

# “A lot of snow out of one cloud”: A concordance analysis of Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Hainish Cycle*



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**Abstract:** Whereas prior academic studies of the *Hainish Cycle* have been primarily produced by means of textual analysis, I demonstrate that a concordance analysis of its six novels reveals significant, yet heretofore overlooked, ecological aspects of Le Guin’s series. As becomes apparent, snow imagery literalises the *Hainish Cycle*’s New Wave moves from technological, to biological and sociological concerns, emphasising the series’ significant challenge to the technophilic assumptions and eschatological foundations of the preceding Golden Age. Accordingly, this article demonstrates the primacy of the datum of snow within the narratives of the *Hainish Cycle* novels, and delineates its important contribution to the series’ SFnal dialectic on aggregate.

**Key words:** Ursula K. Le Guin, New Wave, Hainish Cycle, concordance analysis, Science Fiction.

## Introduction

By emending—and rejecting—many of the established tropes of the Golden Age, Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Hainish Cycle* (1964 - 2000) redefined the assumptions of the future history motif in SF, and became an instrumental proponent of the New Wave. For Adam Roberts, New Wave sf involves “a Le Guinian circularity, the genre revolving back upon itself to reconsider its original logic” (2016: 377). Likewise, this article seeks to revisit Le Guin’s pioneering role within that important movement from a novel angle. As George Edgar Slusser emphasises, “Le Guin’s ‘future history’ differs greatly from the Heinleinian variety, where each episode is a decisive step in man’s conquest of the universe. Here both man and technology are defeated” (1976: 10-11). Manifestly,

the *Hainish Cycle*’s conspicuous dialectical departure from anthropocentric and technophilic genre norms is manifested in the series via Le Guin’s prominent depictions of the primacy of day-to-day phenomena, throughout a multiplicitous array of humanoid societies. As Barbara J. Bucknall affirms, even the majority of the nova of the series, including “[m]indspeech, empathy, the ansible, and the capacity for effective dreaming are all symbols for such everyday events as the capacity for minds to meet or for an individual mind to solve problems in sleep” (1981: 152).

In this manner, the *Hainish Cycle* manifestly depicts the immanence of everyday phenomena as a means of contesting, and productively moving beyond, the eschatological tropes of



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Golden Age SF. According to Tom Shippey, data are “discrete fact[s] stated or implied” (2016: 8) in literary texts, whose context is immediately familiar to readers, and hence, the process of reading SF texts is characteristically defined by the fact that “[a]s well as recognising data, you recognise non-data” (10), or nova. Shippey subsequently revises Darko Suvin’s assertion that SF is “a symbolic system centred on a novum” (1979: 98) or nova, by distinguishing the data of the genre as an equally important component of its rhetoric. For this article’s purposes, data are subsequently understood as the non-defamiliarising elements of any SF narrative. Whereas the SF genre was, by and large, “reduced to extolling technology” (Suvin, 1979: 264) from the outset of the Golden Age in the 1930s, the significance of data to Le Guin’s *Hainish Cycle* proves an important component of her writing’s New Wave challenge to the former paradigm’s eschatological tendencies. Hence, this article empirically demonstrates that the non-technological data of the series are fundamental to its SFnal dialectic, whilst simultaneously illustrating that prior academic criticism of Le Guin had overly focused upon the rhetorical function of nova within the *Hainish Cycle*. The particular significance that Le Guin imparts to meteorological data in the *Hainish Cycle* therefore bears significance to the history of the SF genre, as it draws attention to a cogent aspect of the paradigm shift effected by the New Wave movement more broadly.

This article’s thesis stands in marked contrast, for instance, to Peter T. Koper’s reading that “hypothetical extensions of current science and technology, provide the furniture of the setting and the impetus of the plot” in Le Guin’s SF (1979: 69). In contrast, this article asserts

that by consistently fixing a narrative focus upon representations of subjective experience throughout the *Hainish Cycle*—rather than the genetic engineering technologies of the Ancient Hainish which produced those subjectivities—the schema of Le Guin’s series literalises the New Wave move from technological, to biological and sociological concerns. Whereas Golden Age SF was defined by “technological optimism” (Bowler, 2017: 37), recklessly creating a veritable fictional “cosmos governed by the laws and right of technoscience” (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., 2003: 238), the New Wave was premised on the recognition that SF “had for too long been an uncritical cheerleader for the social engineering emanating from a narrow technocratic mindset” (Latham, 2017: 493).

Hence, rather than simply through its technological nova, the dialectical thrust of the *Hainish Cycle* is achieved through a close narrative focus upon the data which provide the essential mundane basis from which its SFnal narratives must necessarily depart. Furthermore, the contribution of the data of the series to Le Guin’s overarching New Wave moves is empirically demonstrable. To this end, concordance analysis “make[s] feasible analyses that were heretofore extremely difficult if not impossible” (Carly, 1993: 116) altogether for literary critics to undertake. Concordance analysis imparts a greater measure of objectivity to textual analysis, by allowing researchers to empirically determine “an overall characterization of a text” (Stubbs, 2001: 315), or in this case, a series. Just as the “use of corpus-analytic techniques can contribute to making the invisible visible, and subtleties in literary language more noticeable” (Römer, 2006: 101),



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undertaking a concordance analysis of the *Hainish Cycle* draws attention to the prominent yet subtle ecological role which snow plays in the series’ rhetorical sphere. Because corpus analysis tools readily facilitate quantitative means of analysis that would otherwise prove prohibitively time-consuming, the series’ ecocritical literary “patterns become more clearly discernible” (Mahlberg, 2010: 294).

Nevertheless, like other quantitative means of analysis, the results of concordance analysis are best understood when supplemented by qualitative analyses. Mahlberg asserts that “the application of corpus techniques to the study of literary texts has to combine quantitative and qualitative analyses to provide useful insights” (2010: 297) to literary scholars. Likewise, since concordance analyses “can result in very detailed stylistic descriptions of literary texts that can either complement conventional interpretations or enable insights not possible through intuition alone” (Wahid, 2011: 105), they comprise a research methodology which is most effective in synthesis with the more conventional methodology of textual analysis. Hence, the subsequent key word analysis of the word snow in Le Guin’s *Hainish Cycle* is elucidated through the complementary mode of textual analysis, providing a combined quantitative-qualitative basis for this article’s stated thesis.

The consequent data set was produced using the free software AntConc, from a corpus of the series’ texts rendered in .txt format. This dataset fulfils two purposes. Primarily, it provides a quantitative metric of the word frequency of the noun snow within the *Hainish Cycle*. Although the raw word frequency results reported below are derived from a modest corpus,

they prove sufficient to empirically establish the substantial, yet otherwise critically ignored, role that snow plays as a datum in the series. In later sections, however, this same data also provides the empirical basis from which the dozens of occurrences of the word snow which are subsequently analysed via textual analysis are derived.

Recently, Valentina Salvatierra has convincingly demonstrated that Le Guin utilises neologism throughout the *Hainish Cycle* to “produce the cognitive estrangement that has been viewed as essential to sf since Darko Suvin’s seminal definition” (2019: 7). However, from an empirical perspective, the predominance of snow as a datum is a significantly more important component of the series SFnal rhetoric than any Suvinian novum. As concordance analysis reveals, within the discrete corpus of the *Hainish Cycle*, the word “snow” is—perhaps surprisingly—one of the most frequently referenced terms.<sup>1</sup> Snow, and constructions of the word snow (i.e. snowy, snowing, snowed), are referenced 427 times throughout the series, and snow is consequently referenced three times as often as the ansible [139], eleven times as often as NAFAL spaceflight [39], and more than the terms Ekumen [339], Hain/Hainish [296], Terra/Terra [392], and human [404]. As its high frequency of occurrence throughout the series reveals, snow is a worthy object of critical enquiry for scholars of the *Hainish Cycle*.

In purely quantitative terms, snow therefore plays a larger role in the series than many of its nova do, and yet, it has been the subject of far less analysis by scholars of Le Guin. Even amongst other

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<sup>1</sup> For the raw concordance analysis results, see the appendix.



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data, snow is predominant within the lexical field of the series. In comparison with other meteorological phenomena, snow is mentioned more than twice as often as rain [182], fifteen times as often as thunder [28], and also significantly more than meteorological phenomena relating to either clouds [126], wind [357], or hail [0]. We can compare this frequency data with other relevant literary works to establish its particular significance to the *Hainish Cycle*. Comparatively, snow and its conjugate verbs are referenced just 51 times throughout the five books comprising Le Guin’s other major series, *Earthsea* (1968-2001). In entirely objective terms, therefore, the datum of snow proves considerably more significant within the *Hainish Cycle* than it is in *Earthsea*. Equally, snow is also more prevalent in the *Hainish Cycle* than in many other canonical works of sf set within winter landscapes. Whereas snow comprises 0.097% of Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Antarctica* (1997), and 0.065% of Brian Aldiss’ *Helliconia Winter* (1985), it comprises 0.250% and 0.207% of *Planet of Exile* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* respectively.

Therefore, it is evidently no coincidence that the worlds detailed within the novels of the *Hainish Cycle* are heavily pervaded by imagery of, and frequently detail the interactions of their central protagonists with, snow. It thus becomes pertinent to query why there has been no considerable analysis of the role of snow in the *Hainish Cycle* to date. We might infer that the propensity for critics to completely overlook Le Guin’s complex figurations of snow is symptomatic of the Suvinian dictate that “the minimal generic difference of SF [is] the presence of a narrative novum [...] significantly different from what is the norm in

‘naturalistic’ or empiricist fiction” (1979: 3). On these terms, the Suvinian paradigm presumes that the significant aspects of SF texts are predominantly either technological or sociological. As this suggests in micro, textual critics consistently devalue the vital role which the familiar, ecological, and naturalistic components of SF texts play within the construction of the genre’s idiosyncratic rhetoric. Precisely because of their everyday nature, it would appear, the rhetorical role of data in SF texts is easy to overlook. Yet, as this article proceeds to demonstrate, snow figures throughout the novels of the *Hainish Cycle* as a datum which bears important Symbolic resonances within their semantic fields. Le Guin’s series, I contend, is just as concerned with the immanence of natural landscapes as it is with facilitating the “psychical processes of landscaping and imagining the future” (Pak, 2016: 130).

### ***The Left Hand of Darkness***

Out of all the texts of the *Hainish Cycle*, snow is most densely referenced within *The Left Hand of Darkness*; by a considerable margin—almost twice as many times as in *Planet of Exile*, the next text in order of frequency. Correspondingly, on Gethen it is highly abnormal to come across any location where “it rained more than it snowed” (Le Guin, 2017c: 525) at any point in the year, and Gethenians subsequently find rain rather than snow the more unusual form of precipitation. Explicitly, Gethen has an utterly different climate system to that of Terra. Accordingly, the Karhidish language has “sixty-two words for the various kinds, states, ages, and qualities of snow; fallen snow, that is. There is



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another set of words for the varieties of snowfall” (Le Guin, 2017c: 511). Given that their language is preoccupied with describing it in such intricate detail, the fixation of Gethenians upon snow emphasises just how fundamental a component of their lifeworlds it is. As is plain when Estraven remarks that a property dispute is a “lot of snow out of one cloud” (Le Guin, 2017c: 399), or when they later remark “we must walk forward troubling the new snow” (Le Guin, 2017c: 503), the broader Gethenian vocabulary is also saturated by a plethora of snow-based imagery. Snow permeates Gethenian thought processes, and becomes a principal means via which they comprehend not merely their landscapes, but also many of the transactions of daily life within their societies.

Indeed, snow is so omnipotent a force within their lives that they deify it, and duly regard it with awe and reverence. The extent to which snow conditions the Gethenian lifeworld, for instance, is made palpable in visual terms by their architecture. The dwelling loaned to the Ekumenical envoy Genly Ai has a “front garden [...] revealed now that the last of the winter’s snow had melted and the winter-doors, ten feet aboveground, were sealed off for a few months, till the autumn and the deep snow should return” (Le Guin, 2017c: 395). Likewise, when Ai visits the city Mishnory, he finds it “an ill-proportioned, grotesque city, in the sunlight”, but asserts that in “winter, with those streets filled ten feet up with packed, hard-rolled snow [...] you would see the fitness of that city, its economy, its beauty” (Le Guin, 2017c: 471). Gethenians necessarily live in close symbiosis with their planet’s natural world; snow must be built into their architecture, and hence, it saturates their

most deeply ingrained mental processes, until it becomes not simply an object, but a collaborator in the cultural stratum of their civilisation—including their aesthetic endeavours.

Gethenians are likewise experts at the classification of snow—Estraven is casually able to identify “sove-snow, between 15 and 20” (Le Guin, 2017c: 555)—and their civilisation’s knowledge of snowfall can also be used as a precise calendar; for instance, they know that the “first great snows” (Le Guin, 2017c: 405) always fall in “the month of Susmy” (Le Guin, 2017c: 405). If Gethenians wish to travel between areas of The Great Continent, only immensely sluggish methods of conveyance such as “slow tractor-plows, power-sledges, and the erratic ice-ships” (Le Guin, 2017c: 425) are viable at any time other than during their summer, and none whatsoever are feasible during the Thaw in spring. Consequently, Ai recognises that if he does not want “to spend all year in Old Karhide” (Le Guin, 2017c: 461), he must leave before the snow starts falling in earnest; his awareness of its absolute potency directly spurs him to undertake immediate action. Snow stipulates that all social developments on Gethen occur slowly, and the apparent acclimatisation of its humanoid population to slow-paced phenomena appears to be perceptual too; one Gethenian describes watching a truck “go over a thousand-foot precipice” only to “take all afternoon” to reach the ground (Le Guin, 2017c: 425).

Hence, Gethenian life does not proceed at an “infinitesimally crawling” (Le Guin, 2017c: 426) pace for any purely technological reason, but rather, Gethenians are so habituated to such a pace, as is dictated by the snows of their world, that they are largely unable to



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comprehend life proceeding at any quicker rate. As is plain when Ai remarks that “our exhalations freezing instantly made a tiny crackling noise, like distant firecrackers”, Le Guin’s figuration of snow contains multitudes (Le Guin, 2017c: 567). As such, her multiplicitous rendering of snow comprises an extended analogue for the immanence of the multiplicity of natural worlds and their humanoid inhabitants which are depicted across the course of the *Hainish Cycle*. Snow is a common factor between all these worlds, and yet its precise meteorological composition and cultural figuration vary upon each, despite its ostensible simultaneity. Unlike the Ekumen, whose culture obscures, blankets, and overrides all others—like a form of cultural snow—the cultures and complex ecological systems of the worlds of Hainish descent share a common base in snow, but their multiplicity is apparent through its varied subjective manifestations on each world.

Ai however, does not appear to find snow interesting in the slightest at the outset of *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Early in the novel’s narrative, he describes the landscape he travels across desultorily as “some thirty-degree, snow encroached grade” (Le Guin, 2017c: 426); the natural world of Gethen plainly appears entirely monotonous to him at this point. His narratorial perspective is perceptibly muddled, however—at a subsequent point he describes being picked up “out of the night like a snowflake on soot” (Le Guin, 2017c: 445) by a Karhidish patrol craft, and at another, describes the Taijitu symbol as a “shadow on snow” (Le Guin, 2017c: 584). It is therefore greatly telling that the Ai who retrospectively narrates the majority of the novel’s chapters—in the form of an

oral synopsis of his time on Gethen—unconsciously slips into a snow-based vernacular redolent of the Gethenian norm occasionally. Plainly he has, at this point, become habitualised to the Gethenian lifeworld to the extent that snow-based constructions continue to figure within his thought processes—even as he attempts to describe his experiences on the planet to his superiors in the objective and declarative manner valued by the Ekumen. He likewise remains haunted by memories of “the susurrus of blown snow” (Le Guin, 2017c: 564) falling on the tent whilst he travelled across the Gobrin Glacier; the snow appears to have had a far more profound cognitive resonance upon him than any novum in the text.

Indeed, whilst Le Guin ludically implies that access to a “small stolen airplane would have spared” (Le Guin, 2017c: 578) Ai and Estraven the majority of their protracted journey,<sup>2</sup> it would also have negated the majority of the text’s SFnal schema, which is considerably produced through the datum of snow. When he and Estraven begin their expedition across the Gobrin Glacier, Ai is “competent on skis, but not much good on snowshoes” (Le Guin, 2017c: 538), and must learn quickly. However, over the months of their journey, the snow will entirely condition the rhythm of their lives, and hence, Ai has a steep learning curve ahead of him in very literal terms. Whilst “ticking thick and soft on the tent” (Le Guin, 2017c: 544) each night, snow

<sup>2</sup> Literary precursors to Le Guin’s penchant for wilderness journeys include J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) and Edgar Rice Burroughs’s planetary romances, such as his *Barsoom* series (1912-1948).



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voices a countdown to their imminent mortality if they do not succeed in completing the protracted trek. On a daily basis, he and Estraven must hope for a “beneficent snowfall” (Le Guin, 2017c: 546) since they are entirely at the mercy of the snows on the Glacier now. As Lindow states, at this point of the text, “the isolation of bitter cold weather and barren landscape reduces behavior to the simplest terms of survival, a common denominator for revelation [sic] of morality and responsibility” (2018: 12), and so Ai’s dawning respect for snow foregrounds the interdependence between humanoids and nature in the novel.

Almost every entry in Estraven’s diary during their time crossing the Gobrin Ice begins with a report on the quality of the snow that day—the two of their lives are utterly contingent upon such meteorological providence, and additionally, the quality of the snowfall will also determine the success or failure of Ai’s Ekumenical objective. For the non-native Ai, the relentless onslaught of Gethenian snow on the Glacier is soul-crushing and extremely psychologically debilitating; he finds the daily process of “setting up camp, making everything secure, getting all the clinging snow off one’s outer clothing, and so on” hugely laborious (Le Guin, 2017c: 567). When he and Estraven do finally emerge from the Glacier, “the sighting of Esherhoth Crags [is] the first thing not ice or snow or sky that [they] had seen for seven weeks” (Le Guin, 2017c: 581), having travelled “730 miles” (Le Guin, 2017c: 587)—aside from each other, snow has quite literally encompassed their entire existence for this time. As is apparent in his report to the Ekumen, his experiences on the Gobrin Glacier affect Ai profoundly. As in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, snow

throughout the *Hainish Cycle* is a datum which comprises a fundamental component of Le Guin’s New Wave agenda. Throughout the series, it foregrounds the multilinear ways in which subjective experience and co-constitutive modes of ecological embeddedness are just as critical as any technological novum, both in SF, and, by extension, in readers’ daily lives.

### *Rocannon’s World*

Similarly, in *Rocannon’s World*, snow comprises a metaphor for the titular protagonist’s blank frame of reference within the native cultures of an unnamed planet, after having been removed from his familiar science fictional lifeworld. Grounded planet-side after the sabotage of his interstellar ship and communications equipment, Rocannon must locate and immobilise the perpetrators of the attack without access to Ekumenical technologies. When he wakes outside one morning and observes that “snow still fell [...] the ground now was white and featureless” (Le Guin, 2017e: 66), the statement summarises his totalising estrangement from his familiar Ekumenical cognitive referents just as much as it comprises a literal observation upon the weather. Initially, imagery of snow is symbolic of his exclusion from the perceptual paradigms accessible to the planet’s natives; whilst his companions Yahan and Piai spend “the rest of the afternoon swapping hunting-stories” (Le Guin, 2017e: 67), Rocannon is left alone to observe the snow falling “windless now and steady” (Le Guin, 2017e: 67). Yahan habitually knows that it “[a]lways snows this time of year, and it’ll snow harder soon” (Le Guin, 2017e: 66), but for



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Rocannon, the prevailing snowfall is an unknown quantity, a white curtain of cognitive impenetrability. Although each snowflake which has ever fallen is fractally unique, to the uninitiated observer, they appear to merely be a uniform white mass. As his segregation from Yahan and Piai within the scene implies, snow is a *de facto* litmus test of everyday lived experience on the planet, and thus, Rocannon is symbolically excluded from more profound insights into its native cultures as a result of his inability to discern the uniqueness which underlies the ostensible uniformity of those same lives.

Later, when he surmounts a mountain range on a windsteed, he discerns “a glow in the flickering mist of snowflakes”, only to suddenly find revealed “valleys, lakes, and glittering tongue of a glacier [sic], green patches of forest” (Le Guin, 2017e: 98). Symbolically, at this precise moment when Rocannon first perceives value within the white blizzard of ostensible banality, he gains an expanded perception of the planet. Likewise, it is after he is enticed by some “snow glittering” (Le Guin, 2017e: 101) that he is drawn into an esoteric encounter with the mystical Ancient One, who offers him prophetic wisdom, grants him the ability to mindspeak, and revitalises his desire to persevere on the quest against the Enemy. In either instance, at the exact moment that Rocannon comes to perceive the beauty which lies within snow—and by extension, within the natural world of the planet and its humanoid natives—his way forward is revealed, and his cognitive horizons are broadened. As Rocannon discovers, on closer inspection snow does not conceal, but rather, reveals. As the precisely deployed imagery of snow throughout the novel foregrounds, in

order to understand the natives of the planet he is stranded upon, Rocannon must first learn to perceive the fractal brilliance which underlies the apparent similitude of their cultures and complex environmental systems.

### *The Dispossessed*

Although there are comparatively few references to snow in *The Dispossessed*, where snow is present, it comprises an important emblem of the dangers of Shevek succumbing to the vanities of capitalist life on Urras. Since Shevek’s home planet Anarres is an anarchist collective, he has had no prior exposure to any capitalist sociocultural paradigm. After arriving on Urras, he is initially seduced by the decadence and class privileges of academic life, and consequently stands at risk of forgetting the ethical principles of his research. Indeed, the majority of the references to snow in the novel cohere around the Urrasti woman Vea, whom Shevek first meets at his colleague Oiié’s house after coming “in out of the snow” (Le Guin, 2017b: 770).

As Shevek’s romantic interest, Vea initially literalises his infatuation with bourgeois Urrasti society. Yet, references to snow foreshadow Vea’s equally crucial role in unwittingly provoking Shevek towards a more discerning perception of Urrasti society, which has, until that point, remained obscured from his purview. Vea initially appears “as extravagant as the snow [...] an innocent whiteness” (Le Guin, 2017b: 771) to Shevek, yet as he comes to understand by the termination of their relationship, her aesthetically pleasing and ostensibly pure exterior is synecdochic of the exploitative



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superstructure of the Urrasti economic system. Whilst he initially takes “pleasure in her inconsequential talk just as he did in the sunshine and the snow” (Le Guin, 2017b: 773), he soon comes to understand that Vea’s benign yet superficial blank facade is symptomatic of the Urrasti government’s concealment of the rampant inequalities of their capitalist society from his sight.

Although the abortive sexual encounter and attempted rape which his and Vea’s relationship climaxes is a reprehensible and deeply shameful moment in Shevek’s life, it also comprises a deeply formative moment in *The Dispossessed’s* bildungsroman schema, as it proves the necessary imperative for Shevek to disavow the hubris of the bourgeois luxury which he languished within on Urras until this point. By perceiving the basis of Vea’s pretensions plainly, he comes to understand the unjust underside to the materialism and fixation on “reputation” which pervades polite Urrasti society (Le Guin, 2017b: 798). Snow therefore figures as a tabula rasa in the novel, materialising a symbolic blank space which coheres in parallel with Shevek’s decision to break free of the upper echelons of Urrasti society. As a stunning manifestation of meteorological metamorphosis, the defamiliarising effects of snow cause perceptual filters to sharpen, profoundly shaking the habitual. Thus, Shevek is newly able to perceive the social realities he has been ignorant of, and accordingly, makes the significant decision to instead join the revolutionaries who seek to overthrow the Urrasti government.

### *City of Illusions*

In *City of Illusions*, imagery of snow once again portends the concealment of a

momentous truth from the comprehension of a central protagonist. Unbeknownst to Falk-Ramarren, the villainous Shing have subjugated Terra’s population, and razed his own mind to erase his former identity. Although he has no notion why he does so, Falk-Ramarren has a predilection for sitting “in one of the window-bays, alone, watching the snow fall outside the grimy glass” in the homestead he inhabits on Terra (Le Guin, 2017a: 230). As this proclivity demonstrates, snow is the prime memory from his forgotten life on Alterra which is strong enough to break his mind’s conditioning. Its saturation of the visual field of his embedded existence on Alterra has plainly been so firmly ingrained that he once more finds himself drawn irresistibly to snow, despite having no conscious rationale for exhibiting such an obsession. Accordingly, throughout the novel, snow comprises a perceptual window for Falk-Ramarren into the revelation and recovery of his forgotten past. Wherever he travels as he journeys onward, “[s]now fell often” (Le Guin, 2017a: 259), manifesting an unrelenting analogue to the arduous journey towards the reclamation of his past, of his struggle to escape the tabula rasa of his blank memory. Appropriately, the unremitting snowfall throughout the novel transforms the landscape he crosses into precisely such a blank slate.

As the novel’s imagery of snow accentuates, his initial ignorance apropos the true significance of his journey is comparable to “a tiny bubble of light, around which hundreds of miles of wind-driven snow hurtled in darkness” (Le Guin, 2017a: 278). Likewise, references to snow also foreground his lack of comprehension of his companion Estrel’s true motives, as when he determines that “in the wan, snowstreaked sphere of light



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[he] saw her face for the first time clearly” (Le Guin, 2017a: 278). Although Falk-Ramarren believes he perceives her accurately at this point, it soon becomes apparent that he has been unable to penetrate the surface of her persona, and has accordingly remained ignorant of her duplicitous motives. Likewise, he himself must constantly proceed onward “through the tireless, relentless, driving snow” (Le Guin, 2017a: 280) symbolic of the impenetrability of every memory of his former life, even as that same snow tantalisingly offers him his only notion of continuity with his past on Alterra. Dancing around him, snow comprises a field of static which refuses to coalesce into a clear image. Crucially therefore, when he begins to recover the Ramarren portion of his persona, his realisation that he has lived a phenomenologically consequential life “among the snowy mountains of Earth” (Le Guin, 2017a: 363) is the keystone of his realisation that Falk is just as much a portion of himself as Ramarren is—an understanding which proves critical to the novel’s eucatastrophe.

### *Planet of Exile*

Meanwhile, snow in *Planet of Exile* comprises so significant a component of Alterra’s protracted winters as to be the primary touchstone of all existence on the planet. Due to the planet’s unusually slow rate of rotation around its axis Alterrans, including the native Askatevar and Gaal, experience seasons which last entire decades. Since it can be experienced at only two points during their lifespan, snow visually bookends Alterran lives, and as such, the elder Wold’s keenest memories of the beginning of his life

“sixty moonphases ago” (Le Guin, 2017d: 165) are of everything “snow-covered, [...] snow birds [...] a patch of snowcrop [...] the lolling white head of a snowghoul” (Le Guin, 2017d: 130). As for all his generation, this Winter marks the culmination of his life, even as the snows preserved in the memories of his youth begin to reappear.

The return of the snow is here subjectively realised as an emblem of the natural cyclicity of Alterran life, of the new generation just beginning to probe the veritable tabula rasa of the planet’s snowy landscape. Accordingly, snow rigorously demonstrates the necessity of embeddedness for the natives of Alterra within the natural cycles of their planet. Whereas the reactionary Gaal repeatedly fail to plan ahead of the Winter each Year, and so must “loot every town on their course [...] or starve before they get out of the snow-lands” (Le Guin, 2017d: 183), the precautionary ideologies of the Askatevar figure snow as a compelling catalyst of interdependence with their planet’s natural world. Snow is accordingly the totalising determinant of their tropisms; by comprehending that “the snow will fall any day” (Le Guin, 2017d: 135), they realise that they must soon move into their Winter fortresses, and begin to live off their stockpiled provisions.<sup>3</sup>

Hence, as this Winter’s snowfall begins in earnest, it becomes apparent just how profoundly implicated it is in the recursive, naturalistic, existences of the Askatevar. Although they are minute individually, the “random flakes f[alling]

<sup>3</sup> Much like the preparations which are necessary to survive the extended ‘seasons’ in N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017).



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from the low sky” (Le Guin, 2017d: 157) rapidly begin to condition all aspects of the lives of Alterra’s humanoid populations. When Jakob Agat is attacked on the outskirts of the Askatevar settlement, Rolery is able to find him in the dark only because his body forms an interruption upon the snow which is “sticking to the ground” (Le Guin, 2017d: 161) everywhere else. Just as it reveals him in the first instance, the snow subsequently “ma[kes] it easier to pull” (Le Guin, 2017d: 162) Agat’s body back to safety for Rolery, likely saving his life by virtue of its chemical properties—as when she later utilises “clean snow from a windowsill” to wash “the wounds in his hand and scalp” (Le Guin, 2017d: 207). Once more, the interdependence of the Askatevar within the natural world of their planet is proven rigorously by their interaction with snow, and as such, Le Guin emphasises that by “biding [their] time through the great Year, flourishing and dying down to wait again” (Le Guin, 2017d: 170), humanoids are just one aspect of the proclivity of cyclical life within Alterra’s natural world. It is therefore no coincidence that fresh snowfall “bring[s] silence” (Le Guin, 2017d: 194) to the violent conflict between the Askatevar and the Gaal; the blank immensity of snow positions even their most ardent endeavours within a far greater framework of cyclical repetition.

Accordingly, as the two civilisations see “[e]verything [...] silenced and transformed by snow” (Le Guin, 2017d: 195), their own immediate struggles seem newly futile in the face of the immensity of Alterra’s recursive past, and they realise that that they are “only shadowy blots of motion [...] on the snow” (Le Guin, 2017d: 220) which will iterate regardless Year after Year. Just as its mere spectre

has already drastically altered the survival tropisms of both civilisations, the fatalistic resonances of the falling snow now cause the Gaal to curtail their attempted invasion of the Askatevar Winter city, and begin “going south” (Le Guin, 2017d: 220). Pointedly, the Gaal are not discouraged by any strategy or high technology of Alterra’s Ekumen colonists, but merely by the snow itself, which underscores their mortality, and robs their endeavours of any distinctiveness by interrelating them within the unfathomable recursivity of the natural cycles of their planet.

Yet, whereas the Gaal’s siege was ephemeral, snow will continue to relentlessly attack the Askatevar Winter city, “lashing [...] fine snow at one’s face like gravel, whirling it in through the smashed glass of windows [...] drifting it across splintered floors” (Le Guin, 2017d: 201) for another sixteen years. The predominance of Alterra’s protracted snows within *Planet of Exile* is conspicuously similar to numerous later SF&F works, in particular, Brian W. Aldiss’s *Helliconia* trilogy (1982-1985) and George R. R. Martin’s perennially incomplete *A Song of Ice and Fire* series (1991- ). Entirely insensible to Alterran affairs, the snow in *Planet of Exile* is a constant, indefatigable presence causing wanton destruction, which disabuses the Askatevar of any measure of anthropic dominance over their planet’s natural world. Although they are able to shelter from it, their endeavours are now starkly conditioned by, and will pale in the wake of, the snow which blankets their world for the duration of the imminent Winter.



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### *The Telling*

Contrastingly, in *The Telling*, imagery of snow reveals the profound insights which are to be found in the natural world of Aka. At the beginning of the novel, the Ekumenical envoy Suttu’s initial conception is that Akan mountains are “nothing dramatic; the land just went slowly up, and up, and up” (Le Guin, 2017f: 613), but by its conclusion she perceives their fractal brilliance in an entirely different manner. A chapter later, having drawn closer to one of these mountains in both physical and psychological terms, she is able to discern “the thin snow-banners” (Le Guin, 2017f: 622) which decorate its summit, and hence, she begins to comprehend the immanence of the natural world of Aka. Just as the veil of the mountain range’s ostensible monotony lifts to reveal the intricate brilliance beneath, snow throughout the novel accentuates Suttu’s gradual realisation of the profundity of the naturalistic philosophy of the Telling—the non-hierarchical belief system which structures much of Akan culture and daily life. Suttu’s progress is symptomatic of the explicit association which Le Guin draws between snow and the surviving written texts of the Telling, which are “[w]hite and silent [...] snowfall” (Le Guin, 2017f: 626). Accordingly, as Suttu begins her trek into the mountains, and towards enlightenment, she finds entire villages clustered among the “late spring snow” (Le Guin, 2017f: 690). Just as these settlements are hidden from view at lower altitudes, so will the everyday revelations of the Telling be facilitated through her subjective and gradual comprehension of the concealed truths of Aka’s natural world.

At one point, when the food supplies of the company she journeys with have been depleted so much that there is “no food left but dried smoked fish”, and too little of that to feed them all, the group elect to share it “out in little portions, soaking it in boiled snow to make soup” (Le Guin, 2017f: 695). As Le Guin’s revisionist rewriting of the Biblical verse Matthew 14.19 implies, the Akans’ own miraculous feat of providing sustenance for more mouths than appeared possible is no divine miracle, but a direct result of their symbiosis with the natural world which surrounds them. When one of their company dies *en route*, they are able to keep his “body frozen in snow till the maz could come and perform his funeral” (Le Guin, 2017f: 696), and likewise, they are also able to use the snow to sketch “out lines, paths” (Le Guin, 2017f: 700) to plan the trajectory of their expedition. Where it ostensibly appeared an impediment to their quest, snow becomes a vital naturally-occurring tool which can be utilised in a variety of ways by the Akan company, demonstrating its versatility as a non-technological datum. The datum of snow therefore becomes a true source of wonder, in contrast with the nova of the series, which, as Bucknall implies, are often considerably mundane upon closer inspection. As such, snow proves far more versatile than any technological novum within the series—the ansible, for instance, can only conceivably be used for communication between worlds.

Whereas “the endless slopes of rock and snow” (Le Guin, 2017f: 700) of neighbouring valleys look monotonous to Suttu from a distance, their visual impenetrability is symbolic of the rich complexity of the Akan natural world, whose totality lies beyond human cognition—as is true of the “ghostly snow



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flurries that never came to earth” (Le Guin, 2017f: 702), and which thus remain tantalisingly impenetrable to her enquiry. As Akans recognise, there is no telos to the Telling precisely because the entire novelty of their natural world can never be assimilated by any one individual; it is a hyperobject which lies “beyond (human) cognition” (Morton, 2013: 43). Identically, when she reaches the mountain caves in which the printed texts of the Telling are housed, Sutti realises that she could not possibly read the many “thousands of books” which lie “[u]nder rock, under snow” in her lifetime (Le Guin, 2017f: 708). Later, when she emerges from a protracted conversation with the Akan Yara, however, she finds that a “little snow had fallen during the last few hours” (Le Guin, 2017f: 735), the snowfall literalising her attainment of a degree of knowledge through that conversation. As this image of the consolidation of snow suggests, the revelatory insights of the Telling do not necessitate years of scholarship, and are found just as readily in conversations about everyday matters on Aka.

### Conclusion

As this concordance analysis has revealed, throughout the *Hainish Cycle*, Le Guin proffers naturalistic data such as snow to materialise a cogent alternative rhetoric to the technophilia of Golden Age SF. In line with Roberts’ assertion, Le Guin’s series reconceptualised and challenged the preoccupations of prior works in the genre, and as this study has demonstrated, it does so in part by establishing significant data, such as snow, alongside its nova. Snow correspondingly grounds her New Wave

objectives and moves rigorously throughout the texts of the series, which, via their depiction of the viscera of daily life in a range of alien societies, challenge readers to rethink the ideologies and possibilities conditioned by our own cultures and societies, in an environmentally-conscious manner. By placing consistent narrative focus upon naturalistic phenomena and representations of subjective experience throughout the series, rather than the technologies which predominate Golden Age SF, the schema of Le Guin’s series cognitively literalises the New Wave move from technological, to biological and sociological concerns.

The growing popularity of concordance analysis as a methodology for scholars of literature, alongside the development and release of increasingly user-friendly tools with which to undertake these analyses, will likely alter considerations of the history of the sf genre significantly, by providing a novel means of producing original readings of classic texts. Accordingly, applications of corpus-based methodologies bear the potential to revitalise critical interest in even those revered sf authors, like Le Guin, whose oeuvres have already been plumbed and discussed by scholars exhaustively. As such, this novel means of approaching the *Hainish Cycle* offers ample scope for expansion by subsequent scholars.<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> References to wind in *Rocannon’s World*, for instance, are three times as frequent as references to snow in that same novel. Equally, the ansible is referenced more frequently than snow in *The Telling* and *The Dispossessed*, indicating that it is more significant in both those novels. References to fire, meanwhile, comprise another predominant compo-



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more closely Le Guin’s data are analysed, the more clearly her overarching emphasis upon “lives lived in [...] balance with nature and other beings” (Fischer, 1991: 28) can be discerned in its entirety, reaffirming the significance of her series in inspiring the ecological trends which pervade the contemporary genre.

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ment of *Rocannon’s World*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *City of Illusions* and *Planet of Exile* in particular.



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### Appendix

References to ‘snow’ in the *Hainish Cycle*, categorised by frequency of appearance in each individual text of the series.

	Snow	Snow as prefix, suffix, in a construction, etc.	Total	
Rocannon’s World	19	8	27	
Planet of Exile	63	37	100	
City of Illusions	35	11	46	
The Left Hand of Darkness	111	66	177	
The Dispossessed	18	5	23	
The Word for World is Forest	0	1	1	
The Telling	26	6	32	<b>Cumulative concordance</b>
<b>Five Ways to Forgiveness</b>				<b>Snow 427</b>
Betrayals	0	0		Rain 182
Forgiveness Day	0	0		Thunder 28
A Man of the People	0	0		Hail 0
A Woman’s Liberation	0	0		Cloud 126
Old Music and the Slave Women	0	0		Wind 357
Notes on Werel and Yeowe	0	0		
<b>Transience Trilogy</b>				<b>Ekumen 339</b>
Winter’s King	5	2	7	Ansible 139
Vaster Than Empires and More Slow	0	0		Hain/Hainish 296
The Day Before the Revolution	0	0		Human 404
Coming of Age in Karhide	3	1	4	Terra/Terran 392
Unchosen Love	0	0		
Mountain Ways	3	1	4	
The Matter of Seggri	0	0		
Solitude	0	0		
The Birthday of the World	3	1	4	
<b>Transience Trilogy</b>				
The Shobies’ Story	0	0		
Dancing to Ganam	0	0		
Another Story or A Fisherman of the Inland Sea	2	0	2	

**Total: 427**