

## **Le Guin's Earthsea Cycle: An Ecological Fable of "Healing the Wounds"<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to evaluate Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea Cycle from the perspective of eco-criticism, arguing that though critics have praised the achievement of the Earthsea Trilogy from the perspectives of anthropology, Taoism, rites of passages, and feminism, the environmental consciousness in the Earthsea has been ignored. Le Guin's Earthsea Cycle is an anti-anthropocentric heroic saga, the outstanding for bringing oriental philosophy and contemporary environmental ethics into western literary tradition. The Earthsea Cycle shall be treasured as a pioneering achievement of an ecological myth on an epic scale, and a successful discovery of an alternative narrative mode to the romantic heroic myth, which we desperately need in this era of environmental crisis.

### **Keywords**

fantasy, witchcraft, Taoism, ecocriticism, coming-of-age novel, feminism

### **I. Preface**

Andrew Wilson opens his *Iliad* website with an statement referring to the 9-11 attacks in America:

Some reflection on why the *Iliad* is terrifyingly relevant today [11 Nov. 2001]—two months since September 11, 2001, and a month since the bombing of Afghanistan began. The first word in the *Iliad* is *menin*—rage, passion, “anger that stores itself up for a long time.”

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<sup>1</sup> “Healing the wounds” is taken from Ynestra King's essay title, “Healing the Wounds: Feminism, Ecology, and the Nature/Culture Dualism” in *Reweaving the World* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990) 106.

Andrew Wilson continues with the quotation from *L'Illiade ou la poème de la force* (1940) by Simone Adolphine Weil: “The true hero, the true subject, the center of the *Iliad*, is force. Force as man’s instrument, force as man’s master, force before which human flesh shrinks back. The human soul, in this poem [*The Iliad*], is shown always in its relation to force: swept away, blinded by the force it thinks it can direct, bent under the pressure of the force to which it is subjected [...]” (Wilson 1). Wilson implies that the force which caused the Muslim terrorists’ attack in New York is no different from Achilles’s rage in the *Iliad*. It is an emotion guided by a lofty ideal, which is “where evil prevails, anger is an assertion of concern for human well-being and human dignity” (Wilson 2).

Wilson’s comparison of Achilles’s anger with the Muslim terrorists’ rage touches on an important fact that a tragic hero, who dies to assert the well being and dignity of himself or his tribe, is still a captivating myth modern people live up to. In the so called postmodern society, we may wonder at the absurdity of suicidal narcissism. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the modern technological progress, together with its siblings—international capitalism and US global militant hegemony—is a product out of the same ideology: a self consciousness that man shall become the sole soliloquist of the phenomenal world, even if his self-fulfillment may lead him to violence and brutality.

For environmental philosophers, heroic myth, for all its tragic romanticizing of humans’ struggle to reach the impossible, is fantasy humans create to prove their superiority above nature. For thousands of years, this tragic mode of thinking has been the dominant narrative both in the fictional and real worlds. Andrew Wilson’s linking of the 9-11 terrorist attack with Greek heroic literature also directly sustains the literary observation made by eco-critics: that literary texts, the institutions of literature and literary criticism help to constitute and perpetuate the dominating anthropocentric dualistic ideology. And it is urgent that literature of alternative ideology and aesthetics be discovered or produced. Otherwise, the tragedy of violence, either done to humans themselves or to the natural world, will continue to plague us.

This paper is an attempt to evaluate Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Earthsea Cycle* from the perspective of eco-criticism, arguing that though critics have praised the achievement of the *Earthsea Trilogy* from the approaches of anthropology (Bitter), Taoism (Bain); rites of passages (Walker), mythology (Barrow; Bitter), Feminism (Bassnett; Littlefield; McLean); the ecological consciousness in *Earthsea* has been ignored. For my part, Le Guin’s *Earthsea Cycle* is an anti-anthropocentric heroic saga because of its successful

transformation of oriental philosophy into contemporary environmental ethics. *Earthsea Cycle* shall be treasured as a successful discovery of an alternative narrative mode that seeks to reconstitute human self and his/her relationship with the environment.

## II. The Changing Earthsea

Winners of numerous awards, the novels which comprise Le Guin's Earthsea Trilogy—*A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), *The Tombs of Autan* (1971), *The Farthest Shore* (1972)—have been hailed as one of the greatest creations in all fantasy literature, comparable to J. R. R. Tolkien's *Middle Earth* series or C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* stories (Bailey; Scholes). Their tremendous success and ongoing popularity propelled Le Guin to write a sequel. Eighteen years later, the long expected "continual," *Tehanu* (1992), was published. However, to readers' disappointment, *Tehanu* was written with a different style and subject; it is a deliberate break away from the fantasy tradition of Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. *Tehanu* is a story no longer about heroic adventure and dazzling magic, but a plain tale of a middle-aged woman's life on a farm. Another problem is: though subtitled "The Last Book of Earthsea," *Tehanu* (1992) concludes with an open ending and leaves both the old themes unattended and new questions unanswered. After a ten-year interval, Le Guin published the final book in the series, *The Other Wind* (2001), in which she returns to the theme of life and death and completes the myth of the dragon legend to answer all other unresolved issues.

Le Guin's effort was moderately received. Yet, to most readers used to the spectacular treat of fantasy and magic, the later two books were anti-climatic sequence indeed. Besides, because the Earthsea trilogy are coming-of-age novels written originally for juvenile readers, they are often misleadingly classified as children's fantasy (even though many of the books' admirers are adults).<sup>2</sup> For young readers who often have stock schema of what a wizard book shall be like, the playing down of magic and the impotence of the human hero are grave faults indeed. Both Holly Littlefield and Susan McLean have explained clearly that the change is due to the mainstreaming of feminism and Le Guin's personal evolution of feminist consciousness.

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<sup>2</sup> Le Guin wrote: "Most of my letters about the Earthsea books from American readers are from people between sixteen and twenty-five. The English who write me tend to be, as well as I can guess, over thirty, and more predominantly male. Several of them are Anglican clergyman [...]" (*Language* 55).

Their argument is well established and true to Le Guin's intention. Still, it is only partially valid to view the later two novels as Le Guin's self-deconstructing of her earlier works. After the publication of *The Other Wind*, it is clear that *Tehanu* and *The Other Wind* are not betraying their predecessors. Instead, they are in accord with and a completion of Le Guin's Taoist philosophy, which has been transformed into a mythic Earthsea legend that reflects the emergence of environmental ethics in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Like Tolkien's Middle Earth and C. S. Lewis's Narnia, Earthsea is a "secondary universe," an imaginary world Le Guin creates to embody her mythical vision. Earthsea is a world of archipelago, comprised of three parts: in the center is the Inner Land (also called the Isles) where witchcraft/magic is a common practice on all the islands, in the east is the Kargo Land where people worship the god of dark power, and in the West Reach islands dwell the frightening wild winged dragons. Not a wonderland where magic, unicorns, and other fairy figures appear arbitrarily; Earthsea is a mimetic reorganization of our historical past when witchcraft was practiced as a necessary part of human lives. Modern readers can recognize the geography, fauna, human species, social history of our world rearranged to create an ancient world located somewhere between Stone Age and medieval times. In such a time and place both strange and familiar, the deeds of the greatest wizard who ever lived in Earthsea are recalled in epic scale and mythic beauty.

### III. A Different Kind of Magic

In Earthsea, the subject matter of magic/witchcraft/sorcery, which often appears in heroic adventure as devices to sustain or detain the heroes' exploits, is given a fresh definition. In both literature and social history, magic/witchcraft itself has been stigmatized as an evil art after Christianity established itself firmly in politics and religion. As Jeffery B. Russell reminds us of the semantic change concerning magic/witch/wizard:

"Witch" derives from the Old English *wicca* [...] and *wicce* [...] and from the verb *wiccian*, meaning "to cast a spell." Contrary to common belief among modern witches, it is not Celtic in derivation, and it has

nothing to do with the Old English *witan*, “to know,” or any other word relating to “wisdom.” The explanation that witchcraft means “craft of the wise” is false.

[...] “Witch” is applied to both sexes. “Wizard,” unlike “witch,” really does derive from Middle English *wis*, “wise.” The word first appears about 1440, meaning a “wise man or woman”; in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it designated a high magician, and only after 1825 was it used as equivalent of “witch.”

[...] “Magician” derives from French *magique*, Latin *magia*, and Greek *mageia*. The Greek word *magos* originally designated the Iranian astrologer-priests who accompanied the army of Xerxes into Greece. Used in English by the end of the fourteenth century, “magic” has often implied a sophisticated intellectual system as opposed to the cruder practices of “sorcery.” (12)

The above lexical archeology sheds light on Le Guin’s careful choice of words in *Earthsea*. A “wizard” means “a wise man,” therefore, in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, only those male magicians who are formally trained in the School of Wizards can be called wizards. Contrastingly, “witch,” in *Earthsea*, retains the negative image of an ignorant woman who practices simple magic of herbal healing or even harmful black magic in the countryside. In the opening chapter of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, there are statements like “weak as a woman’s magic” and “wicked as a woman’s magic” (5). T. A. Shippery points out that Le Guin has deliberately avoided the word, “magician,” because the word has acquired deprecatory meaning of “conjurer” or “juggler” after the rise of “scientist.” Yet, she keeps the base form of “magic”—“mage.” “Mage” is from Latin *magus*, which means a man with superhuman power or great hero that is half-human and half-divine. Thus Le Guin uses “mage” instead of “magician” and even “creates a series of compounds not recorded in the *OED* at all—[such as,] ‘Archmage,’ ‘magelight,’ ‘magewind,’ ‘magery’”—to separate the art of outstanding wizard from “witchcraft” (101). In fact, “magic/magery” and “witchcraft” are the same thing. But Le Guin chooses to crown the hero and his art with “archmage” and “magery,” avoiding the negative impression “witchcraft” may have on the reader’s mind.

#### IV. The School of Wizardry

Besides the cautious choice of words to modify the negative impression of magic, in Earthsea magic is not a dark mysterious knowledge, privately owned or studied by some outcast prodigy. Magery is a high art, a public education open to the talented from every part of the world. In *The Farthest Shore*, the importance of magic and wizards' eminent social position is explained:

The School on Roke is where boys who show promise in sorcery are sent from all the Inner Land of Earthsea to learn the highest arts of magic. There they become proficient in the various kinds of sorcery, learning names, and runes, and skills, and spells, and what should and what should not be done, and why. And there, after long practice, and if hand and mind and spirit all keep pace together, they may be named wizard, and receive the staff of power. True wizards are made only on Roke.

Since there are sorcerers and witches on all the isles, and the uses of magic are as needful to their people as bread and as delightful as music, so the School of Wizardry is a place held in reverence. The nine mages who are the Masters of the School are considered the equals of the great princes of the Archipelago. Their master, warden of Roke, the Archmage, is held to be accountable to no man at all, except the King of All the Isles; and that only by an act of fealty, by heart's gift, for not even a king could constrain so great a mage to serve the common law, if his will were otherwise [...]. (13-14)

Though the world of Earthsea is governed by the common law formulated by the kings, the real spiritual guide in Earthsea is the law represented and guarded by the Masters on Roke Island (the Island of the Wise). It is also emphasized that the education of wizards includes not only hard acquirement of magic skills and knowledge but also philosophical and ethical understanding of their role in society.

Like other magic fantasy, Le Guin also plays with different kinds of magic shows: spells, charms, runes, herbal healing, spirit invocation, shape changing, weather controlling, telepathy, mind speech, etc. Yet, with her rich background of anthropology, mythology and literature, Le Guin extends the scope of magic art and endows it with a

modern connotation. The School of Wizardry is more like an institution of higher education where different masters in proper order teach knowledge and skills to students. For instance, from Master Chanter, they learn “the Deeds of heroes and the Lays of wisdom, which begins with the oldest of all songs, the *Creation of Ea*.” Master Windkey teaches arts of wind and weather. Master Herbal instructs “the ways and properties of things that grow; and the Master Hand teaches sleight and jugglery and the lesser arts of Changing” (*A Wizard of Earthsea* 55). Then the more advanced subjects which give a wizard real power to change and control the world are taught by Master Changer and Master Namer. Master Changer knows the process of making a stone into a diamond by calling power from different material and changing the true nature of a thing—which is connected to the learning from Master Namer about true names and “Language of the Making.” After that, students will learn the knowledge of metaphysics, such as patterns and rules of earth and cosmos, from Master Patterner.

The subject may be complicated, laborious and its width and depth extending with new discovery. For example, in Master Namer’s class, “a student must learn before midnight the name of every cape, point, bay, sound, inlet, channel, harbor, shallows, reef and rock of the shores of Lossow, a little islet of the Pelnish Sea,” because “he who would be Seamaster must know the true name of every drop of water in the sea.” He also mentions that “many a mage of great power has spent his whole life to find out the name of one single thing—one single lost or hidden name. And still the lists are not finished” (*A Wizard of Earthsea* 46).

The reader recognizes that a mage’s devotion to finding out a true name in order to control it is similar to a modern scientist’s persistent research on a certain subject. It is no mistake that the education of wizards is made deliberately comparable to the modern corpus of knowledge. The difference is that there is no clear boundary between humanities and hard science. All knowledge, skills, and crafts, no matter if it is linguistic, historical, psychological, or chemical, are means that give wizards power over the environment. But the power also requires a wizard to know his own limits and responsibilities. As Master Hand said:

[...] Illusion fools the beholder’s senses; it makes him see and hear and feel that the thing is changed. But it does not change the thing. To change this rock into a jewel, you must change its true name. And to do that, my son, even to so small a scrap of the world, is to change the world. It can be done. Indeed it can be done. It is the art of the Master Changer,

and you will learn it, when you are ready to learn it. But you must not change one thing, one pebble, one grain of sand, until you know what good and evil will follow on that act. The world is in balance, in Equilibrium. A wizard's power of Changing and of Summoning can shake the balance of the world. It is dangerous, that power. It is most perilous. It must follow knowledge, and serve need. To light a candle is to cast a shadow. (*A Wizard of Earthsea* 43-44)

The above statement reveals that Le Guin is sympathetic towards the medieval belief in an organic cosmos in which everything is connected to everything else. The Earthsea magic is not a "fallacy, a mistaken conception of the association of ideas" (Frazer 32). It is more in line with Bronislaw Malinowski's view that witchcraft is a pseudo science because it is also based on observation and experience, practiced for the purpose of subduing nature for our own use. Moreover, one thing that makes Earthsea magic so much like modern science is that a magician, like a scientist, possesses the power to change and to affect the world. And what makes it even more relevant to our times is that the ethics or moral use of knowledge is an integral part of lessons. Master Summoner emphasizes that "true magic can summon energies as light, and heat, and the force that draws the magnet," therefore, "the true wizard uses such spells only at need, since to summon up such earthly forces is to change the earth of which they are a part of" (*A Wizard of Earthsea* 53-54). Master Namer also warns: if the wizards monkeyed with their skills of changing, and "sought to change what cannot be changed, and the Equilibrium would fail. The unbalanced sea would overwhelm the islands where we perilously dwell, and in the old silence all voices and all names would be lost" (*A Wizard of Earthsea* 48).

It is the ethics of "to do and not to do" in accord with the Equilibrium that is the highest art of magic. The ethics of using power is obviously a Taoist notion. As Le Guin clearly explained: Earthsea is a Taoist world; Equilibrium means maintaining the pattern, the order of universe and "the true laws—ethical and aesthetic, as surely as scientific—which are not imposed from above by any authority, but exist in things and are to be found—discovered" (*Language* 49). And it is such a wisdom that gives Ged, the Archmage, the highest power and position in Earthsea.

## V. Beyond dualistic opposition: *Tao Te Ching* as Background<sup>3</sup>

Le Guin wrote: “Of all the deep springs, this [*Tao Te Ching*] is the purest water. To me, it is also the deepest spring” (*Tao Te Ching* x). After several decades of researching different editions of *Tao Te Ching* English versions, Le Guin published her own poetic translation of *Tao Te Ching* in 1997. Le Guin adores the intriguing juxtaposition of oppositional words and of the paradoxical wisdom in Lao Tzu’s simple lines. For example:

Everybody on earth knowing  
that beauty is beautiful  
makes ugliness.

Everybody knowing  
that goodness is good  
makes wickedness.

For being and nonbeing  
arise together;  
hard and easy  
complete each other;  
long and short  
shape each other;  
high and low  
depend on each other;  
note and voice  
make the music together;  
before and after  
follow each other.

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<sup>3</sup> This is the title from Dena C. Bain’s article: “‘The *Tao Te Ching* as Background to the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin.’” Bain has given an overall review of Le Guin’s science fiction to show how Le Guin uses her novel to convey the essence of Tao. It is a pity that *Earthsea* is not included in her analysis. Though other writers have also discussed how the Taoist principle manifests itself in the magic of *Earthsea*, their analyses do not include *Tehanu* and *The Other Wind*. In addition, none of them have discussed the implied environmental messages in the Earthsea Cycle.

That's why the wise soul  
does without doing,  
teaches without talking.

The things of this world  
exist, they are;  
you can't refuse them. (4-5)

The above lines display some basic concepts of Taoism. First of all is the yin-yang interplay, the dialectical relationship between polarized forces. Secondly, since doing good is inextricably involved with bringing evil, the hero is so cautious about actions that he prefers actionless activity. Thirdly, knowing that a man does not exist on his own, but in a web of connection with other beings, a sage respects and accepts all things on earth as they are. Le Guin feels acutely that *Tao Te Ching* offers an alternative philosophy to the dualistic hierarchical epistemology of Western culture. In her translation footnote to *Tao Te Ching*, Le Guin comments: "Lao Tzu thinks the materialistic dualist, who tries to ignore the body and live in the head, and the religious dualist, who despise the body and lives for a reward in heaven, are both dangerous and in danger. So, enjoy your life, he says: live in your body, you are your body; where else is there to go? Heaven and earth are one. As you walk the streets of your town you walk on the Way of heaven" (100-01). In contrast with such a hierarchical dualistic epistemology, Taoism conveys wisdom of seeing the whole yin-yang picture. The opening short poem of *Earthsea* is a very imitation of *Tao Te Ching*'s narrative style:

Only in silence the word,  
only in dark the light,  
only in dying life:  
bright the hawk's flight  
on the empty sky.  
—The Creation of Eà

This poem implies that the creation principle of *Earthsea* is the interplay of yin and yang forces, which are seemingly polarized, yet mutually dependent and complementary. This short poem is also a weaving of the various themes in the *Earthsea Trilogy*: "action and non-action" in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, "light and darkness" in *The Tombs of*

*Atuan*, “life and death” in *The Farthest Shore*. The adventure of the hero Sparrowhawk is his journey to see life as “a whole,” to acknowledge the wisdom of “integrating” and “balancing” the opposite forces in our life and to accept things as they are. “Whole,” “balance,” “equilibrium,” “do not do” are key concepts running through the *Earthsea Cycle* together with other Taoist virtues, such as respect for the mysterious nature innate in all beings, unlearning and quietness, and returning to the primitive state like an uncarved wood. The varied aspects of Tao are merged into the Earthsea fantasy, in which the hero, the dragon, the magic and the wizard all take on new roles and new meanings that have rarely been voiced in the Fantastic/juvenile literature.

## VI. The Way Follows What Is

Equilibrium in Earthsea is never named exactly, but its omnipresence is felt through the forces of nature and is metaphorically expressed in the myth of Imminent Grove, in the legend of ancient dragon and in the poetic depiction of natural scenes. Collectively speaking, Earthsea is presented as an idyllic, pastoral world in which human civilization is still in harmony with the natural world. The romantic description of the carefree life in the forest echoes modern readers’ nostalgia for the innocent rural life they may have lost forever. *A Wizard of Earthsea* begins with the picture of Ged’s birth place, the island Gont, which is “a single mountain that lifts its peak a mile above the storm-racked Northsea Sea.” Ged was born in a lonely village called Ten Alders, “high on the mountain at the head of the Northward Vale. Below the village the pastures and plowlands of the Vale slope [...]; above the village only forest rises ridge behind ridge to the stone and snow of the heights” (1-2). Ged’s boyhood is spent most of the time wondering lonely in the forest mountains and his ceremony of passage is his walking “into the cold springs of the Ar [nameless and naked] where it rises among rocks under the high cliffs” (15).

Ged is a natural lad in a Worthworian sense, and his first lesson with Ogion, the great mage who initiates him to true magic, is also a lesson in and about nature. Ogion is portrayed as an Oriental sage, who is “dark copper-brown; grey-haired, lean and tough [...]. He spoke seldom, ate little, slept less. His eyes and ears were very keen, and often there was a listening look on his face” (17). During their journey, Ogion’s first important teaching to Ged is to admire each being as it is:

“You want to work spells,” Ogion said striding alone. “You’ve drawn too much water from that well. Wait. Manhood is patience. Mastery is nine times patience. What is that herb by the path?”

“Strawflower.”

“And that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Fourfoil, they call it. “Ogion had halted, the coppershod foot of his staff near the little weed, so Ged looked closely at the plant, and plucked a dry seed pod from it, and finally asked, since Ogion said nothing more, “What is its use, Master?”

“None I know of.”

Ged kept the seedweed a while as they went on, then tossed it away.

“When you know the fourfoil in all its seasons root and leaf and flower, by sight and scent and seed, then you may learn its true name, knowing its being: which is more than its use. What, after all, is the use of you? or of myself? Is Gont Mountain useful, or the Open Sea?” Ogion went on a halfmile or so, and said at last, “To hear, one must be silent.” (17-18)

“The Way is the way things are”(35). Ogion’s teaching is that man shall observe, and appreciate the mystery of each being as it is. We shall not presume to weigh anything from humans’ perspective or muddle with its existence. “Ogion let the rain fall where it would,” satisfied with his goatherding life in a mountain town, “spoke no great matters but had to do only with simple things, bread and water and weather and sleep.” He sent Ged to gather herbs, gave him freedom to spend all day wandering by rainfilled streams and through the woods” (19-20); for he knows nature is the best teacher of the mystery of life. But Ged was too young to understand Ogion’s teaching of silence and non-action. Nor did he realize the true power of nature until many years later when he almost died as a result of his false pride and reckless action.

The power of nature is best expressed through the Immanent Grove on Roke Island. To enter into the Immanent Grove to study with the Master Patterner is the last stage of a wizard’s training. The Immanent Grove is mystified as the supreme teacher of magic and the life source of Earthsea:

What is learned in the Immanent Grove is not much talked about elsewhere. It is said that no spells are worked there, and yet the place itself is an enchantment. Sometimes the trees of that Grove are seen, and some-

times they are not seen, and they are not always in the same place and part of Roke Island. It is said that the trees of the Grove themselves are wise. It is said that the Master Patterner learns his supreme magery there within the Grove, and if ever the trees should die so shall his wisdom die, and in those days the waters will rise and drown the islands of Earthsea which Segoy raised from the deeps in the time before myth, all the lands where men and dragons dwell. (*A Wizard of Earthsea* 71-72)

In *The Farthest Shore*, the mysterious power and importance of Immanent Grove is further explained:

There is no place for it on maps, and there is no way to it except for those who know the way to it. But even novices and townfolk and farmers can see it, always at a certain distance, a wood of high trees whose leaves have a hint of gold in their greenness even in the spring. And they consider—the novices, the townfolk, the farmers—that the Grove moves about it in a mystifying manner. But in this they are mistaken, for the Grove does not move. Its roots are the root of being. It is all the rest that moves. (9)

Sir Frazer's *The Golden Bough* apparently inspires the myth of Immanent Grove. Frazer mentions: "At the dawn of history Europe was covered with immense primeval forest [...]. Sacred groves were common among the ancient Germans, and tree-worship was practiced by all the Aryan races in Europe" (82-83). It is also a common belief among the primitive tribes that tree-souls are givers of rain and sunshine; they could make the crops grow, granting offspring or an easy delivery to women (86-87). Frazer also recognizes that humans' worship of trees underwent a change from animism into polytheism. Greek and Roman polytheism was later replaced by Christian monotheism, which is a hierarchical belief of a divine order in which God, transcendental to all beings, is the ultimate purpose of human evolution. As Gordon Kaufman, a Christian theologian, argues: human beings occupy a special place in God's symbolic order because humans are the only creatures who possess self-consciousness subjectivity and purposiveness. As for nature, it appears to be in "a non-teleological and non-axiological order" (44-45). Such theological conceptions that create the disjunction of divinity, humanity, and nature, are the root cause of modern technological exploitation of the natural environment. It is now a common conviction among spiritual

feminists, ecofeminists, and ecologists that the preservation of Earth requires a shift in consciousness. Nowadays there is a trend to recover witchcraft, and other ancient religions that revere the connection of all beings (Christ 59-68). Le Guin's myth of Immanent Grove can be seen as a symbolic gesture of restoring the metaphysical importance of the power of nature in our world. But Le Guin returns neither to the ancient Greek anthropomorphism nor to the spiritual belief of living Mother Goddess as many ecofeminists have advocated. The spiritual guide of Archipelago Earthsea is not a religion of any kind. Rather, it is more like the Taoist Way, which is neither transcendental nor external to us, but an impersonal force immanent in all beings. As Ogion had taught Ged, each being has its intrinsic beauty and value. One must be silent before they can really listen to the true being of each species.

Besides the myth of the Immanent Grove, the reliance of the people of Earthsea on the nonhuman power is further illustrated in the myth of the winged dragons. In heroic fantasy, the dragon usually represents the merciless dark power or evil force a hero has to conquer to achieve his higher self. In contrast, dragons in Earthsea symbolize a primordial force that guide humans to the heart of true wisdom. Dragons are portrayed carefully as gigantic dreamlike creatures, frightening and awesome but at the same time, enlightening and sublime. Prince Arren said to Ged that there is a desire in him to see dragons (*The Farthest Shore* 37). And each time a dragon appears, people cry out, meanwhile "watching in wonder that surpassed fear" (*The Farthest Shore* 129).

The winged dragons are ancient creatures, wiser than mankind and whose language is also Old Speech, the True Language of the Making that wizards have to learn to work true magic. Because their language is true speech, dragons do not lie; their speech and their action are one. In other words, dragons are metaphorical figures, not doing, not wanting. They are the manifestation of the inexhaustible fullness of being. Thus Ged explains to Prince Arren:

"But the dragons," said Arren. "Do they not do great evil? Are they innocent?"

"The dragons! The dragons are avaricious, insatiable, treacherous; without pity, without remorse. But are they evil? Who am I, to judge the acts of dragons? [...] They are wiser than man are. It is with them as with dreams, Arren. We men dream dreams, we work magic, we do good, we do evil. The dragons do not dream. They are dreams. They do not work magic: it is their substance, their being. They do not do; they are." (*The*

*Farthest Shore* 36-37)

Dragons embody the mysterious power of the wild in its highest form that young Ged has to fight to test his courage and skill in *A Wizard of Earthsea*. In *The Farthest Shore*, it is the ancient dragon, Bar Oth, that guides Ged to find the evil wizard that threatens the Equilibrium of Earthsea. And it is the oldest dragon, Kalessin, that saves the life of Ged and Arren after they return dying from the Dry Land of the dead.

Besides countering the dragon's image as a savage monster, Le Guin acquits the wizard's pets of their eerie associations. The pets wizards or witches keep are usually of three kinds—toads, owls and black cats—all are rumored to have a dark force that will enhance the power of wizards. In medieval witch trials, black cats were caught as evidence of witchcraft practice and animals were tortured to death together with their masters. In *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the boy Ged found by chance his pet, an otak, during his lonely night in the forest. The small sleek creature followed young Ged out of its own will, resting on Ged's shoulder in the folds of his hood, jumping down and daring off into the woods, but it always came back to Ged (48-49). It was Ged's loyal companion during Ged's dark hours of healing his wound and it saved Ged's life by waking him up from his spiritual trance of bringing back the dying child. Le Guin expresses humans' gratitude to animals in a way rarely seen in other works:

[The little otak was hiding in the rafters of the house when Ged was carried home by strangers. For long hours, he lay stretched stiff and still upon the bed.]

Then the otak crept down and came to Ged [...]. It began to lick his hands and wrists, long and patiently, with its dry leaf-brown tongue. Crouching beside his head it licked his temple, his scarred cheek, and softly touched his closed eyes. And very slowly under that soft touch Ged roused. He woke, [...] Then the otak curled up near his shoulder as usual, and went to sleep.

Later, when Ged thought back upon that night, [...] had none called him back in some way, he might have been lost for good. It was only the dumb instinctive wisdom of the beast who licks his hurt companion to comfort him, and yet in that wisdom Ged saw something akin to his own power, something that went as deep as wizardry. From that time forth he believed that the wise man is one who never sets himself apart from other living

things, whether they have speech or not, and in later years he strove long to learn what can be learned, in silence, from the eyes of animals, the flight of birds, the great slow gestures of trees. (*A Wizard of Earthsea* 82)

As Le Guin further explains in *Language of the Night*: “The animal does not reason, but it sees. And it acts with certainty; it acts ‘rightly,’ appropriately. That is why all animals are beautiful [...]. It is the animal within us, the primitive, the dark brother, the shadow soul, who is the guide” (67). The spiritual mystery of Immanent Grove, the spectacular dragons charged with unconscious power and the otak’s dear relationship with its master are all moving acknowledgement of humans’ reliance on other lives. It is such a recognition that helps to heal Ged, and prepares him to seek the Equilibrium inside himself and then to restore the balance of Earthsea.

## VII. The Epic Journey of Restoring Equilibrium

The *Earthsea Cycle*, collectively speaking, is the life story of Ged, the Archmage and dragonlord, about how he learns the ethics of using power, how he restores the equilibrium both of himself and of the outside world, meanwhile gradually realizing the truth of his own being.

The story of *A Wizard of Earthsea* is about the young years of the Archmage, Sparrowhawk (his true name, Ged)—his initiation and apprenticeship in magic art, how he misused spells of summoning and released a shadow beast, which hunted him and forced him to wander around the Earthsea. Unlike most literary heroes who set out on an adventure to pursue personal worth and glory, Ged is forced to leave because he has sinned. Everything he does is to undo his faults, and his sea voyage is in fact a quest journey, led by the Shadow, to the knowledge of his true self. In *A Wizard of Earthsea*, to know the true name of the shadow is more than the acknowledgement and acceptance of the dark side of oneself. It is to see a human being as a part of the Balance and to know that every human action will have impact, positive or negative, on other parts of the whole. The new Archmage, Lord Gord Gensher, said to the young Ged:

You have great power in born in you, and you used that power wrongly,

to work a spell over which you have no control, not knowing how that spell affects the balance of light and dark, life and death, good and evil. And you were moved to do this by pride and by hate. Is it any wonder the result was ruin? You summoned a spirit from the dead, but with it came one of the Powers of unlife. Uncalled it came from a place where are no names. Evil, it wills to work evil through you. The power you had called it gives it power over you: you are connected. It is the shadow of your arrogance, the shadow of your ignorance, the shadow you cast. Has a shadow a name? (66)

Driven on a voyage of self-exile, Ged fights the ancient dragons, conquering them and winning himself the title of dragonlord. But all the glory and highest magic art he had learned cannot keep away the shadow, which is growing stronger each day, hunting him and threatening to possess him. Driven by the shadow to change himself into a hawk, Ged flew back to Gont, where his master, Ogion, restored his shape and saved his life. Under Ogion's advice, Ged embarks on the quest journey together with his friend, Vetch, to hunt the shadow. On the last corner of the Open Sea where no sailor ever sailed, Ged met the shadow face to face:

It [the shadow] drew together and shrank and blackened, crawling on four short taloned legs upon the sand. [...] In silence, man and shadow met face to face, and stopped.

Aloud and clearly, breaking that old silence, Ged spoke the shadow's name and in the same moment the shadow spoke without lips or tongue, saying the same word: "Ged" and the two voices were one voice. Ged reached out his hands, dropping his staff, and took hold of his shadow, of the black self that reached out to him. Light and darkness met, and joined, and were one.

[.....]

"Estariol," he [Ged] said, "look, it is done. It is over." He laughed. "The wound is healed," he said, "I am whole, I am free." Then he bent over and hid his face in his arms, weeping like a boy. (179-80)

Finally Ged learns that the shadow is an integral part of himself. To know it is to understand that every act carries its opposite force and in human action lies power as

well as weakness, limit and responsibility.

What sets *A Wizard of Earthsea* apart from other wizard stories is that Le Guin is true to the nature of a magician's social function in history. Le Guin explores a good witch's communion or play with the divine energy and his/her public role as a mediator between human society and the phenomenal world. Therefore, *A Wizard of Earthsea* enacts a hero of a different kind, whose wisdom and true power derive from the equilibrium within himself, and whose heroic act and duty is to harmonize the human community with its natural environment. In *The Farthest Shore*, a wizard's public role of keeping equilibrium is further pursued. The struggle is no longer Ged's personal one, but a collective struggle of human society to restore Equilibrium.

The theme of *The Farthest Shore* is the question of life and death. It opens with bad tidings, brought by the young Prince Arren to the Isle of Wise, that the World is experiencing a strange illness. The harvest was poor, the ewes are dying giving birth and lambs are being born deformed; the wizards whose art was to cure the illness, were ill themselves. All over Earthsea, "The spring of the wizardry have run dry" (4-6). Ged, now the Archmage, sailed in Arren's company to the edge of doom to seek out the evil doer. On the sea, Arren asked Ged:

"Can it be a kind of pestilence, a plague, that drifts from land to land, blighting the crops and the flocks and men's spirits?"

"A pestilence is a motion of the great Balance, of the Equilibrium itself; this is different. There is the stink of evil in it. We may suffer for it when the balance of things rights itself, but we do not lose hope and forego art and forget the words of the Making. Nature is not unnatural. This is not a righting of the balance, but an upsetting of it. There is only one creature who can do that."

"A man?" Arren said, tentative.

"We men."

"How?"

"By an unmeasured desire for life."

"For life? But it isn't wrong to want to live?"

"No. But when we carve power over life—endless wealth, unassailable safety, immortality—then desire becomes greed. And if knowledge allies itself to that greed, then comes evil. Then the balance of the world is swayed, and ruin weighs heavy in the scale." (35-36)

It is humans' misuse of power to satisfy their excessive desire for life that brought the pestilence upon themselves and all other things. We recognize that Ged's remark is Le Guin's direct accusation concerning humans' destruction of the environment. Le Guin also voices her scorching critique of humans' blind pursuit for materialism in a scene at Hort Town:

[...] In the rich end of the street he [Arren] had felt choked, suffocated, by the pressures of things to be sold and voices screaming to them to buy, buy. And the peddler's abjectness had shocked them [...].

[.....]

He led on across the marketplace to an awning-shaded booth. Stripes of sunlight colored green, orange, lemon, crimson, azure, fell across the cloths and shawls and woven belts displayed, and danced multitudinous in the tiny mirrors that bedecked the high, feathered headdress of the woman who sold the stuff. She was big and she chanted in big voice, "Silks, satins, canvases, furs, felts, woolens, fleecifells of Gont, gauzes of Sowl, silks of Lorbanery! Hey, you Northern men, [...] How's this to take home to a girl in far Havnor? Look at it, silk of the South, fine as the mayfly's wing!" She had flipped open with deft hands a bolt of gauzy silk, pink shot with threads of silver. (40-41)

Hort Town is a lawless harbor city with crimes and filth lurking every corner. The wizards in this city gave up their art to drug dealing and for the dream of immortal life. Here the rural Earthsea world is replaced by the commercial city of despondence. Magic, a different attitude toward life and universe, has been brushed away as mere lies and foolery.

A sharp contrast to people living on land, the raft-people (the Children of the Open Sea) are a tribe living all year round on the sea. After wandering many days in the strange south sea, Ged and Arren were rescued by them. For Ged and Arren, they were like a dream tale, existing outside the knowledge of man. Raft people landed only once every year to repair their rafts. In Autumn, they followed the route of Big Whale, riding the waves up north. Each time the rafts re-gathered, there would be two rafts missing, or three, or six.... But they accepted it as they accepted any change in the sea. Their life philosophy is totally different from humans' on land. As their chief said: "You stamp the earth down and make it safe, [...]. We dance on the deep sea" (117).

The raft-folk's dream-like life is portrayed with convincing ethnological details and with languid beauty. But their timeless ease of life is based on the embrace of uncertainty and horror of death. Their perilous life on the sea presses young Arren to face his deepest fear about the truth of life:

“[...] I was afraid of you [when Ged was dying in his arms]. I was afraid of death. I was so afraid of it I would not look at you, because you might be dying. I could think of nothing, except that there was—there was a way of not dying for me, if I could find it. But all the time life was running out of it, as if there was a great wound and the blood running from it—such as you had. But this was in everything. And I did nothing, nothing, but try to hide from the horror of dying.”

He stopped, for saying the truth was unendurable. It was not shame that stopped him, but fear, the same fear. [...]. It was because he knew in his heart that reality was empty: without life or warmth or color or sound: without meaning [...]. All this lovely play of form and light and color on the sea and in the eyes of men, was no more than that: a playing of illusions on the shallow void. (121)

Young Prince Arren's passage into adulthood is his acceptance of death and of the fact that “there is no safety, there is no end [...]. The dance [of life] is always danced above the hollow place, above the terrible abyss” (121).

Ged told Arren: “it is your fear, your pain, I follow.” Arren and all the wizards murmured the same desire: “safety: an end to fear—to the fear of death.” It is such a collective unconsciousness of fear and desire to live forever that raised Cob, the wicked wizard, to be the King of the Dark Land of the dead. Orm Embar, an ancient dragon, flew Ged and Arren to the westernmost island, Selidor, where his other brother dragons were bound by Cob's evil spells. There Ged descended into the Dry land of the Dead to shut the black hole opened by Cob. With the spell, “Be thou made whole!”, Ged shut the door in the Stone Wall of Pain. But to restore the world into balance again drained all Ged's magic power. In the end, the eldest dragon, Kalessian, flew Ged back to his homeland, Isle Gont where “he had gone afoot up into the forests of the mountain” (197) and was heard no more. Thus ended the Deeds of Ged in the Earthsea trilogy.

### VIII. Healing the Wounds of Women/Men, Human/Nature Separation

The second volume of the Earthsea trilogy, *The Tomb of Atuan*, is a “feminine coming of age.” Sex is the subject and “birth, rebirth, destruction, freedom are the themes” (Le Guin, *Language* 54). This novel has been accused by feminists for perpetuating gender stereotypes: its heroine, Tenar, plays the passive role of an innocent priestess, waiting to be rescued by a powerful hero (Ged) from the ancient Tombs of Atuan. It was Ged who broke the taboo of bringing light into the forbidden ground of darkness. It was Ged who restored Tenar’s true name, brought her to the Archipelago, and gave her a new life. Littlefield points out that gender power in Earthsea is never in balance, even though “Balance and Equilibrium” is the consistent theme of each Earthsea novel (245-52). Sara Lefanu also makes comments in *Feminism and Science Fiction*: in the Earthsea trilogy the ones with true power and wisdom are all men; women are either ignorant country women or petty witches playing low and black arts (132). Le Guin herself admits that her gender ignorance is part of the tragic fact that most women writers of her generation wrote unconsciously within a male literary tradition. And there were very few models of women writing in science fiction field for her to follow (*Dancing* 234). Feminist insights have inspired Le Guin to rethink all the easy “truths” taken for granted about sex roles. She takes it as a duty for a woman writer to “discover, invent, make our own [women’s] truths, our values, ourselves” (*Language* 142). *Tehanu*, published eighteen years after *The Farthest Shore*, is Le Guin’s experiment in searching for and “remaking of the womanself.”

With its Equilibrium constantly guarded by the wise wizards, Earthsea has vices and cruelties that cannot be righted with magic. The plot of *Tehanu* begins with a tragic event of an eight-year-old girl, Therru, who was found misused, beaten and burned by her father. Tenar, now a middle-aged widow, adopted the disfigured Therru as her own daughter, nurturing her with love and care. During their stay in Ogion’s cottage in Re Albi, Tenar’s life was threatened by Aspen, a misogynist wizard who abused his power by molesting powerless people and chasing immortality. It is also revealed gradually that the wizards have a fixed belief that “wizardry was a man’s work, a man’s skill; magic was made by men. There had never been a woman mage” (36). Though Master Patterner learns in the Immanent Grove that the future of Earthsea

depends on “A woman on Gont” (157), other Masters only see a woman on Gont as a clue that will lead them to Ged. It never occurs to them that a woman may be the answer. Woman, for them, is a mystery beyond their wizardry training and their celibate life.

*Tehanu* uncovers the naked truth of gender bias and hierarchical oppression in the Earthsea. Tenar, a foreign girl with a white skin different from the dark-brown Inland people, found herself an outcast in the new world. Ged could only arrange for her to be an apprentice to his master, Ogion, who lived an isolated life in the forest. Though given the chance and gift to become a wizard, Tenar chose the ordinary path—marrying a farmer and raising children. Tired of the isolated life of a high priestess, Tenar longed for the warmth and peace of a common life. But Ogion could not teach her what she craved for:

I left him. What did I want with his books? What good were they to me? I wanted to live, I wanted a man, I wanted my children, I wanted my life.  
(56)

I used to think, I could be dressed up as a warrior, with a lance and a sword and a plume and all, but it wouldn't fit, would it? What would I do with a sword? Would it make me a hero? I'd be myself in clothes that didn't fit [...]. So I took it off and put on my own clothes. (95)

Tenar's remarks put into question the authority of male knowledge and the heroic values of war and glory. She knows deeply inside herself that no man could be her guide. In *Tehanu*, Le Guin places Tenar in a fatherless universe where she could rely on nothing but her own experience as a woman: Tenar had lost her husband, Flint; Ogion, her foster father, is in his death bed; the Archmage, Ged, had lost his magic power; Prince Arren is not yet crowned to be the new political leader. Earthsea is in a time of transition, its future direction unknown; so is the life of Tenar, who is now a middle-aged woman, searching for a new identity outside her traditional familial (McLean 111).

When the dragon Kalessian brought the dying Ged to Re Albi, who had lost his magic power and in consequence, also his own self-esteem, Tenar had a dialogue with Aunt Moss about the difference between male power and female power:

“What's wrong with men [if he's a wizard]” Tenar inquired cautiously.

“Then it’s all his power inside. His power’s himself, see. That’s how it is with him. And that’s all. When his power goes, he’s gone. Empty.” [...]

“And a woman, then?”

“Oh, well, dearie, a woman’s a different thing entirely. [...] I go back into the dark! No one knows, [...] no one can say what a woman is, a woman of power, a woman’s power, deeper than the roots of trees, deeper than the roots of islands, older than the Making, older than the Moon [...]. Who’ll ask the dark its name?”

[.....]

“I will, “ she [Tenar] said. [...]

“I lived long enough in the dark,” she [Tenar] said. (56-57)

Carol Gilligan has observed that “whereas men define themselves in terms of separation and individuality, women’s identity is defined in a context of relationship and judged by a standard of responsibility and care” (160-61). Le Guin expresses the same understanding in the *Earthsea Cycle*. The heroes in *A Wizard of Earthsea* and *The Farthest Shore* accomplish their self-discovery through solitary victory in strange lands. In *Tehanu*, Le Guin defines a woman’s strength from her personal experience of daily reality, her nurturing power, and her relationship with others. The weakening of Ged is Le Guin’s attempt to redefine strength as something “that doesn’t involve contests and conquests and bossing people around” (*Earthsea Revisioned* 18). Ged’s loss of magery gave him a chance to experience domestic life. From it, he learns the wisdom only women will know from their caring service. Joan Tronto states that women are assigned the direct service of “caring for” children, the old, the sick, while men are credited for “caring about” such romantic ideals as “the prosperity of the family.” Many women develop a relational way of loving and knowing informed by their direct experience in caring for the weak, the helpless and in their daily “labors of love”—feeding, cooking, planting, cleaning (Heller 233). In *Tehanu*, the dominant details are Tenar’s daily chores on the farm, and her doings and negotiations about Therru’s future and also Ged’s. Le Guin attempts to confirm the special wisdom women derive from “doing what they must do” to help life move on. Once Ged lost his power, he found himself in the class of the weak, the ordinary and the outsider, like Tenar and Therru. His life back to Gont is his final realization of the Taoist wisdom he had told Arren on their sea voyage in *The Farthest Shore*: “I, who am old, who have done what I must do, who stand in the daylight facing my own death, [...] there is only one power that is real

and worth the having. And that is the power, not to take, but to accept” (138). Ged’s loss of magic returns him to his roots, to his childhood life in Gont forest. His loss of “yang” power, from the Taoist perspective, makes him discover the “yin” wisdom inside him. In other words, he is reborn and made “whole.”

In *Tehanu*, Le Guin attempts to create a woman’s myth to explore women’s truths and values through Tenar’s caring experiences and her close relationship with the weak and the wild. “Tenar” may derive from the Latin *tenere*, which means “to have, to hold, to keep” (McLean 112). And Tenar’s use name is Gosha, which means “a white spider” in local dialect. In the Native American mythology, spider woman is a Grandmother figure who weaves a web of life that connects all things on earth. Tenar’s relationship with the misused child, Therru, embodies Le Guin’s vision of a “woman-self” that is closely connected with the helpless and “the uncontrollable, animal, unclean” (*Dancing* 117). The deformed Therru looks like “an animal, some strange-horny-skinned wild creature “ (199). And she has one eye blinded by fire. Later, it is revealed that Therru is half human, half dragon. Her two eyes: the normal one sees human reality; and the other one, a dragon’s eye, sees into the nature of all things. When Ogion sees Therru, he tells Tenar: “[...] they [the wizards] will fear her. [...] Teach her, Tenar, [...] Teach her all!—Not Roke. They are afraid—“ (23). Ogion knows that Therru has a natural gift of a woman mage, but the power she has is not the same kind as the magic power of the wizards.

Ogion has told Tenar on his death bed about the legend of dragon people he’d heard a long time ago from a fisherwoman:

In the beginning, dragon and human were all one. [...] Then among the dragon-people some became more and more in love with wilderness and wanted only to fly farther, seeking more freedom. Others of the dragon people came to gather up treasure, wealth, things learned. And they came to fear the wild ones. So those who had been both dragon and human changed, becoming two peoples. [...]

And there are those among us who know they were once dragons and among the dragons there are some who know their kinship with us. And these say that when the one people were becoming two, some of them, still both human and dragon, still winged, went not to the other side of the world. There they live in peace, great winged beings both wild and wise, with human mind and dragon heart. And so she [the fisherwoman] sang,

Farther west than west  
beyond the land  
my people are dancing  
on the other wind.                   (*Tehanu* 12-13)

In the legend of dragon-people, Le Guin is referring to the tragic truth in modern society that humans have isolated themselves from nature. Tenar's connection with Therru, a descendent of the dragon-people, implies that woman's freedom cannot be separated from the liberation of the underprivileged and the wild. When both Ged and Tenar were threatened by the bad wizard, Aspen, it is Therru who called the ancient dragon to save their life. Therru, whose true name, Tehanu, means the central star in the Swan constellation, represents a saving power outside the Earthsea world. As Le Guin explains: "Their [Ged and Tenar] strength and salvation must come from outside the institutions and traditions. It must be a new thing" (*Earthsea Revisioned* 19).

Apparently, "a new thing" refers to the new people who "have the human mind and dragon heart." In the last book, *The Other Wind*, the legend of the dragon-people is further developed to be a myth that liberates humans from their old fear of death and the convention of gender inequality. The opening scene of *The Other Wind* is Gont Port, Ged's native place. The first chapter is titled, "Mending the Green Pitcher," which suggests that Ged's retiring life in Gont forest (together with his wife, Tenar and daughter, Tehanu) is nourishing and peaceful. Like *The Farthest Shore*, *The Other Wind* starts with an ill omen brought by Alder, a minor sorcerer who was sent by Master Patterner of Roke to seek Ged's advice about his painful dream of the dead. Alder's bad dream is a sign of some mage's misuse of wizardry to meddle the law of life and death. While the Earthsea people were troubled by bad dreams, the winged dragons suddenly attacked the west part of Havnor island, where located the ruling power of the Earthsea. Prince Arren (his use-name, Lebannen), now the crowned King, summoned Tehanu to speak to the dragons. One of the dragons, named Orm Irian, came down and changed into a woman shape to negotiate a truce with them. "She [the woman dragon] was young, tall, and strongly built, dark, dark-haired, wearing a farm woman's shift and trousers, barefoot" (147). Irian disclosed to them a dark secret on Roke: Thorion, Master Summoner of Roke, has been making spells of immortality to call back the dead into life. His wicked power is endangering not only of the life of dragons but also the life of all things (154-56). King Lebannen agreed to stop the wizard's misdoings with the help of the dragons. The last chapter, titled "Rejoining,"

describes the symbolic gathering in the Immanent Grove of King Lebannen, Master Patterner, Master Onyx of Roke, Alder, the three women—Tenar, Tehanu, Sesarakh (the future queen)—and the dragon woman, Lady Irian. With the help of Tehanu, Irian dived into the dream world of the dead to undo Thorion’s evil spells. They liberated the dead, who finally could embrace death and “be one with the earth again” (228).

After restoring the Equilibrium, Tehanu turned into a dragon, flying back to the west to dance on the other wind. King Lebannen, also joined Tehanu’s return in his dream. The last book of Earthsea celebrates the reunion of humans and dragons, the power balance between men and woman and humans’ final rejoin with the Earth. The legend of the Earthsea concludes with a Taoist resonance:

“We broke the world to make it whole,” Ged said.

After a long silence Tenar said [...], “The Patterner believes Irian [the dragon woman] will come to the Grove if he calls to her.” [...]

She [Tenar] looked where he was looking, into the dim gulf of air above the western sea.

He looked away, up at the forests, at the mountain, the darkening heights.

“Tell me,” she said, “tell me what you did while I was gone.”

“Kept the house.”

“Did you walk in the forest?”

“Not yet,” he said. (*The Other Wind* 246)

## **IX. Conclusion: An Ecological Fable for Our Times**

In its subject matter and narrative structure, the Earthsea trilogy is written within the epic tradition of Homer and Virgil. The hero, Ged, is compelled to embark on a sea journey, undergoing trials and errors, conquering dragons, regaining lost treasures, descending into Hades to save the world. The Earthsea trilogy is a typical heroic saga in every sense of the word. However what sets this trilogy apart from other heroic legends, is its underlying “anti-heroic” spirit that sabotages the “anthropocentric” ideology underpinning the corpus of western romance literature. The controlling philosophy in the Earthsea romance is Taoist ethics of equilibrium and balance, that

means going beyond humans' relative values to see the whole picture of yin-yang dialectics, and respecting the wild (dragons) as the guide to the Way it is. In the sequel, *Tehanu*, Le Guin replaces the male-power-dominating romance and magic wonder with ordinary, dull, everyday order which women's strength helps to sustain. Mike Christie and Robert A. Collins have pointed out that the social criticism of gender imbalance and the sudden change of mood and style in *Tehanu* are ill-tempered and jarring within the structure of magic fantasy (McLean 117). However, after the publication of *The Other Wind* in 2001, it is clear that Le Guin intended to complete an alternative heroic (or anti-heroic) epic that is responsive to growing environmental consciousness. We can approach Le Guin's Earthsea Cycle with the ecological literary criticism proposed by Joseph W. Meeker. In his essay, "Comic Mode," Meeker contends that western literary criticism starts with the term, *mimesis*, which means "an imitation of actions of men"—the actions that are preferably tragic:

The tragic view assumes that man exists in a state of conflict with powers that are greater than he is. Such forces as nature, the gods, moral law, passionate love, the greatness of ideas and knowledge all seem enormously above mankind and in some way determine his welfare or his suffering. Tragic literature and philosophy, then, undertake to demonstrate that man is equal or superior to his conflict. The tragic man takes his conflict seriously, and feels compelled to affirm his mastery and his greatness in face of his own destruction. He is triumphant image of what man can be. (157)

For hundreds of years, tragedy has been the dominant narrative mode, practiced as either a literary form or a philosophical attitude, to celebrate humans' singularity and greatness above other species. In contrast, "comedy avoids strong emotions. Passionate love, hate, or patriotism generally appear ridiculous in a comic context" (158). While the tragic hero dies for his lofty ideals, the comic hero survives without them. Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* is a good example: while all young men want to go away to join the war, Lysistrata calls for a sex strike of all wives to stop the war. What Lysistrata cares is the continuity of normal life rather than the rhetoric of warriors and honor. Meeker also mentions:

The Greek demigod Comus, whose name was probably the origin of the word comedy, was a god of fertility [...]. Comus was content to leave

matters of great intellectual import to Apollo and gigantic passions to Dionysus while he busied himself with the maintenance of the commonplace conditions that are friendly to life. Maintaining equilibrium among living things, and restoring it once it has been lost, are Comus's special talents, and they are shared by the many comic heroes who follow the god's example. (159)

Meeker observes that the tragic view of man, for all its flattery of humans' unrelenting quest for the impossible, has led to cultural and biological disasters, and it is time to look for an alternative narrative mode which encourages the survival of humans and other living things.

Le Guin has expressed a similar literary perception about science fiction in her essay, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction":

If science fiction is the mythology of modern technology, then its myth is tragic. "Technology," or "modern science" (using the words as they are usually used, in an unexamined shorthand standing for the "hard" sciences and high technology founded upon continuous economic growth), is a heroic undertaking. Herculean, Promethean, conceived as triumph, hence ultimately as tragedy. The fiction embodying this myth will be, and has been, triumphant (Man conquers earth, space, aliens, death, the future, etc.) and tragic (apocalypse, holocaust, then or now).

If, however, one avoids the linear, progressive, Time's-(killing)-arrow mode of the Techo-Heroic, and redefines technology and science as primary cultural bag rather than weapon of domination, one pleasant side effect is that science fiction can be seen as a far less rigid, narrow field, not necessarily Promethean or apocalyptic at all, and in fact less a mythological genre than a realistic one. (153-54)

Le Guin questions the dominant historical telling of how human civilization evolves through hunting, thrusting, killing, bashing. Instead, she is a firm believer of what Fisher calls "the Carrier Bag Theory of human evolution." Fisher argues that human civilization survives mainly because of carrier bag holders, who gather and collect wild food and products. Le Guin believes that humans should not always appear as conquerors, violators in the natural world. Humans should be, in normal circumstances, the "in-

gresssive” and “uncombative” carrier bag holders. Unfortunately, the killer stories of conflict and fighting take over. The narrative about people collecting food and dancing in the field is lost.

Still, the human story is unending and as Le Guin says: There is time enough to describe how people relate to everything else in this universe, “this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were” (154). *The Earthsea Cycle* is her successful attempt to restore the lost images of what life might have been like and so provide an alternative vision to the destructive tragic vision of heroic triumph.

Writers, especially writers for children, understand that literature is an illusion that helps the youth to shape their dream about what they may become. The major contribution of *The Earthsea Trilogy* to juvenile literature is that Le Guin conveys a moral vision rarely voiced in the genre of coming-of-age fantasy. Le Guin opens our eyes to the true nature of magic and wizard—both are redefined and re-evaluated in terms of their social functions of connecting humans with the environment. Thus Le Guin gives us a new type of hero whose true wisdom is his knowledge of inner wholeness and his conception of the reciprocity between humans and natural objects as a balance or Equilibrium.

For Le Guin, science fiction/fantasy is more than an “extrapolative” drama for the “escapist” audience (*Language* 155). “We read books to find out who we are” (qtd. in Le Guin, *Language* 29). *The Earthsea Cycle* is Le Guin’s thoughtful reflection on the truth of human nature and what impact humans’ technological progress may have on the environment. Though the *Earthsea Cycle* as a whole is a magic fantasy written for young readers, Le Guin shaped the *Earthsea* series into a inspiring myth that “redefines technology and science [magic] as primary cultural bag rather than weapon of domination [...]” (“The Carrier Bag Theory” 154). Le Guin’s progress from the heroic myth of magic power in the *Earthsea Trilogy* to women’s life experience in *Tehanu*, then to the dance of dragon-people in *The Other Wind*, is her gradual completion of an ecological vision of “healing the wounds” of modern humans’ isolation from their whole self, and other beings. *The Earthsea Cycle* is an anti-anthropocentric epic journey of restoring the Equilibrium between inner and outer, light and darkness, death and life, woman and men, humans and nature. As Shippery mentions: “A reader may start on *A Wizard of Earthsea* for its spells and dragons [...] or pre-medieval trapping; he would be imperceptive, however, if he failed to realize before long—however dim the realization—that he was reading not just a parable, but a parable for our times” (117).

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