

# The Queen of Air and Darkness Short Guide

## The Queen of Air and Darkness by Poul Anderson

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# Characters

Although the mysterious Queen of Air and Darkness appears only briefly near the end of the novella, her presence is felt throughout. Her illusory world of magic colors the actions of all the other characters. Some, such as Mitherd, are totally under her sway and revere her as the wise monarch of the fairy world. She frightens others because of her role as a mystical being who rules a magic land just outside of conscious thought. The protagonists, Barbra Cullen and Eric Sherrinford, fight her influence because her minions have kidnapped Cullen's child, as they had Mitherd and other human children.

Sherrinford is an unusual addition to a story of fantasy and futuristic fiction.

He is from the planet Beowulf, and like the legendary warrior Beowulf, he comes to rid a land of a monster that makes people mysteriously disappear — one that in this case steals children, instead of murdering thanes; he has settled on the still sparsely populated Roland as the planet's only private detective. Hired by Cullen, he approaches the case of her missing child as though it were a mystery. His deductive powers enable him to fathom the nature of the Queen of Air and Darkness. His presence indicates the novella's thematic complexity. That is, *The Queen of Air and Darkness* is at once a mystery, an adventure, a fairy tale, and a futuristic science fiction story.

Sherrinford travels literally and figuratively into the Outworld of magic, and in solving the mystery he carries the reader with him into an exploration of ideas about human freedom and of the powers of some mystical archetypes to at once enchant and terrify people.



## Social Concerns/Themes

In *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, Anderson declares, "Homo can truly be called Sapiens when he practices his specialty of being unspecialized. His repeated attempts to freeze himself into an all-answering pattern or culture or ideology or whatever he has named it, have repeatedly brought ruin." As in much of his writing, Anderson here explores the nature of freedom and the illusions that humanity sometimes creates for itself.

The story takes place on a planet named "Roland," which is the name of a hero of medieval French romances.

The secretive native inhabitants of Roland use their psychic powers to make themselves appear to be fairies, elves, and trolls. Some human beings are deluded into believing that the fairy world is real and is a beautiful realm of freedom, although the humans are actually deluded psychic slaves.

Much is made of the fairy world appealing to subconscious "archetypes" that seem to people to be magical and free of frailty and sorrow. The blending of science fiction and medieval myths into a coherent narrative makes *The Queen of Air and Darkness* an exceptionally memorable work of fiction.

## Techniques

The Queen of Air and Darkness is so thematically complicated that it must provide much explanation for the reader to follow the action. To begin the tale with a dry disquisition about Anderson's ideas would probably lose readers. Instead, Anderson begins in the middle of the mystery. The opening scenes are of a fairyland of winged sprites and changeling children; without explanation, Anderson portrays an enchanted world that may hold the attention of an audience. Explanations come later and are mostly presented by Sherrinford.

The kidnapping of a child fits elegantly into the fairyland theme and provides motivation for Cullen and Sherrinford to uncover the reality of the magical Outworld. Anderson often uses mysteries to give his fiction narrative drive; in The Queen of Air and Darkness, the logical uncovering of clues makes for a logical development of his themes. The more the Outworld is explained, the more Anderson's ideas are explored.



## Key Questions

A successful discussion of *The Queen of Air and Darkness* probably should begin with its ideas. What are the notions of freedom that the novella explores? What advantages does the presentation of medieval myth offer?

Anderson's use of medieval myth in his science fiction story indicates his respect for the power of folklore to influence people; his presentation of people who half believe that there are fairies in the woods is credible, perhaps because his audience is likely to feel — if not understand — the powerful tug on their imaginations of long-held cultural beliefs.

1. How are the kidnapped children fooled into believing in the Queen?
2. To what does the title refer? How does the reference apply to the novella?
3. Is *The Queen of Air and Darkness* a good example of how fantasy and science fiction can be mixed? Does the mixture make for bad writing? Does the fantasy enhance the science fiction elements? Should fantasy and science fiction be kept as separate genres?
4. In what ways is Eric Sherrinford like a knight errant — like Roland?
5. What is Barbra Cullen's role in *The Queen of Air and Darkness*? How well rounded is she? Is she subordinate to Sherrinford, his equal, or his superior?
6. What adjustments will the kidnapped children have to make to human society? Would they miss their alien captors and their magical world?

Would they be permanently psychologically damaged by their experiences in the world of the Queen?

7. How will humans deal with the telepathic natives of Roland? Can they coexist? What sort of society might evolve out of coexistence on the planet? Will it be perpetual hostility, paternalism, or something creative?

8. Put yourself in the place of the Queen. How would you use your mental powers to influence the strange colonists who are building towns and settling farms on your land?

9. *The Queen of Air and Darkness* has had a magical appeal to some readers from the moment it was published.

What in the novella could account for this?

10. What are the subconscious archetypes that Roland's natives use to manipulate people? Do you agree with Anderson that these archetypes can motivate people in fundamental ways?

# Literary Precedents

The Queen of Air and Darkness belongs to an ill-defined literary subgenre called "science fantasy." It more often appears in novels, such as Andre Norton's *Witch World* (1963) and James H. Schmitz's *The Witches of Karres* (1966), probably because most magazines, with the exceptions of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *Amazing Science Fiction Stories*, want stories that are either science fiction or fantasy, not both at once.

## Related Titles

Anderson is one of the foremost practitioners of science fantasy. Among his many efforts that blend myths and science are *The Merman's Children* (1979), a controversial novel of the conflict between mythic beings and human beings in Croatia during the early Christian era, and *The Dancer from Atlantis* (1971), a novel about time travel and the possible reality of Atlantis.





# Copyright Information

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