

The Darkangel Short Guide

The Darkangel by Meredith Ann Pierce

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Overview

The Darkangel plunges the reader into a world of fantasy and mythical creatures, while at the same time treating basic human qualities like love, loyalty, and bravery. The situations that Aeriël, the heroine, faces are realistic to the reader, despite the novel's fantastic setting.

The detailed descriptions of creatures, landscapes, food, clothing, tools, and lifestyles all serve to enhance the story.

The novel is alive with tangible detail, from the tiny, trumpet-shaped hornflowers that Aeriël and her mistress Eoduin seek, to the almonds, steamed crayfish, and white grapes that emerge from the magic pouch to satisfy Aeriël's hunger when she is crossing the desert.

In addition, the reader can identify with Aeriël's values: the loyalty she gives to her friend, Eoduin; the friendship she extends to undesirable creatures like the gargoyles and the wraiths; and the confusion and unselfishness she feels about the vampire. The reader can also appreciate the tensions created when Aeriël feels compassion and even love for the evil vampire. Aeriël's attraction to evil is something that many experience and struggle against.

About the Author

Meredith Ann Pierce was born July 5, 1958, in Seattle, Washington, and recalls living a "reasonably miserable" childhood in California, Illinois, and Texas. When she was fifteen, a short story she wrote won a national creative writing contest. Later, she earned a master's degree in creative writing from the University of Florida. She is currently a children's librarian in Gainesville, Florida, where she has lived for the last fifteen years. She is at work on *Dark Moon*, the second volume of her unicorn trilogy, which began with *The Birth of Firebringer*.

Pierce finds her subjects in interesting ways. *The Darkangel* stems from a dream that the psychologist Carl Jung describes in his book *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Although the description of the dream is only a page and a half long, Pierce uses it as the basis of her entire novel. In a similar way, *The Woman Who Loved Reindeer* derived from a memory Pierce had held since she was in ninth or tenth grade. On the last day of school, as she looked out over the empty playground, she imagined a woman holding her arms out as a reindeer sprinted away with the woman's child cradled in its horns. More than ten years later, Pierce wove that memory into a novel.

Where the Wild Geese Go, a children's picture book, was written in response to the drawings of Jamichael Henterly.

Usually an illustrator is found after a book has been written, but Pierce, having seen Henterly's drawings, wrote a book that she thought would fit his artistic style.

The Darkangel was Pierce's first novel, written when she was twenty-three. It won the 1983 International Reading Association Children's Book Award and was selected as a 1982 Parents' Choice book and a New York Times Outstanding Book. Pierce has also been awarded a fellowship to the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and a grant from Florida's Division of Cultural Affairs.

Setting

The moon has long ago been settled and then abandoned by people from the earth. They created an atmosphere so they could breathe on the moon's surface, and left behind races of people and creatures, as well as plants and languages. The current inhabitants of the moon have legends of the earthpeople, whom they call the Old Ones, but no one remembers the events that led to their departure from the planet.

Just as the moon hangs above earth in the sky, the earth, which is called Oceanus, shines down on the moon.

Solstar, the sun, shines in the distance.

Time is measured in day-months, where a month of light is followed by a month of darkness.

The two main places of action are the vampire's castle and the surrounding desert. The castle is cold and lifeless, inhabited only by the vampire and the wraiths, his wives. The gargoyles stand guard outside. Life and warmth characterize the desert, which is full of helpful creatures and people, such as the lion Pendarlon and the nomadic Ma'a-mbai tribe.



Social Sensitivity

Some readers may be disturbed by Aeriell's attraction to the vampire, a character with no redeeming qualities except for his physical beauty. This situation, however, is a common one, since physical traits can often be much more compelling than less visible ones such as honesty or compassion. Pierce's treatment of the issue is refreshing, because Aeriell realizes why she is attracted to the vampire, a creature who breaks the wings of small bats simply for pleasure. Aeriell tries to be honest with herself, and her internal struggle is sympathetically portrayed.

Readers should also be aware of and sensitive to the presentation of a rigidly stratified society. The role a character plays is dependent on its race; for example, Talb remarks: "We dwarroughs are miners and scholars, not spinners."

He implies that because he is a dwarf, he is unable to understand feelings. This exemplifies the larger problem of stereotyping. A disturbing element of this is found in *A Gathering of Gargoyles*, the sequel to *The Darkangel*, where Aeriell is revealed to be a princess. The implication is that her ability to be strong and enduring while she carries out difficult tasks is dependent not on her own maturity and virtue, but simply on the fact that she is of royal blood.

Literary Qualities

Pierce expands the dream recounted by Jung into a story by giving it multidimensional characters and an easilyvisualized setting. She draws on myths and fairytales from different traditions for the creatures which inhabit her world; for example, vampires are called icari after the winged character, Icarus, from Greek mythology. The duarough, who lived underground and were closely associated with the earth, comes from Scandinavian myth.

Pierce also uses the familiar pattern of the quest, which is a theme that has long been common to both the oral and written traditions of many cultures. In this pattern, a character must undertake a difficult journey, such as Aerial's venture across the desert, in search of some end. For Aerial, the end is the hoof of the Starhorse. Often, there are wise helpers along the way, such as the duarough and the Pendarlon, as well as enchanted implements like the magical bag of food that Aerial carries. Through the course of the journey the hero or heroine gains maturity and self-confidence by successfully passing difficult trials.



Themes and Characters

The most important character in *The Darkangel* is Aerial. At the beginning of the novel she is a slave girl characterized by humility, physical unattractiveness, and clumsiness. Aerial is completely dedicated to her mistress, Eoduin, who is only a few years older.

Later, when she serves the vampire, Aerial must also serve the wraiths, who are helpless and capable of giving only confusing and enigmatic instructions.

Thus called upon to serve the helpless, she begins to become independent. By the time Aerial returns from her quest to find the hoof of the starhorse, she has acquired practical skills, and has learned to trust her own thoughts and instincts. She has also matured physically, becoming graceful, and attractive.

The other main character of the novel, the vampire (who is also called the Darkangel), is physically striking because of the contrasts of his coloring. His skin is pale; his wings are black. Aerial finds him beautiful. As the novel progresses, he changes from being simply a representation of evil to a petulant youth who is bored, cruel, and lonely.

Eoduin, the daughter in an aristocratic family, is capable of wielding power and commanding respect; she is also sometimes temperamental and foolishly adventuresome. Her delight in danger sets the plot in motion when she insists on going higher and higher into the mountains. But when Eoduin becomes a wraith, she loses all of her power and even her personality. Aerial, who has been completely devoted to Eoduin, takes responsibility and realizes her own potential while her mistress becomes a mere shadow.

The duarough, Talb, is the stable and warm element in the cold environment of the castle. Aerial's trust of him is immediate; he embraces the solidity of food, warmth, and earthiness that are absent in the ghostly surroundings.

When the Old Ones departed from the moon, they left behind them guardians, including the lion Pendarlon. With his strength, power, and wisdom, Pendarlon helps Aerial, and she learns from his example of self-sacrifice. Although Aerial argues with the advice of the duarough and others, she never questions the words of Pendarlon, except in the hope of lessening his own suffering.

Pierce examines the concept of loyalty through the actions of many of the characters. Aerial, for example, is loyal to Eoduin, even when Eoduin is too shadowlike to be recognized. Aerial's loyalty to the vampire wavers only slightly, even though he has not earned her respect through kindness, compassion, or any of the other qualities she values in the duarough or in Pendarlon.

Aerial can always count on help from the duarough, and Pendarlon extends his services to all creatures in his realm. He is very strong and will help even the weakest of creatures.



Ariel's growth throughout the book is a comment on master/slave relationships. It is only when Eoduin becomes dependent on Ariel—in the same way that the slave girl had been dependent on her mistress for her livelihood—that Ariel is allowed to grow. She is the servant of the vampire by this time, but she has already cast off the menial stance she once took. Instead of cowering before him, she begins to do as she likes, befriending the gargoyles, for example. Once she returns from her desert journey, the vampire begins to see Ariel as more than a simple-minded servant.

A large part of Ariel's character is her compassion, which she extends toward the kind and the cruel, the strong and the powerless. As she matures, her ability to feel compassion becomes stronger; she is able to put aside her self-consciousness and become more aware of others' needs. From the Pendarlon and the duarough, Ariel learns about kindness to oneself and to others. The duarough's skillful attention to his own physical needs as well as to Ariel's helps her to survive in the harsh environment of the desert. Pendarlon represents self-sacrifice, a form of compassion.

Ariel feels compassion towards the vampire, too, but she also feels a strong physical attraction to him. She is intrigued by his evil actions and their motivating factors—or lack thereof.

Ariel is attracted to evil because it is at the same time dangerous and rewarding. She risks her own goodness by giving in to the allure of the vampire.



Topics for Discussion

1. How has Ariel changed when she returns from her desert journey? What qualities has she gained and lost?
2. How does Ariel's relationship with the vampire change throughout the book? What makes these changes take place?
3. What is the effect on Ariel of Eoduin's becoming a wraith? How does their relationship change?
4. Discuss the character of the duarough. What does he contribute to the castle? In what ways does he help Ariel?
5. What is the basis of Ariel's friendship with the gargoyles?
6. Even though Ariel recognizes that the vampire is cruel and ill-intentioned, she is attracted to him. Have you or someone you have known ever been attracted to someone who is unkind? Why were you attracted to that person? What is the best thing to do in this situation?
7. Ariel's relationship with the vampire has benefits and drawbacks for both Ariel and the vampire. What are they?
8. Compare the mistress/slave relationship of Ariel and Eoduin in the beginning of the book with the master/ servant relationship of Ariel and the vampire.
9. Consider the end of the book. Some readers find the scene where Ariel exchanges hearts with the vampire too unrealistic. What was your reaction?
10. Describe as best you can the dynamics of the relationship between the vampire and the witch.
11. At the beginning of the book the vampire finds Ariel clumsy and ugly. By the end of the book he changes his mind.
Why? Is it simply because she has matured physically? Or does he come to appreciate her in other ways? She also gains power; how does this affect the vampire?
12. Discuss Ariel's reasons for not killing the vampire. Is she right in letting him live?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Using outside sources, research the origin of the name icarus, which is one of the vampire's names (try a handbook of Greek mythology). Also research gargoyle, lorelei, wraith, equustel (another name for the starhorse), leosol (the Pendarlon's name), and duarough, and explain the meaning of the names in *The Darkangel* 2. Find out more about vampires.

What is their origin in legend? How do the vampires in this book differ from traditional vampires?

3. Research the phases of the moon and explain the units of time, such as day-month, that are used in the book.

4. Compare the dream in chapter four, "Psychiatric Activities," of Carl G. Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* with the plot of *The Darkangel*.

5. What is the main role of dreams in Jungian psychology? How do the vampire's dreams fit into this framework?

6. Choose one of the following pairs of characters to compare and contrast: the duarough and the Pendarlon; Dirna and Bomba; Eoduin before and after she becomes a wraith.

7. Choose a character other than Aeriell and write a character sketch about him or her.

8. Consider what would have happened if Aeriell had killed the vampire, or if she had become his fourteenth bride.

Write your own ending to the book based on one of these alternatives. Or make up a different ending.

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Related Titles

The Darkangel is the first book of a trilogy; the final volume, not yet published is The Pearl of the Soul of the World.

A Gathering of Gargoyles, the middle book, begins three day-months after Aerial and Prince Irrylath have escaped across the Sea-of-Dust to Isternes, the home of the prince's real mother. But the prince cannot accept his new wife—or himself—because he is still tormented by the witch who speaks to him in his dreams.

Once again, Aerial must undertake an arduous journey in search of an answer to a puzzling rhyme, and in hopes of tearing the bond by which the witch holds Irrylath. Similarly, Aerial encounters kind helpers and interesting— but often dangerous—people. Many characters from the first volume appear, often in unexpected ways. The book ends on a note of hope, but the story remains unfinished.



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