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Introduction to the Special Issue: The Art, the Craft, the Tale of Vision and Re-vision: Ursula K. Le Guin Shows the Way

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Abstract

This issue of *Mythlore* commemorates the life and writing of author Ursula Kroeber Le Guin: visionary essayist, poet, blogger, critic, teacher, and grandmaster of fantasy and science fiction via novel, novella, and short story. Le Guin was indisputably a gamechanger in the fiction genres of fantasy and science fiction, and her essays about these genres remain some of the most thought-provoking and insightful ever published. Le Guin has left us a body of mythopoeic work that is an inexhaustible source of wonder.



HONORING URSULA K. LE GUIN: CITIZEN OF MONDATH

THE ART, THE CRAFT, THE TALE OF VISION AND RE-VISION: URSULA K. LE GUIN SHOWS THE WAY

MELANIE A. RAWLS

THIS ISSUE OF *MYTHLORE* COMMEMORATES the life and writing of author Ursula Kroeber Le Guin: visionary essayist, poet, blogger, critic, teacher, and grandmaster of fantasy and science fiction via novel, novella, and short story. Le Guin was indisputably a gamechanger in the fiction genres of fantasy and science fiction, and her essays about these genres remain some of the most thought-provoking and insightful ever published. Le Guin has left us a body of mythopoeic work that is an inexhaustible source of wonder.

What can we say about Ursula Le Guin?

She was a writer on the border, mistress of liminality. Much of her science fiction is mythopoeic in tone, in its world-building, in archetypes manifesting as rounded characters, in the manner in which her tales considered the great questions: birth, life, love, and death, fate and free will, peace and war, knowledge and ignorance, freedom and power, the individual, the community, the individual in community and, again in the mythopoeic sense, of wonder evoked. She concerned herself with two vast subjects: the uses (and abuses) of power and the nature of relationship, as in: living creatures to one another, living creatures to the natural world, living creatures to their mortality, and living conscious creatures in their living out answers to the questions, "Who am I? How shall I live my life?" She explored these subjects in fiction, essay, and poetry. Seldom didactic, often playful, she seemed to be saying, "Here's a way to look at these matters" and "I'll tell a story; see what you make of it." As a Taoist, she was not in favor of singular answers, closed systems, or monotheisms.

Le Guin was a revisionist in the best sense of that word. She literally re-envisioned her sub-creation Earthsea, re-thinking and radically changing, in the last three volumes of a six-volume saga, assumptions and assertions made in the first three volumes. She did in public and in great detail what many of us are loath to do even in private: changed her mind.

Le Guin was a teacher in her acceptance of controversy. Meghann Cassidy writes in her essay in this issue, "Who Is There? Subjectivity, Transformation, and the Child's Journey in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Tombs of Atuan*": "Le Guin's stories may push buttons precisely *because* they initiate changes in our thinking. The worlds she creates poke and prod at the very limits of our language, culture and conceptual frameworks." Cassidy continues, "The reader is thus drawn into a moral and philosophical query."

Our essayists for this issue unpack for us aspects of Le Guin's vision. Dennis Friedrichsen, in his essay "Aspects of Worldbuilding: Taoism as Foundational in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea*" discusses the philosophy that underpins the sub-creation that is *Earthsea*, but that is, in fact, an underpinning of all of Le Guin's writings, an observation supported by Derance A. Rolim Filho's "The Taoist Myths of Winter: Mythopoesis in *The Left Hand of Darkness*." The science fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* is, of course, Le Guin's breakthrough novel, the one that gained Le Guin her first and, perhaps, greatest literary attention. Rolim Filho demonstrates Le Guin's mythopoetic powers by revealing how she created myths for a secondary world and how those myths function in their sub-created setting with the same effects of revelation, mystery, and enigma as our Primary world's myths function.

The essay "Magic, Witchcraft, and Faerie: Evolution of Magical Ideas in Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* Cycle," by Oleksandra Filonenko, brings to us an historical and etymological review of magic, including modes and manifestations in myth, legend and story, and demonstrates how these are manifested as well in *Earthsea*.

John Rosegrant discusses symbolic death as an engine of maturation and transformation in the essay "The Four Deaths of Ged." Finally, Jon Alkorta Martiartu addresses a subject that for Le Guin is one of preeminent concern and exploration in her writings: inclusivity. In the essay, "'Beware Her, the Day She Finds Her Strength!': Tehanu and the Power of the Marginalized to Affect Social Change in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* Saga," Martiartu explores how Le Guin again addresses the subject of the inclusion of the marginalized, this time from the perspective of disability studies.

Two notes round out the contents of the special issue. David Bratman locates and describes the real-world landscapes that inspired Le Guin's 1985 novel/anthropological worldbuilding exercise *Always Coming Home*. Kris Swank collects Le Guin's own reports of the works and authors that have inspired her, tracing their influences (which, in case of some some living authors, have been mutual).



When I read stories of other worlds and other times, often I ask myself, Would I want my life and my children's lives to be lived in this world?

My answer is "Yes" for all the worlds created by Le Guin, fantasy and science fiction alike. They all have the essential quality of Faerie, being both "fair and perilous" (as Tolkien's Aragorn says of Lothlórien, *LotR* II.6.338), but they all have a naturalness suited for human existence: wilderness, farm, town, city; mountain, meadow, sea coast, village; path, cave, temple, university; the scaled, furred and feathered, leafed and rooted, a quiet room for study or spinning. The scale is always human, and the humans are always human, being "fair and perilous" as well; also, seekers courageous and flawed, working good and evil and the mix; until, of course, Le Guin brings us before dragons or "real powers, drawn from the immense fathomless energies of the universe, which no man's spells or uses could exhaust or unbalance" (*A Wizard of Earthsea* 62-3). As Tolkien writes in "On Fairy-stories," "Fantasy is made out of the Primary World, but a good craftsman loves his material, and has a knowledge and feeling for clay, stone and wood which only the art of making can give. By the forging of Gram cold iron was revealed; by the making of Pegasus horses were ennobled; in the Trees of the Sun and Moon root and stock, flower and fruit are manifested in glory" (68). By these words, Le Guin is a master maker.

Finally, I would like to pay tribute to the beauty of Le Guin's storytelling. She is a poet within her prose. The success of her world-building is grounded in her ability to use language to evoke sensory images and experiences. So here are some passages I believe exemplify this gift. Perhaps I *should* say, here are passages during which I experienced, in the original meaning of the word, moments of unmistakable enchantment:

Then Ged was aware that the highest tower slowly changed its shape, bulging out on one side as if it grew an arm. He feared dragon-magic [...] but a moment more and he saw this was not a trick of the dragon, but of his own eyes. What he had taken for a part of the tower was the shoulder of the Dragon of Pendor [...]. Lean as a hound he was and huge as a hill. (*A Wizard of Earthsea* 5.104)

That night as she lay going to sleep, she entered again into the vast gulfs of wind and light, but the light was smoky, red and orange-red and amber, as if the air itself were fire. In this element she was and was not; flying on the wind and being the wind, the blowing of the wind, the force that went free; and no voice called her. (*Tehanu* 8.101)

Sometime that night, as Orr was trying to find his way through the suburbs of chaos to Corbett Avenue, an Aldebaranian Alien stopped him and persuaded him to come with it. He came along, docile. He asked it

after a while if it was Tiua'k Ennbe Ennbe, but he did not ask with much conviction, and did not seem to mind when the Alien explained, rather laboriously, that he was called Jor Jor and it was called E'nememen Asfah. [...]. E'nememen Asfah stood immense in greenish armor, holding an egg whisk. (*The Lathe of Heaven* 11.169, 173)

All around me was the silken blue water, and in the distance a few reed-islands, and beyond them the low green shore, and far in the distance a blue hill . . . So I had come round to the earliest and oldest of all my rememberings or visions, and was in the memory, the vision itself. (*Powers* 12.377)

[W]ith Roke Knoll, it had stood since Segoy made the islands of the world, and that all magic was in the roots of the trees, and that they were mingled with the roots of all the forests that were or might yet be. ("Dragonfly," *Tales From Earthsea* 140)

Then those on the terrace and in the windows of the towers saw the strangest thing they might ever see however long they lived in a world of sorceries and wonders. They saw the dragon, the huge creature whose scaled belly and thorny tail dragged and stretched half across the breadth of the terrace, and whose red-horned head reared up twice the height of the king—they saw it lower that big head, and tremble so that its wings rattled like cymbals, and not smoke but a mist breathed out of its deep nostrils, clouding its shape, so that it became cloudy like thin fog or worn glass; and then it was gone. The midday sun beat down on the scored, scarred, white pavement. There was no dragon. There was a woman. She stood some ten paces from Tehanu and the king. She stood where the heart of the dragon might have been. (*The Other Wind* 3.147)

In leaving progress to the machines, in letting technology go forward on its own terms and selecting from it, with what seems to us excessive caution, modesty, or restraint, the limited though completely adequate implements of their cultures, is it possible that in thus opting not to move 'forward' or not only 'forward,' these people did in fact succeed in living in human history, with energy, liberty, and grace? (*Always Coming Home* 381)

This is how stories are told.

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MELANIE A. RAWLS earned her master's degree in English from Florida State University and taught composition at Florida A&M University, both in Tallahassee. She is a published poet, essayist, and short story author. *Mythlore* has published several of her essays, including "The Rings of Power" (1984), "The Verse of J.R.R. Tolkien (1993), "Witches, Wives and Dragons: The Evolution of the Women in Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea—An Overview" (2008), "Arwen, Shadow Bride" (1985), and "*Herland* and *Out of the Silent Planet*: A Comparison of a Feminist Utopia and a Male-charactered Fantasy" (1986). Her influential *Mythlore* essay "The Feminine Principle in Tolkien" (1984) was reprinted in *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J.R.R. Tolkien* (2015).

