



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 36 | Number 2 | Issue 132, Spring/Summer

Article 8

4-15-2018

Ursula K. Le Guin: an appreciation

David Bratman
independent scholar

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bratman, David (2018) "Ursula K. Le Guin: an appreciation," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 36 : No. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol36/iss2/8>

This Notes and Letters is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.



Ursula K. Le Guin: an appreciation

Abstract

It seems appropriate in the aftermath of her death, which occurred January 22, 2018, at the age of 88, to name Ursula K. Le Guin as the most consequential writer in the fantastic mode of the last half century. Her work spans a range from traditionalist European fantasy to hard-edged social science fiction on the effect of technology on society, without ever drawing a firm line between categories. Le Guin never disavowed genre, but refused to be bound by it. She used it as a tool to express herself.

Additional Keywords

Le Guin, Ursula K.

NOTES AND LETTERS

URSULA K. LE GUIN: AN APPRECIATION

DAVID BRATMAN

IT SEEMS APPROPRIATE IN THE AFTERMATH OF HER DEATH, which occurred January 22, 2018, at the age of 88, to name Ursula K. Le Guin as the most consequential writer in the fantastic mode of the last half century. Her work spans a range from traditionalist European fantasy to hard-edged social science fiction on the effect of technology on society, without ever drawing a firm line between categories. Le Guin never disavowed genre, but refused to be bound by it. She used it as a tool to express herself.

To the Mythopoeic Society, and many of her readers, Le Guin's central achievements were as a writer of fantasy, especially the books of Earthsea, but in her case—as with the Inklings—it is perhaps best to think of “fantasy” not as a genre that some of her works fit, but as a mode of writing that characterizes most of her works, regardless of genre. What she searched for throughout her career was a “distancing from the ordinary,” as she described it (89). This led her to the imaginary lands of conventional fantasy and to the alien planets of science fiction, and then—more so over the years—to dream realms and others not so easily described.

Wherever she set her fiction, however imaginary or—occasionally—real the locale, Le Guin always sunk roots deep into the place, so that it would live and breathe, and command the Secondary Belief that is the highest achievement of the mode of the fantastic. The islands of Earthsea, each individually described; the hidden corners of the American West fictionalized in *Always Coming Home* and *Searoad*; the various planets of her SF; all give off strong and distinct senses of place.

Within those locales, Le Guin's primary interest was always in exploring human societies, often through the eyes of characters who are strangers there. She would set up societies unusual in their culture or biology for the purpose of discovering how humans would behave there, often as seen by a stranger to that culture. This reached an early peak in her SF novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, describing the planet Gethen, inhabited by aliens genetically related to humans, but who are neuter except when they come into heat (*kemmer*), which they can experience as both male and female at different times. Its most extreme appearance is in the bizarre civilizations to be found on other

planes of existence in her late collection *Changing Planes*. In all of these, the emphasis is on how the conditions would affect human behavior.

Le Guin had a noble pedigree for such a perspective, as the daughter of two explorers of human cultures, the pioneering anthropologist Alfred Kroeber and the writer Theodora Kroeber. She grew up surrounded by Alfred's Native American informants (though not the famous Ishi, who died before her birth), was taught by her parents to live lightly on the landscape, and went to college to study classical French literature, whose even tone also affected her fiction. An anthropological perspective shows up early in Le Guin's work, in the native myths and ethnographic report inserted in *Left Hand* and in the detailed study and understanding of the limitations of magic in *Earthsea*. It's most prominent in *Always Coming Home*, which is, quite simply, a work of fictional anthropology. The book forms a mosaic portrait of an imaginary people called the Kesh, inspired by California natives, in the form of a thorough study of their lives, customs, and beliefs, from their diets to their spiritual rituals, and it does not spare the anthropologist's personal observations. The focus of the book is on the literary art and music of the Kesh, with generous helpings of their memoirs, drama, and poetry.

Another salient Le Guin characteristic was her willingness to break convention and to reinterpret and retrospectively recast her own work. The trouble with print, she once wrote, is that it never changes its mind. But when she was no longer satisfied with what her essays said, she reprinted them with footnotes; and when she was no longer satisfied with male pronouns for the neuter Gethenians, she experimented with other options.

The most extensive re-envisioning Le Guin ever did was of *Earthsea*. She began this at the start, by quietly giving her heroes brown or black skin, while the villains are pasty white, choices that have led to conflict with publishers and movie adapters. *A Wizard of Earthsea* begins as the story of a talented boy, Ged, who is sent to study at a special wizards' academy. So far it's a precursor to *Harry Potter*, though with a subtler form of magic and less in debt to school stories—and unknown to those who hailed Hogwarts as an original idea. But the plot takes a turn partway through and becomes a story of Ged's self-discovery. In the book's successors, Ged applies what he learned in his training, focused on the restraint of doing by not doing. (A balance and stillness derived from the *Tao Te Ching*, a work Le Guin translated, is central to her work, lending a motionlessness and sometimes eventless quality to her fiction that frustrates some readers.)

After leaving *Earthsea* fallow for some years, Le Guin returned to it, maintaining these qualities but finding herself dissatisfied with others, notably a Eurocentric storytelling style and a masculinist plotting, in which men had the magic and took the action. In three subsequent books (two novels and a story

collection), Le Guin revisited Earthsea, recasting it in a woman-oriented direction, changing the direction of the world while attempting not to undercut the authority of the earlier works. She did the same with her later science fiction, wrote some bold feminist parables, and explored new approaches in such later works as the *Annals of the Western Shore*, a trilogy of novels about the place of an elusive magic in a society that distrusts and fears it, and which also focuses on parent-child relationships with great sensitivity.

Le Guin was Guest of Honor at the 1988 Mythopoeic Conference, at which she gave a speech and participated in a panel on the inspiration and writing of *Always Coming Home*, transcripts of which are available only in *Mythlore*. It was here that she met Patrick Wynne and acquired a piece of his artwork, which led to his collaboration as illustrator of *Fish Soup*, one of numerous Le Guin picture books for children.

Brian Attebery was Le Guin's co-guest at that Mythcon, and later collaborator with her as a co-editor of *The Norton Book of Science Fiction*. He had written that, in the earlier Earthsea books, Le Guin was one of the few post-Tolkien fantasists to have "absorbed Tolkien, comprehended him, and gone on in her own direction" (162).

This was a conscious effort on Le Guin's part. She was well aware of her relationship to Tolkien's footsteps, and she honored him as one of the great writers, not just of fantasy but of modern literature. She discussed and referred to Tolkien in many of her essays on writing. She had read *The Lord of the Rings* soon after publication in the mid 1950s, and was thankful that by this time she was in her mid-twenties, still capable of learning from the book but mature enough not to be totally overwhelmed by it and distracted from her own path. She recounts this in an essay called "The Staring Eye" and expanded on it in "A Citizen of Mondath," which tells a fuller story of the road she followed as a reader towards becoming a writer of fantasy and SF. Both are collected in *The Language of the Night*, which also includes "From Elfland to Poughkeepsie," an important critical polemic on style in fantasy, using *The Lord of the Rings* as one of the principal examples for her thesis that style expresses character.

Her fullest critical essay on Tolkien is "Rhythmic Pattern in *The Lord of the Rings*" (in the collection *The Wave in the Mind*), a fully scholarly "analysis of Tolkien's use of rhythm, recurrence, and opposition to create emotional effects in a sample chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*, 'Fog on the Barrow-Downs'" (Bratman 297). Tolkien also reappears prominently in "The Critics, the Monsters, and the Fantasists" (in the collection *Cheek by Jowl*), one of several of Le Guin's defenses of the literary value of fantasy.

Lastly, Tolkien makes an appearance in *Steering the Craft*, Le Guin's writers' workshop in print, in the form of exercises and discussions. Le Guin frequently uses selections from authors she admires to illustrate her lesson

points. *The Lord of the Rings* appears in a chapter on point of view. To illustrate the possibility of dropping briefly into other view perspectives, Le Guin uses the passage with the sapient fox who sees the hobbits asleep in “Three Is Company.” Some critics consider that passage one of Tolkien’s worst blunders, but as Tolkien himself once wrote, “the passages or chapters that are to some a blemish are all by others specially approved” (xxiii). I think we can see here Le Guin as a most perceptive and approving reader of Tolkien.

WORKS CITED

- Attebery, Brian. *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin*. Indiana UP, 1980.
- Bratman, David. “The Years’ Work in Tolkien Studies 2001–2002.” *Tolkien Studies*, vol. 2, 2005, pp. 289–315.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Putnam, 1979.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. 50th Anniversary ed. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004.

DAVID BRATMAN is co-editor of *Tolkien Studies: An Annual Scholarly Review* and has written the annual “Year’s Work in Tolkien Studies” for that publication. His other writings include the article on authors contemporary with Tolkien for *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien* edited by Stuart D. Lee (Wiley Blackwell, 2014) and the bio-bibliographical appendix on the Inklings to *The Company They Keep* by Diana Pavlac Glyer (Kent State, 2007). His work on Tolkien and the Inklings has also appeared in *Mythlore*.



URSULA K. LE GUIN IN MYTHLORE

JANET BRENNAN CROFT

URSULA K. LE GUIN, WHOSE CAREER AND INFLUENCE are examined in brief in the preceding note by David Bratman, has long been a writer of interest to the readers of *Mythlore* and members of the Mythopoeic Society. She was the Author Guest of Honor at Mythcon 19 (the theme of which was “Legends for a New Land: Fantasy in America”) at Berkeley CA in 1988, and was a finalist for the Myth and Fantasy Studies Award in 2011 and 2012 for her essay collection *Cheek by Jowl* (Aqueduct Press, 2009).

BY LE GUIN

Le Guin, Ursula K. “Legends for a New Land.” *Mythlore*, vol. 15, no.2 (#56), 1988, pp. 4–10. Guest of Honor speech, Mythcon 19. An account of how Le Guin was finally able to write *Always Coming Home*, using not an imaginary world but the transfigured Napa Valley of her childhood. Acknowledges her debt to Native American worldview known through its myths.