

Ged's Coming of Age

A Wizard of Earthsea examines Ged's coming of age, especially the period of anguish and ordeal that follows the release of the shadow into the world. Growing up, accepting responsibility, and recognizing one's strengths and limitations are principal themes of nearly all young adult fiction. In many young adult novels a girl or boy undergoes a period of confusion and ordeal and emerges a new and different person, one with greater understanding of himself and others.

This same process of transformation is also one that we associate with religious or social "rites of passage." In *A Wizard of Earthsea* the boy called Duny at the age of 13 walks naked through the icy Ar river and crosses to where Ogion "reached out his hand and clasping the boy's arm whispered to him his true name: Ged." Despite this ritual, Ged has a long way to go before he understands and becomes his true self—and it is these teenaged years of arrogance, trial, defeat, and eventual self-acceptance that Le Guin chronicles.

In his classic study *The Rites of Passage*, Arnold van Gennep postulated a three-part movement to the recognized process of coming of age: separation from the community, followed by a kind of wilderness period when one has shed one identity but not yet found another, and then a re-entry into society as a new man or woman. In the equally celebrated *The Ritual Process*, Victor Turner focuses on that middle or liminal period. (Liminal means threshold—the place where one is neither in nor out.) The liminal state dissolves normal barriers and boundaries, is full of ambiguity and indeterminacy—it is a no-man's land, a limbo, a period marked by seclusion, testing,

uncertainty, sexual confusion, chastening, the breakdown of social norms. This state mirrors Ged's mental state and experiences after he releases the Shadow.

The psychologist Carl Gustav Jung studied the nature of the unconscious and our need in life to achieve integration of our various selves and impulses. Archetypal figures (the Wise Old Man, the helpful animal), universal symbols (water as the unconscious), and primordial experiences (the night sea journey to the ends of the earth) pervade Jungian thought—and Le Guin's novel. Most strikingly, Jung speculated that a person could only reach full maturity by confronting what he called the Shadow—one's dark side, all those desires and temptations that the public self tries to hide and repress. To Jung, this dark side is as much a part of us as our light side.

Psychological growth, then, implies an enlargement of consciousness, incorporation rather than rejection, both rather than one or the other. Like Taoism, Jung rejects duality for harmony.

These theories of personal transformation—anthropological, mythic, and psychological—all posit what may be called a period of ritual or symbolic death. Each insists on a time of darkness, of limbo or physical abuse that mimics actual death. Many times Ged comes close to dying in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, each time emerging as a different, stronger self. To confront the Shadow, he sails beyond the known world to face what looks like certain death in order to re-emerge as a mature person, the man who will one day become Archmage and dragonlord.