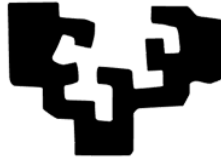


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The Contested Tombs

An Ecofeminist Analysis of Ursula K. Le Guin's Character Tenar

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Abstract: The Earthsea Cycle by Ursula K. Le Guin is frequently mentioned in discussions of fantasy literature, not only for the relevance it has narratively and as a saga, but also because thematically it deals with topics inherent to what make us human. The Cycle also gives the reader a view into the development of the author's ideology and views, due to the almost forty years of writing they encompass, views that are heavily reflected on Tenar the main protagonist of various novels, who was introduced in *The Tombs of Atuan* and further developed in *Tehanu*. I contend that one of the key elements to show Tenar's development in these two novels is her relationship to the space she occupies, which ends up leading to a radical change in the power structures cemented on Earthsea. For that purpose, I not only analyse Tenar's journey, but elements that disrupt said spaces, be it other characters, like Ged and Therru, or dragons; delving into their relationship with Tenar and how they also aid in her development and search of self. For this purpose, said analysis will be performed through an ecofeminist lens, borrowing elements from feminist studies of gothic spaces to also comment on the characteristics that make one of the most relevant environments—the labyrinth beneath the Tombs—feel like a living being. The outcome of this dissertation being that the Tombs act as an ambivalent space, which empty Tenar of her self to later on feature as a heavy factor on its restoration. The depiction of organisms of power that disrupt the balance in between humanity and nature should also be acknowledged, as this lack of balance later on leads to the systematic oppression of those in vulnerable positions, like Tenar. This last factor being one of the keys to why more narratives, that show slow but effective quests for self, without neglecting to address the difficulty to conform an oppressive state of being, should be encouraged to proliferate.

Keywords: ecofeminism; Earthsea; Ursula K. Le Guin; feminism; The Tombs of Atuan; Tehanu

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0. Introduction

Fantasy literature, along with science fiction and horror, has always been regarded as an escapist kind of literature. One usually assumed to make its dwelling away from reality, just because of the far-off worlds in which it takes places, or the wondrous creatures and powers that it presents to the reader. Nevertheless, and almost since its inception as a genre, speculative fiction has never shied away from dealing with complex topics. From the works considered to be the first, like *Frankenstein* and Mary Shelley's preoccupation with progress and Otherness, to more recent works like Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* or N.K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy; speculative fiction—as most fiction—has always been concerned with the state of the world in which it was produced, never shying away from making poignant social criticism that has made it garner both adepts and detractors.

One of the most obvious historical moments during which speculative fiction, and specially science-fiction, generated a significant amount of interest due to its heavy political implications was during the 1950's and 1960's. In a world that had just gone through one of the most devastating historical events ever caused by humanity—World War II—questions about the legitimacy of militaristic efforts, censorship, western supremacy and so on began to be in the spotlight, and writers at the time responded in kind. It is during this period, that authors like Ursula K. Le Guin began writing, adding an additional twist to this new wave of heavily political science fiction—by adding a more social dimension. Rejecting to focus on heavy sciences like some of the most acclaimed works of science fiction had until then, Le Guin tried to delve deeper into other kind of science, the social ones, steering her novels into exploring matters more heavily related to anthropology and sociology than to quantum physics or chemistry. The conflict in her novels being about the protagonist—usually human to work as a surrogate for the reader—being forced to question matters they had been taking for granted their entire life. Her production during the 60's and 70's gave birth to some of her most acclaimed works, still referred to as revolutionary—from her heavy insight into gender roles and sex in *The Left Hand of Darkness* to the gifts and the problems that could arise from a functioning anarchic society in *The Dispossessed*.

It is in this context that Le Guin wrote the original *Earthsea Trilogy*, which would later be completed with more books and is now collectively known as the *Earthsea Cycle*. Heavily influenced by her Taoist beliefs and her interest in Jungian philosophy (*Dialogue*

with *Ursula Le Guin* 14), Le Guin published *A Wizard of Earthsea* in 1968, closely followed by *The Tombs of Atuan* (1970) and *The Farthest Shore* (1972), each of the novels following the coming-of-age journeys of their protagonists—Ged, Tenar and Arren, respectively—as they travel through the various islands and archipelagos across Earthsea, and do not only find out how vast the world is beyond them but how what they took for granted is usually a lie.

Ged is the most recurring character across this first trilogy, featuring as the protagonist in the first one and as a guide of sorts both in the second and third—leaving his place as the lead of the tale to help others find their way as he did in *A Wizard*, in which he very literally fights his inner demons only to learn that only by accepting them he can truly be himself. But Le Guin did not stop there, and almost twenty years after the first Earthsea novel was published she ventured back into the archipelago with a far more intimate and adult novel, *Tehanu* (1990) with Tenar, the protagonist of *Tombs*, coming to reprise her role, now more than twenty years older. It was later on followed by *Tales of Earthsea* (2001)—a collection of short stories, unveiling the inner trappings and forgotten stories of Earthsea—and *The Other Wind* (2001), considered to be the last novel in the Earthsea Cycle; even if the short story “Firelight” would be published posthumously in 2018.

Why, then, return to Earthsea after so long? Why come back with so much new—more mature—material and expand on a world that seemed closed after its three instalments? Simply put, progress. Not progress in writing, or in an effort to rebuild what was previously there—but to retcon it, albeit not in a conventional way. Le Guin did not present new information that forced the reader to re-evaluate what they had read in the first three books, but she filtered it through a new lens, she offered a new perspective—a feminist one—that helped unveil the ugly truths that had remained hidden in the world she had created without denying herself that same growth, that same ability to recognise the potential to grow from a misconception into a more inclusive truth.

It is thus, the aim of this dissertation to analyse the development of female identity in Ursula K. Le Guin’s Earthsea, to be more precise, Tenar’s identity as a character through an ecofeminist lens, due to the affinity Le Guin has shown through her works with this branch of feminism and how it heavily manifests in the Earthsea Cycle. I have chosen to centre my analysis on *Tombs of Atuan* and *Tehanu*, as the first gives us a

glimpse into Le Guin's early feminist thinking and the second presents how she became more vocal about it, both due to the influence of second wave feminism (Douglas and Byrne 2) and the passing of time. This is not to belittle or separate the series in two, as in spite of the temporal separation, it is consistent and should be read as a whole, but these two novels represent significant landmarks in its development, both of the character and the saga as a whole regarding certain central themes and ideas.

It is relevant to note that a considerable amount of academic research has been carried out, both regarding Le Guin's work, and more heavily focused on Tenar as an evolving character. The scopes through which this research has been carried out is immensely varied, ranging from psychoanalysis and Taoism like Norris, to space and feminism like Douglas and Byrne—which aligns with the present dissertation. Notwithstanding, most of the works dealing with the aforementioned approach rely heavily on the inference that relates women, wombs and enclosed spaces which I have tried to avoid due to the substantial essentialist implications they carry.

Thus, after establishing the theoretical framework, the present dissertation's analysis is structured in three parts; the first one introducing Tenar and her relationship to other characters in the cycle, along with the beginning of her loss of self, the second one dealing with how this reclaiming of self is possible through her relationship to her environment and Ged—who decides to breach it—and the third, and final one, centring around how this development stagnates to thrive afterwards once she is away from that which both prevented her from developing and helped her grow. References will be quoted according to the guidelines of MLA 8th Edition.

1. Theoretical Framework

Prior to moving on to the analysis of Tenar, I intend to present the methodology. Even if ecofeminism is the main focus, in order to analyse the interactions between a female character and the space she occupies, other notions belonging to adjacent fields of studies will be applied.

Firstly, before defining ecofeminism, a brief definition of feminism is required, or at least, the definition of what a feminist approach implies. "Feminism is said to be the movement to end women's oppression" (bell hooks qtd. in Mikkola), and it also is, as De Lauretis posits, the rejection to adhere fully to the ideology of gender, specifically, in

male-centred societies (11). Gender, understood as not a property of bodies or something originally existent in human beings, but “the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations,” in Foucault's words, “by the deployment of ‘a complex political technology’” (3).

Gender is thus, “not sex, a state of nature, but the representation of each individual in terms of a particular social relation which pre-exists the individual and is predicated on the conceptual and rigid (structural) opposition of two biological sexes” (5). It presents a binary opposition in between male and female, associating ideas, actions and traits to each of them, in an effort to differentiate them, when the line in between is blurrier than that. It is undeniable, however, that gender is part of every human being’s identity—even if undesirably so—as it helps place us in different grids (I am a woman, a student, a friend, a daughter; and so on), and it would be effective and beneficial for us if it were natural, when as previously mentioned, it is not. It also would be beneficial, if it were not for the fact that it feeds systematic oppression against one of the two sides of this binary, women.

It is thus essential to understand gender as not something inherent to humans, not something that we are born with, but as something that we learn how to “do”:

There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results’. Thus, what our culture understands by feminine behaviour is not the consequence or the product of a feminine identity; instead, our understanding of a feminine identity is produced, within signification, through the repeated performance of words and actions which we code as ‘feminine’. (Butler 25)

Taking into consideration the previously noted claims, it should not be surprising to note that feminism has—especially after its second wave—tried to operate as an intersectional discipline, as understanding oppression only by gender standards could be considered essentialist and inadequately reductive. It is here when movements like ecofeminism come into play, as they relate feminist ideas and goals with like-minded movements that seek to end the unfair treatment of other oppressed groups. Born in the mid-1970s, along with several other movements that aimed for the liberation of oppressed collectives—such as the LGBT movement—, ecofeminism allows for two academic areas that are closely knit by undergoing political activism to coalesce, bringing forth the exploration of common points in between how “women and the environment are controlled, exploited, and dominated by white, middle-class men in Western society” (Rosser 143). “It

takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women” (Mellor 1), merging them to present a theory that claims that this production will never be sustainable if it completely drains resources out of the same environment that is keeping humans alive (7).

At no point though, does ecofeminism try to approach Earth by humanizing it or by trying to grant it sentient values as

‘Nature’ has no will or destiny. The natural world in its totality has agency, but not consciousness. While humanity is embedded in the natural world, its interrelationship with its environment is an historical process. ... Neither humanity nor ‘nature’ are determinant; what is inescapable are the consequences of the dynamics between them. (Mellor 13)

It is the importance to understand humanity’s relationships with nature what matters, and even if more “mystical” approaches are undeniably present in some branches of the ecofeminist movement, they are usually regarded as merely essentialist and non-relevant, as they equate femininity with the ability to create with our own body—giving birth—which alienates a large number of women and also reduces feminine coded people to the same set of expected characteristics that a patriarchal society does. It offers no liberation, just another set of rules to emulate in search of this connection.

Going through these different branches of ecofeminism, it is most notable how some of them easily resonate with Ursula K. Le Guin’s philosophy, especially those related to cultural feminism, as values “[stress] male domination *per se* ... as the cause of destructive and socially oppressive behaviour” (Mellor 6) are present in various works of her bibliography. In her essay *Is Gender Necessary* (1976) and its revised version—*Is Gender Necessary: Redux* (1988)—Le Guin analyses and comments on the criticism that one of her most poignant novels, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, received, explaining the choices and thought process she followed to build the world and society of Gethen, “an imaginary culture which is totally free of sex roles because there is no, absolutely no, physiological sex distinction” (160).

In this essay, she numbers several factors that this society would be lacking comparing it to ours, these roughly being “the absence of war” (160), “the absence of exploitation” (164) and “the absence of sexuality as a continuous social factor” (165). The first

two are the most relevant to our case, as in Le Guin's *Gethen*, the idea of rape, be it performed upon another sentient body or upon their own world, is unimaginable, as Gethenians have developed a highly functional industrial and technological world that does not rely on the "myth of progress" that Western cultures seem to have relied on for the past couple of centuries (164). At no given point does she dulcify the danger of nature or its sheer power though, as *Gethen* is a cold world that lives in a permanent state of Winter, but she does not either diminish the strong relationship its inhabitants have towards it, or tries to extricate them out of the environment in which they have thrived. These notions heavily relate with how she engages with the environment in the rest of her works, *Earthsea* included.

Related to these recurring ideas in Le Guin's writing, it is important to emphasise the intersectionality that I have previously mentioned, as ecofeminism would not only aim "to eliminate research that leads to the exploitation and destruction of nature [but also] the destruction of the human race and other species, and that justifies the oppression of people because of race, gender, class, sexuality, or nationality" (Ruth Bleier qtd. in Rosser 144), making notions from disciplines such as post-colonial studies, queer studies and so on, converge under one same banner to defend our planet.

Having established the relationship between gender and space, it is necessary to lastly introduce how this relationship might not always be positive, and sometimes even, how it might beget horror. Viewing spaces through a gothic lens can help present a different perspective of places that previously had mostly caused, at their worst, a vague uneasiness, bringing out of hiding the darkness that may be lurking in the shadows. Born in 18th century England, the Gothic genre—predecessor to modern horror fiction and other derivatives—as so many others, served from a very early start as a gateway for female writers to explore and break the rules and standards of the rigid society of the time. As Punter explains, "the Gothic ... in its heyday, [was] frequently concerned with the hidden operations of the power and the subjection and victimization of the subject" (135).

The Gothic delves deep into the disgusting, the bizarre and the occult—it basks in the horror it builds to land poignant social criticism, or simply to get the reader out of their comfort zone, all in all, it deals with the uncanny. Uncanny, coming from the German *unheimlich*—literally meaning 'unhomely'—was a term coined by Freud during the 1905's to describe "[that] undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses

dread and horror; equally certainly, too, the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general” (Sigmund Freud qtd. in Punter 130). It is something that generates a sense of uncomfortableness, even if we are aware of where this lack of comfort comes from, it “is the name to everything that ought to have remained ... secret and hidden but has come to light” (130). It represents everything that should feel safe and homely—as we associate our homes with safety, feeling warm and welcome—but that it does not, as our homes and those who inhabit them also hide both literal and figurative secrets, which should never let us feel completely safe.

Uncanniness therefore, occupies a liminal space in between what we know and what we cannot know, the fear it generates comes from our uncertainty upon facing the unknown—“if we have a sense of the uncanny, it is because the barriers between the known and the unknown are teetering on the brink of collapse. We are afraid, certainly; but what we are afraid of is at least partly our own sense that we have *been here before*” (130). This space that the uncanny presents, becomes thus a space that can be plagued and inhabited both by those socially accepted and those who do not belong—as they move around the margins of what feels like home, as they threaten to come outside and invade that fabricated normality.

All of this helps understand how the Gothic quickly became a female dominated genre, not only by its writers but also by its protagonists, as it was engulfed by female heroines who had to escape or hide from a monstrous presence, usually embodied by a violent man. This, along with the action usually taking place in a space the main female lead would feel safe in—home—brings forth reminiscences of a reality that still haunts us nowadays, intra-familiar gender violence. Performed by an angry father, a brother or a groom to be, “the strand of popular culture we call the Gothic novel can be distinguished by the presence of houses in which people are locked in and locked out. They are concerned with violence done to familial bonds that is frequently directed against women” (Ellis 3). The Gothic genre became thus for women, not only a method to acquire some agency by the act of writing, but also to denounce a reality they went through by adding a dash of fantasy to it that would make it both horrifying and palatable to the society of the time. It is a fantasy in which “the heroine exposes the villain’s usurpation and thus reclaims an enclosed space that should have been a refuge from evil but as become the very opposite, a prison” (xiii).

The Tombs of Atuan is not a gothic novel, by any means, but the Tombs themselves and Tenar, our heroine, clearly exhibit some of their characteristics as gothic adjacent—as there is also a heavy focus on how Tenar interacts with a place she used to call home.

2. The Analysis of Tenar from an Ecofeminist Perspective

2.1 A Burial of Self

Tenar is one of the main protagonists of the original Earthsea trilogy, who later on would also be the lead character of *Tehanu* and part of the main character ensemble in both *The Other Wind* and *Firelight*. In *The Tombs of Atuan* she is fifteen years old, with dark hair and pale skin that, among other things, make her very different from the other two main characters of the original trilogy—Ged and Arren. The three of them have in common that they begin their journeys in search for themselves in their very early youth, but here the similarities end, as on a basic level Arren and Ged have more in common in between them than Tenar has with both. Thematically, however, their three journeys do work as parallel coming-of-age tales, for the trilogy “consists mainly of accepting responsibility for oneself, one’s actions, and one’s relationship with others” (Francis J. Molson qtd. in Cadden 427). Even if Ged’s tale overarches the three first novels, it never completely obscures the two books of which he is not the sole focus, giving Tenar and Arren leeway to develop and go through their journeys, of discovery of self and empathy, in Tenar’s case, and of his own mortality, in Arren’s (433). Nevertheless, and actually taking a look at the aforementioned journeys on a physical level, both Ged and Arren have to travel along Earthsea to progress and encounter that which will trigger this discovery of self, while Tenar’s journey is completely interior—both in a figurative and literal way.

Born into a humble family of many that lives in a hut in a deep valley (*Earthsea* 175, 176), Tenar is taken away from home at a very young age—five years old—to become the One Priestess of the Tombs of Atuan, who is perpetually reincarnated into a child born the day of her death (182). Tenar goes through a dark, void ceremony in which her identity is emptied, so that she may become Arha—The Eaten One—and serve The Nameless Ones for the rest of her life, as they chant

“O let the Nameless Ones behold the girl given to them, who is verily the one born ever nameless. Let them accept her life and the years of her life until her death, which is also theirs. Let them find her acceptable. Let her be eaten!”

Other voices, shrill and harsh as trumpets, replied: “She is eaten! She is eaten!” (178)

It is not only the loss of identity taking place that is a form of unspeakable evil in this ceremony, but also the loss of her name. In Le Guin’s world, in Earthsea, names hold power; words hold power. The magic that wizards, witches and enchanters weave revolves around the knowing of names; names of things as mundane as the wind or water, or as specific as quicksilver or swallows. These names must be spoken in the Old Speech, the language of dragons, of Segoy and of Creation, as it is only this tongue that can name truly everything that inhabits the world (50). When referring to people, names hold power, and to freely speak the true name of another can hold them under the speaker’s yoke for indefinite time. So, to speak one’s true name to another becomes an act of utmost trust and reverence, as the name that people use in their daily lives is but a mask which serves the purpose of protection. In the Kargad Lands, where Tenar comes from, magic is a long-lost art, names and their significance have been long lost—unlike in the rest of Earthsea, where they are tightly knit to one’s identity, and the loss of one’s name would signify the loss of self. Tenar has just one name, who she is and who she will become are imbued into it, so its loss becomes a loss of self, “her individual identity is ... sacrificed to her assigned role as priestess of the ancient underworld powers. Her supposed rebirth as a priestess represents her death as an individual” (Spivack 33).

Tenar’s quest in *The Tombs of Atuan* begins and culminates in the eponymous Tombs, the one place in which she has grown and been “systematically traumatized, emotionally damaged and intellectually neglected” (Lindow 12) by the other inhabitants of the Tombs—The Cult of the Nameless Ones. The Cult itself serves no real purpose, theoretically serving the Old Powers of the Earth by not letting anyone that is not Arha access the Tombs but to be sacrificed. The religion they profess, is empty, as empty as their High Priestess, as they chant songs devoid of meaning, “The tune was on three notes only, and the word that was repeated over and over was a word so old it had lost its meaning, like a signpost still standing when the road is gone. Over and over they chanted the empty word” (*Earthsea* 179), exiting a symbolic Throne Room—“The throne itself was black, with a dull glimmer of precious stones or gold on the arms and back, and it was huge. ...

it was not of human dimensions. It was empty.” (177)—that has been empty for millennia, as

The jewels ... and the back were glazed with dust, and on the carven back were cobwebs and whitish stains of owl droppings. The three highest steps ... had never been climbed by mortal feet. They were so thick with dust that they looked like one slant of gray soil ... untrodden siftings of how many years, how many centuries. (178)

As Kossil—High Priestess of the God King of Awabath—later implies, the Cult lost its meaning and relevance long ago, and it is now just another tool for the God King to use as a penalty to keep his people subjected to his undeniably frightening traditions. The Tombs are but gallows, execution grounds for those who oppose his regime to die beheaded or starve to death—very literal nameless tombstones. The Forbidden Ones are little more than an old legend to Kossil; “they are old. Their worship is forgotten, save in this one place. Their power is gone. They are only shadows. They have no power any more. Do not try to frighten me, Eaten One. You are the First Priestess; does that not mean also that you are the last?” (259)

“The tombs are ostensibly sacred to women’s power, but they have been perverted by the Godking to serve men’s power and so have lost their real ability to provide women with the power they should possess” (Douglas and Byrne 6). The cult is but an organization helmed by and composed by women who work under the thumb of patriarchal rule, they are not an autonomous female-run group with dreadful intent, as scholars like Kuznets have claimed them to be (32), they are but another branch of Kargish society with no autonomy at all: “the Powers of the Dark are not limited specifically to quasi-gods or a generalized shot at dogmatism, but also the patriarchal structure that undergirds the system of which Arha [is] part” (Norris 63).

Among the many that inhabit the Tombs, not all have the hunger for power and animosity towards Arha that Kossil demonstrates; there are other priestesses that serve in the Place—the location of the Tombs—like Mebbeth and Thar who are strict but kind towards her, or other girls with whom Arha grows and bonds in spite of her responsibilities and position. Eunuchs, among which there is Arha’s guardian, Manan, also help the women in the Place, and guards seem to come and go from the main precinct and out of the walls; but never into the Tombs, never down to the vast forbidden labyrinth that coils for miles and miles of unmapped darkness. Two hundred people approximately (*Earthsea*

186) going about their daily lives atop the dwelling of the Nameless ones. As McKibben asserts, “the ecosystem surrounding any living organism imposes boundary conditions upon it. Humanity’s failure to respect the ecological limits of these bounding conditions has caused the present ecological crisis” (qtd. in Mellor 1). What happens above the Tombs and in the Kargad lands cannot be called essentially an “ecological crisis”, but it is framed as a situation of social injustice in which those who go against the system are fed to the ecosystem, gorging even further a darkness that could be interpreted as something more than symbolic. An unrest that goes to the point of sickening nature itself.

2.2 Light in the Darkest Places

The Place, named so as it “was all the name it had or needed, for it was the most ancient and sacred of all places in the Four Lands of the Kargish Empire” (*Earthsea* 186) and located in the middle of the desert resembles a small town. Past the buildings “[runs] a massive wall of rock, laid without mortar and half fallen down in many places” (187), and once passed, behind the Hall of the Empty Throne lay the Tombs of Atuan. From the wall that surrounds the Tombs the labyrinth can be accessed, an enclosure that both speaks of stillness and quiet, and of something very slow but alive lurking in the dark. Arha is first able to access the labyrinth one year after “[making] her crossing into womanhood (194)”, aged fifteen, and accompanied by a woman that only seems to resent her for what she represents, Kossil. Light is forbidden inside the Tombs as it is “the very home of darkness, the inmost center of the night” (200), its presence would anger The Nameless Ones. Inside the labyrinth, with little to no help, Arha must learn the structure of the maze just by touch and counting her steps, leaning heavily on the walls and passing her fingers through the grooves and indentations that they have to find the different rooms that are relevant for the rituals she must perform, “touch was one’s whole guidance; one could not see the way but held it in one’s hand” (201). Above ground there are spyholes around the place for her to check the inside when she is out, but in short time she learns how to move through the entire place with almost utmost certainty of where she is—“the labyrinth becomes her only self, her privacy, possession, and the narrowest of liberties. Her inscape” (Douglas and Byrne 1). Arha ends up moving through the darkness of the Tombs “like a swimmer through water” (*Earthsea* 203).

However, the labyrinth is not only used as a space in which Tenar is built as a character, since Le Guin hints that the Tombs are almost a character in themselves—they become a location with a will of its own. This notion ties irrevocably with ecofeminist ideas on spaces being very much alive as “the natural world of which humanity is a part has its own dynamic beyond human ‘construction’ or control” (Mellor 7). Elements of the underground being described as an eerie peaceful being, that seems almost synchronised with Arha as she traverses it and also feels peace inside; “she had favourite places in the Hall of the Throne, as one might have favourite spots to sit in a sunny house” (*Earthsea* 222), “here, winter or summer, there was no cold, no heat: always the same even chill ... Here there was no wind, no season; it was close, it was still, it was safe” (223, 224). As Douglas and Byrne explain, “[The labyrinth] becomes the site of her individuation. Her subterranean meanderings entail learning its intricacies and finding her identity” (6). Tracing the walls and counting steps not to get lost becomes not only an obligation, out of her necessity of survival, but also Arha’s way of finding something only she can do, a way of feeling like a valuable individual aside from what is expected of her as High Priestess.

There is an event, however, that makes Arha’s evolution suddenly escalate, as she is forced to confront all that she deemed as factual in her life: Ged’s apparition in the Painted Room. First of all, something should be said about the Painted Room as a space itself, even if I believe most of what can be commented about how it is framed, both in the novel and in the labyrinth, will leave more questions than answers. The Painted Room is quite literally in the centre of the labyrinth, and passing through it is the only route possible to access the Great Treasure, the most forbidden place inside the labyrinth, which at the same time is the most forbidden place in the whole Kargad Empire for anyone who is not Arha. Its name comes from “the strange wall drawings that [leap] out of the dark at the gleam of her candle: men with long wings and great eyes, serene and morose” (*Earthsea* 224), which no one can properly identify in the Place. Arha associates them with “the spirits of the damned, who are not reborn” (224), but with the benefit of hindsight we know that she could not be further from the truth.

According to the ancient Lore of Paln, which has long been forgotten, dragons and humans used to be one single species that for unknown reasons separated geographically to later on diverge biologically (*Tales from Earthsea* 344), and tales across *Earthsea* talk

about dragons that still live among people taking human form—which will be later confirmed in *Tehanu*. Taking into account the previously mentioned antiquity of the Tombs, and the fact that tales of this dragon-people are most prominent at Hur-at-Hur—the easternmost island of the Kargad lands—it would not be far-fetched to suggest that that is precisely what the paintings represent, those in between humans and dragons, those still not able to extricate themselves from one reality or another—beings with a dual identity. The symbolism of dragons in Earthsea shifts with the saga, having been symbols for uncontrollable nature and knowledge, closer to the dragons present in earlier fantasy like *Beowulf* or *The Hobbit*, and later on—in the three last books of the cycle—changing “to symbolize ‘subversion, revolution, change,’ Mother Nature herself resetting the gauge, correcting and imbalance” (Lindow 35). The fact that Arha first encounters Ged on her way to the painted room, where they will later talk about dragons and magic, could be interpreted as a foreshadowing of a disruption to come in both of their lives and in the labyrinth’s existence as it is. The key which gives access to the Treasure Room is also dragon-shaped (*Earthsea* 275).

Ged appearing inside of the Tombs halfway through the novel, bearing magical light, and having completely escaped Arha’s notice, serves as a turning point in the narrative—and also for Arha. Her first reaction is fear, of course,

this was a man, and no man's foot must ever touch the soil of the Tombs, the Holy Place. Yet he had come here into the hollow place that was the heart of the Tombs. He had entered in. He had made light where light was forbidden, where it had never been since world's beginning. Why did the Nameless Ones not strike him down? (225)

she screams, and once again the same uncanny oneness in between the labyrinth and herself comes into play.

“Go! Go! Begone!” she screamed all at once at the top of her voice. Great echoes shrilled and boomed across the cavern, seeming to blur the dark, startled face that turned towards her, ... Then the light was gone. All splendor gone. Blind dark, and silence. Now she could think again. She was released from the spell of light. (225, 226)

Darkness is familiar to her, it is the element in which she is able to move “as a little fish in dark water” (223), but seeing light inside the tunnels, or more precisely, seeing the tunnels bathed in light, leaves her confounded:

she had known it only as a region defined by hearing, by hand's touch, by drifts of cool air in the dark; a vastness; a mystery, never to be seen. She had seen it, and the mystery had given place, not to horror, but to beauty, a mystery deeper even than that of the dark. (226)

This is the first door that Ged opens for her, the first step into breaking the almost symbiotic relationship she had developed with the labyrinth to grow a sense of self—an empty one, far from whom she could really become.

Arha spends the following days watching Ged slowly die through the spy-holes placed above. “It is a cruel death, thirst” (233), as Kossil puts it. Arha seems to be ready to kill a man in cold blood, like she has done so many times before—but curiosity is a powerful thing, and the fact that she cannot piece together how he entered the labyrinth on his own, makes her resolve waver. Questioning him on his intentions only serves to make things worse for Arha, as she begins to long for the light and things that she has been taught that are profane, “a longing swept over her to light her lantern, to see once more, just for a moment, the time-carven stone, the lovely glitter of the walls. She shut her eyes tight and hurried on” (245). Her decision to continue visiting Ged, to finally decide that helping him is worth it—even if she makes the choice out of impulse, at the fear she feels after Kossil discovers them talking—it is this choice, along with the initial one not to kill him that “[represent] defiance of Kossil and a claim to independence. A show of independence is a decided step towards maturation” (Stevens 28). Her choice of compassion makes her mature, because at the end of the day, deciding not to kill a man when she has been indoctrinated to do so, is a powerful ethical decision, it “symbolizes the acceptance of ... her own power to act morally and independently” (Lindow 13).

It is in the Treasure Room, however, where all the changes that bring forth Arha's final stance on wanting to be free happen. As previously mentioned, it is not a room that stands at the centre of the labyrinth, but in spite of this fact it does function as its symbolic heart, for no one but the High Priestess of the Tombs has ever entered it. Ged seeks to get inside to reclaim one half of the ring of Erreth-Akhbe, a mythical object that when returned to Havnor—the capital of Earthsea—is said to bring forth change to achieve a perfectly balanced world. It is not the only gift that the treasure room holds, however, as it is here where Ged gives Tenar her name back. He offers her the chance to know more about the outside world, to sever the link between her and the Tombs; he talks about dragons, about magic, performs a few tricks for her, like conjuring a blue dress so that

she may see herself as something more than the Eaten One, and to finish, before she abandons him in the Great Treasure only holding on to her promise that she'll return, he utters her name, "he raised his face to her. His expression was strange. 'Take care, Tenar,'" (*Earthsea* 256).

Giving her name back seals their fate, it is a statement that essentially says "you can be more than this prescribed namelessness. You can be loved. You can *be* love. The dress is not Arha, but neither is the black cloak of a dogmatic religion which was thrust upon her" (Norris 52). Tenar finds the gift of recovering her own identity inside the Treasure Room. As Norris states, it does not only hold treasures for them individually, as the ring with its heavy symbology of two parts needing to be united so that balance is restored echoes the relationship Ged and Tenar end up establishing in that same room: "it is the very idea of this trust, this love between Sparrowhawk and Tenar, that is the greatest treasure found in the Tombs of Atuan. It is the possibility of another being worthy of that trust that binds meaning itself to our words" (54). Some, as Nodelman, have framed this exchange, this establishing of trust and its subsequent payoff, as a case of Le Guin recurring to a male saviour who must rescue the fair maiden from her ill fate (186), a stance with which I disagree. Without Tenar's intervention Ged would have turned into yet another man plunging into certain death in the dark due to the Ancient Powers of the Earth, and Tenar would have simply never left. The rescuing performed is mutually helpful and necessary, it is an act of trust, that as mentioned, leads to a necessary balance between the masculine and the feminine, light and dark, wizard and priestess¹.

It is only logical then, that when this connection with the outside is made, when Tenar decides to follow Ged and get the ring out, the connection that Arha had with the labyrinth gets severed, and hell breaks loose. Tenar is aware of this bond being broken, as she tells Ged, "If I leave the service of the Dark Ones, they will kill me. If I leave this

¹ This emphasis on the necessity for balance is pervasive in all of Le Guin's works, as it is linked with her Taoist beliefs. It features heavily in *Earthsea* not only as a theme, but also as a cornerstone of how magic works. As Ged puts it in *The Farthest Shore*: "Do you see, Arren, how an act is not, as young men think, like a rock that one picks up and throws, and it hits or misses, and that's the end of it. When that rock is lifted, the earth is lighter; the hand that bears it heavier. When it is thrown the circuits of the stars respond, and where it strikes or falls the universe is changed. On every act the Balance of the Whole depends. The winds and seas, the powers of water and earth and light, all that these do, and all that the beasts and green things do, is well done and rightly done. All these act within the Equilibrium. From the hurricane and the great whale's sounding to the fall of a dry leaf and the gnat's flight, all they do is done within the Balance of the Whole. But we, insofar as we have power over the world and over one another, we must learn to do what the leaf and the whale and the wind do of their own nature. We must learn to keep the Balance. Having intelligence, we must not act in ignorance. Having choice, we must not act without responsibility." (361)

place I will die” (*Earthsea* 272), but Ged only remarks the obvious, ““You will not die. Arha will die.’ ... ‘To be reborn one must die, Tenar. It is not so hard as it looks from the other side”” (272, 273). These words are not empty, as Ged truly understands what he is telling Tenar due to the events that he went through in *A Wizard of Earthsea*.

Emphasis has previously been made on the living quality of the Tombs, of the feeling of a slumbering *something* that lurks through their halls, but after Tenar and Ged exit the Treasure Room the Tombs truly awaken:

there was a low vibration, not quite a noise, in the rock of the walls and floor and vaulting. It was like distant thunder, like something huge falling a great way off. The hair on her head rose up, and without stopping to reason she blew out the candle in the tin lantern. ... From unseen cross-passages came a cold breath and a sharp, dank odor, the lifeless smell of the huge hollowness beneath them (275)

turning into a monstrous creature that seeks to fall and bring them down with it. Le Guin inscribes the Tombs with qualities that in any other situation we would only be able to relate to a living being—a heartbeat like noise, breath, stone steps that “hum and shiver” (279), hatred and sound that can be felt and heard by Tenar—fully fleshing out something otherworldly, never alive as a person or animal would be, but not as quiescent as the earth is claimed to be. The labyrinth turns into something uncanny both to the reader and to the characters;

the uncanny is a crisis of the proper: it entails a critical disturbance of what is proper (from the Latin *propius*, ‘own’), a disturbance of the very idea of personal or private property including the properness of proper names, one’s so-called ‘own’ name... It is a crisis of the natural, touching upon everything that one might have thought was ‘part of nature’: one’s own nature, human nature, the nature of reality and the world. (Nicholas Royle qtd. in Punter 132)

As they manage to escape thanks to their combined abilities, the Tombs shatter, being engulfed by the earth by what might be seen as an earthquake, “from the black mouth among the rocks behind them issued forth a long, long, groaning howl of hatred and lament” (*Earthsea* 280), the Tombs die. The Nameless ones still inhabit other places in *Earthsea*, at no moment does Ged imply they could ever vanish, but the Place and its significance—or lack thereof—are now gone, and Tenar is free. In Douglas and Byrne’s words,

Le Guin brings together the feminised meanings of underground space, ... making the labyrinth a powerfully ambivalent site. Those who, like ... Kossil, seek power and possessions, lose their way and find doom in the labyrinths, but those who seek a deeper knowledge of themselves and others find that labyrinths can lead to freedom. (5)

Notwithstanding, this freedom that Tenar is able to reclaim is not easy to accept. There is no easy answer for Tenar of where to go now, or what to latch onto, but then again, there never is in most of Le Guin's young adult novels. Arren, in *The Farthest Shore*, poses an exception as he will return to Havnor once his journey ends and become king, but Ged and Tenar, at the end of *A Wizard of Earthsea* and *Tombs of Atuan* respectively, do not get an answer concerning what to do next. This closely relates to one of the many things Le Guin has said about fantasy literature: "a fantasy world ... is not where you live your life, but where you go to begin to comprehend it" (qtd. in Cadden 434). Both Tenar and Arren share quest narratives in an unreal space not governed by the same rules as the rest of the world, and once they get out of them they have to continue growing after the novel is finished (Cadden 433). In Tenar's case, however, we can see what happens after *Tombs of Atuan* is over.

2.3. Earth, Wind and Fire

We do not hear about Tenar for the first twenty pages of *Tehanu*; instead we hear about Goha, a widow who lives in Gont—Ged's birthplace—who was married to a farmer, had a son and a daughter and has decided to adopt an abused half-burnt child named Therru. We also hear about uglier aspects of the world of Earthsea, things implicit in the original trilogy that are now brought to light; how women are expected to behave as mothers, daughters or *something* to men to have any kind of worth, how the wizarding school of Roke is full of men anchored in the past who fear change like it was the blight, and how even if the ring of Erreth-Akhbe and a king are both present in Havnor, balance is still absent from the archipelago.

Tehanu is a much more adult novel than the original trilogy, both in tone and thematically, featuring less clear quests in search of self and liberation than the previous three novels. Tenar finds herself in a liminal space where she can only fit under different labels that feel wrong to her, and the novel is very much the story of her realising that she can fit under all the ones she finds comfort in and still be a good person who deserves

love and care. Precisely these two last things, these two qualities that we so rarely see underlined as remarkable, are what will propel Earthsea forward, as from Tenar's attentive care and affection Therru will be able to grow.

Tehanu deserves a much more in-depth analysis than the one that I am able to provide due to spatial constraints, but I do want to underline two aspects that enrich the narrative woven in *Tombs* around Tenar and her journey of truly finding herself—these two aspects being magic—focusing on its relationship with women—and dragons.

“Weak as woman's magic, wicked as woman's magic” (16) are two complimentary sayings introduced to us at the beginning of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, and that are echoed a few more times along the trilogy. Women cannot practice magic, and if they do, it will never be the same magic that those who study at Roke are able to perform, it will be a magic related to dirt, nature and nurture—lesser magic. Among all the minor characters that appear in the three first books, women occupy a handful of positions in between them—mothers, daughters, weavers, witches, and street peddlers. None of them acquire the relevance Tenar did in *Tombs of Atuan*, and the ones that do, do so due to their hunger for power like Kossil or the Lady of O. However, women *can* practice magic and have been doing so for ages, the only issue is that the magic they practice is not the one taught at Roke. When Tenar tried to practice this kind of magic, under Ged's old teacher's wing, she never felt comfortable. As Moss, a village witch who is Ged's aunt, says:

I have roots, I have roots deeper than this island. Deeper than the sea, older than the raising of the lands. ... I go back into the dark! Before the moon I was. No one knows, no one knows, no one can say what I am, what a woman is, a woman of power, a woman's power, deeper than the roots of trees, deeper than the roots of islands, older than the Making, older than the moon. Who dares ask questions of the dark? Who'll ask the dark its name? (528)

Tenar answers, “I will, ...I lived long enough in the dark” (529). Tenar is ready to defy the obscurity into which women's magic and identity have been cast for centuries, even if she is not even a woman who actively practices it. Her agency and dedication to leading a fulfilling life drive her entirely throughout the novel, along with her need to protect Therru from harm;

[Tenar's] definition of action, decision, and power is not heroic in the masculine sense. Her acts and choice do not involve ascendance, domination, power over others, and

seem not to involve great consequences. They are ‘private’ acts and choices, made in terms of immediate, actual relationships (*Revised* 13).

The Old Powers of the Earth are not always prone to evil, prone to taking, but they can be, as well as they can bring forth life and creation, Tenar being the epitome of this duality. Tenar will help Therru heal so that she can bring forth change to the world.

Even if the last statement may seem ominous, it is what Le Guin hints at in the last chapter of the novel and actually puts into motion into the following one, *The Other Wind*. Therru is not a normal child, and what at the beginning Tenar and other women believe are signs of past trauma manifesting themselves, end up being indications that Therru is a dragon, one of the mythical figures Tenar gazed at in the Tombs’ Painted Room. Furthermore, from the very beginning of *Tehanu* the fact that only women can also be dragons to some extent is already hinted at, as Tenar tells Therru the story of the fisherwoman of Kemay, whom Ogion met while travelling and recognised as a dragon when he touched her to learn her true name (490, 491).

It could be said then, that Le Guin uses dragons with a dual purpose in Earthsea, one that grew out of using them simply as creatures to inspire awe and fear, to develop them into something more. Into beasts that can bridge the many ills that are still afflicting the land—gender divide being just one of them. As Waugh explains, “women have traditionally been positioned in terms of ‘otherness’” (360), so adding this extra layer of divide into the mix, making women powerful beings intrinsically tied to the magic that they have so long been denied, and which serves to oppress them, as the School of Roke is one of the major institutions of the archipelago, is groundbreaking. Be it through their connection to dragons or be it through their connection to the Old Powers of the Earth, they already become more closely connected to magic than those that access it through academia do due to their privilege.

Some scholars, like Newell, accuse Le Guin of heavily politicising her work from the nineties onwards (73), and they seem to fail to see that, maybe not in an evident way, but her works have always been political—which is a very feminist notion *per se*, “the personal is [always] political” (De Lauretis 8). What we create is thus inherently political too, be it art done out of a whim to create or so that it can be appreciated by the rest of the world. There is no imaginable way of extricating one’s own identity from the society

we live in, and inescapably, every force at work will influence politics. As Le Guin herself explained in her talk, later to be turned into an essay entitled *Earthsea Revisioned*,

Oh, they say, what a shame, Le Guin has politicized her delightful fantasy world, Earthsea will never be the same. I'll say it won't. The politics were there all along, the hidden politics of the hero-tale, the spell you don't know you're living under till you cast it off. (24)

In the same essay, she also asserts that “authority is male. It is a fact. My fantasy dutifully reported fact. But is that all a fantasy does—report facts?” (11) putting yet more emphasis in the need for change and in the need for that change to emerge for there to be kindness.

Therru ends up helping Tenar escape darkness the same way Tenar helped her escape the man that abused her. At the very end of the novel, Tenar and Ged are captured by a wizard, Aspen, who works as a clear representative of hegemonic masculinity driven to its most rotten extreme. He traps her in a magically created darkness, that afterwards becomes very real;

Something was fastened around her neck and she was made to crawl up more stairs and into a room that smelled of urine and rotting meat and sweet flowers. Voices spoke. A cold hand like a stone struck her head feebly while something laughed ... Then there was a door that crashed, and silence, and the dark. (*Earthsea* 684)

This darkness has nothing to do with the Old Powers of the Earth, it is a return into darkness that totally robs her of agency, a darkness that turns her into an object in men's hands. Once again, as in the Painted Room, it is dragons that bring change and freedom. The appearance of Kalessin—a recurring dragon in the cycle—and Therru, free her from this corrupted darkness, not different from the one the Cult of the Nameless Ones desired, as it is not darkness in itself which is bad, but darkness corrupted by the greed of men, who wish to only use it to *take*. Light also loses the positive meaning it could have by traditional standards, as “men came when the light came” (686), making it an omen of upcoming abuse—creating a situation in which Le Guin's Taoist beliefs come once more into play. A balance between light and darkness is necessary and the fact that both are summoned artificially can upset this balance. This of course does not empty light and darkness of their ambivalent meaning along the cycle, as doing so would very much relate to ascribing a consciousness to natural elements, which they lack.

Humanity tampering with nature can upset the Balance, and thus Le Guin's dragons become agents to restore not only natural balance, but also social one:

The dragon is subversion, revolution, change—a going beyond the old order in which men were taught to own and dominate and women were taught to collude with them: the order of oppression. It is the wildness of the spirit and of the earth, uprising against misrule. And it rejects gender ... the dragon defies gender entirely. (*Revised* 23, 24)

3. Conclusion

The relevance of the Earthsea cycle is undeniable nowadays, both due to the themes that Le Guin wrote about, which are universal, but also because of the struggles, both personal and social, that it portrays, as most of them are still relevant.

Tenar's journey through the labyrinth in search of her self blends genres in a way that plays with the reader's comfort, as Le Guin's exploration is not a safe one, presenting a character that has gone through unspeakable horrors in the name of what she has been taught is right and giving her the chance to be herself and thus better. The connection between woman and labyrinth is a strong presence that aids Tenar in her process of maturation until the end, and even after this connection is severed, she is still able to see the good aspects that this bond granted her. The fact that Tenar's journey is not resolved in *Tombs of Atuan* adds another layer of realism to the whole picture—as we never stop growing and our destination in life will almost always be uncertain.

The fact that Le Guin does not shy away from giving her a further and rounder evolution in *Tehanu* and the following novels should also be underlined. Just like Ged or Arren got a semblance of an ending that brought them a certain level of closure, Tenar also deserves some future certainty. It should also be noted that Tenar's disinterested help and care being able to bring forth an even more positive effect into the world also reinforce the idea of a heroism away of the prevailing masculine one; there is no need for violence or bloodshed but for understanding that comes from acts of compassion, a much needed narrative in the world we live in. This idea gets reinforced in both novels through Tenar's relationship to her environment, the Tombs being a clear example of how humanity can take more than it should from Earth—which ends in disaster—and how this unbalanced relationship can reinforce the systematic oppression of women.

Furthermore, the mere notion that acts and stories only become political after they put the status quo into question should also be scrutinised, for it is not only troubling that this is such a widespread perception, but it also makes evident that many more narratives, like the one that Le Guin develops from *Tehanu* onwards are necessary. Quoting Le Guin herself, “they are afraid of dragons, because they are afraid of freedom” (“Why are Americans” 44).

To sum up, an ecofeminist perspective is pertinent not only because Tenar’s early development is intrinsically connected to the environment that robs her of her identity, and thanks to outside intervention, which helps rebuild it later, but also because it is heavily linked to the Taoist beliefs Le Guin emphasised throughout her works. Beliefs that not only highlight the necessity for balance in all our acts but also in all our interactions with our surroundings, which come close to the ecofeminist notion of environmental abuse being closely linked to different types of oppression. The restoration of Balance in Earthsea is gradual and so is Tenar’s restoration of identity; it is not enough to liberate her from the Tombs that took her identity away from her, but to also recognise that they acted as a pivotal point in her development. It is not enough to acknowledge Tenar’s dissatisfaction with what others expect her identity to be, but to also recognise that the same elements that freed her once, can do so again.

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