Aspects of Worldbuilding: Taoism as Foundational in Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea Saga

Dennis Friedrichsen
Justus Liebig University

Recommended Citation

SWOSU

Online MidSummer Seminar 2025
More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy
August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

OMS 4—ONLINE MIDSUMMER SEMINAR 2025
AUGUST 2-3, 2025 VIA ZOOM AND DISCORD
HTTPS://MYTHSOC.ORG/OMS/OMS-04.HTM

More Perilous and Fair:
Women and Gender in
Mythopoeic Fantasy

PERILOUS AND FAIR
Women in the Works and Life of J. R. R. Tolkien

EDITED BY JANET BRENNAN CROFT
AND LESLIE A. DONOVAN

Aspects of Worldbuilding: Taoism as Foundational in Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea Saga

Abstract

Ursula K. Le Guin's influential Earthsea novels are an integral part of the fantasy literature tradition, and the way Le Guin constructed both her narrative and the accompanying storyworld continues to inspire reader reactions and scholarly attention. This article seeks to directly link the Taoist philosophy to Le Guin's worldbuilding and argues that Taoism is foundational for Earthsea and its construction. Multiple aspects of the storyworld are affected by Taoism including dialogue, character motivations, major quests, and moral systems. Through examples from primarily A Wizard of Earthsea, the article showcases how Taoism is meaningful in Earthsea and the strong degree to which Le Guin used Taoism as a building block in the same manner that J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis employed Christianity in their work. The main character, Ged, provides the most material for examining Taoist influence, and his journey – which is reminiscent of a classic Bildungsroman – produces several crucial moments that highlight central areas Taoism is concerned with, including Balance, Wholeness, and Equilibrium.

Additional Keywords

Taoism; Worldbuilding; Earthsea; Narratology; Fantasy; Le Guin

Aspects of Worldbuilding: Taoism as Foundational in Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea Saga

Dennis Friedrichsen

Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* stories, *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971), *The Farthest Shore* (1972), *Tehanu* (1990), as well as *The Other Wind* (2001) and the collection of short stories in *Tales from Earthsea* (2001) are a cornerstone of fantasy literature. Le Guin's storyworld has evolved and changed from its inception to the final installment, and the significance, influence, and depth of the *Earthsea* saga remains unmistakable. In this article, I will trace the influence that the Taoist philosophy has had on *Earthsea* and consider it in light of contemporary worldbuilding theory that aims to identify the narratological building blocks of fictional worlds. My core argument is that Taoism rests at the very center of *Earthsea* and is the foundation on which Le Guin's worldbuilding is formed. Taoism also influences many other areas of the narrative, including dialogue, quests, characters and character development. Several scholars[1] have considered Taoism in the context of *Earthsea*, but my endeavor concerns directly linking the philosophy to the essence of *Earthsea*'s mythopoeic worldbuilding. Considerations about the practice of fictional worldbuilding are important because these practices engage reader imagination; the fictional world is both created but also understood and interpreted as an idea or a thought experiment which, in the context of Le Guin, is relevant, given her interest in philosophy. Essentially, paying close attention to Le Guin's worldbuilding strategies in *Earthsea* reveals the foundational role that Taoism plays. The *Earthsea* storyworld consequently becomes an arena in which philosophical and political[2] ideas may be represented, investigated, problematized or interpreted. Le Guin's storyworld must necessarily be considered in light of these perspectives, and throughout this article I will closely link the Taoist philosophy and Le Guin's worldbuilding; this aspect, more than anything else, is what

---

[1] See Dena C. Bain's "The *Tao Te Ching* as Background to the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin" (1986); Robert Galbreath's "Taoist Magic in *The Earthsea Trilogy*" (1980); and James Bittner's *Approaches to the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin* (1984).

[2] Le Guin's interest in politics is also well-documented, but political readings are not within the scope of this article. For an overview, see Donna White's *Dancing With Dragons: Ursula K. Le Guin and the Critics* (1999).

remains central since it shows the foundational narrative and structural mechanisms of *Earthsea*. Using theory and terminology from the field of worldbuilding will provide new perspectives on the topic of Taoism in the context of Le Guin, and help explain the philosophical elements that Le Guin consciously employs in order to construct her storyworld.

As a point of contrast, I will compare Le Guin to J.R.R. Tolkien's work in order to show how Le Guin both belongs to the Western fantasy tradition but also deliberately and successfully employs narrative strategies that are (and remain) unique. Although I will consider the entirety of the *Earthsea* storyworld, I will limit my examples to *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Representatively, *Wizard* will highlight how several major areas of the storyworld are influenced by Taoist worldbuilding: the invented moral and cultural realms within the storyworld, its aesthetic dimension, its moral quality, and the narrative construction of all the *Earthsea* novels. In order to consider *Earthsea* and the aspects of its worldbuilding, I employ primarily Mark J.P. Wolf and his significant contribution in *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012), which in many ways is the first book that considers the core narratological structures within fictional worlds. While Possible Worlds theory has existed since the 1970's, Wolf's book serves as a type of handbook of worldbuilding and narratology, and is consequently a useful tool for any analytical considerations about storyworlds. Wolf's work is less philosophical in nature and is therefore quite easily applicable to texts that feature aspects of fictional worldbuilding.

A Wizard of Earthsea is the well-known first novel in the *Earthsea* series, and this book effectively introduces readers to both the storyworld of Earthsea as well as the main character, Ged. This novel in particular follows a conventional quest-fantasy structure, and my overarching arguments concerning Taoism and fictional worldbuilding are directly linked to Ged's journey within *Wizard*.[3] In *Wizard*, we follow Ged, first named Duny and nicknamed Sparrowhawk (the latter name following him throughout the entire series), who discovers magical aptitude; he defends his home from invaders by using magic, and is taken on as apprentice by Ogion, under whose tutelage Ged struggles due to his own arrogance and youthful impatience. Ogion gives Ged his 'true name' and tries to educate him on the significance of balance and equilibrium, topics that will prove central in *Wizard* and in subsequent novels. Wanting to learn more wizardry, Ged journeys to a school of wizards on the island of Roke where he quickly garners admiration for his fast learning and powerful abilities. However, in a moment of reckless bravado, Ged summons a Shadow from the land of the dead that means to possess him; this entity

---

[3] See also Peter Hollindale's "The Last Dragon of Earthsea" (2003).

becomes the focus of the novel's major quest, and Ged first desperately flees from the Shadow until he realizes that he must face it head-on in order to break its grasp on him. In the final moments of the novel, Ged confronts the Shadow and names it with its True Name, which is 'Ged,' and has thus conquered it and restored balance to both his persona and the archipelago of Earthsea. The Shadow is specifically what causes an imbalance, and Ged must overcome both himself and the Shadow to set things right. Having defeated the Shadow, both Ged and Earthsea itself are healed and made whole. In the subsequent novels, tone, style and structure are changed and while Ged remains an important character throughout, he is often relegated to a supporting role.[4]

At first glance this tale may seem a conventional or even clichéd story, but the fact remains that overcoming evil as something *internal* rather than something *external* is a significant variation from most traditional fantasy quests. The underlying mechanisms of the storyworld in *Wizard* and Ged's journey—especially once an analysis includes more of the *Earthsea* books—showcase Le Guin's archipelago as an inventive realm that produces significant moments in both reader and narrative construction. In the context of fantasy literature and its tradition, *Earthsea*'s position and Le Guin's influence only seems clichéd at first since she invented many of the tropes and structures that have since been re-used and re-worked in later fantasy novels. For example, a boy of little worldly knowledge and experience who attends a magical school might not be described as innovative in contemporary fantasy (although it can still be entirely enjoyable). Le Guin's interpretation of magic and the manner in which she weaves the overarching struggle around non-Christian ideas of good and evil, balance and equilibrium, are areas that continue to inspire and influence.

The tenets of the Taoist philosophy play an important role in the construction of *Earthsea*, and Le Guin has made no secret of her interest in this branch of Eastern philosophy.[5] Quoting from Ted Honderich's *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Marek Oziewicz provides a general introduction to Taoism in the context of Le Guin in his 2008 book *One Earth, One People* where he observes that:

---

[4] Already in *The Tombs of Atuan*, for example, Tenar (or Arha) is the main character with Ged only appearing around the middle of the narrative. In *The Farthest Shore*, Ged supports Lebannen (or Arren) in his quest to the land of the dead. In *Tehanu*, Ged is a minor character while Tenar occupies the central role. In *The Other Wind*, Ged is also a supporting character who appears early in the novel, but only functions as a wise sage; the main quest revolves around Alder, King Lebannen, Seserakh, Tenar, and Tehanu.

[5] See, for example, Le Guin's 1997 Introduction to her rendition of *Tao Te Ching.*

> Taoism is a Chinese school of thought which sees universal correspondences between all planes of existence, holds that "operations of the human world should ideally be continuous with that of the natural order," and assumes that the ultimate reality called by the name of "*tao* (the Way)" is "the source of all things, … is characterized by *wu* (non-being, vacuity), [and] transcends all distinctions and conceptualizations" […]. (120)

This 'natural order' is connected to the well-known idea of yin and yang in which balance and correlation between all things play a central role. It is in this part of Taoism that we find a building block of *Earthsea,* since Le Guin's interest in 'balance' is a noticeable and recurring theme in all the *Earthsea* novels. In *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ged upsets balance by bringing the Shadow into the world and must strive to restore order; in *The Tombs of Atuan*, the broken ring of Erreth-Akbe must be made whole, and Tenar must achieve balance between her role and persona as Priestess, Arha, and her new life as Tenar. In *The Farthest Shore*, Le Guin's careful navigation of the idea of death is a core problem; death becomes automatically juxtaposed with life, and the balance between the two is a recurring theme. In *Tehanu*, Tenar balances the new circumstances of her life with Therru and her relationship with Ged; and in *The Other Wind*, Le Guin attempts to tie together strands from previous novels and focuses on the struggle between dragons and humans as well as the introspective struggles of several main characters. Introspection has been a general trend in most of Le Guin's writing and instead of traditional heroism, Le Guin's protagonists often wrestle more with inner demons than evil overlords; this is true for Ged in *Earthsea,* Genly in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and Shevek in *The Dispossessed.* As we can now see, although the structure and focus of each of Le Guin's stories differ, there are still foundational elements that inform her storyworlds. Taoism merges seemingly oppositional forces, and while arguably only *A Wizard of Earthsea* has a direct oppositional relationship manifested through the struggle between Ged and the Shadow, the groundwork within the narratives is still linked to Taoism and its focus on balance, wholeness, and equilibrium. Taoism informs the storyworld much as Welsh, Roman, Norse, Greek, and Finnish mythology did for Middle-earth and similar narratives and is consequently woven into the very fabric of both story and storyworld.

The very nature of the *Earthsea* storyworld is constructed in such a way that it implicitly engages readers in philosophical thought, specifically Taoist reflections on equilibrium, balance, and personal wholeness. Le Guin herself, with her usual self-awareness, has elaborated on Taoist perspectives in her work, and she offers her own definitions of fantasy while arguing for the genre's positive potential. For example, in her essay "The Child and the Shadow," her statement that fantasy is "a universal and essential faculty of the human mind"

(69) reveals her strong opinion on a genre often dismissed (especially in the late-1960s when *Wizard* was published). The fantasy with its 'essential faculty' seems somewhat divorced from the overt use of political themes in her science fiction novels and instead focuses on nostalgic ideas about the nature of being, evidenced by Ged's journey and the archetypical[6] challenges he faces. Brian Attebery has commented on the limitations but also potential of fantasy and the genre's inherent ability to generate awareness: "Fantasy does impose many restrictions on the power of the imagination, but in return it offers the possibility of generating not merely a meaning but an awareness of and a pattern for meaningfulness" (17). There is a strong connection between this meaningfulness in fantasy and the influence of Taoism that is evident in the construction of *Earthsea* because the stories showcase how fantasy, despite its fictitious nature, is able to pose questions about life and meaning, and present themes or problems from the real world in a recognizable-but-different secondary world. In this way, Taoism in *Earthsea*, even if the reader does not pick up on the finer points of the philosophy itself, permeates the narrative and storyworld to a degree where engagement with the novel automatically results in a broadening of horizons and a gaining of new perspectives. In other words, if a reader does not immediately understand the Taoist undertones in the storyworld, she is nevertheless engaging with characters and a storyworld in which tenets of the philosophy manifest.

In *Building Imaginary Worlds*, Mark J.P. Wolf identifies core features of fictional worldbuilding and shows how these worlds *invent* (34) new areas; strive for *completeness* (38), and rely on a level of *consistency* (43) for the sake of internal coherence. Particularly his ideas on so-called cultural inventions are relevant: "The most changes to be found are in [...] the *cultural* realm, which consists of all things made by humans (or other creatures), and in which new objects, artifacts, technologies, customs, institutions, ideas, and so forth appear" (35, emphasis original). Many of Le Guin's inventions, including the fictional landscape and the Roke wizard school institution, are important for the story. However, her 'idea' of incorporating Taoism is what serves as the foundation and is thus the most meaningful (if subtle) of her inventions within the storyworld. Through this avenue we may identify structures which explain the inner-workings of fantasy worlds and pinpoint elements that explain the mechanisms of storyworlds.

---

[6] Le Guin's interest in C.G. Jung and archetypes has also been noted but is an area beyond the scope of this article. For more information, see Sue Jenkins' "Growing Up in Earthsea"; Margaret Esmonde's "The Master Pattern: The Psychological Journey in *The Earthsea Trilogy*"; Craig & Diana Barrow's "Le Guin's *Earthsea*: Voyages into Consciousness"; Gordon E. Slethaug's "The Paradoxical Double in Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*."

For Le Guin, fantasy and science fiction are genres through which readers can explore different meanings through fantastic places and people. Fantasy becomes a narrative mode that effectively functions as a vehicle for philosophical problematizations and it handles these ideas through creative writing that offers a dimension which pure realism does not. In the case of traditional fantasy that I will discuss (Tolkien and Lewis in particular), texts are created with specific (often allegorical) meanings that either directly influence the story (Narnia), or exist with such a strong pre-packaged religious and philosophical backbone (Middle-earth) that the meaning-making process for the reader necessarily has to consider these elements. While *Earthsea* is clearly also based on a specific philosophy, the tenets of that philosophy allow for different kinds of reader-reactions and immersion exactly because Taoism is broader in scope. For example, concrete ideas about 'wholeness' and 'equilibrium' may mean a variety of different things to different readers depending on their proclivities and focus in the process of reading and interpreting. Le Guin herself commented on interpretation and her dislike for allegory in "Dreams Must Explain Themselves," ultimately trusting readers to engage with her work with an open mind without the need for senselessly de-coding pre-defined secrets: "I hate allegories. A is "really" B and hawk is "really" a handsaw—bah. Humbug. Any creation, primary or secondary, with any vitality to it, can "really" be a dozen mutually exclusive things at once, before breakfast" (53). We may then assume that there is no 'correct' way of unlocking *Earthsea*, but rather that Le Guin wanted to create a storyworld in which ideas and thoughts that inspired and influenced her were allowed to have free rein.

Oziewicz contributes to the discussion about what he calls mythopoeic fantasy[7] and its ability to address cultural and aesthetic needs; his considerations include worlds based on mythology that also house a deliberately moral outlook. Mythopoeic fantasy is uniquely able to provide an aesthetic dimension that seems hard to reproduce in other genres. It is my view that particularly aesthetic needs are an intangible but important area that remains complex to classify but remains crucial in intellectual self-realization and affective connections to aesthetic objects. Put differently, fantasy literature is able to provide engagement with specific aesthetic objects (texts) that provide unique intellectual stimulation. Oziewicz states that:

> I argue for a mythopoeic fantasy as a holistic, soul-nurturing type of narrative capable of addressing vital psychological, cultural and aesthetic needs which are disregarded by most other forms of contemporary literature. I stress that the secondary worlds that mythopoetic fantasy

---

[7] Any storyworld that is based on mythology is mythopoeic (Middle-earth being a classic example).

employs are morally charged universes in which human actions are
meaningful and may suggest a paradigm for a creative and fulfilling life
in the real world. (8)

It veers close to self-evident that *Earthsea* is 'morally charged', but the
progressive and positivistic nature of *Earthsea* and its concern with wholeness
and balance singles it out as a literary object that in (and through) its
worldbuilding exactly presents these actions that are meaningful and may lead
to—or at least inspire—a "fulfilling life in the real world." Although writing
about fantasy more generally, Farah Mendlesohn approaches the same issues
from a moral standpoint and argues that fantasy and its storyworlds rely on
moral universes more so than science fiction. Mendlesohn argues that:

> What underpins [Mendlesohn's arguments about fantasy] is the idea of
> moral expectation. Fantasy, unlike science fiction, relies on a moral
> universe: it is less an argument with the universe than a sermon on the
> way things should be, a belief that the universe should yield to moral
> precepts. (5)

It is my view that fantasy is perhaps based on, and not reliant on, moral
foundations more often than science fiction. Taking this argument a step further,
we might consider how worldbuilding that is 'based on' a moral foundation is
different from what Mendlesohn argues in the context of fantasy being 'reliant
on' a moral universe. Tolkien, Lewis and Le Guin all based their storyworlds
and their foundational elements on religious ideas and structures, and this fact
impacts all major areas of the narrative and must as such be considered or
acknowledged in most interpretations. Consequently, they explicitly engage
with those ideas as well, although how this engagement manifests itself differs.
Tolkien, for example, was an unapologetic Christian but significantly less overt
in his religious imagery than Lewis, and famously declared his dislike for
allegorical readings.[8] Lewis clearly intended his Narnian world to be read
allegorically, and the relationship between Christian themes and motifs and the
structure and events in Narnia seems clear. What unites both Tolkien and Lewis
is precisely the moral foundation of their storyworlds. In Tolkien's work, the
mythological quality and the creationism myth in *The Silmarillion* is based on

---

[8] "I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I
grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history—true or feigned—
with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many
confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader,
and the other in the purposed domination of the author." ("Foreword to the Second
Edition" to *The Lord of the Rings*, p. xxiv)

Christian ideas: monotheism, a 'fallen' angel-entity that becomes a manifestation of evil, and clear distinctions between good and evil. There are meaningful changes, such as Eru Ilúvatar, or The One, singing the world into being (inspiration taken from Finnish mythology), but major components remain religious and primarily Christian. Even when Tolkien's worldbuilding does not directly draw on Christianity or mythology, the underlying structure(s) nevertheless remain informed by the Christian aspects and the accompanying moral foundation.

Consider, however, a juxtaposition between *Earthsea* and the Judeo-Christian approach with its Supreme Being cosmology. Le Guin deliberately has no godhood figure at all, but instead employs myths and legends about Segoy who raised the islands of the archipelago out of the water long ago: "in those days the waters will rise and drown the islands of Earthsea which Segoy raised from the deeps in the time before myth, all the lands where men and dragons dwell" (*Wizard* 4.73).[9] Importantly, Segoy was specifically a wizard, not a god. This is not to say that *Earthsea* is secular—in fact, the Kargish culture includes the Twin Gods (or Warrior Gods) Wuluah and Atwah. However, *Earthsea* does primarily rely on a mythopoeic quality and structure that intentionally seeks to establish new pathways in the fantasy tradition while still understanding the foundational ideas that made Tolkien's and Lewis's texts meaningful. My argument ultimately is that these influential fantasy storyworlds are thus *based on* ideas that are fundamentally religious and moral in nature. (For the sake of contrast, we may consider popular storyworlds such as Westeros in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire,* which employs a deliberately different take on morality that is inspired by historical events and reactionary in how it strives to counter the Tolkenian, and arguably the Le Guinian, tradition of establishing a moral foundation for a storyworld. Martin, instead, focuses to a large extent on the socio-political struggles that drive major conflicts.) In the case of Le Guin, who was undoubtedly inspired by Tolkien and wanted to write something similar in style, her work and its worldbuilding was ultimately *based on* the Taoist philosophy and its religious and mythological aspects, which means that Taoism in Le Guin's worldbuilding plays much the same role as Christianity does in Tolkien's Middle-earth. Taoism is visible in the actions, dialogue, and motivations/problems of the main characters, and is recognizable in all the structures of the storyworld. As such, Taoism becomes a *conscious* structure. Consider first the very poem that starts *A Wizard of Earthsea,* a small epigraph that sets the tone for the storyworld in five brief lines and is later repeated two times in the novel itself. The epigraph reads:

---

[9] Since there are so many editions of the *Earthsea* books, references will be given in the format *chapter.page.*

> Only in silence the word,
> only in dark the light,
> only in dying life:
> bright the hawk's flight
> on the empty sky.
> *The Creation of Éa* (12)

While epigraphs are often used to convey tone and style, Le Guin's use also reveals important aspects of the core Taoist ideas behind her worldbuilding—although this fact may only become clear *after* reading the novel. The issue of balance is visible early, with clear complementary opposites in the form of 'silence' and 'the word', 'dark' and 'the light', and 'dying' and 'life.' A careful reading will thus reveal a structure that runs through the entire series, and the repeated use of references to *The Creation of Éa* (an intradiegetic text; one that does not exist outside of the storyworld) underscores its significance. As we learn while Ged is an apprentice at the school on Roke: "Part of each day he studied with the Master Chanter, learning the Deeds of heroes and the Lays of wisdom, beginning with the oldest of all songs, the Creation of Éa" (3.47).[10] Consider the tonal significance for both the story and its worldbuilding: the literary style in *Earthsea* is immediately clear and readers can then successfully draw on their learned experience of the fantasy genre to (re-)position themselves (cf. Ryan) and accept the nature of Le Guin's magical world.[11] While the Taoist elements may not immediately be apparent, a knowledgeable reader will quickly recognize it and an unknowledgeable reader will become exposed and attuned to it. Next, in a moment showcasing both structural balance and circularity, the very end of *A Wizard of Earthsea* recalls "The Creation of Éa" when Vetch, after having travelled with Ged and hunted the Shadow, sings the song in a meaningful conclusive moment:

> Now when he [Vetch] saw his friend and heard him speak, his doubt
> vanished. And he began to see the truth, that Ged had neither lost nor
> won but, naming the shadow of his death with his own name, had made
> himself whole: a man: who, knowing his whole true self, cannot be used
> or possessed by any power other than himself, and whose life therefore
> is lived for life's sake and never in the service of ruin, or pain, or hatred,
> or the dark. In the *Creation of Éa*, which is the oldest song, it is said, "Only

---

[10] Here we also immediately see how Le Guin was inspired by Tolkien; The Creation of Éa is a song, a phenomenon Tolkien also used to create his world as it was sung into being, as well as the fact that Le Guin borrowed the Éa-word; Tolkien writes Eä (meaning "the Created World"), but the similarity is hardly a coincidence.

[11] The map, which is presented before the epigraph, is naturally a very significant part of this as well.

in silence the word, only in dark the light, only in dying life: bright the hawk's flight on the empty sky." That song Vetch sang aloud now as he held the boat westward, going before the cold wind of the winter night that blew at their backs from the vastness of the Open Sea. (10.165-66)

The epigraph highlights early on the direct influence Taoism has had on *Earthsea* and its characters; in this context, focusing on "The Creation of Éa," we see the analytical point concerning the foundational role Taoism plays in *Earthsea*. Not only do we return to the beginning (cf. circularity of the narrative structure) in the final pages via "The Creation of Éa," but may also identify how the song encompasses the entirety of *Earthsea* and its structure: the balance, the circularity, and the aesthetics. Not only the direct references to balance are important, however, but also formalist aspects such as the circular nature of the narrative: especially, Ged's journey is characterized by a circularity evidenced in the first three books. Ged is assisted by Ogion and enters the wider world beyond Gont; Ged then becomes the experienced wizard who helps Tenar leave behind her secluded existence; and, finally, Ged becomes the Archmage and replaces Ogion as the 'Wise Sage'[12] in the narrative as he travels with young Arren and thus completes the circle. Although mostly true for the original trilogy, the structure is continued in the fourth book, *Tehanu*, in which Tenar now supports Therru, or Tehanu, with Ged only appearing on the fringes of the story.

As a final point in this context, I want to showcase a conversation between Ged and Vetch's family that also indirectly recalls the song. In this situation, Ged has left the school (where he learned the words of the song) and we see how "The Creation of Éa" has become part of his personal philosophy in a much more overt manner: "Staying his knife on the carved wood, Murre asked, 'What of death?' The girl listened, her shining black head bent down. 'For a word to be spoken,' Ged answered slowly, 'there must be silence. Before and after'" (9.152). Ged paraphrases the song in a recognizable way, directly drawing on the meaning of the words and communicating them to Murre. Ged has evolved in his thinking and progressed from his arrogance and willfulness to a mature individual who sees the need for balance in all things—even between life and death, as Ogion did as well. The change in Ged from wild youth to insightful wizard is part of the Bildungsroman-aspect of *Wizard*, and Ogion's role is important in this process since he embodies strength, potential, and wisdom. In light of Ged's above conversation with Murre, we may recall an early conversation between a young Ged and Ogion:

---

[12] cf. Jungian archetypes, although Jung called this one the 'wise old man.'

> "When you know the fourfoil in all its seasons root and leaf and flower, by sight and scent and seed, then you may learn its true name, knowing its being: which is more than its use. What, after all, is the use of you? or of myself? Is Gont Mountain useful, or the Open Sea?" Ogion went on a half mile or so, and said at last, "To hear, one must be silent." (2.20)

Initially somewhat angered by this rebuke, Ged nevertheless adopts the same philosophy of mind as Ogion once he grows as a wizard and as a person.

Continuing the argument that there is a Taoist foundation, we may look to structural differences in the worldbuilding of Tolkien and Le Guin. Due to the nature of the moral philosophy that informed Tolkien's writing, it was both convenient and not entirely illogical to have distinctly evil races with few redeeming qualities. The orcs and goblins that Tolkien popularized are not without personality, but they seemingly automatically follow whatever evil powers exist and create a stark contrast to the moral heroes: the quaint but relatable hobbits, and the larger-than-life mythological heroes such as Aragorn. The orcs appear to be inherently and intrinsically *evil*, while Aragorn appears to be moral and unequivocally *good*. This specific area is where Le Guin, through Taoist worldbuilding, shifts away from Tolkien. There are significantly fewer species in Earthsea; in fact, only humans and dragons play any meaningful role. Within these two groups, there is no intrinsic *goodness* or *evil* but instead force of personality and cultural upbringing and belonging. This observation is important because Tolkien's clear moral borders are a major area that post-Tolkien fantasy writers were inspired by, and they created evil that functions in the same predictable and disposable manner: trollocs in Jordan's *Wheel of Time*, reavers in Farland's *The Runelords*, and murgos in Eddings's *The Belgariad*. The introspective nature of *Earthsea*, however, speaks to the Taoist notions that drive its worldbuilding, and this is a major reason why *Earthsea*—a storyworld that in many ways does belong to the Tolkienian tradition—nevertheless is markedly different. The *Earthsea* tales deliberately set out to portray good and evil in an entirely contrasting manner. Since the starting point for Le Guin's moral core in *Earthsea* is Taoist, characters and their beliefs are informed by Taoism as well, in their motivations (Ged's quest for restoring balance), their conversations, which often center around equilibrium and wholeness, and the interrelationships between characters. In this way we can identify that Le Guin's structure belongs to the Tolkienian tradition of basing a storyworld on a particular thought-tradition, but her strategy of avoiding an explicitly Christian foundation is even today, in the context of Western fantasy, not common.

Consider, for example, an instance of Ged talking to the Master Hand early in his career at the Roke school for Wizards. The Master Hand explains the workings and dangers of magic and the importance of careful consideration:

> But you must not change one thing, one pebble, one grain of sand, until you know what good and evil will follow on that act. The world is in balance, and Equilibrium. A wizard's power of Changing and Summoning can shake the balance of the world. It is dangerous, that power. It is most perilous. It must follow knowledge, and serve need. To light a candle is to cast a shadow . . . . " (3.48)

The capitalized Equilibrium is telling, stressing not only its importance but the seemingly innate quality and role of it, and wizards, with their power, must specifically keep this Equilibrium as a central goal.

There are more instances of light being juxtaposed with shadow, an effective metaphor for balance and consequences. We may continue with the following from the same conversation with the Master Hand: "[…] and drive back darkness with his own light" (3.48), from Ged talking to Lord Gensher: "Restored and ready lay the balance of light and dark" (4.64); from the loosening of the shadow: "[…] not knowing how that spell affects the balance of light and dark, life and death, good and evil" (4.68); and finally from Ged's and Vetch's journey on sea hunting the shadow, "toward the very center of that balance, toward the place where light and darkness meet" (10.153). As these examples illustrate, Le Guin deliberately reuses the same phrases and terminology from Taoism to underscore the importance of balance and wholeness. Additionally, the function of magic and its role in *Earthsea*'s worldbuilding is tightly interwoven with the foundational philosophical ideas that Ged (and readers) learn gradually. Taoist influence is thus visible in the vocabulary used by characters and it is visible in the philosophical groundwork of the story itself.

Different elements in worldbuilding generally, and *Earthsea* specifically, allow us to analyze and understand the underlying structure of the storyworld itself and thereby gain insight into the context that the characters operate within. The above examples highlight where the focus of *Earthsea* lies. The point could be made that Frodo's quest in *The Lord of the Rings* is also about restoring a (type of) balance since the Ring is a disturbing force, but the crucial difference between Middle-earth and Earthsea lies exactly in the role power plays. The Ring is used to dominate and subjugate, and thus the Ring is at the center of the struggles in Middle-earth. Le Guin uses neither a physical item nor domination over others as the driving force behind the overarching quest; instead focus is placed on *personal* wholeness and obtaining an objective balance between all forces, beings, and even inanimate objects. The Master Hand touches on this in a conversation with Ged: "He looked down at the pebble again. 'A rock is a good thing, too, you know,' he said, speaking less gravely. 'If the Isles of Earthsea were all made of diamond, we'd lead a hard life here'" (3.48). As such, in terms of storyworld scope (cf. Wolf, *Routledge Companion* 68)

and what is at stake, *Earthsea* is comparatively small, but this is a necessary feature of a quest-structure that is internally motivated rather than externally. I mentioned earlier that Le Guin strove for openness in terms of possible interpretations of *Earthsea*, and how exactly a story is interpreted is influenced by where the reader is in her own life. Writing about *The Lord of the Rings*, Wolf argues in the same vein, stating,

> [A]t different stages of one's life, one's understanding of the world, and thus its defaults, may differ considerably, so that each time we read the book we fill in the gaps differently, creating a new experience of the world even though the book itself has not changed, but rather because the reader has changed since his or her last reading. (*Building Imaginary Worlds* 55)

This is a central feature of especially mythopoeic fantasy storytelling, and Wolf's point is entirely relevant for *Earthsea* too since Taoism places such extreme focus on *personal* wholeness and balance. Ultimately one can make the argument that reading *Earthsea* as a young person might mean a focus on Ged's journey through a fantastical realm; an adult might notice the inner struggles of the characters; and in a re-reading later in life the nostalgic beauty of *Earthsea* is highlighted in addition to the wondrous quest that Ged undertakes.

Lastly, *Earthsea* remains an important part of fantasy literature, and has long since cemented its place as an integral piece of the fantasy tradition. While this article has not highlighted the numerous ways in which *Earthsea* has inspired other fantasy storyworlds, its influence cannot be disputed; this is in large part thanks to the innovative and profound manner in which Le Guin laid the foundation for her storyworld. As we have now seen, Le Guin's use of Taoism was no accident and its influence can be noted both directly in conversations and quests, but also in the fundamental construction of the story and the storyworld. Taoism ultimately informs all aspects of Le Guin's worldbuilding within *Earthsea* and understanding this significant element may well deepen appreciation of a storyworld which seems to rightly deserve both readerly praise and continued scholarly attention.

WORKS CITED

Attebery, Brian. *Strategies of Fantasy*. Indiana UP, 1992.

Bain, Dena C. "*The Tao Te Ching* as Background to the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin." *Ursula K. Le Guin (Modern Critical Views)*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House, 1986, pp. 211-224.

Barrow, Craig and Diana Barrow. "Le Guin's Earthsea: Voyages in Consciousness." *Extrapolation*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1991, pp. 20–44.

Bell, Alice, and Marie-Laure Ryan. *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology*. Lincoln and London, 2019.

Bittner, James W. *Approaches to the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin*. UMI Research Press, 1984.

Esmonde, Margaret P. "The Master Pattern: The Psychological Journey in the Earthsea Trilogy." *Ursula K. Le Guin*, edited by Joseph D. Olander and Martin Harry Greenberg, Taplinger, 1979, pp. 15-35.

Galbreath, Robert. "Taoist Magic in the Earthsea Trilogy." *Extrapolation*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1980, pp. 262–268.

Hollindale, Peter. "The Last Dragon of Earthsea." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2003, pp. 183-193.

Honderich, Ted (Ed.). *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. 2nd ed. Oxford UP, 2005.

Jenkins, Sue. "Growing up in Earthsea." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1985, pp. 21–31.

Lao Tzu. *Lao Tzu: Tao te Ching: A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way*, translated by Ursula K. Le Guin and Jerome P. Seaton, Shambhala, 1997.

Le Guin, Ursula K. "The Child and the Shadow." *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, edited by Susan Wood, Putnam, 1979, pp. 59-72.

—. "Dreams Must Explain Themselves." *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, edited by Susan Wood, Putnam, 1979, pp. 47-56.

—. *The Earthsea Quartet*. Penguin Group, 1993.

—. *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Repr. Virago Press. 1999.

—. *The Other Wind*. Orion. 2002.

—. *Tales from Earthsea*. Pbk. ed. Orion. 2003.

Mendlesohn, Farah. *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Wesleyan UP, 2008.

Oziewicz, Marek. *One Earth, One People: The Mythopoeic Fantasy Series of Ursula K. Le Guin, Lloyd Alexander, Madeleine L'Engle, and Orson Scott Card*. McFarland & Co, 2008.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. Indiana UP, 1991.

Slethaug, Gordon E. "The Paradoxical Double in Le Guin's A Wizard of Earthsea." *Extrapolation*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1986, pp. 326–333.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. 50th Anniversary Edition edition, Houghton Mifflin, 2004.

—. "On Fairy-stories." *Tolkien on Fairy-stories*, edited by Douglas A. Anderson and Verlyn Flieger, HarperCollins, 2008, pp. 27-84.

White, Donna R. *Dancing with Dragons: Ursula K. Le Guin and the Critics*. Camden House, 1999.

Wolf, Mark J.P. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. Routledge. 2013.

Wolf, Mark J.P., editor. *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*. Routledge, 2018.

DENNIS FRIEDRICHSEN is a PhD student at Justus Liebig University in Germany. He completed his MA at Aalborg University in Denmark in 2014, and in 2018 began work on his PhD which focuses on worldbuilding and atmospheres in speculative fiction and fantasy. He is interested in writers such as J.R.R. Tolkien, Ursula K. Le Guin, Mervyn Peake, Haruki Murakami, and China Miéville. He has published articles on empathy, worldbuilding and atmospheres in literature and is currently preparing his monograph for publication. friedrichsendennis@gmail.com.

Image by Manu Nayak from Pixabay