

# Dancing the Tao



Dancing the Tao:  
Le Guin and Moral Development

By

Sandra J. Lindow

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P U B L I S H I N G

Dancing the Tao: Le Guin and Moral Development,  
by Sandra J. Lindow

This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-3988-4, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3988-4

*To Michael  
for the pleasure of our enduring conversation*



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my husband Michael Levy for his academic cheerleading and excellent editing, for encouraging me in my scholarship and for taking me to conferences and conventions where I learned how to play with the big kids. I would like to thank Ursula K. Le Guin for her graciousness in answering my questions and correcting my misunderstandings. I also want to acknowledge my readers, especially Peg Lauber, Carol Stevens, Richard D. Erlich, and Warren Rochelle who gave me many thoughtful suggestions and my editors for liking my work enough to publish it: David Hartwell, Farah Mendelsohn, Sheryl Vint, Brian Attebery, Javier Martinez and Lisa Yaszek for their patience and their polite nudging as I learned to think and write in Academic. Special thanks to those who helped with the cover: AJ for reminding me to follow the light, Jean Accola for her artist's eye and Sharon Stickney for her finishing skills. Finally, I would like to thank the Writing Group at the Library for applauding my progress and our Arkham Horror Support Group: Laura, Kelly, Mandy and Matt for bringing me back to the fantastic when my brain had turned to sludge.

Parts of this book were previously published in earlier journal versions:

- Lindow, Sandra. "Ursula K. Le Guin: Rescuing the Damaged Child." *The New York Review of Science Fiction* (January 1997): 1, 10-13.
- . "Trauma and Recovery in *Wonderful Alexander*: Animal as Guide through the Inner Space of the Unconscious" *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction* (August 1997): 32-38.
  - . "Becoming Dragon: The Transcendence of the Damaged Child." *Extrapolation* 44.1 (2003): 32-44.
  - . "Sometimes it takes a Leap: Decision Making and the Tao within the work of Ursula K. Le Guin." *Foundation* 33, # 90 (Spring 2004): 71-80.
  - . "Wild Gifts: Anger Management and Moral Development in the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin and Maurice Sendak." *Extrapolation* 47.3 (2006): 445-456.
  - . "Lavinia: A Women Reinvents Herself in Fact and/or Fiction" *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*. 20.2 #76 (2009): 221-237.
  - . "Mapping the Walls of *The Dispossessed*." *Extrapolation* 52.2 (2011): 174-191.

*The way you can go  
Isn't the real way,  
The name you can say  
Isn't the real name.*  
—Lao Tzu (trans. Le Guin)

*Prose and poetry--all art, music, dance--rise from and move with  
the profound rhythms of our body, our being, and the body and  
being of the world... Once we get the beat, the right beat, our ideas  
and our words dance to it.*  
—Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Wave in the Mind*

## INTRODUCTION

### CARRIER BAGS FOR MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Ursula K. Le Guin is one of the finest and most innovative moral thinkers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Her ideas are in no way new; rather, her wide-ranging eclectic and idiosyncratic study of anthropology, sociology, psychology, theology and mythology creates a meta-cognitive setting for stories and novels where the essence of human morality is revealed through taboo-challenging thought experiments into gender, family structure, and government. In her essay “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” Le Guin quotes Elizabeth Fisher’s “carrier bag theory of human evolution,” suggesting prehistoric women’s gathering or carrier bags were as essential to human evolution as developing the use of tools (*DEW* 167). Le Guin writes:

If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it’s useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people, and then later take it out and eat it or share it or store it up for the winter in a solider container ...—if to do that is human, if that’s what it takes, then I am a human being after all. Fully, freely, gladly for the first time. (*DEW* 168)

Thus, a carrier bag is a gathering bag and also a metaphor for describing homes and communities. Le Guin uses her carrier bag not only as a good way to organize the novels and stories she writes, but also as a handy descriptor for what it means to be human: “my carrier bag full of wimps and klutzes, and tiny grains of things smaller than a mustard seed ...” Le Guin has an affinity for writing about women, children, wimps and klutzes but she is uncomfortable writing about heroes doing traditionally heroic things: Le Guin ruefully writes that a Hero with his “imperial nature” tends to be governed by an “uncontrollable impulse, to take everything over and run it while making stern decrees and laws to control his uncontrollable impulse to kill it” (*DEW* 168-169). Le Guin was raised on hero stories and was educated in the classics. At first, she chose to write

through the eyes of male viewpoint characters until the sea change of the women's movement forced her to see and write through gendered eyes. Writing through male points of view, however, did not preclude her from having a pacifist and egalitarian agenda. In "Cross-Dressing as a Male Narrator," Jane Donawerth suggests that one of the values of having male viewpoint characters is "converting them to feminism" (112). Although Le Guin did not identify as a feminist at first, her male protagonists all react against stereotype. Ged in *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), Genly in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), and Shevek in *The Dispossessed* (1974) are more interested in subduing their own inner demons than in heroic derring-do. Even Le Guin's Aeneas, the hero of Vergil's *Aeneid* (*Lavinia* 2008), is a protofeminist who regrets the "blood lust" and "battle madness" that make him such an effective warrior (121). From early on, Le Guin recognized that stereotypical heroes walked a path fraught with moral quicksand. It is all too easy to go from doing good to doing harm.

In her 1986 essay, "Heroes," Le Guin writes, "All I want to do is lose the hero myths so that I can find what is worth admiration" (*DEW* 174). She suggests that *the modern novel "is a fundamentally unheroic kind of story"* (168). Therefore, she does not organize her writing around resolving a specific conflict, as writing teachers often suggest, but around the carrier bags of everyday life, "since their purpose is neither resolution nor stasis but continuing process": "beginnings without ends, ...initiations, ...losses, ... transformations and translations, and far more tricks than conflicts, far fewer triumphs than snares and delusions" (*DEW* 169). Ultimately Le Guin's oeuvre is speculative work that revolves primarily around decision-making rather than wizards warring on Misery Mountain or flashy phaser duels at Notokay Station, while nevertheless revealing human behavior "worth admiration."

Since what concerns Le Guin is what it means to be fully human and admirable, her writing: fiction, nonfiction, novels, stories, picture books and poems all become carrier bags for morality and her insight into what that is. Le Guin has explained that her novels are character-driven. She has written that most of her stories occur in writer's trance, apparently channeling strong voices that come to her through her subconscious (*WM* 84). More often than not, her novels' organizational structures follow a labyrinthine, slice-of-life moral path as her protagonists find their ways through life-challenging experiments into political organization, family structure and gender identity, ultimately discovering the center of what it means to live honestly and respectfully in any world. Influenced by her life-long love of the *Tao Te Ching*, one of the oldest guides for moral development, Le Guin's conclusions about moral behavior from early

childhood to old age also parallel those of modern moral theorists such as Erik Erikson, Lawrence Kohlberg, Carol Gilligan, and Mary Field Belenky. This book looks specifically at how Le Guin depicts those pivotal moral decisions that function as rites of passage and correspondingly affect the direction and quality of later life.

Outside her fiction, Le Guin is fairly blunt about the process of developing moral maturity. In her essay, "Indian Uncles" Le Guin writes "People should not *use* other people" (WM 14). Certainly this relates directly back to her problem with heroes, who, more often than not, use others to win wars, attain dynasty, and cement their place in history and poetry. Her early novels, such as the original Earthsea trilogy and *The Dispossessed* (1974) all deal with child neglect and abandonment. *The Lathe of Heaven* (1977) evolves out of therapist abuse. Stone Telling, the central character of her omnibus novel, *Always Coming Home* (1985), is born into a single parent family and is bullied on the playground because of it. Later work in the Earthsea series focuses on the serious after effects of incest and child abuse. Other novels such as *The Telling* (2000), a response to China's disastrous cultural revolution; *Gifts* (2004), a coming of age fantasy in a lawless world; and *Lavinia* (2008), a redaction of the *Aeneid*, describe attempts to recover and make sense of all the suffering left in the wake of abuse that has been systematized on a cultural level. Of course, not using people is a platonic ideal for behavior and Le Guin is wise enough to realize there are exceptions to this rule. She writes:

The use of grown-ups by children is one of the numerous exceptions to my absolute rule that people should not use other people. Weaker people, of course, get to use stronger ones; they have to. But the limits of use are best set by the strong, not the weak. (WM 15)

In other words, the morally mature have a responsibility to set appropriate boundaries for the young and any others who need guidance. She concludes, "Children are ignorant and foolish, but they learn if they are given the chance to learn" (WM 16). Her picture books such as *A Ride on the Red Mare's Back* and her chapter books such as *Catwings* were written for her grandchildren and are intended to explain various developmental issues, but these books offer valuable lessons for people of all ages.

Achieving moral maturity is by definition a lifelong process. Le Guin's fictional thought experiments give her vulnerable, imperfect (often wimpy and klutzy) characters plenty of chances to learn how to be morally mature. Other writers do this as well. What makes Le Guin's work outstanding, however, is the wisdom and love with which her characters'

struggles and moral quandaries are depicted. She recognizes, in Owen Pugh's words, that love is "practice, partly" (WTO 130). Though not extremely demonstrative in their expression of love, her protagonists learn to act and do noble, important things as moral human beings, often foregoing the letter of the law because they realize it is more important to do the loving thing. In her early short story "Nine Lives," love and loyalty drive miners Owen Pugh and Alvaro Martin to risk their lives for each other. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, love unites Genly and Estraven and opens Gethen to the stars. Shevek, the protagonist in *The Dispossessed*, cannot develop his unified field theory until he learns the lessons of love.<sup>1</sup> In the short story "Sur," love helps a small group of South American women reach the South Pole first and also makes it unnecessary for them to publicize what they have achieved. In *Wonderful Alexander and the Catwings*, love helps heal the serious emotional trauma experienced by Jane, the winged kitten, and in *Tehanu*, Tenar's love saves Therru from a life of mental illness and despair, finally allowing the burned child to transcend incest and unspeakable abuse to become a dragon. The examples are many. Though perhaps not obvious at first, love is the element within which all her stories are written. Le Guin writes:

Children brought up in great security, tribal or familial, aren't very aware of love, as I suppose fish aren't very aware of water. That's the way it ought to be, love as air, love as the human element. (WM 17)

From this firm foundation of love, Le Guin traces a path to moral maturity that parallels the *Tao* and the work of feminist thinkers such as Carol Gilligan and Mary Field Belenky. Thus, Le Guin's stories, beyond being good reads, become templates for how to live morally, lovingly in the world. They are carrier bags for moral choices folded within the human element of love.

Love, however, is not the whole story. The unexpected ingredient in Le Guin's carrier bag recipe is a heaping tablespoon of subversion. Through effective use of limited narrators and third person viewpoint characters, Le Guin lures readers into uncomfortable literary situations that force them to question their own moral values. For instance, readers slowly recognize that Capt. Don Davidson in "The Word for World is Forest" is not a stereotypical pulp SF space hero but a despicable villain. Often the subversive issue is sexuality. Like Genly Ai, readers must reconsider their own gender when Estraven kemmers into a woman. The Moon Dance of *Always Coming Home* and the kemmerhouse of "Coming of Age in Karhide" both depict culturally sanctioned promiscuity. Both are heuristics intended to force readers to see that moral choices are based on cultural

values. Universal morality involves acceptance of otherness, but what if another's behavior tests our own deeply held personal values? Sexuality is such a complex moral issue because it involves the creation of life and requires decisions about personhood, ownership and agency. Throughout her fiction and nonfiction, Le Guin protects a woman's right to choose, asserting that abortion can be an acceptable solution to a difficult moral problem. As Le Guin makes clear in her speech "Moral and Ethical Implications of Family Planning" (1978), there is a difference between what is ethical (based on a set of rules) and what is moral (based on a universal understanding of what is caring and just). She concludes that since male moral philosophers historically have tended to exclude women in their philosophies, "a morality that includes the feminine will have to be invented as we go along" (*DEW* 19). Close examination of Le Guin's work does reveal an inclusive morality, but not by avoiding some interesting and uncomfortable dilemmas. Overall, Le Guin believes that personal values are not worth much unless they have been tested and deeply considered, and there lies the value of subversion.

## Notes

1. In fact, authorized biographer Julie Phillips reveals that Shevek's name was based on the names of two men, friends of Alfred Kroeber, that Le Guin admired during her early childhood: Sheviakov, a Russian psychology student, and Klimek, a Polish anthropologist, whom Ursula has described as her "first love" (although she was five and he was about thirty-five at the time) (Phillips 162). Small children's emotions can be very powerful. Early relationships are often integrated becoming part of the adult Self. Thus, after the sea change of time, it is easy to see how these emotionally charged early relationships led to the creation of a character so well-rounded and intimately well-developed.

# CHAPTER ONE

## RESCUING THE DAMAGED CHILD

In "Some Thoughts on Narrative" (1980), Ursula K. Le Guin writes that "narrative is a central function of language. . . a fundamental operation of the normal mind functioning in society. To learn to speak is to learn to tell a story (39)." She goes on to suggest that narratives like dreams are the primary way we "make sense" of the complicated jumble of our corresponding thoughts and experiences. Thus, we are constantly telling ourselves our own stories not so much out of choice but out of necessity, the need to justify our own actions and connect the present within the context of "the unverifiable past and the unpredictable future (45)."

To be a writer is to be obsessed with this process, to be constantly telling and retelling our own stories in various disguised and imaginative ways and thus making decisions about what it is to be a person whether in Menomonie, Wisconsin; Portland, Oregon; or Earthsea. Le Guin calls her excursions into imaginary experience, "thought experiments." When she conducts these experiments, she is, by definition working at the edges of her own moral and intellectual development. They function to expand her understanding of what is morally and humanly possible (and, perhaps, herself). Therefore, it should be possible to look at Le Guin's work and see how her moral development has evolved throughout her career as a writer.

### **The Foundation of Le Guin's Moral Thinking**

Le Guin's foundation in moral thinking came through her relationship with her parents. Le Guin reports to have had a privileged, eventful childhood and yet her fiction is full of damaged children. In a 1982 speech to the Portland Branch of the National Abortion Rights Action League, she describes her younger self as "the Princess." Her father was Dr. Alfred Kroeber, the celebrated anthropologist. Her mother, Theodora Kroeber, had been trained as a clinical psychologist, and was a writer best known for her book, *Ishi in Two Worlds*. Her childhood home was a gathering place for artists and intellectuals. Everything within the world of the mind was fair game for questioning and examination, and yet as an Honor's List college



student, Le Guin knew almost nothing about contraception (75). A brief college love affair with a graduate student left her pregnant. When Le Guin suggested marriage, "the Prince" replied that he was going home to his mother. "He went home to his family palace in Brooklyn Heights, and hid in the throne room (76)."

Le Guin also went home to her deeply moral, intellectually sophisticated "though modest and even inhibited" parents (75). Abortion, in the late forties, was illegal:

And yet now, without hesitation, they resolved to break the law, to conspire to commit a felony. And they did so in the reasoned and deeply felt conviction that it was right, that indeed it was their *responsibility*, to do so.

The princess herself questioned the decision, not on legal grounds, of course, but ethically. She cried some more and said, "I'm being cowardly. I'm being dishonest. I'm evading the consequence of my own action."

Her father said, "That's right. You are. That cowardice, dishonesty, evasion, is a lesser sin than the crass irresponsibility of sacrificing your training, your talent, and the children you will want to have, in order to have one nobody wants to have." (76)

The result was that Le Guin had "the best abortion" by "the highest class abortionists in New York City" (77). "They charged more for an abortion than most working families made in a year" and the word "abortion" was never even spoken, but rather the "cute euphemism 'A.B.' (77)." Paralleling the cost of the abortion with working class wages underlines Le Guin's recognition of privilege and the obligations that go with it. Le Guin continues:

As for the princess, she got her B.A. a few months after she got her A.B., and then went on to graduate school, and then got married, and was a writer, and got pregnant by choice four times. One pregnancy ended in spontaneous abortion, miscarriage, in the third month; three pregnancies ended in live normal birth. She had three desired and beloved children, none of whom would have been born if her first pregnancy had gone to term. (77)

Afterwards Le Guin considered the morality of what she had done and when "the terror was past" she concluded that she had done the right thing (78). Le Guin realized,

What was wrong was not knowing how to prevent getting pregnant. What was wrong was my ignorance. To legislate that ignorance, that's the crime. I'm ashamed, she thought, for letting the bigots keep me ignorant, and for

acting willfully in my ignorance, and for falling in love with a weak, selfish man. I am deeply ashamed. But I'm not guilty. Where does guilt come in? I did what I had to do so that I could do the work I was put here to do. I will do that work. That's what it's all about. It's about taking responsibility. (78)

## Le Guin and Gilligan

The reasoning Le Guin used in defending her choice demonstrates that she had set forth on the road of an adult woman's moral development, a journey that Carol Gilligan chronicles in her ground-breaking book, *In a Different Voice* (1982). Gilligan saw that women's moral development often did not follow the same path as men's moral development and based her conclusions on interviews with women who had had an unplanned pregnancy. In *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, Le Guin recommends Gilligan's work as "one of the most useful guides into the difficult area of the cultural determination and enforcement of differences between male and female moral perception (20)."

In her chapter "Concepts of Self and Morality," Gilligan writes that controlling fertility through birth control and abortion frees women from dependence and gives them the chance to consider what they actually want for themselves. However, this puts them in conflict with the cultural norms and expectations that women be caretakers and nurturers. "Although independent assertion in judgment and action is considered to be the hallmark of adulthood, it is rather in their care and concern for others that women have both judged themselves and been judged (70)." Gilligan goes on to explain:

The conflict between self and other thus constitutes the central moral problem for women posing a dilemma whose resolution requires a reconciliation between femininity and adulthood ... It is precisely this dilemma—the conflict between compassion and autonomy, between virtue and power—which the feminine voice struggles to resolve in its effort to reclaim the self and to solve the moral problem in such a way that no one is hurt. (70)

## Passages to Understanding Women's Moral Development

When Ursula Le Guin took responsibility for her mistakes and attempted to make moral sense of her choices, she struggled to become more conscious in her behavior. Her personal narrative created clarity out

of chaos. She saw that dependency and passivity had caused her to be at the mercy of the manipulations of an older, more experienced Prince Charming as well as her own unconscious drives. Her initial, uncritical acceptance of Charming as sexual expert who would protect her, had put her in a situation where she, alone, was forced to consciously destroy life (do harm) in order to keep from doing a greater harm to her own life. The abortion abruptly jerked Le Guin into a clearer understanding of herself in relationship to others. It was a crisis of identity. Gilligan describes the abortion decision as one that brings into focus those issues that define the experience of being a woman, what Joan Didion (1972) calls "the irreconcilable difference of it—that sense of living one's life underwater, that dark involvement with blood and birth and death (71)."

Though it is highly likely that Le Guin would have become a writer without the trauma of an unplanned pregnancy, it is also likely that working through the shame and "endless sorrow" has influenced her fiction throughout her career (*DEW* 77). Le Guin's evolution as a writer seems to rest on her grappling with moral dilemmas—and particularly the rights of the individual versus the rights of the culture. The act of writing fiction pulls her "underwater" into the semiconscious, Didion's "dark involvement with blood, birth and death." Over the years, her literary solutions have been like birth children born naturally from the womb of her evolving moral development. These solutions evince an evolving "ethic of care," what Gilligan describes as a "universal... condemnation of exploitation and hurt" (74). Thus, she develops a clearer understanding of the psychology of human relationships—an increasing differentiation of self and other and a growing comprehension of the dynamics of social interaction. This ethic, which reflects a cumulative knowledge of human relationships, evolves from a central insight, that the self and other are interdependent.

An important motif in Le Guin's work is confrontation with the dark powers of the subconscious. Sheltered and ignorant of the dynamics of human sexuality, the young Ursula Kroeber existed in a kind of emotional darkness. Before her unplanned pregnancy, she seemed to lack conscious knowledge of her own ability to act independently; but her pregnancy decision required considerable moral growth. By choosing an abortion, she actively took responsibility for changing her own behavior. This transition is paralleled in much of her fiction. In a yin/yang dark to light progression, she frequently moves her characters out of dark, enclosed, womblike spaces and into a cleaner, clearer light of understanding. Insight grows out of suffering and opposites are reconciled (Spivak 25).

## Earthsea and Childhood Trauma

Le Guin's *Earthsea* books are important examples of her own evolving understanding of human moral development. Ged, the hero of *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), was physically abused and neglected as a child. As a young wizard, his shadow, the dark side of his subconscious, is separated from him. Just as the abortion decision forced Le Guin to do battle with herself, Ged must grapple with and then reintegrate the shadow beast to become a complete human being:

[T]he lump of shadow that clung to Ged tearing at his flesh . . . was like a black beast, the size of a young child, though it seemed to swell and shrink; and it had no head or face, only the four taloned paws with which it gripped and tore. (WE 61)

Ged's shadow is childhood trauma personified.

In her important book, *Unchained Memories: True Stories of Traumatic Memories Lost and Found*, child psychiatrist Lenore Terr describes the process by which an abused child splits off memory of parental abuse. Discovered by Freud late in his career and called *Ich-Spaltung* (literally, "I splitting"), it is a defense mechanism where the child splits off or sequesters memory of the abuse from awareness (124). By doing so, the child is protected from consciously recognizing the unspeakable horror, shame and powerlessness implicit in the trauma of repeated abuse.

Splitting is a defense mechanism that allows you to see yourself or others as "all good" or "all bad." The person who splits cannot integrate positive and negative qualities of self or others into full and cohesive images. Occasionally the memories of one of these "selves" are lost. (125)

Terr goes on to explain that most commonly, children split their "bad" selves from their "good:"

The child who employs "splitting of the self" considers the unwanted side a kind of gangrenous appendage, and tries to cut it off. This mental amputation costs the child fullness of character, mental energy, and considerable memory; the sick, or bad, or night side remains intact though hidden--as though the child had to drag around a rotten, half-severed limb (126).

When Ged reintegrates his shadow self, he becomes a kinder, more emotionally balanced human being. However, he is still prohibited from the full range of human expression. As a wizard, he must not be sexually active lest his magical powers be lost. Perhaps it is the repressed sexual

energy that gives him the power to do magic. Aside from the conventions of traditional folklore, magical thinking often controls the thoughts of real, previously traumatized children. In *Too Scared to Cry: Psychic Trauma in Childhood* (1990), psychologist Lenore Terr explains that they often come up with a false causality by which an unavoidable traumatic event could have been avoided. "If only I hadn't had that fight with my mother, we wouldn't have been kidnapped (61)." Terr concludes that children would rather feel guilty than powerless:

Shame comes from public exposure of one's own vulnerability. Guilt, on the other hand, is private. It follows from a sense of failing to measure up to private, internal standards. When others "know" that you once were helpless, you tend to feel ashamed. *They* know. If, on the other hand, you feel you caused your own problems, you cease feeling so vulnerable and blame yourself, instead, for the shape of events. (113)

For Le Guin, becoming sexually active and then pregnant destroyed the magical power of her childish trust. She was ashamed that she had loved "a weak, selfish man." She could no longer believe that she would always be protected and safe in a dangerous world. It is not surprising that in writing the original *Earthsea* trilogy she did not question the genre tradition that wizards must not be sexual although this changes as the *Earthsea* series progresses.

Le Guin undoubtedly recognized the fundamental unfairness in the sex/magic tradeoff, and much of her later work examines gender and how paternal cultures scapegoat women. *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) creates a culture where gender and sexism do not exist. This imaginary world of visually androgynous and asexual Gethenians is a literary triumph that skillfully guides us into examining our own subconscious, sexual chauvinism. Gethen is a world largely free of sexually irresponsible Prince Charmings.<sup>2</sup>

### **Identity Reclaimed in *Tombs of Atuan***

For Le Guin, however, the Gethenian thought experiment did not solve the problem of a young woman's identity crisis, that painful passage out of the powerful, dark magic of tradition, passivity and dependence. Prior to *The Tombs of Atuan* (1970), the second book of the *Earthsea* trilogy, Le Guin's viewpoint characters had been male, but in this novel Le Guin created Tenar, a girl destined from birth to be given to the powers of darkness. At age six, Tenar is taken from her family and dedicated to the

service of ancient, dark gods. In the terrifying rituals of dedication Tenar is symbolically sacrificed:

A figure in a belted gown of white ... His face was masked with white. He held a sword of polished steel five feet long. Without a word or hesitation he swung the sword, held in both hands, up over the little girl's neck. The drum stopped beating. (4)

The masked figure in white parallels Le Guin's abortionist, but this time the sacrifice does not occur. "A figure in black . . . leapt down the stairs, and stayed the sacrificer's arms (5). The figure in black rescues the child so that she might be dedicated to service. On a literary level, Le Guin rescues her character so that she may be used to explore the power of the unconscious. In her critical biography of Le Guin, Charlotte Spivak describes Tenar's transition into darkness:

Clad in a black robe in a ceremonial enactment of the conflict between the forces of light and darkness, she enters the dark Place of the Tombs and surrenders her old identity as Tenar. Now in the service of the Nameless Ones, she adopts the new name of Arha, which means the Eaten One. Her individual identity is thus sacrificed to her assigned role as priestess of the ancient underworld powers. Her supposed rebirth as a priestess represents her death as an individual. (Spivak 33)

Henceforth, Tenar now Arha, lives a confined life, one circumscribed by the darkness of the mazelike tombs she must learn to negotiate. She has been systematically traumatized, emotionally damaged and intellectually neglected. What emerging selfhood she once had, has been eaten, destroyed. She is at the mercy of dark, unconscious forces, for Le Guin undoubtedly realizes that the unconscious mind gains its greatest power through confinement and sensory deprivation. At age fifteen Arha is an emotionally disturbed child with very little sense of her own rights and responsibilities as an individual. Spivak goes on to suggest, "Psychologically, as well as literally, she has been living out her years underground. But it is also in the underground—at once womb and tomb—that the transformation begins" (Spivak 35).

When tongueless prisoners are brought to the Tombs to be executed, Arha has them killed and their bodies removed from the room in the Tombs where they had been kept. After this, she begins to explore the labyrinth much as having an abortion often spurs a woman into exploring her own labyrinthine subconscious. It is interesting to note that "labia" and "labyrinth" have similar roots.

When Ged enters the Tombs in search of the other half of the fabled ring of the legendary hero, Erreth-Akbe, Arha's emerging sexuality as well as her intellectual curiosity cause her to rebel against ancient dictates. Fascinated by Ged, dark skinned and the first whole man she has ever seen, she stalls then finally refuses to kill Ged for trespassing in the tombs. Ged, whose special power lies in his ability to see another's true name, is able to free her from the grip of the Nameless Ones by restoring her true name. Though both are sworn to celibacy, in a symbolic act of marriage and sexual creation, they put together the halves of Erreth-Akbe's ring, unite light and dark and magically restore peace and unity to Earthsea. Tenar and Ged escape as the tombs fall into destruction behind them:

. . . a kind of wave ran up the hillside, and a huge crack opened among the Tombstones, gaping on the blackness underneath, oozing dust like gray smoke. The stones that still stood upright toppled into it and were swallowed. Then with a crash that seemed to echo off the sky itself, the raw black lips of the crack closed together; and the hill shook once, and grew still. (123)

Thus, Tenar's moral dilemma, choosing between life and death for Ged, the intruder, parallels the decision a woman must make in deciding the outcome of an unwanted pregnancy. The fetus, at first, is seen as an intruder in her womb and no part of herself. As Tenar gets to know Ged, she realizes she cannot kill him. It was only the previous anonymity of prisoners that allowed her to let them be killed. Saving Ged thus symbolizes the acceptance of both her own sexuality and her own power to act morally and independently. In doing so, Tenar, herself, is saved. More like a birth than an abortion, the earth shudders and closes in an enormous, orgasmic contraction. Ged and Tenar are reborn; balance is restored and evil is destroyed.

Despite this climactic act of unification, Tenar still feels guilt and shame that Manan, the eunuch, died because of her. To which Ged responds:

Listen, Tenar. Heed me. You were the vessel of evil. The evil is poured out. It is done. It is buried in its own tomb. You were never made for cruelty and darkness; you were made to hold light. . . . In the place of darkness I found the light, her spirit. By her an old evil was brought to nothing. By her I was brought out of the grave. By her the broken was made whole, and where there was hatred there will be peace.<sup>3</sup> (145-146)

As *The Tombs of Atuan* comes to a close, Tenar's relationship with Ged seems to wane in an unsatisfying direction. Spivak calls it "A mature

narrative about growing up, a moral tale without a moral (66)." Ged takes Tenar to live with his old master, Ogion, and the novel ends. It is as if Le Guin did not know how to resolve the relationship issues these two powerful but damaged individuals would certainly have. Like Ged, Tenar's moral development is still in progress. Perhaps Le Guin, herself, did not yet know what it was to be a woman and powerful. In 1970, science fiction and fantasy offered few literary role models of strong, heroic women. The women's movement had really just begun to examine what it was to be a mature woman coming into the fulfillment of her own power. In any case, Le Guin lived nearly another twenty years before she continued the story of Ged and Tenar. In the meantime, she wrote *The Farthest Shore* (1972), the third book in the Earthsea trilogy and continued to struggle with the problem of the shame compassionate individuals experience when, in order to be happy, they are forced to do harm.

### **The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas**

Le Guin's 1974 Hugo Award-winning short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" has had a dynamic, long –lasting influence due to controversial subject matter that still inspires spirited arguments at conventions and in classrooms. Although Le Guin has explained that its name was inspired by a backwards misreading of Salem O. on a road sign, perhaps another, deeper interpretation would be to read it pronounced as "Oh, my loss!"<sup>4</sup> Just as Le Guin's later success and happiness was in part predicated on the abortion she had as a college student, so Omelas is a beautiful, joyful city whose beauty and happiness are predicated on the suffering of a single, miserable child locked in the darkness of a basement broom closet.

The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room a child is sitting. It might be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits hunched in the corner farthest from the bucket and the two mops. It is afraid of the mops. . . It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually. (229)

Here is a child placed in a dark, womblike environment. It is a child created by an abortive act of societal moral development, a child who might be seen as one "nobody wants." Furthermore, the happiness of the



society is based on the misery of this child. "It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science" (230). Just as the young Le Guin walked away from the misery of her abortion to go on with her life, in 1973 the only solution Le Guin offers "her adolescent girls or boys" is to walk away into the darkness of their unpredictable futures, futures where they will no longer be guided by magical, unconscious cultural scripts that insure them of happiness (231).

They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go toward is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.<sup>5</sup> (231)

Omelas's ending parallels lines in the first chapter of the *Tao*:

Yet mystery and reality/ emerge from the same source. This source is called darkness./Darkness born from darkness./ The beginning of understanding. (McDonald 16)

Walking into darkness indicates walking into uncertainty, knowing that a life of privilege tends to be founded on the suffering of others who are not as privileged. One of the reasons "Omelas" makes such a good teaching story is that readers are forced to reconsider their own attitudes and come up with their own solutions to the dilemma of the damaged child.

In "Exit-Voice Dilemmas in Adolescent Development," Carol Gilligan has written that adolescents are the ones most likely to see a society's injustices:

In the life cycle the adolescent is the truth teller . . . exposing hypocrisy and revealing truths about human relationships. These truths pertain to justice and care, the moral coordinates of human connection, heightened for adolescents who stand between the innocence of childhood and the responsibility of adulthood. (143-144)

In other words, adolescents grow up knowing about society's secret dirty underwear. Much of Le Guin's later work focuses on the importance of a few young people being morally strong, bright and connected enough to learn from their mistakes and eventually work to enact enlightened methods for societal laundry. In "Omelas" the moral message is in the importance of accepting uncertainty in the journey of moral development.

The metaphor of the journey will be further explored in *The Farthest Shore* (1975) where Le Guin puts her hope for Earthsea's renewal in a young prince named Arren. She has not yet learned to put her literary trust in girls.

### ***Farthest Shore and Acceptance of Endings***

In *The Farthest Shore*, Ged explains mindfulness and morality to Arren, his young companion:

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. (34-35)

This might well be Le Guin talking of herself. Certainly becoming sexually active moves a young person from a life of "being" into a life of "doing". Furthermore, we have seen how Le Guin believes her later life to be irrevocably bound to her abortion decision, "each act binds you . . . to its consequences."

Recognizing this is an important step in moral development. Because she is a woman of action, Le Guin's thoughts are not kept to herself. Rather her conclusions about human nature become the moral center of her fiction. In the late seventies and early eighties, Le Guin became active in the ProChoice Movement and made public her early abortion decision. The act of going public is important here because it implies self-acceptance and an unwillingness to carry further the heavy baggage of past secrets. After this, one would expect that her fiction would also show a paradigm shift in moral development.

### **Moral Maturity in *Tehanu***

In her 1990 Nebula Award winning novel, *Tehanu*, we finally see Le Guin reckoning with the issues of a mature woman's moral development. Tenar, now a middle-aged widow with grown children, saves and adopts a physically and sexually abused child. The child has been repeatedly beaten, molested and then finally thrown into the fire and left for dead by her mother and her mother's male companions. The child looks to be about six, the same age Tenar was when she was given to the Nameless Ones. Age six seems to be a critical age for Le Guin. The child locked in the

Omela's broom closet also appears to be about this age, though is actually nearly ten. In a letter dated May 11, 1996, Le Guin writes that she "nearly died of appendicitis at six." (This emergency surgery also correlates with the masked figure in white that was mentioned in *Tombs*). Psychologists find that childhood trauma has amazing longevity in individual lives. Although sixty some years later Le Guin believes that her near death experience has not had much significance in her life, I would like to respond that perhaps it no longer has much significance because she was able to unconsciously process the trauma through her fiction. In her letter she goes on to say that "Many people's real memories begin at about six. It's one of those change points, I think" (personal letter).

When Tenar adopts the child, Ogion renames her Therru which means "burning, the flaming fire" in Kargish (21). Therru has been so damaged and disfigured that one side of her face will remain a scarred ruin. One eye is permanently blinded; one hand is like a claw, possibly reflecting archetypal wildness like the "taloned paws" of Ged's shadow. Perhaps Tenar is drawn to Therru because of unresolved issues relating to her own early traumatic experiences. As Tenar had once been called Arha, the Eaten One, Therru has almost literally been eaten by the fire (33). The half blindness is symbolic of the darkness of the abuse and of the hold it still has on Therru. Like many seriously abused children, Therru is so traumatized that she is unable to cry (108). Once Therru's physical damage heals, Tenar begins the nearly impossible task of healing the emotional damage. Tenar is at that middle-aged passage time when women begin to rethink their choices:

She had fled from the Powers of the desert tombs, and then she had left the powers of learning and skill offered her by her guardian, Ogion. She had turned her back on all that, gone to the other side, the other room, where the women lived, to be one of them. A wife, a farmer's wife, a mother, a householder, undertaking the power that a woman was born to, the authority allotted her by the arrangements of mankind. (30)

Once she was a vessel for the power of the Nameless Ones. Then she became a vessel molded to the needs of her husband and children:

I chose to mold myself like clay to the use of a farm and a farmer and our children. I made myself a vessel. I know its shape. But not the clay. Life danced me. I know the dances. But I don't know who the dancer is. (201)

By acknowledging her own sexuality, Tenar is able to leave a life symbolized by the dryness of the desert tombs. She gives up her magical powers in favor of the traditional powers afforded by the role of wife,

mother, and householder. However, she makes this transition without ever coming to terms with who she is outside of the roles she has to play. Adopting Therru causes Tenar to move outside the familiar, safe spaces of hearth and home. For Tenar, this act of compassion is the beginning of what proves to be a mid-life crisis and sea change. Carol Gilligan writes,

Women's construction of the moral problem of care and responsibility in relationships rather than as one of rights and rules, ties the development of their moral thinking to changes in their understanding of responsibility and relationships. (Voice 73)

## **Gendering the LeGuiniverse**

When Tenar begins to question what it is to be a powerful woman in her own right, Moss, the village witch and wise woman, tells her:

Who knows where a woman begins and ends? Listen, mistress, I have roots, I have roots deeper than this island. Deeper than the sea, older than the rising of the lands. I go back into the dark. . . . No one knows . . . no one can say what I am, 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 dares ask questions of the dark? Who'll ask the dark its name? (52)

As Moss's answer fades into a mumble of rocking and chanting, Tenar sits upright and splits a reed down the center with her thumbnail. "I will," she answers. "I lived long enough in the dark." Here Tenar seems to speak for Le Guin. Le Guin, a Taoist, recognizes the importance of naming and integrating the dark. In the letter mentioned previously, Le Guin writes, "[Tenar] does NOT accept this essentialist idea of Woman as The Obscure." Rather than obscure, Tenar's mind and emotions seem very clear and bright. As a result of her questions, she begins to understand that magic may not be something she lost forever along with her virginity. Though women's magic has often been described as "weak and wicked," evidently it is possible for a woman to be a witch and also sexually active (32). (It is interesting to note that "weak and wicked" parallels the "weak" and "selfish" of Le Guin's college lover.) A woman's sexuality does not destroy her power. Later Moss explains:

Ours is only a little power, seems like, next to theirs. . . . But it goes down deep. It's like an old blackberry thicket. And a wizard's power's like a fir tree, maybe, great and tall and grand, but it'll blow right down in a storm. Nothing kills a blackberry bramble. (100)

Much folklore describes women's power as coming from deep within. In *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (1992), Clarissa Pinkola Estes connects women's creativity with their sexuality, coming from *los ovarios*, the ovaries, "a knowing deep within the body, deep within the mind, deep within the soul" (33). It becomes clear as the story progresses that Moss has a deeper moral wisdom than the majority of Earthsea's wizards who are jockeying for power.

When Ged suddenly appears after twenty-five years, he is a broken, demoralized man, without his wizardly powers. Tenar takes him into her life and eventually into her bed. They explore together what it means to love and trust; and as they do so, they gain a new understanding of power through interdependency. Tenar concludes, "Real power, real freedom, would lie in trust, not force" (198).<sup>6</sup> Carol Gilligan writes that the highest level of moral development is attained when "Care becomes the self-chosen principle of a judgment that remains psychological in its concern with relationships and response but becomes universal in its condemnation of exploitation and hurt" (74). In her interactions with Therru and Ged, Tenar indicates that she has attained the highest level of moral development. She has reached an understanding of "the contextual relativity of both truth and choice" (Gilligan 166).

However, after reuniting Tenar and Ged, Le Guin does not leave them to live happily ever after. The lingering power of their past lives causes them to be noticed by an evil wizard who attempts to destroy them to increase his own power. Captured by the wizard's magic, Tenar and Ged become helpless puppets. Tenar loses control of her body and is forced to crawl along the ground.

She could not crawl fast enough, and was kicked in the breasts and in the mouth. Then there was a door that crashed, and silence, and the dark. She heard somebody crying and thought it was the child, her child. She wanted the child not to cry. At last it stopped. (218)

But Tenar and Ged are not destroyed. At the last possible moment, love saves them. Although Tenar is forced into utter groveling and powerlessness, the resonance of her powerful kindness remains. Therru has been able to contact the dragon, Kalessin. The great winged dragon swoops in out of the west and chars the evil wizard with one breath. Out of the pain and horror of her abuse, Therru has gained the power to know true names and to call dragons. Tenar's love has unlocked that power. Thus, it is Tenar's love and compassion that eventually saves all of them, not through independent action but through the power of interdependency. At last Therru's true name is revealed as Tehanu. As the book closes, Tenar,

Ged and Tehanu have taken up residence in Ogion's house, a symbolic acceptance of the power of magic but, for the first time, on their own terms.<sup>7</sup>

Though it took nearly twenty years to write, *Tehanu* answers the questions about the nature of power and powerlessness that Le Guin posed in the Earthsea trilogy. In the mature Tenar, Le Guin provides the moral answer Charlotte Spivak could not find in *The Tombs of Atuan*. By rescuing the damaged child, Tenar rescues the damaged child in herself and is saved to experience a wholeness that was previously denied her. The name "Earthsea" implies a balance of opposites. Tenar and Ged take different paths to moral maturity, but eventually both arrive in the same place. In the end, the novel balances male and female as well as conscious and unconscious forces. Tenar's ultimate acceptance of powerlessness is the key to her understanding of true power and an essential step in her moral development.<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

1. Alfred Kroeber's succinct reasoning here indicates a high level of moral development. Alfred was a wise and contemplative man knowledgeable in Eastern religions as well as Native American stories and mythology. Le Guin has written that her understanding of wizards perhaps came from growing up with one (Phillips 160).
2. Some individuals do recognize the power of sexuality and early in LHD Gaum, a political opponent, attempts to seduce Estraven, but Estraven is too politically savvy and self-controlled to be seduced (112).
3. Ged's speech reminds me of Kroeber's response to the abortion decision. Ged's line "the broken was made whole, and where there was hatred there will be peace" (TA 146) parallels the cadences of the prayer attributed to St. Francis that begins "*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace./ Where there is hatred, let me sow love.*" Similar parallel language is used in *The Other Wind*, the last book of the series: "What was built is broken. What was broken is made whole" (ACH 240).
4. There may be a cognitive connection between "Omelas" and "The New Atlantis" (1975) Le Guin's dystopian study of marriage in a twenty-first century totalitarian America where independent research has been banned and marriage has been declared illegal. At the end of the story, Belle, Le Guin's viewpoint character has set off on foot to rescue her mathematician husband from a mental hospital in Salem, Oregon. In creating Omelas, Le Guin may well have been critiquing America where the gap between rich and poor has continued to increase. Hunger is now a greater problem than it was when "Omelas" was published. In 2011, forty-five million Americans, about one in seven, received Food Stamps and half of these were children (Washington 2A).