

Thomas Mazzuchi  
Prof. Arielle Saiber  
World Science Fiction  
28 February 2020

### **Repercussions of Homogeneity in Ursula K. Le Guin's "Nine Lives"**

In her "Nine Lives," Ursula K. Le Guin tells the story of a man who must build himself up from scratch after losing his only friends in life — his siblings. Using cloning as a basis, Le Guin explores the consequences of homogeneity among humans. She shows us benefits, makes us feel the repercussions that are the price of those benefits, and offers a hopeful outlook that those repercussions may not be irreversible.

Very early on in the story, we meet the "tenclone" unit, a group of ten human beings all cloned from the same original seed, a man named John Chow. It is quickly established that the clone works like a perfectly oiled machine. Each member processes information in nearly the exact same way, such that given the same situation with the same problem, each will arrive at the same solution simultaneously (Le Guin, p. 456). Consequently, they never need to spend time explaining anything to one another, as each already knows how the others arrived at their conclusions (Le Guin, p. 457). When Martin asks them how they fare in unexpected situations, one responds that where they fall short in the ability to come up with different solutions and decide on the best, they make up with the fact that their seed was among the "ninety-ninth percentile," meaning that they can reliably all come to the best solution from the start, skipping the need to decide among many possibilities (Le Guin, p. 457). In sum, given whatever task, this team will consistently come up with the best method, and come up with it quickly. In response to the seeming perfection of the clone, Pugh even begins to wonder if he, the commander of the Base, is fit to be in charge of the "superman-woman-entity-of-ten" (Le Guin, p. 458). After spending a few days

with the clone, Pugh realizes that he is “no use to them at all,” as they are self-sufficient “physically, sexually, emotionally, intellectually” (Le Guin, p. 461). Each member has all that he or she needs within the clone, and nothing from the outside world of humanity is necessary. With this description, Le Guin seems to argue that a pocket of total homogeneity creates a form of true utopia, wherein all the needs of each member are satisfied.

Midway through the story, though, this utopia breaks down. An earthquake on the planet kills nine of the ten members of the clone, leaving only one man alive, Kaph, who is rescued by Martin and Pugh. After the two men bring Kaph back to relative safety and stabilize him, Martin reflects, wondering why this perfect team did not radio back to the base and ask the men for help. He hypothesizes that those who were not killed immediately were not thinking straight, but that even if they were, they may not have radioed because they always look within the clone for help, not outside of it (Le Guin, p. 466). Here, Le Guin exposes a flaw of a homogeneous group: even if they need it, they will not seek help from others because they have never had to before. This is an important weakness, but the far more significant one is represented by Kaph’s struggle with the aftermath of losing his nine companions. After several resuscitations, the first words that Kaph speaks are “Let me die,” which he follows up with “I am nine-tenths dead. There is not enough of me left alive” (Le Guin, p. 468). Upon hearing this, Pugh realizes (as does the reader) that Kaph has no sense of identity or purpose without his siblings. Since life with the clone is the only life he has known, he thinks that removing the clone is equivalent to removing his life. Pugh responds to this plea with conviction, saying that while Kaph’s brothers and sisters may be dead, he is still very much alive and still has autonomy (Le Guin, p. 468). Kaph, in his desperation, gives no response.

As time passes, Kaph begins to take back some of his life, though it is clear that he is still damaged. He takes over some mundane responsibilities around the base but avoids speaking whenever he can and generally isolates himself. He and Martin even get into an argument over Kaph’s refusal to

speak, in which Martin tries to convince Kaph that he should always respond when spoken to (Le Guin, p. 471). Soon after, though, another earthquake emergency occurs, from which Pugh goes to rescue Martin, who is luckily unharmed (Le Guin, p. 474). After Martin is back to safety, Kaph, surprisingly, starts a conversation with Pugh, in which he asks Pugh if he loves Martin, to which Pugh responds that he does (Le Guin, p. 475). Kaph, seemingly bewildered, responds to Pugh saying, "How can you. . . How do you. . ." (Le Guin, p. 475). It is at this moment that we realize that Kaph (and, presumably all the other members of the clone) has never even considered emotional attachment to anyone outside the clone, which is the cause of his psychological torment. Here, Le Guin shows a serious repercussion of homogeneity, namely that an individual member of a homogeneous group will be entirely helpless if removed from the group. Moments after this conversation, Pugh decides to sleep, and says goodnight to Kaph. Though Pugh does not hear it, the reader finds out that Kaph does indeed reply, which shows that he has grown since his argument with Martin. Here, Le Guin insinuates that, though someone removed from a homogenous group is at first uncomfortable with loving others, they are certainly capable of learning, and likely will, given enough time.

Toward the beginning of the story, Pugh, about to receive a video transmission, says that he will "be glad to see a human face" (Le Guin, p. 453). To this, Martin gives a sarcastic "Thanks," and Pugh responds by saying that Martin's face is indeed human, but that he has "seen it so long [he] can't see it" (Le Guin, p. 453). This interaction implies that, though he has been in the presence of a human for the past six months, Pugh has still forgotten what it is like to see a human face. Le Guin seems to be insinuating here that seeing one other human is somehow not human enough, that in order for Pugh to remember what humans look like, he would need to be around a collection of several different, diverse humans. This, I think, combined with Kaph's struggle, conveys the broader message of "Nine Lives:" that to truly experience humanity, to truly be human, one cannot be confined to a homogeneous society.

The essence of humanity is its diversity, and consequently that diversity is something to be embraced, not weeded away.

### **Works Cited**

Le Guin, Ursula K. "Nine Lives" (1969). *The Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction*. Ed. Arthur B. Evans, et al. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2019. 178-188