states that "it was Lyubov who healed me, and set me free," implying Lyubov played the important role of granting Selver, who would eventually become a translator and god, life (54). Lyubov is in this way a bridge between the two camps that he cannot cross himself. His curiosity is what helps him overcome, as Watson puts it, the initial first reaction of "confusion, fear and dislike" for the forest that his fellow colonisers experience (231). It is Lyubov who points out that "[t]he Athshean word for *world* is also the word for *forest*" (86), literally translating meanings of the Athshean culture to his own people.

Even though "[i]t was not in Raj Lyubov's nature to think, "What can I do?" the forest as setting has influenced him to endeavor to change the Athsheans' fate (124). As a scientist, "[h]is job was to find out what they did, and his inclination was to let them go on doing it" (124). However, his time spent in the forest and its inhabitants has changed him. Barbour argues that Lyuob's gradual move from fearing to accepting the forest shows how much has been lost on Earth by deforesting and technologizing it in the humans' unending quest for power, falsely assuming trees will grow again from the exhausted soil (170). Lyubov can no longer passively observe this process: he has become part of the whole, and he must find out what his role is. After all, "'What are they doing?' abruptly becomes, 'What are we doing?' and then, 'What must I do?'" (124).

The Forest

Bereit interestingly mentions that the elements of time, setting and technology can sometimes become so essential to the narrative in science fiction that they become characters themselves (899). In *The Word for World is Forest* this may be the case, with the forest playing an important role as an entity. In the novel, the forest is referenced to as a living being multiple times, and its presence is crucial in both the events taking place and the way these are described. Watson extends his argument that the forest and the Athsheans' lives are deeply intertwined, arguing that the forest can even be seen as the representative of their subconscious (232). Even the forest's absence, such as the wasteland where too many trees have been cut down for new ones to grow, is telling regarding how the colonisers see and treat the planet Athshe. Watson points out that when confronted by something sentient that they do not understand, fear and averse, their first reaction is deforestation, made possible by their advanced technological equipment (231-32). Because they make the forest their enemy and opponent, the colonisers actually enhance its existence and presence in their lives.

Chapter 3: The Reader and the Novel

The Word for World is Forest contains more than just speculative thinking about futuristic technology that would make space travel between planets billions of light years away from each other possible: it also asks the hypothetical question of what an inherently non-violent society, whose members live in harmony with their surroundings and each other, would look like. Further, it illustrates the possibilities of collective change in the Athsheans' originally peaceful nature, after their encounter with the colonisers and suffering under their violence. The novel raises various questions about how closely connected people are to their environment, and how violence can disrupt the harmony established in their ecosystem of life. The novel does not answer all these questions, but by raising them it does call for an awareness of these matters – inviting and opening a door to collaboration from its readers. The reader, through experiencing the speculative world Le Guin creates in *The Word for World is Forest*, is offered the opportunity to view the conflicts from the novel in relation to their own reality.

Pamela Annas argues that science fiction has the power to create new worlds that indirectly comment on the one its readers live in (143). Science fiction is so well-suited for this endeavour because it makes it possible for abstract, imaginary worlds to become a reality in the mind's eye through writing, says Annas, and these worlds may contain different belief systems than what readers usually recognise. The readers are, in a way, "reborn into a reborn world" (145). Annas argues that this is what draws the reader to participate in the experiment the novel sets up, and maintains that this allows the reader, after being confronted with their belief systems and assumptions, take new perspectives back into their lives (146).

Jim Jose points out that ever since industrialisation and the rise of capitalism as a central societal value, European thought holds that, with time and effort, there is nothing advanced technology cannot solve, and it assumes that there are no problems with the ever-expanding

advancements of modern technology (184-5). It does not consider how this alters the way we see and treat our planet, let alone the consequences of the pollution the production of these technologies and their implementation cause. This preoccupation with making money by all means is present in *The Word for World is Forest* too, where Earth has been exhausted from its resources until there is nothing left that will grow. With present-day pressing climate change that the reader may already be concerned about, the possibility of Earth's bleak future sketched in the novel helps convey vividly how dire the situation may become if the importance of conserving Earth is not acknowledged and addressed. To our current knowledge, there is no promise of faraway worlds that will be able to provide resources or even support life – and even if there were, the speculative situation created in *The Word for World is Forest* shows that the brutal violence the colonisers use against the forest and its people has negative consequences for everyone involved. The novel in this way, too, addresses our relation to setting, and suggests we are much more closely connected to the spaces we live in than we may realise.

The novel also leaves the question open of whether the Athsheans have been forever changed because of their newly learned ability to kill. In retaliation against the destructive force that is the colonisers, the Athsheans, led by Selver, fight back even though they do not believe it is right: "Do men kill men except in madness?" (44). But, Selver adds: "There is a wish to kill in [the colonisers], and therefore I saw fit to put them to death (44)." Selver's strong feelings translated to new action, murder, are what makes him a god. Godhood and and the dream-time are closely connected: "[The god] brings [a new thing] across the bridge between the dream-time and world-time. When he has done this, it is done. You cannot take things that exist in the world and try to drive them back into the dream. (…) That is insanity. What is, is. There is no use pretending, now that we do not know how to kill one another" (188-89). It is not clear how deeply this will become part of the Athsheans' culture, or if they

will from now on kill each other. "Maybe after I die people will be as they were before I was born. (…) But I do not think they will" (189). Selver's opinion suggests the inner workings of their society are irrevocably altered, but it is not a definite answer. The question whether the Athsheans' relationship with the forest has changed too is not answered either, but the setting at the end of the novel suggests it has: the last meeting between Selver and colonisers takes place neither in the forest nor in the colonisers' territory. Yet it is still "in the shade of a big ash-tree," with the light still being "complex with shadows" (185). This suggests that the duality of killing and not killing may have added to the Athsheans' complex nature, which may still be reflective of the complex ecosystem of the forest around them. At the end of the book it is then left to the reader to speculate further about what and how killing changes, both in the novel and in their own world.

Le Guin can thus be argued to utilise the elements of setting, time and technology in science fiction as a way to criticise, reflect on and ask questions about what they mean for our, her readers', future. Utilising the speculative nature of science fiction the novel is able to inspire its readers and may even give them a new perspective on the world they inhabit day-to-day.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have aimed to prove the importance of worldbuilding as a means for characterisation in *The Word for World is Forest*. By analysing the characters through close reading I tried to show that setting is not secondary nor a discrete aspect of storytelling for Le Guin's novel, but that it crucially shapes the characters and their actions, and in this way the novel's plot. The forest, which poses as the setting in *The Word for World is Forest*, is a uniting element for each character, and can even be considered a character of its own. The extent of influence it exercises on each character demonstrates how crucial and impactful setting is in this novel, and how much the characters and the interaction between characters depend upon its characteristics. The setting calls forth aspects of the characters' personalities that otherwise may not have surfaced and creates the environment that pushes characters to act a certain way – alone and with each other.

A worthwhile continuation or addition to this paper would be to investigate the Athsheans' cultural practices, and the changes their culture may undergo as a reflection of the changes in the forest such as through deforestation. Examples of cultural aspects that could be investigated are their use of singing as battle, their use of dreaming in everyday life and the way their houses are incorporated into the forest. Though I have tried to point out the major aspects relevant to this paper, due to time and space constraints I was not able to discuss everything fully. In addition, this paper may inspire other case studies of the role of worldbuilding in science fiction novels.

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