Tehanu Short Guide

Tehanu by Ursula K. Le Guin

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Contents

Overview

Since Tehanu is the last volume of a four-book series, some attention must be given to the earlier books, and the reasons why, after nearly twenty years, Le Guin returned to her fantasy series.

In 1967, the publisher of Parnassus Press asked Le Guin to write a book for an adolescent audience, and she chose to do a fantasy about coming of age, a central concern of adolescents. Each of the first three volumes of the Earthsea series is a rite of passage story: in A Wizard of Earthsea the rite of passage is Ged's, the character who ties the whole series together, who learns the limits of his power as a magician; in The Tombs of Atuan the rite of passage focuses on Tenar, a character, like Ged, who is featured in Tehanu but who learns about life and death in Tombs; and in The Farthest Shore the rite of passage focuses on Prince Arren, a young man who will be overlord of the islands of Earthsea, but must learn the limits of 4096 Tehanu magic and the necessity to face fear.

Tehanu too is a rite-of-passage story for its central characters Tenar, Ged, and Therru, who will become Tehanu.

Tenar is a middle-aged widow with a grown, married daughter, Apple, and a seaman son, Spark. Since Tenar chose to marry Flint and live with him on Gont, she has lost the individuality she achieved in The Tombs of Atuan because of institutional sexual bias. Although she has caused Flint's farm to prosper, she and the women of Gont have no property rights. While Tenar knows her own true name, she is known by the people of Gont as Goha, the white spider.

The magician of high rank and power, Ged, who is several years older than Tenar, sacrificed his magic in The Farthest Shore. In Tehanu, Ged must live with the consequences of his loss of power, which he confuses with a loss of his identity. Therru, who appears to be a child of approximately six years, has been abandoned and victimized by men, raped, beaten, burned, and left for dead. When Tenar discovers Therru, her heart goes out to the girl and she decides to raise her. Tenar has a similar helping role with respect to Ged, whom she loved in an unfulfilled way in The Tombs of Atuan as an adolescent. The novel's plot focuses on answering three questions: What kind of creature will Therru grow up to become? Will Ged adjust to his loss of power? Can Tenar reassert her identity?

Since the publication of the first three Earthsea books, Le Guin has grown more and more responsive to her feminist critics who have denigrated her for not having significant female protagonists. To the feminists, women were doing nothing, men everything in Le Guin's novels and short stories. What she began to do in the 1980s is, to some extent, rewrite her writing, redo masculine actions with feminine ones. While Tenar was a significant early character in Le Guin's writing, Ged had a powerful role to play in her rite of passage. In Tehanu, Tenar's strength and love assist Ged's finding his manhood without magic, and sexuality and love without dominance. More than

changing roles is at stake in this book; power too is feminized. And with Therru, Le Guin is dealing with a character who has every reason to hate men and to let that hatred shape her life. Can Tenar's nurturing offset Therru's victimization? This, too, is a question Le Guin is working out through this book.

About the Author

Ursula K. Le Guin was born in a fascinating Berkeley household on October 21, 1929. Her parents, Alfred and Theodora Kroeber, were intellectuals of a high order, he a famous anthropologist whose career spanned from Franz Boas at its beginning to Claude Levi-Strauss at its end; she a writer who frequently explored the stories within her husband's career, such as her narrative of the last member of a native American tribe in Ishi: Last of His Tribe (1964). A field worker among California Indians early in his career and a theorist of culture after heart trouble, Alfred Kroeber was a fine storyteller, as were his native American informants. Le Guin's later tales of alien cultures were formed in part through the stories she heard and the people she met while growing up.

Although Le Guin wanted to be a writer from early childhood, she studied French and Italian Renaissance poetry at Radcliffe College, where she received her B.A. in 1951, and at Columbia University, where she received her M.A. in 1952. She received a Fulbright Fellowship while at Columbia University, and continued her doctoral work in Paris, where she met her husband, Charles Le Guin, a historian now teaching at Portland State University.

Since Le Guin wanted to be a creative writer, giving up a college teaching career in favor of her husband's career was not a great sacrifice. Le Guin wrote several novels while accompanying her husband from college to college, but she had difficulty getting published. Part of the reason were the types of novels she was writing; for instance, she had invented a central European country with parallels to contemporary history that left publishers cold, although they later published a revision of the original novel as Orsinian Tales in 1976 and Malafrena in 1979. Le Guin found she could sell her work as science fiction and fantasy which she had enjoyed reading years earlier. Her first stories began to sell in the early 1960s, and soon the fabric of a science fiction series of novels was created, the Hainish cycle, as well as a fantasy series, Earthsea, of which Tehanu is the concluding part.

Le Guin has achieved much success as a writer, winning Hugo and Nebula awards for many novels and stories as well as the National Book Award in 1973 for The Farthest Shore, the immediate predecessor of Tehanu in the Earthsea series. Le Guin's rich writing style has the symbolic and imagistic weight of writers such as Conrad, Joyce, and Lawrence, but her differences from previous writers are telling.

Neither Christianity nor Judaism was a part of her upbringing; therefore, religious acceptance or rebellion is not a part of her life, although the symbolic rituals of many peoples shape her symbolic imagination. Also, unlike many professional writers of previous generations, Le Guin has not allowed writing to dominate her life. In other words, she has remained a supportive wife to her husband, a mother to three children now grown, a grandmother, a sister to her three academically successful brothers, and a good citizen of Portland, Oregon. While Le Guin has had scarring experiences with men, one of which she deals with in "The Princess" in Dancing at the Edge of the World, she has not allowed these experiences to overcome her balance as an artist.

Along with her feminist allegiance, her environmental awareness is a part of this balance. More than any other writer she has brought science fiction and fantasy mainstream acceptance, while she has also raised the artistry of the genre.

Setting

Earthsea, a group of islands forming an archipelago, is an imaginary world similar to western Europe's middle ages. In place of the church and clerics holding western Europe together, magic and magicians bind Earthsea.

The magic of Earthsea, however, is much like science. The quest of the magicians seems to be to discover the true names and behaviors of objects in nature. On knowing these a still more important goal presents itself, maintaining the balance or equilibrium of the world. True or good magic then only seeks to maintain the natural order and not wantonly to exercise power over it.

Gont, the setting of Tehanu, is the island home of Ged, one of the great mages of his culture. Poor and rocky, the island's economy is supported by seafaring, farming, and grazing. Like the rest of Earthsea, Gont has a preindustrial craft culture. Tenar, who was a priestess of the Nameless Ones in The Tombs of Atuan, has settled down to a life as a farmer's wife, now widow, in Tehanu. She is uncertain how to live the rest of her life. Should she become a nanny to grandchildren and join the household of her daughter, or should she continue living on the farm of Flint, her deceased husband? Ged, too, is waiting, but his waiting is tormented and a denial of life. Therru learns from both adults, and is in part, the catalyst that brings them together.

Social Sensitivity

Clearly Le Guin has done what she could do to make Tehanu a feminist novel. Just as a thinker such as Plato could win an argument with an allegory before opposition to the argument could arise, so too does Tehanu persuade its audience about discrimination and crimes against women. The discrimination and crimes against women occur in the imaginary culture of Earthsea, but the legalized discrimination and crimes of violence against women that occur in Earthsea also occur in our world. As polemical as this fantasy is, it is doubtful that Le Guin's imaginative arguments are going to outrage many readers.

As strong as Le Guin's indictments are, she never denounces relationships similar to marriage. The love of Tenar and Ged is beautifully handled. Le Guin may argue for equity in her imaginary land, yet this equity does not destroy the family but negotiates new roles for family members. In Le Guin's discussions of male and female identity, largely through the conversations of Tenar and Aunty Moss, there is much discussion of male strength and weakness. Ged's challenges to find a life without power, as well as a love long past youthful attractions, are legitimate challenges for men. Ged's ability to defend Tenar and Therru with a pitchfork, in homely rather than heroic terms, is a part of his education about power and manliness. Using Aunty Moss's metaphor, men need to be more than the tough shell of a walnut, with manmeat inside, Aunty Moss's links women with creation, the dark, and the Earth through the image of a blackberry thicket. Men, as Le Guin portrays them, need to discover more fruitful selves. Although Tenar, along with other women in the story, attempts to discover the nature of women's power, it is not clearly defined, perhaps because Le Guin herself has not yet completely defined power in women. What is clear is that the power of women is connected to other women, not isolated, or dependent upon men.

Literary Qualities

Several motifs help structure Tehanu: the education or growth plots of Tenar, Ged, and Therru; the heroic romance of Therru's assumption of magical dragon-like power; the political melodrama involving women as victims and men as victimizers; and the romantic comedy of the mature love of two middle-aged characters from earlier novels.

As usual with Le Guin, political reform and healing through love occur together. Tenar's decisions regarding Therru, Ged, her son, and her enemies place Tenar in a position of having to make decisions through which ideological themes are debated. Tenar's motives for her choices are consequently springboards for the novel's thematic interests.

As cunningly as the action and narration are rendered, Le Guin's artfulness is in the richness of her symbolic language. This richness is more difficult for Le Guin to achieve than for many writers because she chooses not to rely on cultural master texts such as the Bible or classical mythology to promote symbolic resonance. Instead, she generates symbols and figurative language sequences by the repetition of descriptive features of actions. Early in the novel, for example, Tenar tells Therru one of Ogion's stories of a woman/dragon who sings a song to Ogion describing a time when dragons and humans were the same in Earthsea, a dragon/human androgyny. In subsequent descriptions when Tenar is angry or when Therru is frightened or upset, the rust color of the dragon and fire are associated with both, subtly connecting the dragons, the language of creation, and women.

Le Guin's use of naming also is significant in the novels. Just as the North American Indians studied by Le Guin's father created "use" names for everyday reality and revealed true names only to intimates, Le Guin's characters have both use names and true names.

Ged's use name, Sparrowhawk, or Hawk, reflects his spirit. For Therru, her true name of Tehanu is again tied to fire, because the name Tehanu in Atuan, Tenar's home, is the name of a star. This figurative density in Le Guin's writing is what many of her readers enjoy about her work.

Themes and Characters

The story is told from the point of view of Tenar, one of the dynamic characters along with Ged, who must find a life apart from magical power.

Therru, who seems to be a small girl, was raped, burned, beaten, and left for dead by her young, shiftless, and perverted parents and their friends. There is some question as to what she will become. While the novel is dominated by the middle-aged lives of Tenar and Ged, each of whom is facing a crisis of self-definition (triggered in Tenar's case by her husband's death and in Ged's by the loss of his power), Therru's nurture and growth are important to the novel's action.

Among the static characters are two classes of villain, Therru's parents and their friends, and Aspen, a local wizard. Her parents, Hake and Senini, as well as their friends, Handy and Shag, are a physical threat to Therru whenever they appear; the men's attempt to rape and mutilate Therru and Tenar is one of the more frightening parts of the book, and yet their threat is less frightening than that of Aspen, who uses power to dominate and destroy those he hates. He hates Tenar particularly because she is a woman who challenges his will, and he believes what his society believes, that women are inferior to men.

Ged, with a pitchfork, not magic, and Tenar, with her anger and a knife, are more than a match for Handy, Hake, and Shag. However, Aspen's threat is dealt with by Therru, who uses her innate knowledge of the old language of creation to call on Kalessin, a powerful dragon. Kalessin destroys Aspen and his cronies who have been humiliating Ged and Tenar. Although Therru acts like a child in the rescue of her loving guardians, her potential power as a dragon/human is foreshadowed in her call to Kalessin.

While the story of Ged and Tenar features melodramatic action and a plot focusing on personal growth, involving adjustment for both, the character Therru, or Tehanu, introduces heroic romance to the novel, although it is more muted than in earlier Earthsea volumes.

The helpers, victims, and victimizers are static characters. Chief among the helpers are Ogion, a wizard of Gont who helped to raise Tenar and Ged in earlier Earthsea books, and Lebannen, King of Earthsea, whose coming-of-age story and adventures with Ged as mentor structured The Farthest Shore. Ogion's home is the site of much significant action in Tehanu, and his fragmented vision of the future, given at his death, provides Tenar with hope and some direction. Lebannen, whose name was Arren in The Farthest Shore, provides a temporary refuge for Therru and Tenar from Handy and Aspen.

Lebannen's own reason for traveling to Gont is to have Ged crown him in Havnor, the city at the heart of Earthsea.

Ged's humiliation in his loss of power, his masculine shame, causes him to hide from Lebannen, his friend and king, who shows his wisdom in not trying to force Ged to carry out a role that Ged sees as a display of his own weakness.

The witches, Ivy, who lives near Tenar's farm, and Aunt Moss, who lives near Ogion's home, are helpers to the extent that they recognize Therru's potential in magic, but for the most part they are victims because of their place in Earthsea culture and particularly in their education. As Tenar ponders what to do in bringing up Therru, Ivy, and especially Aunty Moss, are useful in discussing women's marginalization through educational and social biases orchestrated by men. Although the culture is Earthsea's, clearly the problem Le Guin is addressing through these characters is institutionalized sexual bias on Earth.

While Aunty Moss and Ivy are victimized, the greatest victims are Tenar and Therru, whose resistance is dramatized in the novel. Becoming Flint's wife on Gont is a choice Tenar made that had its consequences. Social respect comes through male attachments and is not conferred on women individually. When Tenar's husband dies, she "owns" his farm only until Spark, her son, returns from his career as a seaman. While Spark's honor hangs by a dishrag he thinks only women should use, Ged shares the housework with Tenar in their life together.

The threat of physical violence against women is an even greater problem. Therru is a victim of rape, torture, incest, and burning, and these crimes occur through the agency of those she ought to have been able to trust. Worse still, these terrors are not simply a part of Therru's past; they are a threat to her as soon as her father and his male friends realize she is still alive. And, instead of feeling gratitude to Tenar, who attempts to raise the girl on her own, these worthless young men seek only to rape and to injure Tenar as well. While the cruelty of these men is awful, still worse is the cruelty of Aspen, who denies Tenar's humanity, robs her of language, and gives her a dog's commands.

As strongly feminist as Tehanu is, Le Guin still endorses male and female relationships, and love is still a source of joy. Where Ged waited for Tenar to become a person on her own in The Tombs of Atuan, Tenar leads Ged to a sexual love denied him by his priestlike role as a wizard and Archmage in Tehanu. Although the joys of young love are denied these lovers, they share their work, reflect on their pasts, and enjoy their lives together. Youth's spring is past, but their autumn is a celebration of its own.

Topics for Discussion

1. "High fantasy" is a term some critics use to define books in which the author creates a world entirely different from our own. Is Tehanu a high fantasy? What are the characteristics of the created world?

2. What motivated Tenar to adopt Therru? What difficulties does such an adoption have?

3. Tenar's relationship to the two witches in the story, Ivy and Aunty Moss, changes. What is it initially, and why does the relationship change?

4. When Ged returns from his journey on Kelessin, what is wrong with him? Why does he wish to avoid people, especially his friend, King Lebannen?

5. Le Guin has created a sexist world in Tehanu. What aspects of the social lives of women seem unfair?

6. Magic is a major part of Earthsea culture. Who practices it, and at what levels? What does magic have to do with naming practices on Earthsea?

7. Why is Aspen so cruel to Tenar?

What does he have against her?

8. What experience enabled Ged to recover himself and to accept his limited magical power?

9. What does Tenar do to help transform the lives of Ged and Therru?

10. Is the novel too political about feminist issues?

11. Has Le Guin unfairly positioned her male characters?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Alfred Kroeber, Ursula K. Le Guin's father, wrote a pioneering study early in his career entitled Handbook of the Indians of California. Several tribes he studied had naming practices, use names and true names, resembling the practices in Le Guin's Earthsea. After reading Kroeber's text, try to determine the similarities in naming practice between the two, native Americans and natives of Earthsea, and what the significance of naming is in Le Guin's fantasy.

2. Several essays in Le Guin's The Language of the Night deal with fantasy, such as "The Child and the Shadow."

After reading some of the essays, try to define Le Guin's idea of fantasy and apply your definition to an analysis of Tehanu.

3. Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex was one of the first major studies of sexism in culture. After reading the book, describe the sexist practices in Tehanu.

4. Tehanu, written more than fifteen years after the Earthsea novels, extends actions seen in these earlier books. After reading A Wizard of Earthsea, The Tombs of Atuan, and The Farthest Shore, show how Tehanu concludes actions begun in each of the earlier novels.

5. Read Margaret Mead's Male and Female and discuss sexual differences in Le Guin's Tehanu.

For Further Reference

Barrow, Craig, and Diana Barrow. "Le Guin's Earthsea: Voyages in Consciousness." Extrapolation 32,1 (Spring 1991): 20-44. This essay was published just as Tehanu appeared, so most of it focuses on the first three parts of the Earthsea series. The authors spend some time connecting native American folkways to the Earthsea series.

Bittner, James W. Approaches to the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984. This is a revised dissertation, but it is a fine one suggesting many ways to analyze and group Le Guin's novels.

Bucknall, Barbara J. Ursula K. Le Guin.

New York: Ungar, 1981. This book in Ungar's Recognitions series is similar to a reader's guide to Le Guin, but it is insightful and well done, tying Le Guin's speculations in The Language of the Night to Le Guin's work up to 1980.

Cummins, Elizabeth. Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1990. Cummins has devoted more than a decade to studying Le Guin.

Her descriptions of Le Guin's imagined worlds followed by her analyses of characters' actions in them is particularly useful.

Le Guin, Ursula K. Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places. New York: Grove, 1989.

These essays are not central to knowledge of Earthsea, but one can see Le Guin's increasing feminism in them.

—— . The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction. Edited by Susan Wood and Ursula K. Le Guin. Rev. ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1992. Le Guin's essays "The Child and the Shadow," "Is Gender Necessary?" and "Dreams Must Explain Themselves" are particularly helpful to readers of the Earthsea series. They help gauge Le Guin's politics and some of the forces helping to shape her imagination, such as Jungian psychology.

Le Guin, Ursula K. and Brian Attebery, eds. The Norton Book of Science Fiction.

New York: Norton, 1993. Le Guin's introduction, about 40 pages, is a good overview of her notions of science fiction and fantasy.

Related Titles

Le Guin has had a remarkably full writing career with many volumes of poetry, criticism, fantasy, science fiction, adolescent fiction, children's literature, and mainstream fiction to her credit. While the earlier books in the Earthsea series, A Wizard of Earthsea, The Tombs of Atuan, and The Farthest Shore, are the obvious connections to Tehanu, there are others as well. Very Far Away from Anywhere Else is a coming-of-age story for gifted adolescents told in a realistic mode similar to the adolescent novels of Judy Blume or Paul Zindel.

The Lathe of Heaven is a novel about dreams, dreaming, and utopia; as the main character, George Orr, discovers he can sometimes change reality by dreaming. The book in some ways resembles Utopian fiction, fantasy, and science fiction. The Beginning Place is similar to an adolescent novel, but there is an alternative world or dream world within the narrative's realistic frame story.

A Wizard of Earthsea, The Tombs of Atuan, and The Farthest Shore, the earlier parts of the Earthsea series, all feature rite-of-passage stories such as Therru's in Tehanu. Ged as a boy and young man comes to grips with his talent and his pride in A Wizard of Earthsea; Tenar chooses a life in the world rather than a life that denies life as priestess of the Tombs in The Tombs of Atuan; and Lebannen, with Ged, learns to reject the attraction of perpetual life because of its corrupting qualities in The Farthest Shore. Tehanu is different from the earlier novels in that the lives of older people, Ged and Tenar, are more central to it. Also, political issues are less important in the earlier books than in Tehanu. With the possible exception of The Tombs of Atuan, the other early novels accept Earthsea's patriarchy of magic. The Tombs of Atuan was the most feminist of the earlier books in the series, but Ged's role as helper of Tenar blurs some of the novels's feminist aspirations. Moreover, Tenar in the earlier book at the end of the action discovers only what she could become—too much of her true self is unexplored, as one sees a symbolic birth at the end rather than development. Tehanu fills this empty space for Tenar, and since she has a defined self, the love between Tenar and Ged only promised in The Tombs of Atuan can become a reality in Tehanu.

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