
Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and
Fantasy Research
journal.finfar.org

Opposing Forces and Ethical Judgments in
Samuel Delany's *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*

Päivi Väättänen

Abstract: This article discusses the opposing forces of conservative and liberal ideologies in Samuel Delany's science fiction novel Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand (1984). In this article, I conduct a rhetorical analysis of the novel using James Phelan's notions of the rhetorical theory of narrative. Laying emphasis on ethical judgments that the novel evokes in the readers, I analyze the rhetorical strategies used in the novel to challenge its readers to reconsider and deconstruct the concepts of gender and sexuality. This article argues that the rhetoric of Stars in My Pocket works largely by juxtaposing conservative and liberal ideologies, societies, and characters. Readers are led to make ethical judgments, which may change during the process of reading. In the end, though, it is clear that the conservative ideology and characters representing it evoke negative ethical judgments, whereas their liberal counterparts are seen in a positive light. By evoking associations between the conservative societies and the world readers live in, Stars in My Pocket presents a compelling social critique of our treatment of otherness, which is as topical today as it was in 1984.

Keywords: Samuel Delany, Stars In my Pocket like Grains of Sand, deconstruction, the rhetorical theory of narrative.

Biography and contact info: Päivi Väättänen (MA, English Philology) is a doctoral student at the University of Helsinki.

Simultaneous juxtaposition and deconstruction of identity categories and opposing opinions has often been an integral part of 20th-century identity politics, and Samuel Delany's novel *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* (1984) is no exception. In the galaxy of *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*, societies are following either of the two different and competing ideologies: the conservative "Family" and the liberal "Sygn". The main factor separating the two ideologies is their attitude towards gender, sexuality, difference, and the different alien species populating the numerous worlds in that galaxy. This article aims to show how Delany juxtaposes the two ideologies and societies following them, evoking associations between the narrative world and our world, and demonstrates which one of the opposing forces is preferable by inducing ethical judgments of certain characters and their actions. *Stars in My Pocket* is Delany's last science fiction novel to date,¹ and in many ways a culmination point of the themes present in much of Delany's fiction and critical work: identity, gender, and sexuality. Whereas Delany's early fiction was, in his

¹ Delany's science fiction novel *They Fly at Çiron* (1993) was published later, but it is a rewriting of a novelette published in 1971.

own words, “written as ‘heterosexually’ as any homophobe could wish” (Beam, “The Possibility of Possibilities” 3), his treatment of gender and sexuality had become more and more diverse up to the rigorously deconstructive *Stars in My Pocket*.

Even though science fiction until the 1960s did not pay much attention to exploring gender and sexuality (Attebery 5), questioning of these as stable categories was nothing radically new in science fiction at the time of the publication of *Stars in My Pocket*. During the late sixties, reflecting the changing attitudes in the Western world, science fiction in general had started to question the binaries of gender and sexuality. In addition to Delany, especially other feminist science fiction writers like Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ, and Marcy Piercy had been writing novels where sexuality and gender were given a twist in future societies or on other planets. Problematization of the issues continued during the last decades of the 20th century – to the extent that by the turn of the century, according to Attebery, gender had become “an integral part of the genre’s intellectual and aesthetic structure” (Attebery 10). There could still be room for more explorations of gender and sexuality, as Veronica Hollinger pointed out in 2000: even though science fiction as a genre would be ideal for providing “imaginative challenges to heteronormativity,” it often passes on that opportunity (198).

Changes in the surrounding society and topical issues in identity politics can be seen to be reflected in *Stars in My Pocket* as well. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, feminism and gay and lesbian rights had brought gender and sexuality to the agenda of the nation in the US, and by 1980, the pioneers’ work was bearing fruit: the gay community was being established “as a powerful minority” (Cruikshank 75), and especially multiracial feminist movement was strong during the decade (Thompson 344). At the same time, however, the gay and lesbian activism was confronted with a conservative backlash with the New Right and Christian Right leaders targeting gender and sexual liberation (Stein 116–117). This clash of liberal and conservative ideologies is vividly present in *Stars in My Pocket*.

Even though Reid-Pharr has lamented the “woefully underexamined” fate of *Stars in My Pocket* (390), the almost didactic nature of Delany’s novel has been noted by many. Science fiction scholars have written about their own reactions to the revelations Delany leads his readers to. Especially Carl Freedman and Mary Kay Bray have drawn attention to how the novel seems to “modulate its readers’ consciousness” (Bray 18). Bartter compares the narration of *Stars in My Pocket* to quantum mechanics and concludes that readers experience “a paradigm shift” regarding literature by being “exposed” to novels like *Stars in My Pocket* (336); Blackford, even though he does not seem to agree with all that Delany is trying to achieve with the novel, has pointed out that *Stars in My Pocket* is a “courageous attempt to dramatize explosive themes in the teeth of traditional social attitudes” (41). Broderick, while using *Stars in My Pocket* as an example of postmodern science fiction, and characterizes the novel as “a cognitive assault on late twentieth-century certitudes, or at least on what the text assumes by its activities are such smug prejudices” (140). Tucker concentrates on the racial thematics of the novel, while Reid-Pharr analyzes the connection between cleanliness and the gay identity, and Avilez looks at the novel from the queer perspective. In other words, there is no lack of material on the effects of *Stars in My Pocket*. The impetus for this article was the observation that so many others have also found *Stars in My Pocket* to be a novel that impacts its readers somehow, or is at least aiming to do so, but so far little attention has been paid to the overall rhetorical structure and strategy Delany uses in *Stars in My Pocket*, juxtaposing conservative and liberal ideologies and guiding readers towards certain ethical judgments. This article aims to combine the earlier observations with a rhetorical analysis of *Stars in My Pocket*, using James Phelan’s notions of the rhetorical theory of narrative.

The rhetorical theory of narrative analyzes narrative as a rhetorical act. According to Phelan, the rhetorical theory of narrative ultimately aims to account for how fictional narrative can “reinforce, extend, challenge, or sometimes change what we know, think, believe, and value”

(*Experiencing Fiction* xv). According to Phelan, authors craft their texts in order to elicit particular reactions in their audiences, and the interpretation of a text is conveyed through “the words, techniques, structures, forms, and dialogic relations of texts as well as the genres and conventions readers use to understand them” (*Experiencing Fiction* 4). In this article, the main focus is on ethical judgments those factors prompt readers to make.

In Phelan’s model, the audience of a narrative can be identified on four levels² (*ibid.*). For the purposes of this article, the most important ones are the authorial audience or implied reader and the flesh-and-blood reader, the actual reading individual. Both levels aim to give an account of readers’ interpretations of a fictional narrative. The concept of the authorial audience makes it possible to understand how readers can share the reading experience, while the concept of the flesh-and-blood reader can shed light on how different individuals can have different responses and interpretations” (Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction* 5).

The division of the audience levels can in practice be very slippery, or, using a term from the protagonist of *Stars in My Pocket*, “a fuzzy-edged phenomenon” – thus a clear demarcation between an interpretation by a certain flesh-and-blood reader and one implied in the authorial audience can be difficult to draw. In this article, I am mainly focusing on the authorial audience when analyzing the rhetoric of the text itself. What is the text trying to accomplish, what kinds of emotions to evoke? When discussing the interpretations of other critics and their reactions to the text, I am naturally referring to the actual, flesh-and-blood reading individual. In the model, reader responses are prompted by the text and thus are also indicators of what is going on in the text (Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction* 4). Therefore, the reactions of the flesh-and-blood readers can be used by the rhetorical theorist to shed light on the workings of the text’s authorial audience as well.

Despite the fact that *Stars in My Pocket* was published three decades ago, the issues it addresses are very much topical to this day, with gender equality and the rights of LGTB people still a hot topic all over the world. Therefore, even though the readers of *Stars in My Pocket* during the 1980s would most likely have been more sensitive to the themes in the novel, and the 21st century reader is likely to take the deconstruction of gender and sexuality as more self-evident, the novel’s authorial audience still speaks to a 2010s reader, as more recent examples of the flesh-and-blood readers’ interpretations show.

For a rhetorical analysis, the focus is on what can be found in the text itself, because each narrative establishes its own ethical standards. Therefore, as Phelan puts it, instead of assessing the text in the framework of pre-existing ethical systems “narrative judgments proceed from the inside out rather than outside in” (*Living to Tell* 10). A narrative’s ethical standards are largely manifested in and expressed by the characters in a narrative. Phelan argues that readers make interpretive and ethical judgments on characters, their actions, and the situations they are in during the process of reading, and those interpretations and judgments can and do change while the narrative progresses and characters and situations change³ (*Experiencing Fiction* 7). In the case of Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket*, it is also the readers’ outlook on the novel’s themes that are likely to change. In addition to crafted ethical judgments, Delany uses the science-fictional grotesque as a tool to deconstruct readers’ prejudices or preconceptions about gender, sexuality, and race. The science-fictional grotesque, as defined by Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, is a novum which breaks categories and creates confusion. According to Csicsery-Ronay, “[t]he grotesque obstructs the mind from completing its effort of quick understanding, arresting it when it wishes to get on with its routine of knowing, and forces it to learn something it is not sure it wants to know” (186). By exposing readers to radical

2 Phelan’s model, building on the work of Peter Rabinowitz, and consists of “the flesh-and-blood or actual reader, the authorial audience (the author’s ideal reader or ... the implied reader ..., the narrative audience (the observer position within the narrative world that the flesh-and-blood reader assumes), and the narratee, the audience addressed by the narrator)” (*Experiencing Fiction* 4).

3 Even though a narrative directs readers to adopt changing ethical stances during the process of reading, presently there is no compelling evidence for the permanence of the changes in flesh-and-blood readers’ ethical positions (eg. Suzanne Keen 16-26; Sanford & Emmott 233-234).

alterity in the form of grotesque genders, sexualities, and aliens, and thus providing his readers something to tackle with, Delany makes readers pause at certain key points in the narrative to make interpretations and connections they might otherwise miss.

Dystopian Beginnings

Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand begins with a 60 pages long “Prologue” narrating the life of “Rat” Korga, a young man living on a planet called Rhyonon. Korga is a misfit who has been in trouble with the law practically all his life, and at the beginning of the prologue, he is subjected to “radical anxiety termination,” a space age lobotomy that is supposed to make him happy. Instead, he becomes a slave, a “rat” working as a porter at different research stations under appallingly inhuman conditions – until one day his planet is destroyed in a mysterious holocaust, whose cause the readers never get to know.

The society of Rhyonon is sexist, hierarchical, and riddled with taboos, some of which seem very strange. For example, sex between a tall and a short person is forbidden, and homosexuality is illegal before the age of 27 – and seems not to be socially accepted after that either; it is an “unspeakable desire,” as one female character labels it (53). The whole society is riddled with oppression and power struggles. People seem not to be valued as individuals. No-one’s name is mentioned in the prologue; we find out Korga’s name and the name of his planet only afterwards. Instead, people are referred to as “the man,” “the woman,” or “the rat,” which implies that on Rhyonon, the most important factors differentiating people are their gender and their status in a hierarchical society. Women are lower in the social hierarchy; almost all prominent positions in the society are occupied by men. The society on Rhyonon relies heavily on the binary man/woman, and the roles and properties of each are strictly normative. Sexuality is a battlefield on Rhyonon, and sex seems to be mostly happening in terms of the power hierarchies: sadism is common, and “rat” trainers abuse rats sexually, thinking that it adds to their authority. Rhyonon is thus clearly displayed as a dystopian society; it is hard to think of anyone who would find the oppressive world a good place to live in. However, despite the negative ethical judgments in the beginning of the novel, the full extent of the dystopian nature of Rhyonon only sinks in completely later on, in comparison with a better society, which we are introduced to in the main part of the novel.

Critical Utopias and Ambiguous Genders

After the prologue, we take up with Marq Dyeth, an “Industrial Diplomat” who lives in an “urban complex” Morgre on planet Velm, which is home to two intelligent species: humans and the six-legged lizard-like evelmi. Despite antagonisms between the two species in the northern parts of Velm, in Morgre the two species get along fine. Marq’s work as an “Industrial Diplomat” takes him around the galaxy, where there are more than six thousand inhabited worlds and the variety of life forms, cultures and customs is immense. Through complicated circumstances, Marq meets Rat Korga, who has, as the sole survival, been rescued by the galactic organization “the Web” from the burning remains of Rhyonon, and they become lovers. When Marq shows Rat Korga – and the readers – around his home urban complex, through Marq’s narration Delany presents us a society where sexuality is not governed by norms or rigid regulations, as was the case on Rhyonon. Morgran society is egalitarian and people seem to be content with their lives. Everyone can fulfill his or her sexual desires in any way they choose to, regardless of the gender or species of the object of her desire – there are no moral judgments attached to any form of sexuality in the society. Whereas on Rhyonon people were categorized according to their gender or position in society, in

Morgre all are respected as individuals; readers do not even always get to know the gender or species of a character as Marq's narration does not necessarily reveal it; instead, we get to know them by their name, and as individuals and personalities.

Even if Rhyonon could be quite straightforwardly called a dystopia, to call Morgran society a utopia is not as simple. Traditional utopias tend to be guilty of extreme totalization, denying the possibility of further change: for Delany, utopias represent the “unimaginative exclusion of the singular” (McGuirk 177). Instead of imposing rigid structures and ready-made solutions on everyone, Morgran society avoids being oppressive or exclusive. It seems to negotiate the interests of the society and the individual quite well: it is a healthy society that guarantees good living conditions and freedom of choice for each individual, and contented individuals create a peaceful society. Therefore, Morgran society is better described as a critical utopia, which Tom Moylan defines as a text that “reject[s] utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream” (10). Because critical utopias are neither perfect nor unified, they offer “recognizable and dynamic” alternative models (ibid.). Furthermore, according to Moylan, critical utopias highlight the differences between the original world and the utopian society, making the changes that would be needed to reach that society more evident (10–11). The society of Morgre is not only compared with the “original world,” but also with the dystopian Rhyonon. Looking back at Rhyonon after having been presented with a much more ethical society, readers are likely to see Rhyonon in an even grimmer light than before.

An important factor in creating ethical judgments of the two societies is the way the central characters experience them. When Marq and Korga discuss the differences between their worlds, Korga tells Marq about the laws concerning sexuality on his now destroyed home world: “On my world, sex between males was illegal until you were twenty-seven, although it went on pretty constantly anyway. What was completely illegal on my world was sex between a person your height and a person of mine [a tall and a short person]. For all genders.” (198.) As Tucker, too, has noted, the conversation between Marq and Korga points out the arbitrariness of such proscriptions against different sexual behaviors (258). When Marq asks the question which many readers have on their minds: “Whatever for?” Korga answers that “[i]t was a law – a law that, today, I understand. Thanks to the Web.” (198.) Being dependent on the dialogue between the two characters, readers are never provided any more information than Korga's answer to Marq. Without a valid explanation, readers are left wondering what exactly could be the logic of such a law. By leaving the oddity unexplained, Delany leaves his readers pondering on the motivations behind all laws regulating sexuality – including the laws of the readers' own society.

The narration in *Stars in My Pocket* often pauses soon after confusing passages like this, and has the narrator comment on the experience and prompting certain kinds of interpretations. After the dialogue between Marq and Korga, Marq asks (silently): “Will sex between humans ever lose its endless repeated history?” (199). The rhetorical question stands out in the novel due to its slightly preaching tone, and because Marq, living in a galaxy full of sentient beings, would probably not use the word “human” in a question like this. Therefore, this question is not just Marq's own frustrated thought but seems to be narrative commentary directed at the readers. These estranging moments foreground the fictionality of the text and nudge readers towards drawing the parallels between the fictional world and their own world. Since during these interruptions the narrator can be felt to talk directly to readers, this disruption of the realistic illusion of the narrative could also be seen as a metaphoric way of including readers in the narrative, as a narratee to whom the story is told, as if it was the narrator's acknowledgement of the flesh-and-blood reader's presence. As a result of the readerly enterprise of contrasting the societies of Morgre and Rhyonon, readers are likely to have the revelation Bray suggests: “When considering the ways in which the present and known world would have to be different for a society like Rhyonon's to exist, readers might well surmise that except for its alternative placement in time and space, Rhyonon already exists” (21). Carl Freedman

calls this comparison of the two fictional societies and the readers' reality "complex triangular estrangement," which is a result of contrasting Korga's world and his previous life experiences with Marq's, and then the readers' own "mundane earthly actuality" (160).

Simultaneously with setting the ground for ethical judgments of societies and characters, Delany sets out to deconstruct binary structures behind identity categories like gender, sexuality, and race. Reading *Stars in My Pocket* exposes readers to their own ossified models of thinking by setting cunning "traps" in the way of readers' interpretations in the comfort zone, and then deconstructs those thought structures. As has been suggested before, Delany has been greatly influenced by Jacques Derrida's notions about deconstruction (see e.g. Väättänen "Deconstructing Race"), and he even wrote an article on deconstruction and structuralism for science fiction readers in 1988 ("Neither the First Word"). Delany clearly used the insights gained in this process in his fiction. As a result, one could describe *Stars in My Pocket* as a deconstructive novel; however, it is not the text that is deconstructed during the process of reading but readers' prejudices or preconceptions about gender and sexuality. With the help of a fictional variety of English, which uses gendered pronouns and words like *man* and *woman* in an ambiguous way, *Stars in My Pocket* at times confuses readers by changing the logic of gender, sexuality, and language. In a scene early on in the novel, Marq meets two women in a corridor of a space station:

Both human, both female, . . . , two women strolled up to me. "I think that's him ..." one announced.
 "Perhaps for you," said her friend. "For me, while she's quite a pleasant looking male..."
 "I'm complimented." I smiled. I nodded. "But while I'm indeed male, this woman is going to refuse your proposition!" (70.)

Soon after the perplexing passage, the logic of Arachnian is explained to readers: all individuals of sentient species are called "women" and referred to with the pronoun *she*, while *he* "has been reserved for the general sexual object of 'she' during the period of excitation, regardless of the gender of the woman speaking or the gender of the woman referred to" (73).

Getting used to this new usage takes time and can be very disorienting: readers often cannot be sure whether a certain character being described in conflicting terms is male or female, and what clues to trust in making the judgment. For example a "woman" Marq meets at a conference is described as "tall," "bald," "towering and shirtless" (82), and there is a pendant hanging "on the bony place between her breasts." "She" has a "broad nose" in her "brown round face," which is "flattened by epicanthic folds" (82). After describing this character, Marq comments – seemingly on the conflicting political emblems she is wearing as well – that "[i]t all seemed ludicrously contradictory" (83). It is, however, hard not to read the comment as mirroring readers' responses to trying to pinpoint the "woman": is she Asian or African, a woman or a man – and, as she is obviously infatuated with a male character – is she thus straight or gay? One's interpretation depends on what features a flesh-and-blood reader finds most pervasive and dominant: physical features like tallness and breasts, cultural factors like hair style or clothing customs, or the gender of the person's object of desire?

Delany's usage of the fictional variety of English is best described as grotesque. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay points out (building on Geoffrey Harpham's ideas of the grotesque) that the science-fictional grotesque works by "present[ing] 'a certain set of obstacles to structured thought', and the mind is troubled, trying to find a solution to the problem posed by perceiving what it should not be possible to perceive" (186). The play on gendered pronouns and words denoting gender leaves in many cases a character's gender – and thus his/her sexual orientation – unresolved, exposing readers to their own conceptions of masculine/feminine traits. Whatever the interpretation, the character cannot completely fit any conventional identity category or cultural expectation.

Delany's narration and his ambiguous characters challenge the attentive reader in that they grotesquely "call into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable parts," as Csicsery-Ronay describes one of the effects of the science-fictional grotesque (186). As a result, readers may be, after a novel's length of these grotesque moments, more open to admit that categorization is futile: gender roles are artificial and sexualities multiple. Indeed, as Marq ponders after the first gender-confusion scene is resolved: "Or is it possible that women are just more complex than can be made out by starlight alone?" (74).

The same conclusion can be made of the aliens in *Stars in My Pocket*, the evelmi, who are in a way an incarnation of a grotesque gender. In addition to being lizard-like and six-legged, the evelmi have three genders: male, female, and neuter. Even though the "neutrality" of gender might evoke an association with asexuality, the neuters seem to be sexually active beings – by which they further complicate the idea that gender must be strictly connected to sexuality. Furthermore, humans and evelmi can and do have sex with each other, and have children together – usually through adoption or cloning, but sometimes producing genetically modified hybrid offspring. The evelmi, as well as the gender ambiguities of *Stars in My Pocket*, resist easy classification and question the meaningfulness of strict binary categories of sex, gender, and sexuality.

When discussing *Stars in My Pocket*, Damien Broderick notes that science fiction performs a transgression of gender and sexuality outlined by Jacques Derrida:

Were we to approach the area of a relationship to the other where the code of sexual marks would no longer be discriminating [... that relationship] would not be a-sexual, far from it, but would be sexual otherwise: beyond the opposition feminine/masculine, beyond homosexuality and heterosexuality which come to the same thing... this mobile of non-identified sexual marks whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply the body of each 'individual,' whether he be classified as 'man' or 'woman' according to the criteria of usage. (qtd. in Broderick 50.)

Delany takes advantage of the genre's potential to the full. In Delany's universe, sexuality has broken through the framework we are used to when thinking of sexuality: the most important defining factor of sexuality in *Stars in My Pocket* is not gender but each individual's personal tastes or desires that might not be linked to gender in any way. By presenting us his universe full of diverse sexualities, Delany has obviously wanted his reader to gain the insight that "when one begins to consider the range of diversities through the sexual landscape, the so-called normalcy of heterosexuality does not seem so 'normal' anymore" ("Aversion/Perversion/Diversion" 141). As GerShun Avilez puts it, in *Stars in My Pocket* the range of sexualities generate "cartographies of desire" and create "queer space" within the novel (126).

Shifting Ethical Judgments

Regardless of how positively *Stars in My Pocket* presents this new world of possibilities and new ways of thinking of gender and sexuality, the reading experience is confusing in all its grotesqueness: the evelmi do feel alien and the habits of the people of Morgre do seem weird at times. The ethical judgments readers are trying to come to terms with are mirrored by the reactions of those characters in the book who are visitors to Morgre: Rat Korga and an acquaintance family of Marq's, the Thants. In the beginning of novel, when the Thants make their first appearance, it is easy for readers to relate to them and adopt their attitudes towards Marq's way of life as, being strangers to the Morgran society, they find everything a little odd. As Broderick has noted, the Thants shun the Morgran "utterly casual, often homosexual and generally interspecific sexuality," like many of the novel's readers may do (140). They talk about "the local aliens," and especially the

youngest of them, Alsrod, who is visiting Morgre for the first time, asks a lot of questions and amusedly marvels at everything Marq tells her. The Thants seem to be unable to fully accept the fact that the evelmi are intelligent co-inhabitants in Morgre, but instead see them as animals and openly call them “lizards.” Rat Korga, on the other hand, despite never having been outside his home planet before, takes to the new world with an open mind. With Marq, he gets to know Morgran society and tries his best to adjust. As the parallels between Rat Korga’s world and the contemporary society begins to dawn on readers, it becomes easier and easier to adopt Korga’s point of view – to the point of Freedman describing him as “a kind of utopian Everyman” (161) who facilitates readers’ journey towards the kind of conclusions the text aims for.

Phelan argues that “[t]he default expectation for reading fiction is that authors will take ethical stands on the events and characters they represent and will guide us explicitly or implicitly, heavy-handedly or subtly (or, indeed, any way in between) to adopt those stands.” Furthermore, as Phelan points out, in some cases, the ethical judgments of characters work by clear contrast (*Living to Tell* 52). This is obviously the case with *Stars in My Pocket*: the desired ethical stand is apparent and created to a large extent by contrasting characters, societies, and attitudes against each other. Conservative and liberal ethical standards are polarized in the novel between the two coexisting or competing ideologies, the Sygn and the Family. For the conservative Family followers, the genders, families, and sexualities of the aliens break their (human) norms and thus make the aliens seem grotesque and unnatural. The followers of the Family cling to heteronormative ideals and strongly disapprove of the human–evelm relationships, as well as everything else that differs from their idealized view of the life of the human race on Earth a long time ago. In Marq’s words, they are “trying to establish the dream of a classic past as pictured in a world that may never even have existed [the Earth] in order to achieve cultural stability” (80). Quite symbolically, they cherish objects like “the platinum centimeter bars ... and plastic molecular models of human DNA, all lovingly imported (supposedly) from world to world,” conserving them in museums or “retreats” on worlds they colonize (96). Whereas the Family is devoted to conserving old ideals and morals, the Sygn is “committed to the living interaction and difference between each woman and each world from which the right stability and play may flower” (80). For the Sygn adherents, human–alien coexistence is quite natural, because all sentient beings are equal. The Sygn accepts change, adaptation, alterity, and cultural relativity as the basis of any functional society. Human and alien cultures fuse and produce interesting hybrids in all areas of the society, from architecture to offspring. In a Sygn environment like Morgre, everyone’s individuality seems to be respected and everyone is accepted as they are.

Central to both of the ideologies is their conceptions of a family, or a “nurture stream,” as they are called in a Sygn society. For the Family, the basic unit of society is the traditional nuclear family consisting of a father, a mother, and their children. The Sygn avoids that model, because for them, it “represents a power structure, a structure of strong and mediating powers, and subordinate powers, as well as paths for power developments and power restrictions” (119). In a Sygn society, nurture streams do not imply power structures or predetermined gender roles, but are based on “community and communion” between individuals regardless of their age, species, or gender (118). Readers learn later that the Family uses “focus families,” families who function as models for a whole world, when attempting to stabilize a society in turmoil – a term that undoubtedly invokes in many readers’ minds the conservative evangelical organization Focus on the Family, which promotes conservative gender roles and disapproves of LGBT rights. Founded in the late 70s, it was active during the time of publication of *Stars in My Pocket*. Making that connection evokes strong associations of what the values of a Family society and a “focus family” are, and on the other hand, by guiding readers to a negative ethical judgments of their actions and ideology, provides insight into the implications of that kind of ideology in real life.

Another indication of the way the contrasting ethical judgments work in *Stars in my Pocket* is the ethical judgments readers make of the outsider characters Rat Korga and the Thants towards the end of the novel. Phelan points out that “narrativity involves the interaction of two kinds of change: that experienced by the characters and that experienced by the audience in its developing responses to the characters’ changes” (*Living to Tell about It* 7). At the beginning of the novel, when readers met the Thants for the first time, they and their bemusement were quite easy to identify with. However, when they reappear towards the end of the novel, readers have had time to explore the Sygn ideology and follow Rat Korga’s adjustment to the new freedom provided by that kind of society. Even though the new liberal world pleases Korga, it still makes him slightly anxious, as his comment on his experiences and all the new things he has learned shows: “One burden of all this new knowledge is that old certainties crumble beneath it” (199). As Korga is originally from a world that resembles our own world, many of Korga’s old certainties are the same as the readers’, and those readers who by the end of the novel are willing to question their old certainties, become like Rat Korga, soaking in the sense of wonder at the new worlds and new ideas.

If many readers admit to being more like Rat Korga than one might have imagined in the beginning, the Thant family induce an opposite reaction with regard to identification and ethical judgments. When they return to Morgre, they appear bigoted and rude. At a party organized in their honor, they talk loudly amongst themselves, condemning the Morgran way of life as bestiality, a disease and an unnatural crime, “which can only be cured by the most primitive means: quarantine, fire, prayer...” (303). For the Thants, the depravity of the Morgran way of life is culminated in liberal sexuality: “Not only the males with the females, but the males do it with males, the females do it with females, within the race, across the races – and what are we to make of neuters – as if they had not even reached the elementary stage of culture, however ignorant, where a family takes its appropriate course...” (302). Their hate speech clearly echoes the prejudices and bigoted arguments in our contemporary world, to the extent that Freedman has described it as “Christian fascism” (158) and “the “equivalent of unabashed Ku Klux racism” (159). This scene is obviously one of the most ethically loaded ones, as so many critics have reacted strongly to it. Broderick finds the Thants to be “unpleasant and ignoble” (144), and Bray notes that the Thants are “a visible reminder to readers of how far current social reality is removed from the possibilities ... manifest in Morgran society” (23). Tucker points out the racist connotations of the epithet “lizard-lover” the Thants use of Marq: for Tucker, it is a “term that models the fear of miscegenation, antipathy towards whites invested in black liberation” (266).

The intensity of the flesh-and-blood readers’ reactions can be explained by two factors in the novel’s structure, both having to do with the changing ethical judgments and the timing of the scene in the narrative. Firstly, by leading readers to certain ethical judgments, the novel entices readers to see the novel’s liberal universe as desirable, and the world of Rhyonon, the Family ideology, as well as the world we live in as narrow-minded and intolerant. Thus, having been exposed to the immense variety of sexualities in the new universe, the Thant/Family version of rigid heterosexuality seems like a hidebound attitude readers are not invited to join in (Broderick 144). Secondly, readers have learned to know the characters, whose lives these ideologies have had an impact on, and the Thants’ insults seem so harsh because they attack the way of life that makes the main characters justifiably happy. Furthermore, by having the Thants use rhetoric which resembles that of contemporary anti-gay discourse, the scene resonates strongly with regard to current state of affairs in the real world, both during the 1980s and the 2010s. Delany leads readers to see attitudes like those expressed by the Thants as extremely negative, only to realize that, actually, it is our own society – perhaps our own attitudes – that we have just disapproved of.

Conclusion

All in all, the rhetorical structure of *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* is based on contrast. Societies, characters, and ideologies are juxtaposed so that readers are led to make certain ethical judgments: negative judgments of the conservative societies and characters, positive judgments of the liberal ones – finally evoking the epiphany of parallels between the conservative ideologies and the world readers live in. This estrangement is typical of science fiction in general, as Moylan points out: science fiction and utopian literature are “meditations upon deep conflicts in the historical present that are displaced onto the terrain of an otherworldly locus so that the reader, consciously or unconsciously, can see her or his society and its contradictions in a fresh and perhaps motivating light” (32). Therefore, reading *Stars in My Pocket* means exposing readers also to the ethical shortcomings of the contemporary society. Martha Bartter notes, discussing Delany’s fiction in relation to the postmodern quantum paradigm, that the structure and rhetoric of the narrative do have an effect on readers in the end: “Having experienced *Stars in My Pocket* ... must change the way we look at the beginning of the book, at the relationships it explores, at ourselves. The world-view inevitably alters work, even as the work alters world-view” (336, emphasis original).

At the end of the novel, in the “Epilogue” named “Morning,” Marq is traveling to a distant world in a large space ship and he is reflecting on other trips he has made during his career as industrial diplomat. He remembers visiting “a society far more liberal than any [he]’d ever known” and how he felt when leaving it. This memory makes Marq ruminate on the effects of visiting a world different from one’s own: “To leave a world at dawn ... is to know how much you can want to remember; and to realize how much, because of the cultural and conceptual grid a world casts over our experience of it, we are victims to that truth against our will, once we tear loose from it into night” (338). In addition to providing a metaphoric description of the experiences of the readers who might still be trying to come to terms with the novel’s themes at the last pages of the novel passage, the passage – like many similar ones earlier in the novel – also directs readers to reflect on their experience and the “cultural and conceptual grid” now that they are leaving the world of *Stars in My Pocket*.

James Phelan describes the default ethical relation between the implied author and readers as one of mutual influence. Authors provide readers with “guidance to their particular value systems and to the ethical judgments that follow from those systems” and in return, receive the attention of their audiences. Readers, on the other hand, receive “reinforcements, challenges to, or disagreements with their own value systems” (*Experiencing Fiction* 53–54). *Stars in My Pocket* offers plenty of challenges and reinforcements. It aims at showing readers which side it is preferable to be on, mostly with the help of changing ethical judgments of the characters and their actions, especially the Thant family and Rat Korga, both outsiders in Morgre. In *Stars in My Pocket*, the followers of the Family ideology do not change – they take good care not to – but readers are, during the process of reading the novel, led to realize the evils that the Family-type ideology causes and perhaps to adopt the Sygn way of embracing difference. They are enticed to join in Rat Korga’s acceptance of this new liberal and liberating way of thinking and to reject the conservative Thant way. As Istvan Csicsery-Ronay put it, the science fictional grotesque “forces [the mind] to learn something it is not sure it wants to know” (186). This is exactly what *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* does to its readers. Negotiating one’s way through the abundance of sexualities, readers are invited to widen their horizons and to reconsider their own attitudes towards different aspects of gender, sexuality, and alterity.

Works Cited

- Attebery, Brian. *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Avilez, GerShun. "Cartographies of Desire: Mapping Queer Space in the Fiction of Samuel Delany and Darieck Scott." *Callaloo*, 34.1 (2011): 126-142. *Project Muse*. Web. 24 Jan. 2014.
- Bartter, Martha. "The (SF) Reader and the Quantum Paradigm: Problems in Delany's *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*." *Science Fiction Studies* 17.3 (1990): 325-340. Print.
- Beam, Joseph. "Samuel R. Delany: The Possibility of Possibilities." 1986. *Conversations with Samuel R. Delany*. Ed. Carl Freedman. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2009. 3–19. Print.
- Blackford, Russell. "Debased and Lascivious?" Samuel R. Delany's *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*." *Ash of Stars: On the Writing of Samuel R. Delany*. Ed. James Sallis. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1996. 26–42. Print.
- Bray, Mary Kay. "To See What Condition Our Condition Is In: Trial by Language in *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*." *Ash of Stars: On the Writing of Samuel R. Delany*. Ed. James Sallis. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1996. 17–25. Print.
- Broderick, Damien. *Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- Cruikshank, Margaret. *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- Csicsery-Ronay, Istvan, Jr. *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2008. Print.
- Delany, Samuel R. "Aversion/Perversion/Diversion." *Longer Views: Extended Essays*. Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1996. 119–143. Print.
- . "Neither the First Word nor the Last on Deconstruction, Structuralism, Poststructuralism, and Semiotics for SF Readers." *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts & the Politics of the Paraliterary*. 1988. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan, 1999. Print.
- . *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*. 1984. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2004. Print.
- . *They Fly at Çiron*. New York: Tom Doherty-Tor, 1993. Print.
- Freedman, Carl. *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan UP, 2000. 146-64. Print.
- Hollinger, Veronica. "(Re)reading Queerly: Science Fiction, Feminism, and the Defamiliarization of Gender." *Future Females, the Next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism*. Ed. Marleen S. Barr. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000. 197–215. Print.
- Keen, Suzanne. *Empathy and the Novel*. New York: Oxford UP, 2007. Print.

McGuirk, Carol. "NoWhere Man: Towards a Poetics of Post-Utopian Characterization." *Transformations of Utopia: Changing Views of the Perfect Society*. Ed. George Slusser, Paul Alkon, Roger Gaillard, and Danièle Chatelain. New York: AMS Press, 1999. 169–180. Print.

Moylan, Tom. *Demand the impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian imagination*. London: Methuen, 1986. Print.

Phelan, James. *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2007. Print.

---. *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2005. Print.

Reid-Pharr, Robert F. "Clean: Death and Desire in Samuel R. Delany's *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*." *American Literature* 83.2 (2011): 389-411. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 24 Jan. 2014.

Sanford, Anthony J. and Catherine Emmott. *Mind, Brain and Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012. Print.

Stein, Marc. *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*. New York: Routledge, 2012. Print.

Thompson, Becky. "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism." *Feminist Studies* 28.2 (2002): 337–360. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 28 Jan. 2014.

Tucker, Jeffrey Allen. "The Necessity of Models, of Alternatives: Samuel Delany's *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109:2 (2010): 249–278. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 15 Feb. 2014.

Väättänen, Päivi. "Deconstructing Race, Gender, and Sexuality: Structure, Sign, and Play in Samuel R. Delany's *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*." MA thesis. U of Helsinki, 2003. Print.