

**Summary** Please summarise, in not more than 1,000 words, how the cited work contributes to knowledge and represents a coherent study.

## Women and Other Aliens

The four pieces of fiction cited—the stories "It Takes Two" and "Cold Wind," and the novels *Always* and *Hild*—excavate and highlight the Other's experience. In this thesis I intend to argue that, in so doing, they form a coherent body of work which argues for the possibility that to be a woman (or queer, or poor, or disabled) does not, in any era, preclude a life of grace and agency.

Both the novels and stories address, reframe, and expand the roles of women and other aliens through time. They privilege female and queer experience: the protagonists are women with queer desires. Women play all roles: desiring and desired, protagonist and antagonist. Women in these fictions occupy all points of the moral compass, all layers of socio-economic class, and all levels of physical ability.

The short stories are set in a world within touching distance of the here and now in which women (and other so-called aliens) are agents of their own lives; they refuse a focus on men (Kosofsky-Sedgwick; Hollinger). This is also true of the thoroughly contemporary *Always*. The protagonist/narrator is unusual in that she is not punished with violence for not conforming to accepted standards of womanhood (Halberstam) but instead uses violence as a tool. She is a woman, but—without apology or explanation—a radically different kind of woman. My most recent novel, *Hild*, is set in seventh-century Britain, a time that used to be called the Dark Ages, and for which, due to the misogyny of our sources, it is hard to recover the agency of women (Lees and Overing). Yet I create a world in which *Hild*, though constrained (as we all are, to a degree), is a woman at the centre of the narrative (and her world) who is valued for her mind not her sexuality.

Adrienne Rich said, "We must use what we have to invent what we desire" (Rich). I use literature to invent what I desire: women (and other politically and economically disenfranchised groups: aliens) who are fully human. In pursuit of this goal, I use many tools: labelling theory, genre theory, diction, imagery, and setting.

Labelling theory suggests that the self-identity and behaviour of individuals may be determined or influenced by the terms used to classify them (Macionis). I am careful to build internally-consistent milieux in which such labels could be applied—but are not. My fictions, whatever the setting or apparent genre, create their own social and sexual economy in which none of the usual labels are applied (Duchamp). For example, in *Hild* I recreate seventh-century Britain without contravening known facts (when material culture contradicted textual sources, I privileged the former). I then explore what might be possible rather than what historians have deemed probable. While maintaining historical veracity, the people in my seventh-century—whether queer or not, female or male, slave or owner—are written as human beings. They feel as human and regard themselves as human. My aim is for this to become a self-fulfilling prophecy in the minds of readers: these characters, no matter who they are or what their situation, are human.

Throughout my novels I use genre as a carefully-selected vehicle to carry the reader into and across specific narrative terrains. The non-mimetic events of both "Cold Wind" and "It Takes Two" generate cognitive estrangement (Suvín; Mendlesohn). The natural world of the deep past can produce in the reader the sense that they are reading a fantasy alive with magic (Maitland). Contravening the expected tropes of noir—that there are no heroes; that women must be victim or femme fatale (Tuttle)—upends reader certainty about the role of women. These choices serve to destabilise reader assumptions.

There's ample evidence to show that we as readers take the experience—the emotion, the thoughts, the struggles—of well-drawn characters as our own (Clay and Iacoboni; Zunshine). To exploit this documented ability to induce empathy in readers and recreate

protagonists' experience inside the reader, I use a variety of techniques such as diction, imagery, and setting.

Setting is my primary joy as a writer. All my fiction open with place, funneling and filtering the environment through the emotional lens of my protagonist. In describing the character's world, I'm describing her and her situation. The reader sees, smells, hears, feels the world through the character, experiences the world through her body. This reflects the body's significant causative role in cognitive processing (Wilson and Foglia); it is a refusal of dualism. By keeping my characters firmly embodied I am free to use all the senses. With specific and particular word-choice I activate the reader's mirror neurons and so trigger empathy (Oatley). My attention to imagery includes kinaesthesia. If my characters are to be subject, not object, they must, to a degree, be active. I reinforce this with diction, particularly my focus on verbs—on ensuring women are subject, not object—which mitigates the historical linguistic alienation of women, even with regard to our own reproduction (Martin).

By inducing empathy for my protagonists—persuading the reader to recreate the characters' experience inside themselves—I invite the reader to consider those they may have previously regarded as Other as real human beings. My characters are not magical, mystical (with one exception), or miraculous. Some are extraordinary, yes, but within the constraints of their time. By imagining what was possible for a woman in the past, what is possible today, what could be possible in the future, I am recasting what we think might have been, is, and will be possible for women and other aliens. I am inventing what I desire: a world where we are real people at the centre of our own lives.

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