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Abstract

Examines *The Tombs of Atuan* and *Tehanu* in contrast to the "journey of the hero" as defined by Campbell and Pratt, and also Jungian concepts of the Self. Notes ways in which the journey of the heroine is different from that of the hero.

Additional Keywords

Heroine's journey; Le Guin, Ursula K.—Characters—Tehanu; Le Guin, Ursula K.—Characters—Tenar (Arua); Le Guin, Ursula K. Tehanu; Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Tombs of Atuan*

The Night in Her Own Country

The Heroine's Quest for Self in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Tombs of Atuan*

GAIL SIDONIE SOBAT

If we do not want to change and develop, then we might as well remain in a deathlike sleep. During their sleep, the heroines' beauty is a frigid one, theirs is the isolation of narcissism. In such self-involvement which excludes the rest of the world there is no suffering, but also no knowledge to be gained, no feelings to be experienced. . . . The entire world then becomes dead to the person. . . . The world becomes alive only to the person who herself awakens to it. Only relating positively to the other "awakens" us from the danger of sleeping away our life. The kiss of the prince breaks the spell of narcissism and awakens a womanhood which up to then has remained undeveloped. Only if the maiden grows into woman can life go on. (Bettelheim 234)

Like Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and various other fairy tale heroines who lie in enchanted sleep until they are delivered, Tenar, in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Tombs of Atuan* (1970), "sleeps" through a significant portion of her life. Bruno Bettelheim, in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1975), states that a fairy tale heroine succumbs to a deep sleep from which she awakens a woman, but he goes no further than to explain this slumber as "the spell of narcissism," and tells us nothing of what happens to the heroine during this time. In *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949), Joseph Campbell provides some insight into the "deep sleep" which he designates as the hero's descent to the underworld or unconscious. However, Campbell's paradigm, by his own admission, is a male-centered pattern of development. Thus, these critics offer only a point of departure for an analysis of the heroine's journey. How then do we examine *The Tombs of Atuan*, a female *bildungsroman* about a heroine who, for much of the novel, dwells underground?

Annis Pratt, in *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (1981), provides a fuller framework for an analysis of Le Guin's novel, but does not explain why Le Guin's heroine would spend so much time in the dark. Unlike the Brothers Grimm who do not allow us a glimpse of the interior journeys of their heroines - we know nothing of what Snow White or Sleeping Beauty - dream Le Guin fashions a dreamscape of the unconscious, an underworld of Undertombs and Labyrinth to which Arha must descend and from which she must ultimately escape so that she may become her Self,¹ Tenar. While the story above ground is set in a patriarchy, the story below ground is set within

an inner "sacred space," the labyrinth of her Self, which is the source of Tenar's powers of imagination and of magic (both traditionally feminine² attributes because of their association with the feminine unconscious). Within she also discovers her own sexuality, sparked by her positive relationship with the wizard Ged.

An examination of Le Guin's use of Taoist ideas and Jungian symbolism facilitates a feminist reading of the text: a woman shows a man "the way," and as a result both are reborn, each delivering the other. As well, mythological echoes of ancient goddesses and female Eleusinian rites resound within the novel to suggest that the tale of Arha has been told before. Le Guin herself identifies the theme of *The Tombs of Atuan* as universal, as a "feminine coming-of-age," with images of "birth, rebirth, destruction, freedom" ("Dreams Must Explain Themselves" 55). At the novel's conclusion, Tenar succeeds in transforming the Tombs of Atuan into a womb, and her liberating journey through the feminine realms breaks the "spell of narcissism." But she never entirely abandons the darkness, the source of strength which she will draw upon during other trials she must face: Tenar will again "liv[e] through the night in [her] own country" (Le Guin, "A Left-Handed Commencement Address" 117), in *Tehanu*, written twenty years after the publication of *The Tombs of Atuan*. Le Guin's final book of Earthsea (together with her latest essays) sheds a retrospective light upon the earlier novel and upon the heroine who continues to evolve and "come-of-age" throughout all the stages of her life.

To begin, a comparison of the quest patterns outlined by Joseph Campbell and more recently by Annis Pratt will help to illuminate Le Guin's *bildungsroman*. Very briefly, Campbell's model includes the following stages of the hero's development: 1) the Call to Adventure, 2) the Threshold crossing, 3) Tests, 4) Elixir Theft (Father Atonement/Apotheosis), 5) Flight, and 6) Return (245). Pratt outlines the phases of the heroine's quest as: 1) a Splitting Off From Family, 2) the Green-World Guide, 3) the Green-World Lover, 4) a Confrontation With Parental Figures, 5) the Plunge Into The Unconscious (139-141). She concludes that the heroine "is unlikely to be able to reintegrate herself fully into 'normal' society" (143). Both Campbell and Pratt begin their models with the hero or heroine separating from a life before the quest. According to Campbell, the hero "is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds,

to the threshold of adventure" (245). Pratt describes this initial separation as "splitting off from family, husbands, lovers . . . [because of] an acute consciousness of the world of the ego and of a consequent turning away from societal norms" (139). Tenar's narrative seems more in keeping with Campbell's model as she does not answer the call willingly, but, torn from her mother at the age of five, is brought to the Place of the Tombs of Atuan to assume the duties of the One Priestess.

Campbell outlines the next stage of the journey as a defeat of or conciliation with a "shadow presence that guards the passage"; if defeated, the slain hero descends in death to the underworld (246). Pratt identifies a green-world guide or token which helps the heroine to cross the threshold of her adventure. Again, Tenar experiences something more closely attuned to Campbell's model, a ritualistic, symbolic death. Her name is sacrificed to the Nameless Powers she serves, and she, in turn, becomes Arha "the Eaten One," literally a girl with no Self. Thereafter, she assumes the duties of Priestess of the Tombs, the underworld of the Place, where she loses her identity, yet ironically will rediscover her lost Self.

A third significant phase that Arha experiences involves lengthy testing (which corresponds to the third phase of Campbell's model), during which she undertakes her first descent to the Undertomb, undergoes much training, and learns by "braille" and memory the way of the Labyrinth. As well, she encounters teachers and helpers in Thar and Kossil, two lesser priestesses, in Manan, the eunuch protector, and in Penthe, Arha's only girlfriend. It is also during her testing period that Arha fails her first trial: she condemns three prisoners to death, a punishment appropriate to the philosophy and laws of the Nameless Ones, but one that torments the young priestess' conscience in the form of fevers and dreams. After this failed test, Arha resolves to know fully the ways of the Undertomb; it becomes her familiar domain.⁴ Annis Pratt does not specifically delineate a period of testing in her model; she instead identifies the third phase as involving a green-world lover, "an ideal, nonpatriarchal . . . guide [who] often aids at difficult points in the quest" (140).

Pratt's green-world figure corresponds to the wizard Ged, who "breaks and enters" into Arha's world. He is her magical helper and, as ideal male, will help deliver her and return her to society. Ged is also responsible for the epiphanous moment in the Undertomb when Arha is able to see clearly for the first time the reality of her sterile existence. Pratt emphasizes that the green-world lover "does not constitute the turning point or goal of the rebirth journey . . . [but] leads the hero away from society and towards her own unconscious depths" (140). Here author and critic disagree somewhat: Le Guin makes clear that Ged is the impetus behind Arha's self-revelation, change, and development. Without his intervention, Arha would forever remain nameless and soul-less.

Pratt's fourth phase, that of confrontation with paren-

tal figures,⁵ who are part of the heroine's "subconscious, her repository of personal memories," corresponds with Arha's development (140). Although the young priestess does not battle any such figures in her memory, she does battle Kossil, a terrible surrogate mother, whom she curses and who is ultimately destroyed. But Tenar does achieve a type of reconciliation with her never-forgotten biological mother; the girl's newly-discovered inner illumination mirrors that of her mother (whom Tenar associates with firelight and hearth), and in an important dream, a golden-haired maternal image calls Tenar to the light (Le Guin, *Tombs* 96). At this point, according to Pratt, the heroine makes the plunge into "the unconscious proper, . . . a realm of inherited feminine power quite different from patriarchal culture" (141). While this description is appropriate to the Undertomb and Labyrinth, Arha had made her plunge long before her confrontation with Kossil; she has dwelt in the realm of the unconscious for most of her life. Furthermore, the wizard Ged as portrayed by Le Guin is different from Pratt's notion of the green-world lover. In the novel he functions as animus, the "masculine" facet of Tenar's psyche with which she must reconcile. Ged is not the obstacle to the heroine's fulfillment as Pratt suggests the green-world lover could be, but is the heroine's way to selfhood as her male "midwife."

Pratt's model ends with the plunge into the unconscious, while Campbell acknowledges two more phases of the hero's journey: the theft of the boon or elixir and the return. The hero's treasure represents "an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom)" and in Arha's case the reward is two-fold (Campbell 246). The lost half of the ring of Erreth-Akbe is restored - the ring is a symbol of wholeness and integration⁶ - but the truly great treasure is her Self as represented by the restoration of her birth name, Tenar, and the creative power that accompanies self-knowledge. With these boons firmly in her possession, she and Ged prepare their escape to re-emerge "from the kingdom of dread" and to restore the balance in Earthsea shattered by the broken ring (Campbell 246).

The conclusion of Le Guin's novel illustrates the refusal of a narrative to be trapped within the confines of any one structural model. After Tenar's escape from the Tombs, yet another phase may be identified in *The Tombs of Atuan*: a period of sojourn and regeneration before Tenar may become fully integrated in society. Integration, Pratt claims, is often impossible in women's rebirth journeys because society imprisons the "newborn" woman either within conventional traps (i.e., marriage, motherhood) or asylums (i.e., madness). However, Le Guin has a different view. Her novel implies that perhaps the most striking difference between the male and female journeys lies within the actual period of darkness, the descent to the underworld. The hero spends as little time as possible underground; he longs for the journey upward to the light to which he is accustomed. The boon or elixir is quickly if arduously attained-the anima is recognized and the being



made whole-and return is immediate. For the heroine, however, the process is lengthier, perhaps because the way is somehow more mysterious, the search more intricate. Sleeping Beauty sleeps one hundred years; Snow White, "many, many years" (Grimm 202); and Tenar "sleeps" for ten years. Although Annis Pratt quotes May Sarton on the importance of "the deep place, the place of 'great sanity' that can be derived, for women, only from 'feminine power'" associated with the unconscious, Pratt seems to overlook the amount of time and energy a heroine spends rooting around in the dark.

Le Guin recognizes "the necessity for internal exploration, provided by fantasy, to produce a whole integrated human being" who is complete with an "acceptance and discipline of the imagination" (Wood 17). She understands the implications of the journey "down into the subconscious and the collective unconscious, and up again to self-knowledge, to adulthood, to the light" (Le Guin, "Child and Shadow" 65). Thus, it is fitting that a major portion of her fantasy be set underground in a place that is the womb of the Earth, where Tenar rediscovers her imagination and creative potential, and that is also the tomb she must eventually escape in order to live a full and productive life. However, Arha also dwells above ground within a negative matriarchy wherein she is stifled and is not allowed to blossom into the woman she could become. Le Guin notes that

maturity is not an outgrowing, but a growing up: . . . an adult is not a dead child, but a child who survived. . . . all the best faculties of a mature human being exist in the child, . . . but if they are repressed and denied in the child, they will stunt and cripple the adult personality. . . . one of the most deeply human, and humane, of these faculties is the power of imagination: so that it is our pleasant duty . . . to encourage that faculty of imagination in our children, to encourage it to grow freely, to flourish like the green bay tree, by giving it the best, absolutely the best and purest, nourishment that it can absorb. And never under any circumstances, to squelch it, or sneer at it. . . . (Le Guin, "Why are Americans Afraid" 44)

Hence, the author sets up a dichotomy between Tenar's years with her biological mother when the girl's "best faculties" are encouraged, and her years in the Place of the Tombs when she is "repressed, denied and squelched." Arha comes to assimilate the negative ideology of the matriarchy and subsequently develops an unhealthy ego. In "The Child and the Shadow" Le Guin explains the danger of identifying with such a "collective consciousness":

. . . Jung saw the ego, what we usually call the self, as only a part of the Self, the part of it which we are consciously aware of. . . . The Self is transcendent, much larger than the ego; it is not a private possession, but collective—that is, we share it with all other human beings, and perhaps with all beings. It may indeed be our link with what is called God. . . .

The ego, the little private individual consciousness, knows this, and it knows that if it's not to be trapped in the hopeless silence of autism it must identify with something outside itself, beyond itself, larger than itself. If it's weak, or if it's offered nothing better, what it does is identify with the

'collective consciousness.' That is Jung's term for a kind of lowest common denominator of all the little egos added together, the mass mind, which consists of such things as cults . . . all the isms, all the ideologies, all the hollow forms of communication and 'togetherness' that lack real communion or real sharing. The ego, in accepting these empty forms, becomes a member of the 'lonely crowd.' To avoid this, to attain real community, it must turn inward, away from the crowd, to the source: it must identify with its *own* deeper regions, the great unexplored regions of the Self. These regions of the psyche Jung calls the 'collective unconscious,' and it is in them, where we all meet, that he sees the source of true community; of felt religion; of art, grace, spontaneity, and love. (63)

The Matriarchy of the place is much like a cult that lacks "real communion or real sharing." Indeed, Arha becomes very much a member of the "lonely crowd" in this barren, sterile society devoted to repetition and meaningless ritual:

The days went by, the years went by, all alike. The girls of the Place of the Tombs spent their time at classes and disciplines. they did not play any games. There was no time for games. . . . They learned how to spin and weave the wool of their flocks, and how to plant and harvest and prepare the food they always ate. . . . (Le Guin, *Tombs* 13)

Even the physical setting of the Place reflects the sterility of its inhabitants; it is in the truest sense, a wasteland. The atmosphere is "still and cold" and the land is scattered with "dead leaves . . . outlined with frost" (*Tombs* 3). Light is absent during the various rites, and Arha is left lying alone in the dark (*Tombs* 6). Noting but sparse desert plants grow on the hill, and the buildings are described as "ruinous" and "crumbling" (*Tombs* 14-15). The aridity and austerity of the setting are appropriate for the women who will bear no children and who worship dark and negative powers.

Furthermore, only women and eunuchs are allowed within the Wall around the Place. That men are forbidden to this community further emphasizes the sterility of the sisterhood. At the top of the power structure are Kossil, a jealous megalomaniac, and Thar, who teaches Arha that she is the reincarnation of the One Priestess (a falsehood which the young girl eventually recognizes). Both older women are equally unproductive in their devotions. In this matriarchy there is no possibility for life-generative forces, no celebration of sexuality and fertility or the self-knowledge and inner power that attend these. In fact, the Priestesses of the Tombs deny all of the positive aspects that Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor, in *The Great Cosmic Mother* (1987), associate with a matriarchy: an "orientation of consciousness around which . . . patterns of personal, social, cultural, and spiritual relationships . . . occur" (433). The matriarchy is a "communality based on blood and spirit ties uniting all living things within the body and spirit of the Great Mother" (434). Such a harmonious relationship does not exist among the women of the Place. Their lives, filled with hollow ritual, trivial chores, and ennui, lack any true sense of communion with Mother Earth. The rites of

worship are foul and unwholesome, in celebration of death rather than of life and fecundity. Tenar's mock sacrifice to the Nameless Ones, who "consume" her soul and her Self, condemns her to dance thereafter before an Empty Throne, a symbol of her empty and fruitless existence. The lonely and bored girl finds only one young, female friend, the ripe and incongruent Penthe, who would rather "marry a pigherd" than remain "buried alive" as a Priestess of the Place (*Tombs* 40). Thus Arha's involvement in this society, a "demonic modulation"⁸ of the matriarchy defined by Sjöo and Mor, eventually drives her underground to an inner sacred space.

The complex architecture of Arha's inner sanctuary, which harbors the missing elements of her fragmented personality, is drawn from the rich symbolism of the labyrinth. J. C. Cooper in *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (1978) notes that the maze is "often situated underground, in darkness," is "presided over by a woman and walked by a man . . .," and if "multicursal" is "designed with the intention of confusing and puzzling" (Cooper 92). This description sounds much like the twisting Labyrinth of the Place, presided over by Arha the One Priestess, and violated and traversed by a man, Ged. Symbolically, travelling the labyrinth is "a return to Centre; . . . attaining realization after ordeals, trials and testing; initiation, death and rebirth . . .; the mysteries of life and death. . . the body of the Earth Mother" (Cooper 92). The labyrinth also shares the symbolism of the enchanted forest and the cave, both "feminine" realms - under or otherworlds - which when entered represent death, and when exited represent rebirth (Cooper 93). According to Sjöo and Mor, in the maze and cave, "the way" must be danced or walked, just as Arha performs her dances for the Nameless Ones and learns "the ways" of the Labyrinth (75). This is a strikingly Taoist notion. Literally translated, "Tao" is "the Way" - those who achieve harmony and happiness in life attend "the voice within them, the voice of wisdom and simplicity" - an appropriate concept for a story whose protagonist seeks a "way" out of the negative matriarchy, out of entrapment and towards the Self (Hoff 154). To discover the correct path, she turns inward, both literally and symbolically: "as the way to the hidden centre the labyrinth is connected with the search for the Lost Word" (Cooper 92). This lost word in *The Tombs of Atuan* is, of course, a name, "Tenar."

Furthermore, the labyrinth "implies a paradoxical answer to an apparently hopeless question, both of which arise out of the labyrinth's symbolism: once you have made the difficult and complicated journey, what is at the centre? - You are" (Cooper 92). Thus, Arha must escape the collective consciousness of the matriarchy by finding her "way" to her Self. Benjamin Hoff, in *The Tao of Pooh* (1982), outlines the division between "Brain" consciousness and the soul or unconscious:

Everything has its own Inner Nature. Unlike other forms of life, though, people are easily led away from what's right for them, because people have Brain, and Brain can be fooled.

Inner Nature, when relied on, cannot be fooled. But many people do not look at it or listen to it, and consequently do not understand themselves very much. Having little understanding of themselves, they have little respect for themselves, and are therefore easily influenced by others.

But, rather than be carried along by circumstances and manipulated by [others], we can work with our own characteristics and be in control of our own lives. The Way of Self-Reliance starts with recognizing who we are, what we've got to work with, and what works best for us. (57)

Thus Arha must struggle to understand herself, to rely on her "Inner Nature," not on the ideology of the negative matriarchy. The only means to achieve self-reliance is to explore the internal realms of her psyche represented by the Tombs of Atuan. Herein she learns to heed her quiet inner voice and to ask the important question, "Who am I?" Appropriately, she takes control of her destiny and reclaims her identity as Tenar by making her "way" to the deepest part of the Labyrinth - the symbolic Centre - the Great Treasure Room, aptly named because in it she recovers a great treasure indeed.

The Labyrinth and the Undertomb in the novel are a blend of the Taoist notions of yang and yin, with dual perspectives of masculine and feminine, light and dark, good and evil, safety and entrapment, death and birth, healthy psyche and insanity. In its positive role, the Underworld is an element of the Great Mother, "universal genitrix, the Nourisher, the Nurse . . . the universal archetype of fecundity, inexhaustible creativity and sustenance. . . the feminine principle" from whom Tenar is delivered (Cooper 59). Within this manifestation of the Mother Goddess, it is fitting that only a "feminine figure, the feminine forces in life," can negotiate the twisting passages because symbolically, "feminine powers . . . are the subtle guide through the regions of the unconscious" (Chetwynd 256). The Undertomb is Arha's "home of darkness" (*Tombs* 30) where she experiences the "strange, bitter, yet pleasurable certainty of her utter solitude and independence" (45). In fact, Charlotte Spivack notes that Tenar dwells in "almost total unconsciousness" ("Le Guin" 57-58). Her experience in the underworld represents the yin, and although this realm is essential to her internal growth, without the yang of the equation, Arha is in danger of remaining entombed, a Sleeping Beauty unaroused by the lover's kiss.

Ged enters the narrative at a crucial point to release Arha from entrapment. Symbolically, he may be seen as the missing element of yang in her world; she who has been committed to living in the dark and mysterious feminine unconscious is permitted to see the light of day and of consciousness:

Before her encounter with Ged, the tombs represented for Arha an undifferentiated unconscious, deep, demanding, and dumb. With his sudden challenging appearance, she must for the first time act. She must now find within herself the counterpart of the rationality that the wizard represents for her. Her unreasoning devotion to the terrifying nameless gods has kept her existence almost entirely on the level of



intuition. 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. (Spivack, "Le Guin" 59-60)

Thus the haven and refuge of the Undertomb and Labyrinth, like the trap of the negative matriarchy, are also Tenar's prison. (In many novels and fairy tales of female development-*Jane Eyre* and "Rapunzel," for example-physical entrapment is the heroine's state of existence.) To free her from "bondage to a useless evil" Ged's intervention is necessary (Tombs 106). In Brian Attebery's words, he represents "that part of herself that awakens . . . girlhood to the possibility of life and action" (12; my italics). And this Ged literally does in an important epiphanous moment, allowing her to see

what she had never seen, not though she had lived a hundred lives: the great vaulted cavern beneath the Tombstones, not hollowed by man's hand but by the powers of the Earth. It was jeweled with crystals and ornamented with pinnacles and filigrees of white limestone where the waters under earth had worked, eons since: immense, with glittering roof and walls, sparkling, delicate, intricate, a palace of diamonds, a house of amethyst and crystal, from which the ancient darkness had been driven out by glory. (Le Guin, *Tombs* 58)

This remarkable vision represents Tenar's hidden inner beauty. Furthermore, the duality of the inner sanctuary, both beautiful and deadly, reflects the duality of Arha/Tenar or the yin and yang of her personality: "The yin is . . . the passive, feminine, instinctive and intuitional nature, the soul, . . . the negative, . . . ; it is symbolized by all that is dark . . . The yang is the active principle, the spirit, rationalism, height, expansion, the positive . . . and is depicted by all that is light" (Cooper 196). Only the two together can create wholeness, a union of the feminine and masculine principles, the anima and animus. Just as the hero must meet and acknowledge the feminine within before emerging from the Underworld a complete human being, the heroine must accept the masculine. This involves a recognition of not only the beautiful or good - as in Tenar's epiphany - but also of evil "as inextricably involved with [good], as in the yang-yin symbol. Neither is greater than the other, nor can human reason and virtue separate one from the other and choose between them" (Le Guin, "Child and Shadow" 66). Therefore, to achieve individuation, Tenar must first confront her darker self, Arha, who condemned three men to death by starvation, who bears responsibility for Manan's death, and who is capable of evil: "if the individual wants to live in the real world, [she] must . . . admit that the hateful, the evil exists within [her]self . . . The person who denies [her] own profound relationship with evil denies [her] own reality" ("Child and Shadow" 64-65). In addition, the dualism of Tenar's psyche is paralleled by that of the labyrinth and its "mysteries of life and death," its twisting chambers of "illusion and enlightenment," escape and entrapment (Cooper 92-93). Even the young priestess recognizes that the dark maze, though "wonderful," is "nothing, in the end, but a

great trap" (Tombs 55). Arha, who has too long dwelt in the dark, must become Tenar, the White Lady of Gont, as she is called in *Tehanu*.

Le Guin does not suggest that a wizard's metaphoric kiss is the only means to freedom for the priestess, nor that only through a man's intercession can a young woman become complete. And although the author is a proponent of positive inter-gender relationships, neither is the novel just a love story. Rather, for the heroine, as for the hero, there must be a marriage between the fragmented parts of the Self-the animus symbolized by Ged, the anima, symbolized by Tenar-in order for the psyche to be whole and healthy. (We will again see a healing reconciliation of masculine and feminine in *Tehanu*, when Ged seeks Tenar's help to redefine himself as man, rather than as wizard.) Le Guin's underground narrative emphasizes that this union can only take place in "the deep place," the place of "great sanity,"⁹ the feminine underworld of the Goddess.

Mythological echoes of goddesses and heroines - Ariadne, Isis, and Persephone to name only three - reverberate within *The Tombs of Atuan*. At the novel's core, both literally and metaphorically represented, are images of the paleolithic deity whom Marija Gimbutas identifies as the Great Goddess. The Goddess's triple functions "recall" the three phases of the moon: the new moon correlates with the Virgin, the waxing with the Mother, and the waning with the Crone, corresponding with the "life-giving, death-giving, and transformational; rising, dying, and self-renewing" cyclical powers of a woman's life (Gimbutas 316). Through "unvention," to borrow Annis Pratt's term, Le Guin taps "a repository of knowledge lost from Western culture but still available to the author and recognizable to the reader as deriving from a world with which she, at some level of her imagination, is already familiar" (178). The realm of Goddess mythology informs the narrative to suggest that the female journey of development - with the attendant phases of feminine biological and psychological change - is inherently different from that of a hero.

Compare the stories of Ariadne, Isis, and Persephone¹⁰ with that of Tenar and there is little doubt that Le Guin is drawing from a rich story-hoard for her own "making." Ariadne, like Arha, helped a man traverse the mysteries of a labyrinth by handing him a ball of thread with which to retrace his steps. In return he was to take her away from Minos' kingdom. Theseus slew the minotaur, followed the thread, and sailed with Ariadne from Crete; man and woman deliver each other as do Ged and Tenar. Similarly, Isis, who, like Arha, is both a "creating-and-destroying Goddess," swallows Osiris and brings him back to life (after reassembling his dismembered body) reincarnated as Horus or "he who impregnates his mother," just as Arha toys with Ged's life, threatening to destroy him, alternating between cruelty and compassion until her ultimate decision to save him¹¹ (Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* 454). As well, both Persephone and Tenar are abducted and violated, forced to serve male

powers. Persephone must dwell half the year with Pluto; Arha dances before the Empty Throne of nameless male gods who "violate" her identity. The subsequent result, in both stories, is the devastation of nature followed by the triumphant rebirth to a green-world when the respective heroines return from the Underworld to the light.

Le Guin's strongest mythological resonance is that of the triple-functioning Goddess or Trinity in *The Tombs of Atuan*, with Arha/Tenar fulfilling the role of Virgin and Mother, with Tenar's birth mother and Manan as surrogate Mother, within the actual Labyrinth and Undertomb which functions as Mother, and with Thar and Kossil as Crones. Arha moves from five to sixteen in the novel, but as Virgin goddess/priestess, her fertility and fecundity, her sexual, reproductive, and imaginative potential are wasted and useless until Ged's appearance. It is no coincidence that she is on the brink of womanhood and able to "conceive" when he "impregnates" her with the idea of her potentiality. Once thus impregnated, she is prepared for her role as mother, deliverer both of herself and of him. Only she understands the Labyrinth and its feminine mysteries. Like any mother involved in the "creative process" of birth, "she realize[s] that she must lead [Ged]. Only she [knows] the way out of the Labyrinth, and she wait[s] to follow her" (*Tombs* 117). The couple help each other, umbilically linked by holding hands: "with the masculine and feminine combined, the maze of psychic processes becomes the place of transformation" (Chetwynd 256). As moral and spiritual midwife, Ged lends Tenar his strength, but it is she who leads "the Way."

Early in the novel, Le Guin fashions nurturing images of Tenar's birth mother so that we may connect the fair-haired woman associated with the hearth and firelight with the light that is her daughter's: "[Arha is] like a lantern swathed and covered, hidden away in a dark place. Yet the light shines; [the Dark Powers] could not put out the light. They could not hide [her]" (*Tombs* 108). This inner illumination is what sets Arha apart from the other priestesses; she is different, thoughtful and possesses a conscience, perhaps because she spent the first five formative years in the light of her mother who remains an important part of her daughter's subconscious memories: Tenar's dreams and solitary reveries recall her mother's "fair long hair, the color of sunset and firelight" (9). As well, the novel begins and ends with Tenar "coming home" and although the journey is not physically circular, psychologically the cyclical movement again suggests the female cycles of development.¹² Furthermore, if we accept Barbara Walker's notion that Home and Mother are synonymous, then Tenar's journey is a search for mother;¹³ ultimately to know her mother is to know herself (*Woman's Encyclopedia* 265).

Thus the eunuch Manan - Le Guin may have been playing with the French "maman" - who becomes Arha's surrogate Mother, never takes the place of the girl's real mother. The Priestess is fond of him, but that is all. He

offers her comfort after she is made nameless, refers to her in kindness and with petnames, and relates what he knows of her personal history. However, he cannot tell her about the first five years of her life and can never entirely fill the gap. Although he is protective, he also nearly causes her destruction when she chooses to escape the Place. The fact that, as eunuch, he can be neither father nor mother to Arha, emphasizes the bleakness of her isolation and solitude.

But perhaps the strongest and most comprehensive image of the Mother-Goddess is found in the structure and function of the Tombs. The archetype of the mother is dualistic, just as Arha/Tenar has powers as life-giver and death-wielder. Le Guin describes the Mother as both "possessor and destroyer, the mother who feeds you cookies and who must be destroyed before she eats you like a cookie, so that you can grow up and be a mother too" (Le Guin, "Child and Shadow" 66). The Undertomb and Labyrinth are a devouring and nurturing Earth-Mother.

Thus the physicality of the Tombs, which suggest womb and birth canal, accentuates the maternal nature of Le Guin's underworld. Ged penetrates through the Red Rock Door (vulva), entering the sacred and mysterious Undertomb and Labyrinth (vagina). He illuminates (fertilizes) Arha with the potential of Tenar with "light" from his "staff" while in the Painted Room, the matrix of the nether realm. He restores her true name in the Great Treasure Room and they go through the birthing process, through the birth channels of the Labyrinth and out from the womb to life. Their mutual rebirth compares with that of the Earth-Mother goddess from ancient mythology:

... the Goddess brought order out of her own chaos by her rhythmic movements on or within the primal Deep. Indeed, how else would a human mind symbolize the forgotten-but-unforgotten first experience of birth: rhythmic expulsive movements of the womb? The creative process was crowned with the sudden appearance of 'light,' like the forgotten-but-unforgettable first impact of light on eyes that saw only darkness before. (Walker, *The Crone* 27-28)

The Tombs of Atuan describes the "labor" manifested in the earthquake and the accompanying rhythmic thrumming in similar terms (119-120). The dazzling brightness at the moment of birth is apparent as Tenar and Ged burst forth from the Red Rock Door and Tenar crouches in a fetal position (*Tombs* 121-122). Had she not chosen Tenar and freedom, Arha would have remained in the realm of the unconscious, virtually dead. Had Tenar and Ged not escaped the Tombs at exactly this moment, the Mother would have devoured them both.

Thar and Kossil complete the Virgin-Mother-Crone trinity, functioning as Crones, "wom[en] of age, wisdom, and power," and also possessing positive and negative qualities (Walker, *Crone* 1). However, Thar is more a positive than a negative Crone. She is teacher to Arha for eleven years, and the girl misses her sorely when she dies. Thar is described as stern, but never cruel; she taught the Priestess the ways of the Labyrinth, and more importantly,



warned her of Kossil's treachery. In contrast, Kossil is a terrible Crone. She recognizes that the baby Tenar is not stricken with smallpox and takes her away from the biological mother. It is Kossil who whips Penthe for disobedience. The elder woman is jealous of Arha, full of hate and lust for power. Eventually Tenar confronts and curses her. Motivated by desire for vengeance and absolute control, Kossil entraps Tenar and Ged to kill them. To ensure their escape, this Crone must be destroyed. If she is not, Arha herself faces the very real possibility of assimilating the qualities of Kossil to become a terrible Crone.

By drawing upon mythology and the language of the Goddess, Le Guin weaves a narrative not only of feminine individuation, but also of a heroine's escape from repression and enslavement to freedom through the "creative process." In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous supports the notion that creativity (i.e., writing) is the means to female liberation, and urges woman to "write herself: . . . write about women and bring women to writing" and to celebrate in words the female body and female sexuality long considered taboo by male censors (309). Subsequently, a "creative" collusion provides a means of imaginative escape for both reader and writer-therapy through imagination—a means of refashioning male-dominated quest patterns, a feminine response to an age-old question: how to survive the adolescent dark night of the soul. Le Guin takes a good long look at the darkness, long enough for her eyes to adjust and see what it really is: a "great treasure" of creative potential. Through her text she invites others to the inner sanctuary, the room of one's own, to "be at home there, keep house there, be [one's] own mistress" (Le Guin, "Left-Handed Commencement" 117). The author stresses that, for the reader as for Tenar, creativity is the product or elixir of the psychological journey, that the power of the imagination is the "boon" of Selfhood.

Creativity takes on a complexity of implications in Tenar's story. Firstly, her fragmented personality is made whole as represented by the earthquake, which, according to Tom Chetwynd, symbolizes "exploding into the Cosmos, and then reassembling the parts around a new nucleus or Centre in the psyche. The gain is self-knowledge" (120). Despite its potential danger, the earthquake—the fragmentation and reintegration of the psyche—is "a very fruitful experience . . . when all the forces of the cosmos . . . clash in the inner realm . . . everything can be turned into fluid potential" (Chetwynd 121). This fruitful potential is reflected in the green-world setting into which Tenar and Ged are born:

It was all green-green of pines, of grasslands, of sown fields and fallows. Even in the dead of winter, when the thickets were bare and the forests full of gray boughs, it was a green land, humble and mild. . . . The sun itself was hidden, but there was a glitter on the horizon, almost like the dazzle of the crystal walls of the Undertomb, a kind of joyous shimmering off on the edge of the world. (*Tombs* 132)

The shimmering horizon seems to promise a new and rich life for the newborn child who is Tenar.

However, creativity in the heroine's life seems to transcend this green-world potential for future happiness. It also suggests Tenar's newly-discovered magic as "metaphor of the creative power of the imagination" (Spivack 5), and of sexuality and sexual union. In "Dreams Must Explain Themselves," Le Guin says of magic: "Wizardry is artistry. The [Earthsea] trilogy is then, in this sense, about art, the creative experience, the creative process" (53). She also identifies *naming* as the "essence of the art-magic as practiced in Earthsea" and that "to know the true name is to know the thing" ("Dreams" 53). Therefore, when Tenar reclaims her true name, she reclaims her own "magical" inner power, the "light" Ged recognized in the darkness, and is able to deliver both herself and the wizard. In addition, Le Guin writes that the subject of *The Tombs of Atuan* is "in one word sex. . . . More exactly you could call it a feminine coming-of-age. Birth, rebirth, destruction, freedom are the themes" ("Dreams" 55). Why else would Le Guin's novel be steeped in the language and imagery of sexual union and the birth process? But the author also stresses the importance of the sexual "relationship" rather than merely the act. She sees the relationship "conventionally and overtly, as a couple. Both in one: or two making a whole. Yin does not occur without yang, nor yang without yin" (Le Guin, "Planet of Exile" 143). This we can recognize in the "marriage of true minds" between Tenar and Ged, and, in what may be seen as a type of ritual marriage ceremony, the two halves of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe are joined, the anima and animus are reconciled. With the mending of the two halves, the Rune of Peace is restored and harmony will reign in Earthsea.

Thus Ged functions not only as a part of Arha's sleeping Self, but quite literally as her lover. Wizard and Priestess are physically and intellectually attracted to each other. Ged's magic, his knowledge of names, and the creative power of his imagination (Ged is obviously in touch with his feminine principle, the "female" aspect of his psyche) facilitates Arha in discovering her name, her potential, her magic. Together, their magic informs Arha's journey to Tenar, and assists the couple in escaping the deadly Tombs. The young woman's sexual awakening - after all, she bears two "children" in the novel - is the magic that saves them both and leads to self-discovery. In *The Tombs of Atuan* sexuality is celebrated as a way to healing and wholeness, but it is not until *Tehanu*, the fourth book of the Earthsea saga, that Tenar confesses she loved Ged from the moment she first saw him, and their love is physically consummated.

Therefore, an account of Tenar's journey is incomplete without a brief examination of her life in the fourth novel. In *Tehanu*, Le Guin decides whether the White Lady of Gont is truly free and if her creative powers have led her to anything other than a traditionally female role. At first glance, Tenar seems merely to have been borne into yet another form of enslavement, that of a male-dominated, agricultural society. Choosing marriage and motherhood above book-learning and wizardry, she becomes Goha,

Flint's wife. As the novel opens, Goha is a middle-aged widow (approaching the Crone stage) whose property now legally belongs to her son, and who is entrusted with the care and healing of the burned child, Therru, victim of rape and attempted murder. Therru is not a pleasant world, and Goha appears to have as little autonomy as did Arha, Priestess of the Tombs.

However, as the narrative unfolds, Goha once again becomes Tenar, once again with Ged's assistance, and rediscovers that old magic, never entirely lost and inseparable from her sexuality and womanhood. Great emphasis is given to the difference between male and female magic or power. According to the witch, Moss, wizardry is associated with the illusions of the male ego and once spent, the man is impotent. Although witchery is seen as weak and wicked, a woman's power has deeper roots which extend into the dark and unknowable, presumably the unconscious. (Perhaps this ageless, timeless magic is what gives Tenar the ability, unlike any male wizard, to look directly into the dragon Kalessin's eyes.) Gradually, through Tenar, we are shown the humble dignity of the woman's domain; and because of Tenar's powers of healing, nurturing, care-giving, she is once again a "Life-giver," saving both Tehanu/Therru and Ged from spiritual death (*Tehanu* 214).

Although Tenar finds herself once more "in dark places, alone, and afraid" (Le Guin, "Left-Handed Commencement" 116), it is precisely from this realm of the intuitive that she draws her strength

... for living, the whole side of life that includes and takes responsibility for helplessness, weakness, and illness, for the irrational and the irreparable, for all that is obscure, passive, uncontrolled, animal, unclear—the valley of the shadow, the deep, the depths of life. (Le Guin, "Left-Handed Commencement" 117)

In addition, by drawing from this wellspring of imagination, Tenar recounts the stories and lore so crucial to Therru's therapy. Once again, through the magic of sexual union, Ged is restored, reborn a third time (as Ogion says, "third time is the charm"¹⁴) in Tenar's embrace. When she recognizes that hers is a potent though feminine type of magic, one that involves the cyclical, ritual stages of life—"birth, rebirth, destruction, freedom"—Tenar (and Le Guin) also knows that hers is the power of becoming. Perhaps what Tenar learns above all in *Tehanu* is that leaving the Tombs was truly "the beginning of the story" (Le Guin, *Tombs* 113), and that her experience in the Labyrinth helped her to face the future traumas of her life. In the former novel, she transforms tomb into womb, and entrapment into liberation; in the final novel, she returns, metaphorically, to the "night side of [her] country," to the dark reservoir of power where "[her] roots are" (Le Guin, "Left-Handed Commencement" 117), and where she is mistress of her Self.

"The harmonious meeting of prince and princess, their awakening to each other, is a symbol of what maturity implies: not just harmony within oneself, but also with the

other" (Bettelheim 234). So it is with Prince Charming's kiss; so it is with Ged and Tenar. But Le Guin shows us what the writers of the fairy tales failed or feared to reveal: what a woman *does* during her own interior journey. In *The Tombs of Atuan*, Tenar achieves "escape through imagination,"¹⁵ "a withdrawal into the unconscious for the purpose of personal transformation" (Pratt 177). Through *herstory*, a return to the narrative wealth of goddess mythology, Le Guin affects a "restoration through remembering" of exactly what entails during a woman's sojourn in the dark (Pratt 176). Tenar awakens with all the creative potential that is her birthright, a regenerative, life-affirming power. It is a feminine power, Le Guin maintains, different from that of the masculine. It is inextricably linked with female sexuality and springs from the mysterious realm of the unconscious which, for a woman, is never entirely abandoned. She may ascend to the light, but never transcends the darkness wherein lies her inner strength and creative resilience. The heroine is free at the novel's conclusion, that is, empowered to choose what she will become: Tenar, White Lady of Gont, or Goha, wife of Flint. In *Tehanu* we see that Le Guin's heroine achieves those values that in women's fiction constitute "totality of self" (Pratt 176): sexual autonomy, a meaningful social role (that of Life-giver), and a celebration of her own femininity and what it is to be a woman. Having negotiated the Labyrinth of Self, Tenar continues to "become," to expand her awareness and rediscover herself time and again. The hero's quest, once completed, is over. But according to Le Guin, the heroine's journey, perhaps because of woman's marginality, perhaps because biologically and psychologically she goes through so many phases, seems to run, concurrent, with her life. Woman will continue to face "the night in [her] own country" (Le Guin, "Left-Handed Commencement" 117). Hence Tenar's role remains that of helping others find the Way, "not in the light that blinds, but in the dark that nourishes, where human beings grow human souls" (Le Guin, "Left-Handed Commencement" 117):

It is named the Mysterious Female.

And the Doorway of the Mysterious Female

Is the base from which Heaven and Earth sprang.

It is there within us all the while. . . .¹⁶

Notes

1. I refer to Jung's notion of the Self, defined as "an inner guiding factor that is different from the conscious personality and that can be grasped only through the investigation of one's own dreams. These show it to be the regulating center that brings about a constant extension and maturing of the personality" (*Man and His Symbols* 163).
2. Fore purposes of this paper, "feminine" is defined as "of or pertaining to a woman or to women; carried on by women. . ." (*OED* 739).
3. The Eleusinian rites or mysteries celebrated the coming of spring. These fertility rites are closely associated with the myth of Demeter and Persephone: the abduction of Persephone by Hades, Demeter's subsequent grief and devastation of nature, and the rebirth of Persephone and the green world (Pratt 171). Annis Pratt notes that "these rites are part of secret oral traditions, and thus our understanding of them is pieced together from a medley of contemporary and historical accounts" (171).
4. Campbell notes the affinity of the hero for the Underworld, "a world

- of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which are threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers)" (264).
5. Campbell describes the hero's atonement with the father as part of the fourth phase of his model, but, in women's fiction, perhaps because the heroine must break free of the conventions of motherhood, fatherhood, and her repressive society, Pratt identifies parental confrontations as a necessary prelude to self-knowledge.
 6. The ring also holds a special power for Tolkien's Bilbo Baggins who, with his magic talisman, becomes whole (his masculine and feminine principles reconciled), able to escape Gollum, and go on to become a very different hobbit indeed.
 7. Mary Sarton, *Journal of Solitude* (New York, 1973), 37, qtd. in Pratt 142.
 8. Northrop Frye's term is used here to suggest a "deliberate reversal of the customary... associations of a patriarchy" (156).
 9. Mary Sarton, *Journal of Solitude* (New York, 1973), 37, qtd. in Pratt 142.
 10. Charlotte Spivack makes much the same comparison between Ariadne and Arha, and Persephone and Arha in Merlin's Daughters: Contemporary Writers of Women's Fantasy (37).
 11. Ged is like Horus in that he too "impregnates his mother": he fertilizes Arha with the idea of who she can become, and she as Tenar is the mother who helps deliver him from the Tombs.
 12. In "Fantasy and the Feminine," Charlotte Spivack notes that the feminine circular, as opposed to male linear plot is a "narrative device favored by women fantasy writers" (9).
 13. the archetypal search for mother is an important element of many works by women authors whether they write for children, as in Anne Holm's *I Am David* and Virginia Hamilton's *Sweet Whispers*, *Brother Rush*, or for adults, as in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.
 14. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, 144. Ged was reborn twice before: from the Tombs of Atuan and from the Dry Land in *The Farthest Shore*.
 15. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Female Imagination* (New York, 1975), 411, qtd. in Pratt 177.
 16. *Tao Tê Ching* 6, Trans. Arthur Waley. *The Way and Its Power* (London, 1934), 149, qtd. in Campbell, *Occidental Mythology* 80.

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