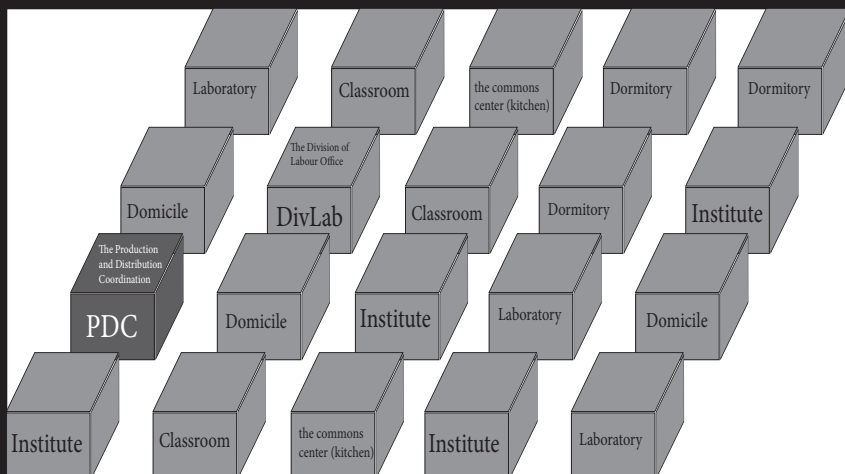


# SHEVEK

was invited for dinner at a  
modest middle-class house



A typical layout of a settlement on Anarres

A brief introduction into the live of the Annaresti,  
a remote community on a dry planet.



A short interview with the novelist Ursula K Le Guin  
on the origins of the social structure of the Annaresti.

# SHEVEK



An *Anarresti* scientist with the name SHEVEK visited a foreign community called the *Urrasti* for reasons of research.

During his long stay he was also invited for dinner at the house of an *Urrasti* family.

SHEVEK agrees to go, since he has never been at a private place of an *Urrasti*...

(...) Invitations to receptions, dedications, openings, and so forth were delivered to Shevek daily. He went to some, because he had come to Urras on a mission and must try to fulfill it: he must urge the idea of brotherhood, he must represent, in his own person, a solidarity of the Two Worlds. He spoke, and people listened to him and said, "How true."

He wondered why the government did not stop him from speaking. Chifoilisk must have exaggerated, for his own purposes, the extent of the control and censorship they could exert. He talked pure anarchism, and they did not stop him. But did they need to stop him? It seemed that he talked to the same people every time: well dressed, well fed, well mannered, smiling. Were they the only kind of people on Urras? "It is pain that brings men together," Shevek said standing up before them, and they nodded and said, "How true."

He began to hate them and, realizing that, abruptly ceased accepting their invitations. But to do so was to accept failure and to increase his isolation. He wasn't doing what-he had come here to do. It was not that they cut him off, he told himself; it was that—as always—he had cut himself off from them. He was lonely, stiflingly lonely, among all the people he saw every day. The trouble was that he was not in touch. He felt that he had not touched anything, anyone, on Urras in all these months. In the Senior Commons at table one night he said, "You know, I don't know how you live, here."

I see the private houses, from the outside.  
But from the inside I know only your not-private  
life—meeting rooms, refectories, laboratories.

...

The next day Oiie rather stiffly asked Shevek  
if he would come to dinner and stay overnight,  
the next weekend, at Oiie's home.

It was in Amoeno, a village a few miles from  
Ieu Eun, and it was by Urrasti standards a modest  
middle-class house, older than most, perhaps.  
It had been built about three hundred  
years ago, of stone, with wood-paneled rooms.  
The characteristic loti double arch was used in  
window frames and doorways. A relative  
absence of furniture pleased Shevek's eye at  
once: the rooms looked austere, spacious, with  
their expanses of deeply polished floor. He had  
always felt uneasy amidst the extravagant decorations  
and conveniences of the public buildings  
in which the receptions, dedications, and  
so forth were held. The Urrasti had taste, but it  
seemed often to be in conflict with an impulse  
towards display—conspicuous expense. The  
natural, aesthetic origin of the desire to own  
things was concealed and perverted by economic  
and competitive compulsions, which in  
turn told on the quality of the things: all they  
achieved was a kind of mechanical lavishness.  
Here, instead, was grace, achieved through  
restraint.

A serving man took their coats at the door.  
Oiie's wife came up to greet Shevek from the  
basement kitchen, where she had been instructing

the cook. As they talked before dinner, Shevek found  
himself speaking to her almost exclusively,  
with a friendliness, a wish to make her like him,  
that surprised himself. But it was so good to be  
talking with a woman again! No wonder he had  
felt his existence to be cut off, artificial, among  
men, always men, lacking the tension and  
attraction of the sexual difference. And Sewa  
Oiie was attractive. Looking at the delicate  
lines of her nape and temples he lost his objections  
to the Urrasti fashion of shaving women's  
heads. She was reticent, rather timid; he tried to  
make her feel at ease with him, and was very  
pleased when he seemed to be succeeding.  
They went in to dinner and were joined at  
the table by two children. Sewa Oiie apologized:  
"One simply can't find a decent nursemaid  
in this part of the country any more," she  
said. Shevek assented, without knowing what a  
nursemaid was. He was watching the little boys,  
with the same relief, the same delight. He had  
scarcely seen a child since he left Anarres.  
They were very clean, sedate children,  
speaking when spoken to, dressed in blue velvet  
coats and breeches. They eyed Shevek with  
awe, as a creature from Outer Space. The nineyear-  
old was severe with the seven-year-old,  
muttering at him not to stare, pinching him savagely  
when he disobeyed. The little one pinched  
back and tried to kick him under the table. The  
Principle of Superiority did not seem to be well  
established in his mind yet.  
Oiie was a changed man at home.

The secretive look left his face, and he did not drawl when he spoke. His family treated him with respect, but there was mutuality in the respect. Shevek had heard a good deal of Oiie's views on women, and was surprised to see that he treated his wife with courtesy, even delicacy. "This is chivalry," Shevek thought, having recently learned the word, but he soon decided it was something better than that. Oiie was fond of his wife and trusted her. He behaved to her and to his children very much as an Anarresti might. In fact, at home, he suddenly appeared as a simple, brotherly kind of man, a free man. It seemed to Shevek a very small range of freedom, a very narrow family, but he felt so much at ease, so much freer himself, that he was disinclined to criticize. In a pause after conversation, the younger boy said in his small, clear voice, "Mr. Shevek doesn't have very good manners." "Why not?" Shevek asked before Oiie's wife could reprove the child. "What did I do?" "You didn't say thank you." "For what?" "When I passed you the dish of pickles." "Ini! Be quiet!" Sadik! Don't egoize! The tone was precisely the same. "I thought you were sharing them with me. Were they a gift? We say thank you only for gifts, in my country. We share other things without talking about it, you see. Would you like the pickles back again?"

"No, I don't like them," the child said, looking up with dark, very clear eyes into Shevek's face. "That makes it particularly easy to share them," Shevek said. The older boy was writhing with the suppressed desire to pinch Ini, but Ini laughed, showing his little white teeth. After a while in another pause he said in a low voice, leaning towards Shevek, "Would you like to see my otter?" "Yes." "He's in the back garden. Mother put him out because she thought he might bother you. Some grownups don't like animals." "I like to see them. We have no animals in my country." "You don't?" said the older boy, staring. "Father! Mr. Shevek says they don't have any animals!" Ini also stared. "But what do you have?" "Other people. Fish. Worms. And holum trees." "What are holum trees?" The conversation went on for half an hour. It was the first time Shevek had been asked, on Urras, to describe Anarres. The children asked the questions, but the parents listened with interest. Shevek kept out of the ethical mode with some scrupulousness; he was not there to propagandize his host's children. He simply told them what the dust was like, what Abbenay looked like, what kind of clothes one wore, what people did when they wanted new clothes, what children did in school. This last became propaganda, despite his intentions.

Ini and Aevi were entranced by his description of a curriculum that included farming, carpentry, sewage reclamation, printing, plumbing, roadmending, playwriting, and all the other occupations of the adult community, and by his admission that nobody was ever punished for anything.

“Though sometimes,” he said, “they make you go away by yourself for a while.”

“But what,” Oiie said abruptly, as if the question, long kept back, burst from him under pressure, “what keeps people in order? Why don’t they rob and murder each other?”

“Nobody owns anything to rob. If you want things you take them from the depository. As for violence, well, I don’t know, Oiie; would you murder me, ordinarily? And if you felt like it, would a law against it stop you? Coercion is the least efficient means of obtaining order.”

“All right, but how do you get people to do the dirty work?”

“What dirty work?” asked Oiie’s wife, not following.

“Garbage collecting, grave digging,” Oiie said; Shevek added, “Mercury mining,” and nearly said, “Shit processing,” but recollected the loti taboo on scatological words. He had reflected, quite early in his stay on Urras, that the Urrasti lived among mountains of excrement, but never mentioned shit.

“Well, we all do them. But nobody has to do them for very long, unless he likes the work. One day in each decad the community management committee or the block committee or whoever needs you can ask you to join in such

work, they make rotating lists. Then the disagreeable work posting, or dangerous ones like the mercury mines and mills, normally they’re for one half year only.”

“But then the whole personnel must consist of people just learning the job.”

“Yes. It’s not efficient, but what else is to be done? You can’t tell a man to work on a job that will cripple him or kill him in a few years. Why should he do that?”

“He can refuse the order?”

“It’s not an order, Oiie. He goes to Divlab—the Division of Labor office—and says, I want to do such and such, what have you got? And they tell him where there are jobs.”

“But then why do people do the dirty work at all? Why do they even accept the one-day-inten jobs?”

“Because they are done together. . . . And other reasons. You know, life on Anarres isn’t rich, as it is here. In the little communities there isn’t very much entertainment, and there is a lot of work to be done. So, if you work at a mechanical loom mostly, every tenth day it’s pleasant to go outside and lay a pipe or plow a field, with a different group of people. . . . And then there is challenge. Here you think that the incentive to work is finances, need for money or desire for profit, but where there’s no money the real motives are clearer, maybe. People like to do things. They like to do them well. People take the dangerous, hard jobs because they take pride in doing them, they can—egoize, we call

it—show off?—to the weaker ones. Hey, look, little boys, see how strong I am! You know? A person likes to do what he is good at doing. . . . But really, it is the question of ends and means. After all, work is done for the work's sake. It is the lasting pleasure of life. The private conscience knows that. And also the social conscience, the opinion of one's neighbors. There is no other reward, on Anarres, no other law. One's own pleasure, and the respect of one's fellows. That is all. When that is so, then you see the opinion of the neighbors becomes a very mighty force."

"No one ever defies it?"

"Perhaps not often enough," Shevek said.

"Does everybody work so hard, then?"

Oiie's wife asked. "What happens to a man who just won't cooperate?"

"Well, he moves on. The others get tired of him, you know. They make fun of him, or they get rough with him, beat him up; in a small community they might agree to take his name off the meals listing, so he has to cook and eat all by himself; that is humiliating. So he moves on, and stays in another place for a while, and then maybe moves on again. Some do it all their lives. Nuchnibi they're called. I am a sort of nuchnib. I am here evading my own work posting. I moved farther than most." Shevek spoke tranquilly; if there was bitterness in his voice it was not discernible to the children, nor explicable to the adults. But a little silence followed on his words.

"I don't know who does the dirty work here," he said. "I never see it being done. It's strange. Who does it? Why do they do it? Are they paid more?"

"For dangerous work, sometimes. For merely menial tasks, no. Less."

"Why do they do them, then?"

"Because low pay is better than no pay," Oiie said, and the bitterness in his voice was quite clear. His wife began speaking nervously to change the subject, but he went on, "My grandfather was a janitor. Scrubbed floors and changed dirty sheets in a hotel for fifty years. Ten hours a day, six days a week. He did it so that he and his family could eat." Oiie stopped abruptly, and glanced at Shevek with his old secretive, distrustful look, and then, almost with defiance, at his wife. She did not meet his eyes. She smiled and said in a nervous, childish voice, "Demaere's father was a very successful man. He owned four companies when he died." Her smile was that of a person in pain, and her dark, slender hands were pressed tightly one over the other.

"I don't suppose you have successful men on Anarres," Oiie said with heavy sarcasm. Then the cook entered to change the plates, and he stopped speaking at once. The child Ini, as if knowing that the serious talk would not resume while the servant was there, said, "Mother, may Mr. Shevek see my otter when dinner's over?"

When they returned to the sitting room Ini was allowed to bring in his pet: a half-grown land otter, a common animal on Urras.



They had been domesticated, Oiie explained, since prehistoric times, first for use as fish retrievers, then as pets. The creature had short legs, an arched and supple back, glossy dark-brown fur. It was the first uncaged animal Shevek had seen close up, and it was more fearless of him than he was of it. The white, sharp teeth were impressive. He put his hand out cautiously to stroke it, as Ini insisted he do. The otter sat up on its haunches and looked at him. Its eyes were dark, shot with gold, intelligent, curious, innocent. “Ammar,” Shevek whispered, caught by that gaze across the gulf of being—“brother.” The otter grunted, dropped to all fours, and examined Shevek’s shoes with interest. “He likes you,” Ini said. “I like him,” Shevek replied, a little sadly. Whenever he saw an animal, the flight of birds, the splendor of autumn trees, that sadness came into him and gave delight a cutting edge.



A short interview with the  
novelist Ursula K Le Guin  
on the origins of the social  
structure of the *Annaresti*.

# An interview with Ursula Le Guin

**U**rsula Le Guin kindly agreed to let us interview her. So the following is a combination of two different e-mail sessions conducted during the hectic end of the year, while she had guests and family visiting.

**AJODA:** People tend to write about utopias as places where the question of scarcity doesn't exist; where people have everything material that they need. Where do you think you got the idea to write about a utopia where material needs aren't all met? The Dispossessed makes the argument that material needs are not the most fundamental aspect of a utopia...

**ULG:** I think the idea of putting a utopian experiment into a very harsh, poor environment came from a reaction against the confusion of "a good life" with "The Good Life," if that's clear. To a lot of people "utopia" is something like a huge mall, plenty of everything, both necessities and luxuries. To a lot of people in poorer countries, America has always looked something like utopia, right?

But there is a vast difference between "plenty" and "enough." No utopia based on sharing fairly will ever promise more than enough. Excess is a necessity only to capitalism, which is based on perpetual growth and radical inequality of material prosperity.

And also, by putting my anarchist experiment on a planet poor in raw materials, I simplified (as a novelist must simplify) my work of showing how the society worked. When there really is barely enough to go round and everybody has to work for it, keeping things shared out fairly is a lot easier.

**AJODA:** In another interview (that we found online) this is stated: "LeGuin explains that 'anarchy has historically been identified as female. The domain allotted to women... 'the family' for example... is the area of order without coercion, rule by custom not force.' We are hoping you can talk more about what that means, what you think about the idea of anarchy as female, of rule by custom, not force."

**ULG:** Let's get the spelling right, one place I am not an anarchist is spelling and grammar—it's Le Guin. OK. Well, this is a huge philosophical question and I don't know if I want to tackle it all over again. There is a good deal of solid evidence that the way women run things (in their usually limited sphere of power) is quite different from the way men



Ursula Le Guin Photo by Mariah Wood Kotlach

run things (usually by first allotting themselves almost all the power). The mere fact that women generally accept the arrangement is significant. Women, as a rule, don't seem to want the kind of power men want so badly. They seem not to care a whole lot who is King and who is Boss and so on, so long as they can run their own life—which necessarily tends to center in the family, which of course in most societies isn't just a couple of people, but a big extended group, a tribe or village. And there, women's preferred mode of keeping order is not by force, but by persuasion, by using rewards and shame—social means rather than brute force. And they tend to seek consensus, instead of wanting to impose their personal will.

They seem to prefer collaboration to hierarchy.

How tied this kind of governance without central authority actually is to gender, I have no idea—I don't think anybody

knows. It may not be feminine at all. It may just be the excessive machismo of our society that sees it as feminine. Consensus governance without a Boss was quite common among Native American peoples. The invading Europeans—all men of course—absolutely failed to understand it; they told the Indians, you guys *must* have a Big Chief; you can't have a society without a Top Man! So the Indians obligingly dragged out some old fellow who was a war chief or a dance leader or had some office, and the Whites made a treaty with him, and then broke it. The status of women varied a lot between Native American peoples; in some societies women had final authority, and named the chiefs; in others—particularly the warlike peoples the Whites admired most—women were treated as serfs and chattel. But even there, social rule was by consensus, not by decree from above. By custom not by force.

**AJODA:** What is your sense of technology as a force in our lives? good, bad, irrelevant?

**ULG:** Hey. Technology means using tools. Technology and language are what have made us different from everybody else on earth. Anybody who thinks technology is irrelevant should try eating chicken broth with his fingers.

**AJODA:** How is the increase in visibility and acceptability of transgendered folks affecting your sense of what is possible/desirable?

**ULG:** It cheers me up. It makes me think maybe people are not all bigoted idiots using religion to justify hatred and fear. It makes it clear that people can change—slowly, slowly... can learn—slowly, slowly...

**AJODA:** How does anarchism continue to run through your work in ways that are more subtle? Does it seem like an ongoing theme to you?

**ULG:** Yes—as it is connected to Taoism, and to a general impulse towards intellectual subversion, anti-authoritarianism, anti-hierarchy and extreme religious heterodoxy.

**AJODA:** Tantalizing. Could you expand on that?

**ULG:** No, I really can't at this point. Sorry.

**AJODA:** What is your current interaction with anarchist ideas? You mention zines and Moe Bowstern—what ideas are you reading or hearing from folks that are exciting, making you think?

**ULG:** Not a whole lot, frankly. But I am not a political person. My interests are not political really, but social and moral. And the terrible thing that is happening to my country under the Bush administration has limited my attention to trying to find ways and allies to resist the corporate/fundamentalist takeover. Anybody who has a chance of outwitting that gang is the person I'll find exciting.

**AJODA:** What speculative/science fiction have you read that is similar to (or reminds you of, or takes off from) *The Dispossessed*? Is it frustrating to have people continue to refer to a book that you wrote so long ago? Have you revisited these questions more recently in a way that is more meaningful to you now?

**ULG:** Well, I talked about planned utopias (such as Anarres) in an essay called "A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be" which was printed in my book *Dancing at the Edge of the World* in 1989; the paperback was still in print last I looked

There I proposed (to myself, anyhow) moving on from the blueprint utopia to something wilder—by which I meant my utopian novel *Always Coming Home*, which people fail to recognise as a utopia because it has no political blueprint or affiliation.

They tend to think it's about Indians. I did steal some stuff from various Native American societies, but believe me, the Kesh people of my book aren't Indians, or anybody else we know; I stole from every non-capitalist, more or less consensual society I could find out about. And what's more I took some liberties with what we call "human nature." (That's because I was brought up, as a good anthropologist's daughter, to distrust any talk about or belief in "human nature." Because "human nature" so far always has turned out to be a matter of opinion, not of observation.)

In that book, I was trying to talk about the same dichotomy we brought up a few questions back—the consensus society versus the hierarchical society; rule by custom rather than by decree; passing around of authority according to the occasion, but lack of any permanent authority of any kind; obligation to share wealth instead of expectation of amassing wealth; lack of social class, including the fundamental class/power "division of labor" on gender lines; an ongoing, daily, communal spirituality, instead of a single god, a priestly caste, dogma, "belief,"—etc. etc. I stuck a very macho hierarchic warlike monotheistic society onto the edge of the story to make the contrast plain. But it's a complicated book, and in some ways elusive, because I really wanted not to preach but just to share this vision, which I thought hopeful, beautiful, and entertaining. But it doesn't come on like a utopia. So nobody agrees with me that *Always Coming Home* is actually a much more radical utopian vision than Anarres in *The Dispossessed*.

In any case, it was as far as I could and can go in that direction.

**AJODA:** What is relevant to you about the gender of your characters, especially Odo and Shevek?

**ULG:** Well, as I think I tried to explain before, people in a novel are people. They come gendered, the way people generally do—so long as we agree that gender for a great many people is not all of them is largely a social construct, not a physical fate. OK?

Odo was a woman—maybe because that way she could literally embody some of those "feminine" anarchistic qualities we were talking about—maybe because it tickled me to have a woman (instead of some guy with a beard) found a whole social movement and eventually a whole society—Maybe just because she wanted to be a woman. As for Shevek, well, he's a guy, that's who he is, who he wants to be. I like writing guys, and gals, and gays, and hets, and cats, and you name it.

People are weird. That is why we have novelists.

**AJODA:** If you were writing *The Dispossessed* now, what would be different? How have your ideas about anarchy changed?

**ULG:** My ideas haven't changed much, but I have. So I couldn't be writing that book now—I'm not that person any more. A novel is not just ideas. It involves the body as much as the mind, maybe more. Ideas are nice and stable and solid and durable. Bodies aren't. Bodies are very anarchic and unreliable and, well, alive.

Until they die and become ideas. I intend to remain body as long as feasible.

*These questions were composed by Lawrence Jarach, Leona Bentele and L.D. Hobson.*

*SHEVEK was invited for dinner at a modest middle class house* is an introduction into the fictional utopian community called the Anarresti, which was invented as part of the novel titled “The Dispossessed”, written by Ursula K. Leguin.



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