

1

Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Ursula K. Le Guin, born in 1929, spent her childhood in California, mainly in Berkeley, where her anthropologist father (A. L. Kroeber) was a professor, but also in the Napa Valley, where her family owned a ranch. As a child she heard Native American myths as bedtime stories, and later read fairy tales, folktales, and fantasy stories with avidity. Such a background may explain, in part, Le Guin's approach to literature: She is a world-builder. Just as an anthropologist reports on an indigenous people in as much detail as possible, so a science fiction or fantasy author will build up an elaborate picture of an alien culture and its inhabitants.

As a writer, Le Guin has chosen to lead a private and quietly ordered life. *A Wizard of Earthsea* stresses that the ideal mage should practice a similar modesty, self-discipline, and mental fortitude.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Have students take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points they learned from the Audio Guide.

Distribute the following essays from the Reader's Guide: "Introduction to the Novel" and "Ursula K. Le Guin (b. 1929)." Divide the class into two groups, and assign one essay to each group. After reading the essays, discuss the ways knowledge of Le Guin's biography might help us understand this novel.

Writing Exercise

Read the opening paragraph of *A Wizard of Earthsea* aloud to your students. Ask your students to write a one-page paper on the following related topics: Why does Le Guin tell us that the hero of her book will eventually become an archmage and a dragonlord? What might she gain by thus undercutting a certain amount of suspense?

Homework

Read Chapter 1, which introduces the young Ged—here called Duny. Come to class with two themes that you believe will develop throughout the novel.

2

Lesson Two

FOCUS: The Fantasy Tradition

A work of art is always part of a tradition and to understand any particular novel one should bear in mind the genre in which it is written. *A Wizard of Earthsea* is a fantasy, that is, a story in which impossible things happen. It is consequently part of a long tradition—think of myths, fairy tales, animal fables, Arabian Nights entertainments, medieval romances, and tales of the supernatural. Such stories often supply us with visions of heroic endeavor and greatness of heart. They restore a sense of wonder to our lives. But they also give us perspective on the way we are actually living. In this sense, fantasies are like thought experiments, creative ways of reflecting on human experience—imaginary places with real people in them. Through the use of what J. R. R. Tolkien called a “secondary world,” we come to better understand our own. While a fantasy isn’t “real,” it can still be true.

Addressing a group of booksellers in 2007, Ursula K. Le Guin stressed that “fantasy is a literature particularly useful for examining the real difference between good and evil. . . . Imagination is the instrument of ethics.” This is one reason why the classic fantasies nearly always include quests, ordeals, temptations, battles, and sacrifice. These can be exciting in themselves, but they also represent the arduous search for psychological or spiritual integrity.

Plan to focus this class on discussing the nature and character of fantasy.

Discussion Activities

Distribute “The Fantasy Tradition,” the timeline, and “Suggested Reading” from the Reader’s Guide. Ask the students to read them in class. Start a discussion by raising some of the following closely related questions: 1) What are some characteristics of fantasy? 2) How does fantasy differ from realistic mainstream fiction? 3) What can fantasy do that realistic fiction cannot? 4) In what way can things be “true” without being “real”?

Writing Exercise

Ask your students to write a one-page essay on a favorite work of fantasy, emphasizing what they liked about it. The timeline and “Suggested Readings” mention many titles that may help students in choosing a book for their essay. If any students have never read a work of fantasy, ask them to write about another book, its genre, and why it appealed to them.

Homework

Read Chapter 2. In this chapter Duny—now called Ged—has become the apprentice to the mage Ogion the Silent. Pay close attention to Ogion’s character. What is he trying to teach Ged? Then read Handout One: Naming, Magic, and the Balance of Nature. How might Handout One make you see Ged differently?

3

Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story, with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The omniscient narrator confides in the reader like a friend, conveying the real story behind the legends of the Archmage Ged. The sentences are formal, clear, and exact, with the musical cadence of an oral storyteller or medieval bard. Le Guin has stressed that heroic or high fantasy demands a slightly formal, elevated style, commensurate with the genre’s focus on nobility of soul, heroism, and self-sacrifice.

Discussion Activities

Why might Le Guin choose an omniscient narrator? Could she tell the same story through a first-person account? Do you think this would improve or weaken the tale? Discuss the narrative style of *A Wizard of Earthsea* with your students. What literary devices does Le Guin use to create her distinctive sound on the page? Are there any sentences students consider beautiful? Do these sentences contribute to an understanding of the narrator’s point of view? Why or why not?

Writing Exercise

The narrator tells of Ged’s encounter with the Lord of Re Albi’s daughter and his journey toward Roke. Ask students to choose one of the following topics and, citing examples from the text, write a short essay defending their thesis.

Does the narrator tell the story of Ged’s youthful mistakes with a sense of compassion or with a cold objectivity? How does the narrator’s view of Ged influence the way the reader feels about the young hero?

How might Ged tell the story, in the first person, of the encounter with the young girl? How might the way he tells the story change five years from the event?

Homework

Read Chapters 3 and 4. Who are the main characters in the novel thus far? What characters influence Ged the most? Which characters can be considered positive influences, and which are negative?

4

Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw such as weakness or ignorance to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

Ged's interaction with other characters—Ogion, the Doorkeeper, the Archmage, Jasper, Vetch, the Shadow, and the little otak Hoeg—reveal his virtues and weaknesses. In the turmoil of adolescence, he must make ethical decisions that affect himself and others. Some characters draw Ged toward strength and nobility, while others spur him to less than virtuous actions. Does Jasper cause the young Ged's undoing, or do the weaknesses of pride and youth overcome our hero, as he challenges his classmate to a sorcerer's duel? The answer to this question depends on what we decide about the character and intentions of these young, brash men.

Discussion Activities

Ask your students to consider the following questions: Who is the protagonist in this novel? Why does Jasper become Ged's enemy? Why does Vetch become his friend? Does the school setting create a backdrop that will bring out certain personality traits in these young people? If so, what traits are likely to emerge due to the school setting? Does the school setting further encourage the antagonism between Jasper and Ged? If so, how?

Writing Exercise

Ursula K. Le Guin has written that the Earthsea trilogy is “in one aspect, about the artist. The artist as magician. The Trickster. Prospero. That is the only truly allegorical aspect it has of which I am conscious. . . . Wizardry is artistry. The trilogy is then, in this sense, about art, the creative experience, the creative process.” Write a one-page essay describing the powers and specialties of one of the Roke wizards. Explain how this wizard may or may not speak to Le Guin's attempt to describe “the creative experience, the creative process.” Does this wizard reflect an aspect of an artist's life or practice?

Homework

Read Chapters 5 and 6. Did the dragon react to Ged as you might expect? What do we learn about Ged when he does not give in to the dragon's offers?

5

Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. Simile is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have significant resemblance. Similes employ connective words, usually “like,” “as,” “than,” or a verb such as “resembles.” A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things.

Discussion Activities

Le Guin uses simile to describe Ged’s control over the dragon: “When he spoke the dragon’s name it was as if he held the huge being on a fine, thin leash, tightening it on his throat.” She also uses metaphor as a descriptive tool: “When he raised it again and looked, the wizard was gone, and the sail of the boat was a white fleck on the waves eastward . . .”

Though Le Guin occasionally uses figurative language, her writing tends to be plain, strong, and direct, without obvious flourish. Consider the very first sentence of the novel: “The island of Gont, a single mountain that lifts its peak a mile above the storm-racked Northeast Sea, is a land famous for wizards.” She gives music and richness to her prose through the rhythm of her sentences and occasionally through the use of alliteration and assonance. For example, even the stolid Vetch sometimes rises to prose-poetry: “‘The Princess Elfarran was only a woman,’ said Vetch, ‘and for her sake all Enlad was laid waste, and the Hero-Mage of Havnor died, and the island Soléa sank beneath the sea.’” Ask the class to select some particularly distinctive sentences from the novel and explain what makes them so striking.

Writing Exercise

Having discussed Le Guin’s style and language with the students, ask them to write a paragraph in that style. Possible topics: Describe getting dressed for a party as if you were a warrior preparing for battle. Evoke the Shadow lurking in the hallways of your school. Pretend that an ant searching for food is a hero on a quest. Imagine the principal of the school making announcements on the public address system in the magisterial voice of a great wizard.

Homework

Read Chapter 7. Review the first seven chapters of the novel. Find three symbols and be prepared to describe why these symbols might be important.

6

Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and re-interpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

Symbols appear throughout the novel. Ged's first journey on the boat called "Shadow" symbolizes and captures the confusion of adolescence, while also foreshadowing later events in the novel. Difficulty in entering the school door suggests that Ged will have to learn humility, understand that one must sometimes ask for help, and become more trusting of himself and others. Throughout the novel, names—true names—represent the essence of a person or a thing, and are the key to understanding oneself and the world. Other key symbols in the novel include birds, dragons, water, islands, hunter and hunted, and the journey.

Discussion Activities

As in her other novels, Le Guin deliberately reverses simplistic stereotypes in order to critique social and cultural norms. In this novel, dark-skinned characters are virtuous and heroic, while only the warlike and barbaric Karg are white. Unlike typical heroes, representing human beings at their most exalted, Ged is at first vain and envious, and then confused and fearful as he deals with the lurking shadow. What makes Ged a hero? Is a flawed hero more believable to us, more useful as a model?

Writing Exercise

Have students identify three symbols in the novel and explain how these lend deeper meaning to the story. To deepen this writing exercise, write an essay on one of the symbols, explaining how this symbol is relevant. Students might consider chapter titles, names, or objects like the Stone of Terrenon as possible symbols.

Homework

Read Chapter 8. Le Guin explains that Ged becomes the hunter and that "the shadow could not draw on his power, so long as he was turned against it." Consider why this is important.

7

Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

In chapter six Ged reaches what may be the nadir of his story. Frightened, afraid of any shadow, he runs away from everything. As a common oarsman, he makes another enemy of Skiorh, encounters a mysterious messenger who tells him to go to Osskil, and eventually finds himself in mortal combat with the Shadow itself.

Discussion Activities

One great test of a person's character explored in literature is how he confronts that which he fears, whether shame, weakness, a hidden stigma, or death itself. Discuss the ways fear controls Ged at various points in the novel. At other times, he overcomes his fear. What character traits allow Ged to conquer self-doubt and terror?

Ask the class to reflect on fear in their own lives. Do they avoid facing those things that frighten or worry them? Or do they confront them? How, in fact, does one deal with stomach-churning fear? Remember that books are not simply aesthetic objects: they also help us to live with greater self-understanding and sympathy for others, and offer us solace and inspiration.

Writing Exercise

Ged has changed since his initial encounter with the Shadow and his brushes with death. He has been making progress in self-awareness and gradually growing wiser, more mature. Write a one-page portrait of Ged as he now is, emphasizing how he differs from his younger self and noting the steps that have led to this, among them his friendship with Pechvarry, his encounter with the dragon Yevaud, and his resistance to Serret.

Homework

Read Chapter 9. In Chapter 9, Ged finally reunites with his friend Vetch. Why has it taken so long for the two sorcerers to reunite? Why might Le Guin have chosen to wait to give us this encounter? What do you think may happen to their friendship as the novel ends?

8

Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the aftereffects of that climactic action are presented.

Ursula K. Le Guin has written: “I think it is a mistake to think of story as simply moving forward. The rhythmic structure of narrative is both journeylike and architectural. Great novels offer us not only a series of events, but a place, a landscape of the imagination which we can inhabit and return to. This may be particularly clear in the ‘secondary universe’ of fantasy, where not only the action but the setting is avowedly invented by the author.”

Discussion Activities

While *A Wizard of Earthsea* clearly focuses on what one might call the education and testing of a young wizard, the novel also manages to convey a growing sense of Earthsea itself. Over the course of the novel Ged visits many of the islands of the archipelago, encounters people of different races and social classes, and sees for himself the richness and variety of Earthsea life. Talk with the class about what lessons Ged learns from his travels. Note which places and people seem admirable, and which are more questionable.

Work with the class to list the lessons Ged has learned from his travels. How does Le Guin pace the story to develop structure in an architectural way? How might the places and people encountered on Ged's journey contribute to the rhythm and structure?

Writing Exercise

While *A Wizard of Earthsea* is dominated by male characters, women do play key roles in Ged's development. Choose one female character and write an essay about what she represents. You might focus this essay on examining Serret or Yarrow specifically. How do the women contribute to the plot of the story? Are they present at significant moments in the story? If so, why? If not, why not?

Homework

Read Handout Three: Ged's Coming of Age. Pick two themes to discuss in the next class. Find selections from the text that speak to the themes you have selected. For example, if your theme relates to the battle of good and evil, choose passages that illustrate that theme.

Read Chapter 10 and finish the novel. Read Handout Two: The Earthsea Trilogy.

9

Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

Like many young adult novels, *A Wizard of Earthsea* focuses on growing up, the passage from childhood to maturity, coming of age. Among other themes, it examines the proper use of power, the need to embrace all aspects of oneself, the importance of community and trust, and the value of altruism as well as courage.

Discussion Activities

Have students share the two themes they identified in last night's homework, citing passages that explore these themes. In addition to themes students identify, discuss the following subjects:

Coming of Age: How does Ged's journey reflect a typical coming of age journey? Does this journey reflect modern coming of age tales? Why or why not?

Psychological Battle: How might psychologists explain Ged's battle with his shadow? How might individual development be challenged by a battle between dark and light forces?

Creative Power: How might the novel reflect a statement about creative power? How does sorcery and magic capture a latent human power that can be used toward good or evil?

Knowledge: How does knowledge and experience temper Ged's ability to make solid judgments? How does knowing names contribute to one's ability to act heroically or justly?

Writing Exercise

Choose one of the themes. Ask students to write a brief overview of how they would teach the novel to a class. They should identify a theme to explore and select a focus topic (genre, symbol, character development, or figurative language) to develop. Have them identify several passages that show what is happening in the story. These lesson plans should include two lessons that relate to the theme and topic selected. Have students share their plan with the class.

Homework

Students can begin developing an essay topic for the novel. They can choose from the Essay Topics provided or develop their own questions.

10

Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Ursula K. Le Guin's novels and stories depict the human condition, the magic and the obstacles in all our lives. She has used fantasy and science fiction to stretch our imaginations, to create works of great beauty, and to raise what philosophy students sometimes call The Big Questions. *A Wizard of Earthsea* asks us to consider the proper use of power and the nature of the self. *The Left Hand of Darkness*, set on a planet where people are both male and female, examines the intricacies of friendship and love. *The Dispossessed* discusses the characteristics of an ideal society. These novels, and many others, have established Ursula K. Le Guin as one of the most admired and admirable writers of our time.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. What elevates a novel to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, within groups, other books they know that include some of these characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *A Wizard of Earthsea*? Is this a great novel?

Some readers might still argue that a fantasy novel must be escapist entertainment and can never rise to the heights of the greatest literature. After reading *A Wizard of Earthsea*, do you think this is true? Would you read other works of fantasy?

Writing Exercise

Write a one-page statement of why every person should read works of fantasy. If you disagree with this statement, write a one-page as to why you disagree.

Homework

Students will complete their essays, due at the next class session.

Naming, Magic, and the Balance of Nature

Le Guin has stressed that *A Wizard of Earthsea*—indeed all her fiction—is suffused with Taoism and the principles poetically set down in Lao Tse’s *Tao-Te-Ching*. The *Tao-Te-Ching* is one of the most beloved books in the world. Tao (pronounced “dow”) means “way,” as in a path, road, or direction; Te (pronounced “duh”) refers to individual power, integrity, and spirit; Ching (pronounced “jeang”) is the Chinese word for a classic. Thus the book’s title has sometimes been rendered “The Book of the Way and its Power” or “The Way of Life” or “The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way.” Any of these various renderings, but especially the last, might be an apt one-phrase description of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, a classic about integrity and the way.

Like Ged’s first master Ogion, the poetic and paradoxical sayings of the *Tao-Te-Ching* ask us to practice modesty, stillness, and spontaneity, to trust in the natural rhythms of life, to live harmoniously with our self and the universe, to go with the flow. In particular, the *Tao-Te-Ching* asks us to cultivate non-action (wu-wei), to recognize the value of emptiness and nothingness. The famous yin-yang symbol—made of interlocking light and dark semi-circles—represents this Taoist unity of opposites: In the dark feminine yin is a dot of white; in the white masculine yang is a dot of black. The name Earthsea is itself a kind of yin-yang word.

From the very opening epigraph—“The Creation of Éa”—*A Wizard of Earthsea* announces that Taoist mutuality, not western duality, is fundamental to Le Guin’s imagined world:

Only in silence the word,
only in dark the light,
only in dying life:

bright the hawk’s flight
on the empty sky.

In fact, this little poem, properly read, sums up the entire novel. Things are not wholly right or wrong, black or white, and we are not required to choose between them: they are aspects of a larger whole. Apparent polarities actually need each other to be complete. As the mage Ogion says to Ged, “to hear, one must be silent.”

In the Old Speech spoken by dragons—Confucius once compared Lao Tse to a dragon able to ascend into heaven—a name and the thing denoted are one. Magic itself is simply knowledge of these words and thus an understanding of the true nature of things. So to speak a spell is to intrude upon the balance of the universe. The hermit-like Ogion tries to teach Taoist quietism to his brash young apprentice, for “what I have is what you lack.” To no avail. Again, at school on Roke, the proud Ged dismisses his teacher’s caution that the use of magic requires responsibility and awareness. One can change a thing by changing its name, the Master Hand tells him, but by doing so one changes the world—and the wise man needs to weigh the consequences.

Ged is nearly destroyed by temptation before he begins his long process of coming to understand his full nature and what he should be. He must, in a sense, become worthy of his true name, of what he is. In the end, the chastened Ged comes to embody what are sometimes called the Three Jewels or Treasures of the Tao: compassion, moderation, and humility. He learns to act appropriately, not simply to master. Of course, these are virtues needed by all men and women, not just wizards of Earthsea.



The Earthsea Trilogy

In 1967 Ursula K. Le Guin was in her late thirties, a mother with three kids under the age of 10, and the author of three science fiction novels that had garnered little critical attention. *A Wizard of Earthsea* appeared in 1968, inaugurating an astonishing burst of literary activity. During the next six years Le Guin published *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Dispossessed* (1974), each of which won Hugo and Nebula Awards for best science fiction novel of the year. She also continued the story of the wizard Ged in both *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971), which received a Newbery Honor Book Citation, and *The Farthest Shore* (1972), which won the National Book Award for children's literature. Finally, *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* (1975) gathered her best short stories up till then, including two early glimpses of Earthsea.

A Wizard of Earthsea focuses on the young Ged's coming of age. *The Tombs of Atuan*, set in an underworld of tunnels, labyrinths, and cells, shows us a young priestess named Tenar rejecting the social and psychological repression she has grown up with to break free into her full true self. While *A Wizard of Earthsea* is full of open-air action, as Ged's adventures take him to many of the islands and cities of the known world, *The Tombs of Atuan* is its opposite: enclosed, claustrophobic, suffocating. In some ways, the two novels interlock like the yin-yang symbol. The bright bold young man Ged needs to confront darkness; the young girl Tenar, who has spent her life in darkness, needs to recognize the light within her.

In the third volume of the trilogy, *The Farthest Shore*, we meet the young prince Arren. Le Guin again continues to explore the theme of maturation by tackling the meaning of death. In *The Farthest Shore*, Ged, now the Archmage of Roke, searches

for the reason why Earthsea is losing its vitality, its magic. Ged brings Arren along as his companion on this quest, recognizing in this confused and uncertain young man an exceptional destiny.

At a rare quiet moment before the novel's climax, Ged observes: "When I was young, I had to choose between the life of being and the life of doing. And I leapt at the latter like a trout to a fly. But each deed you do, each act, binds you to itself and to its consequences, and makes you act again and yet again. Then very seldom do you come upon a space, a time like this, between act and act, when you may stop and simply be. Or wonder who, after all, you are." At the novel's end a weary Ged turns away from the world of action to seek that life of simple being—and so passes, it would seem, into the mists of legend.

For nearly twenty years that's where the Earthsea novels stopped. But then, in 1990, Le Guin unexpectedly returned to the archipelago in *Tehanu*. While this novel again features Ged, Le Guin's tone had changed, though not, in a sense, her overriding theme. *Tehanu* is also, in part, about the coming of age—of old age. While the first three books reflected on power and how men should use it, *Tehanu* examines powerlessness and both the exploitation and wisdom of women.

Le Guin initially called *Tehanu*, "the last book of Earthsea," but she admits that she was mistaken. She continued to write stories set in the archipelago—see *Tales from Earthsea* (2001)—as well as the novel *The Other Wind* (2001). These books certainly amplify and enrich Le Guin's original vision. That said, *A Wizard of Earthsea* remains special: Le Guin calls it "the best put together book" she has ever written.



Ged's Coming of Age

A Wizard of Earthsea examines Ged's coming of age, especially the period of anguish and ordeal that follows the release of the shadow into the world. Growing up, accepting responsibility, and recognizing one's strengths and limitations are principal themes of nearly all young adult fiction. In many young adult novels a girl or boy undergoes a period of confusion and ordeal and emerges a new and different person, one with greater understanding of himself and others.

This same process of transformation is also one that we associate with religious or social "rites of passage." In *A Wizard of Earthsea* the boy called Duny at the age of 13 walks naked through the icy Ar river and crosses to where Ogion "reached out his hand and clasping the boy's arm whispered to him his true name: Ged." Despite this ritual, Ged has a long way to go before he understands and becomes his true self—and it is these teenaged years of arrogance, trial, defeat, and eventual self-acceptance that Le Guin chronicles.

In his classic study *The Rites of Passage*, Arnold van Gennep postulated a three-part movement to the recognized process of coming of age: separation from the community, followed by a kind of wilderness period when one has shed one identity but not yet found another, and then a re-entry into society as a new man or woman. In the equally celebrated *The Ritual Process*, Victor Turner focuses on that middle or liminal period. (Liminal means threshold—the place where one is neither in nor out.) The liminal state dissolves normal barriers and boundaries, is full of ambiguity and indeterminacy—it is a no-man's land, a limbo, a period marked by seclusion, testing, uncertainty,

sexual confusion, chastening, the breakdown of social norms. This state mirrors Ged's mental state and experiences after he releases the Shadow.

The psychologist Carl Gustav Jung studied the nature of the unconscious and our need in life to achieve integration of our various selves and impulses. Archetypal figures (the Wise Old Man, the helpful animal), universal symbols (water as the unconscious), and primordial experiences (the night sea journey to the ends of the earth) pervade Jungian thought—and Le Guin's novel. Most strikingly, Jung speculated that a person could only reach full maturity by confronting what he called the Shadow—one's dark side, all those desires and temptations that the public self tries to hide and repress. To Jung, this dark side is as much a part of us as our light side. Psychological growth, then, implies an enlargement of consciousness, incorporation rather than rejection, both rather than one or the other. Like Taoism, Jung rejects duality for harmony.

These theories of personal transformation—anthropological, mythic, and psychological—all posit what may be called a period of ritual or symbolic death. Each insists on a time of darkness, of limbo or physical abuse that mimics actual death. Many times Ged comes close to dying in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, each time emerging as a different, stronger self. To confront the Shadow, he sails beyond the known world to face what looks like certain death in order to re-emerge as a mature person, the man who will one day become Archmage and dragonlord.

