

Anthropocentrism: the Human View of the Inhuman

Ursula Le Guin's "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow" and Lynda Schneekloth's "Plants: The Ultimate Alien" are two profound accounts of the role of plants as aliens that vary in content and narrative but converge in their discussion of what it is that makes plants alien. Le Guin's short story takes place in a time where the majority of outer space has been colonized, and follows the journey of a team of surveyors as they embark on a long, desolate journey to different planets to take inventory of the plant and animal life they contain. The team, made of "two Cetians...two Hainishmen, one Beldene, and five Terrans" all continue to butt heads as the journey drags on as a result of their differing goals and ideas, but one particular character, Osden, an irritable man who has been cured of autism and now possesses special empathic qualities, creates a larger divide in the team as a result of his lack of control over his emotions. Looking for solitude, Osden embarks into the forest to count species, only for the crew to find him in the depth of the woods, unconscious and bloody. Overwhelmed by the search for the culprit of this attack, the crew fails to recognize the role of the sentient energy and life of the plants in the forest in this chaos and horror.

Schneekloth's "Plants: The Ultimate Alien", on the other hand, takes a more literal and analytical approach to how it is that plants are aliens, exploring the essence of vegetation and its often overlooked relationship to human life. Schneekloth provides evidence and accounts of how it is that plants have quite literally created a habitable Earth for humans and how we would cease to exist without them. Despite this imperative link between humans and plants, the essay emphasizes the collective unconscious idea of plants as non-sentient and useless. Schneekloth

also investigates Le Guin's "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow" within her essay as "one of the most interesting explorations of vegetative sentience" (248). Though Le Guin and Schneekloth take two different approaches to handling the topic of plants as aliens, the two works are abundantly connected in that they both shed light on the important idea that we, as human beings, whether consciously or unconsciously, center our understanding of the alien around our internalized capacity for anthropocentrism.

Anthropocentrism is, in short, the belief that the human race is the superior race. Upon reading Le Guin's sci-fi short story, it was almost impossible for me, as the reader, to not pick up on phrases that hint both clearly and more metaphorically at the idea of human superiority. I argue that this direct and implied anthropocentrism, though it may seem to be irrelevant, is imperative to our understanding of this story and our understanding of "the other" as a whole. Before Osden's departure into the North Circumpolar Forest, the crewmates joke about Osden's hatred towards plants when they figured he'd like them since they can't annoy him as they do, the crewmate Portlock casually agrees that he "can't say [he] likes these plants much [himself]", since they are "all the same. No mind. No change.", and asserts that "a man alone in it would go right off his head" (Le Guin 5). This exchange provides two clear examples of the internalized anthropocentrism of the characters; Olleroo's implication that the plants can't bother Osden the way the crewmates do provides a subtle implication that the plants lack the sentient qualities of human beings. More directly, then, Portlock furthers this view to state his dislike for plants because of their lack of autonomy and their overall boringness. Though at no point do the characters directly express their view of humans as superior, their distaste for plants revolves around their lack of distinctly human qualities: mind, soul, and emotion.

Osden as a character and his experience on the planet is another imperative way in which Le Guin tackles the concept of anthropocentrism. Osden, as stated before, is a peculiar man who has been cured of autism through scientific experiment and, though he does not get along well with other humans, has an exceptional capacity for empathy and an ability for empathetic reception and transmission. One statement of Osden's that highlights the idea of anthropocentrism in an almost backwards way, is Osden's statement on page four of the story when, in a tiff with the crewmates, exclaims "we're two light centuries past the limit of Hainish expansion, and outside that there are no men. Anywhere. You don't think Creation would have made the same hideous mistake twice?" (Le Guin 4). Osden's implication here is that the universe or whoever or whatever the divine creator is would not make the mistake of allowing human life and expansion twice. It is interesting to note that Osden, the crewmate who has the capacity to understand other life forms and has what appears to be a scientifically enhanced and advanced mind is the only person who acknowledges the human race as not only non-superior, but as a mistake.

Le Guin using Osden to, in a sense, bring the team back to reality, and remind them of their lack of superiority is profound and intentional in that he is the one with a more advanced mind and is thus the only one who understands the fragility and faults of the human race. Osden's role as a way of providing clarity to the team is furthered after his attack when he can only speak of the forest through fragmented sentences like "there is only a fear" (Le Guin 15). Osden's understanding of the life of the forest and its ability to make him feel intense and overwhelming emotions helps the team to come to terms with their misunderstanding not only of the sentience of plants, but also of their role in the grand scheme of their environment. "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow" uses the forest's capacity to overcome the humans with emotion

as a way of combating the view of plants as solely vegetative, and subsequently countering the view of anthropocentrism that is inherently ingrained in the human understanding and depiction of “the other”

Schneekloth’s “Plants: The Ultimate Alien” takes a more literal approach to the concept of the plant as the alien, but nonetheless uses her research on the collective unconscious and on Le Guin’s work to counter the idea of anthropocentrism not only in science fiction works but in our understanding of the world in general. Schneekloth begins her work with an imperative question to her work as a whole: “what does science fiction tell us about our relationship to plants?” to which she answers “mostly, it tells us nothing”, explaining how the genre “usually ignores plants, including plant related issues such as food, what people eat and where does it come from” (246). Schneekloth establishes an important distinction here about the representation of plants in science fiction: there is none. This implies the idea of anthropocentrism in that we, as humans, ignore plants in our depiction of the future as we see them as irrelevant and useless when in fact we could not exist without them. Schneekloth furthers this investigation by noting Jung’s idea of the vegetable soul and how it is a metaphor for self growth, but how this idea has been muddled by our “modern industrial world” (247). She explains how the essence of our modern way of life dilutes our idea of plants and vegetation, stating that “vegetation is passive”, that “to be in a vegetative state is to be without mind” (Schneekloth 247). The implication here is that our collective, anthropocentric, unconscious has been programmed to understand the idea of vegetation as immobile and useless, which not only convolutes our understanding of our relationship to plants, but deepens our inherently accepted idea of anthropocentrism as a society.

Schneekloth’s investigation of Le Guin’s “Vaster Than Empires and More Slow” as a remarkable way of reclaiming and reasserting the sentience of plants further expands her

argument and its relationship to our understanding of plants and our internalized anthropocentrism. Her discussion of the story notes the important idea that the crew was uncomfortable and off put “in the endless, silent forest” and, even further, that the realization that it was no human life that attacked Osden “doesn’t account for the depth of fear experienced by the crew”, implying that the crew was unaware of the cause of their deep and unshakeable fear as a result of their consistent overlooking of the sentience of plants (Schneekloth 248).

Schneekloth’s discussion of “Vaster Than Empires and More Slow” highlights Le Guin’s subtle but impactful way of showing plants as sentient and intelligent and helps not only to deepen the readers understanding of the representation of plants in science fiction but to emphasize how deeply ingrained anthropocentrism is in our collective unconscious.

Le Guin and Schneekloth’s works differ fundamentally in content, being that the first is a science fiction short story and the latter is an investigative essay into the essence of our relationship with plants, but the commonality between the two is clear; both works use plants and the human view of plants not only to counter the commonly held ideology of the species as passive and useless, but also to bring forth the idea that anthropocentrism is so deeply rooted in our human minds that it rules our view of the present and our vision for the future. Looking at these two works side by side provides an important investigation into why we see plants the way we do in our 21st century modern society, and how it is that this view relates subsequently to our view of ourselves. “Vaster Than Empires and More Slow” and “Plants: The Ultimate Alien” portray the idea that anthropocentrism, whether blatantly accepted or subconsciously ingrained, is irremovable from the study of science fiction and from the way we navigate our understanding of ourselves and our environment.

Works Cited

Le Guin, Ursula K. "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow".

Schneekloth, Lynda. "Plants: The Ultimate Alien".