

2017

## Mind Over Magic: Repetition-Compulsion, Power Instinct, and Apprehension in Ursula K. Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*

Phillip Snyder

*The University of Southern Mississippi*, [phillip.snyder@usm.edu](mailto:phillip.snyder@usm.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://aquila.usm.edu/southernmisscatalyst>

 Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Snyder, Phillip (2017) "Mind Over Magic: Repetition-Compulsion, Power Instinct, and Apprehension in Ursula K. Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*," *The Catalyst*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

DOI: 10.18785/cat.0401.06

Available at: <http://aquila.usm.edu/southernmisscatalyst/vol4/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Catalyst by an authorized editor of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact [Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu](mailto:Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu).

The Catalyst

Volume 4 | Issue 1 | Article 6

2017

# **Mind Over Magic: Repetition-Compulsion, Power Instinct, and Apprehension in Ursula K. Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea***

*Phillip Snyder*



Ursula K. Le Guin was born into a close family with “reasonable financial security, and an abundance of intellectual stimulation” (Carmean, Williams, and Rich). Biographers Carmean, Williams, and Rich explain that after Le Guin graduated *Magna Cum Laude* in 1951 and attained a Masters degree in 1952, her first real breakthrough in writing was the publication of her short story “April in Paris,” in 1962, after which her “literary output steadily increased.” Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea* was first published in 1968 and was awarded the Boston Globe Horn Book Award in 1969. It has been hailed as a classic in the fantasy genre. Le Guin details her realm of myth and magic through “use of songs, stories, folktales, maps, and depictions of material culture,” in ways that reflect her upbringing (Carmean et. al.). Carmean and her fellow biographers continue that Le Guin grew up in an intellectually rich environment surrounded by books and academic minds. With an anthropologist as a father and “a respected writer with an advanced degree in psychology” as a mother, it comes as no surprise that Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea* easily lends itself to psychoanalytic analysis (Carmean et. al.). The novel’s protagonist, Ged, repeatedly interacts with a creature known as the shadow despite the pain that each meeting brings him. While the novel readily lends itself to psychoanalytic criticism through the lens of C.J. Jung’s work, an avenue of analysis previously explored by scholars such as Gordon E. Slethaug, I find that using a Freudian approach allows for new points that would otherwise go unaddressed. When viewed through Sigmund Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Ged’s interactions with the shadow in Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea* affect our understanding of Freud’s concept of repetition-compulsion and show the process by which people repeat painful actions in order to approach mastery over a situation.

Le Guin’s novel tells the story of Ged, a young wizard from northern Earthsea born with great magical aptitude. Even as a young boy of twelve, he protects his humble village from a band of foreign raiders with his magical talent. This feat of magical power attracts the attention of an accomplished wizard by the name of Ogion. Ogion takes the young boy under his tutelage and gives him his true name of Ged. Ged, however, is prideful and impatient and tries to find a more powerful spell among Ogion’s tomes. He finds a spell to summon dead spirits, but not understanding its power he attracts the attention of a shadow-beast from the realm of the dead. Ogion saves Ged, and Ged decides to study wizardry on the Isle of Roke. On Roke, he excels in his studies but eventually succumbs to his pride at a challenge to summon a dead spirit and inadvertently releases the shadow he had attracted before, which is determined to possess his body. After once again being restored to proper health following the shadow’s attack, Ged spends the next two years fleeing from the shadow until Ogion convinces him to hunt it instead. Ged barely returns from death’s door on numerous occasions but finally confronts and overcomes the shadow.

*A Wizard of Earthsea* has been the subject of various frames of study, notably feminist analysis and Jungian psychoanalysis. In her article “Witches, Wives and Dragons: The Evolution of the Women in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Earthsea*—An Overview,” Melanie A. Rawls analyzes the limited role that women play in *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Rawls writes that all of the relevant women in the story “fit into stock categories” (130). Rawls points out that Ged goes “to the school for wizards on Roke Island, an all-male institution,” and that it is only after the appearance of a fair maiden at Roke that there is a “disastrous wizard’s duel . . . thereby reinforcing the general belief that women and

proper wizardry do not mix" (130). Rawls shows that the novel subtly implies social issues with the way that women are viewed in the land of Earthsea, but that this first text in the Earthsea series does not address women's issues directly.

The novel seems much more interested in the psychological issues presented by Ged's relation with the shadow, a topic explored in more depth by Gordon E. Slethaug. In his article "The Paradoxical Double in Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*," Slethaug discusses the way that the novel depicts elements of Jungian psychoanalytic theory. Slethaug focuses his analysis on Jung's "theories of the personality and of the struggle for power between the conscious and the unconscious, the rational and the shadow, and of the necessary reconciliation of the two" (327). Slethaug continues to explain how the relationship between Ged and the shadow reflects Jung's view that "the shadow . . . unless recognized and integrated, will remain pitted against the moral or rational self" (Slethaug 329). The Jungian views that Slethaug discusses are clearly present in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, but other, less obvious psychoanalytic theories present themselves as explanations for how Ged interacts with the shadow, such as Sigmund Freud's concepts of repetition-compulsion and the power instinct.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud discusses his concept of "repetition-compulsion" (sec. III), which he explains as "an instinct for mastery," or what A.A. Brill translates as "the 'power' instinct" (sec. II). Freud describes how these concepts seek to explain behavior that would otherwise defy his previous theories on the pleasure principle, which suggest that people should seek pleasure rather than pain. The problem his theories encounter is that individuals

## ***"Applying Freud's theories to Ged's relationship with the shadow in Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* offers additional insight into the way we understand the shadow and its mastery."***

will repeat a particular action even if it is psychologically painful for them, particularly in the case of reliving or reenacting traumatic events, seemingly in spite of Freud's theories on the unconscious drive for pleasure.

Freud offers a possible explanation in what Brill translates as the power instinct. In Section II of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud proposes that repetition-compulsion "might be ascribed to the impulse to obtain the mastery of a situation . . . which remains independent of any question of whether the recollection was a pleasant one or not" (sec. II). This power instinct could then be seen as a potential drive for the repetition-compulsion; the more an individual experiences a situation, the more he or she knows how to handle and, consequently, gain mastery over that situation.

The concept of the power instinct would also help explain Freud's other dilemma, that traumatic experiences tend to cause nightmares that "continually [take] the patient back to the situation of his disaster," which seems to counteract his theory that dreams operate on the concept of wish-fulfillment (sec. II). He explains this by proposing, "These dreams are attempts at restoring control of the stimuli by developing apprehension" (sec. IV). Freud defines "apprehension" as "a certain condition as of expectation of danger and preparation for it, even though it be an unknown one" (sec. II). In this context, the repetition of

***“It should therefore come as no surprise that Ged is nearly killed after this attack and that the Archmage must drive the shadow away to save him.”***

nightmares is exposing the dreamer to the traumatic situation in order to help make the experience more familiar and therefore easier to master. With the familiarity apprehension brings, one develops the capability to actively confront past trauma.

Applying Freud’s theories to Ged’s relationship with the shadow in Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea* offers additional insight into the way we understand the shadow and its mastery. Ged repeatedly interacts with the shadow, stating, “It may be I must spend my life running from sea to sea and land to land on an endless vain venture, a shadow-quest” (222). Ged interacts with the shadow throughout the novel, whether in dreams or in reality, both as its prey and as its hunter. With each encounter the shadow manifests itself as more familiar than before, and each time Ged knows it better. Just as the shadow’s form becomes more familiar to him, Ged’s power over it steadily increases until he finally overcomes it.

When Le Guin first introduces the shadow in Ogion’s hut, Ged sees it in the form of an apparition as “a shapeless clot of shadow darker than the darkness. It seemed . . . to call to him in a whisper: but he could not understand the words” (30). Here the shadow is presented as so foreign that it cannot even be properly described as having a shape, and its whispering remains unintelligible. That it must whisper itself indicates obscurity, showing that this shadow is something difficult to understand. Furthermore, that the shadow must call to Ged also implies that there is a distance between the two. This entity is so unfamiliar and separate to human experience that Ged cannot possibly know what this shadow is let alone have power over it.

Le Guin next shows the shadow after Ged misuses a spell to summon the dead. After it comes through the portal Ged has made, the shadow is presented in more mundane terms like “beast” and “child,” which remain familiar to the human mind, though the shadow is still foreign enough to have “no head or face” (85). While this is the first time that Ged sees the shadow in the physical world, seeing it as an apparition in Ogion’s hut has already caused Ged apprehension. This apprehension allows for the shadow to be better understood, allowing it to be perceived in more familiar terms. However, Ged has only seen the shadow once before and over a great distance bridging two separate planes of existence, so the apprehension he has developed through his past experience cannot be sufficient to fully handle this new encounter. Until Ged has further exposure to the shadow so that he may further develop apprehension, he is powerless to stand against it.

It should therefore come as no surprise that Ged is nearly killed after this attack and that the Archmage must drive the shadow away to save him. Ged states that since the attack, he has seen the shadow “in dreams” (Le Guin 91). This coincides with Freud’s theories on dreams and apprehension. Because Ged has experienced severe trauma at the hand of the shadow, and twice been powerless to stop it, his power instinct has sprung into action in the form of his dreams. Ged’s unconscious mind forces him into terror through his dreams so that he may gain mastery over the trauma of the shadow. Each repetition of the event in his dreams helps Ged prepare to more adequately defend himself. In this way, Ged can become better acclimated to the horror that the shadow inspires.

While his dreams of the shadow eventually cease to haunt him, he eventually attracts its attention again, and he “dreamed of the thing like a bear with no head or face . . . Such a dream he had not dreamed since the healing of the wounds the thing had given him” (Le Guin 116). Before, the shadow had been driven away by the Archmage, removing the presence of

immediate danger. Because of this, Ged's power instinct merely drove him to gain mastery over the trauma he had suffered. Now, however, Ged is in imminent danger from the shadow, and so his power instinct once again manifests itself through dreams of the beast in the manner of repetition-compulsion. This further develops Ged's apprehension of the shadow; as continued exposure has made Ged more familiar with the shadow he may now not only gain mastery over his knowledge of it, but of the creature itself.

The text uses Ged's continued exposure to show how he continues to become more familiar with the shadow and the trauma it represents. Le Guin details the development of Ged's apprehension when she states that "When he woke he was weak and cold and [his] scars . . . drew and ached," and that "When he dreamed of the shadow or so much as thought of it, he felt always that same cold dread" (116). His new dreams of the shadow force him to remember the trauma he suffered from his last encounter with it. By associating this new threat with the original trauma, Ged immediately gains a certain level of apprehension for the shadow. As dreadful as these dreams may be, they allow him to continue building upon his original apprehension of the shadow rather than start preparing from nothing. This shows that even the apprehension he experienced from his first encounter is still useful, even though at the time he was in far less danger. Since attempting the spell to summon the dead, the shadow has begun to more actively search for the young wizard.

As Ged flees the influence of the shadow, the novel's events show how the apprehension of his dreams begins to help him. After he has a heated discussion with an oarsman named Skiorh, Ged "dreamed, and Skiorh walked in his dream. Afterwards he avoided the man as best as he could" (Le Guin 143-144). Ged's dreams have been

so filled with apprehension that while Ged felt no threat from Skiorh before, when he sees the man in his dreams Ged knows that Skiorh is dangerous. While Ged currently does not know that Skiorh has indeed come under the influence of the shadow, he proceeds to avoid Skiorh regardless. This act shows that, as Freud hypothesized, the repetition of unpleasant dreams that seem to offer no wish-fulfillment help alert the dreamer to danger and prepare for it, even if it is unknown to the conscious mind.

The shadow again confronts Ged directly through the possessed form of Skiorh, but unlike before, "A rage of horror filled Ged and he swung up and brought down his staff whistling on the hood that hid the shadow-face" (Le Guin 148). Ged's unconscious mind has prepared for this confrontation through the repetition of nightmares, so although the shadow is recognized as horrifying, Ged is still able to react. His swift defense, something that would be impossible if not for his repetition-compulsion, saves his life. Although he fails to defeat it, Ged's retaliation indicates that the apprehension established by his nightmares is still bringing him closer to mastering the shadow.

Ogion convinces Ged to hunt the shadow instead of be hunted by it, by which point Ged has been exposed to the shadow enough to challenge and seek mastery over it. The appearance of the shadow changes once again from beast to "some likeness to a man" (Le Guin 188), and the power Ged is beginning to acquire over it is shown when "the shadow, wavering, turned and fled" (Le Guin 189). It seems that now the shadow is experiencing fright, as it has not only lost mastery over Ged, but is in danger of being mastered by him. Its form becomes steadily more familiar to Ged, and his power instinct pushes him to pursue the shadow and conquer it. Ged's unconscious mind no longer views the shadow as a threat to Ged's existence, but something he must master. Enough apprehension was built for Ged to change his role from reactive to active. Where



the apprehension developed through Ged's dreams was formed reactively, Ged is now driven to actively hunt the shadow.

The shift from passive apprehension to active mastery is reinforced when Ged next finds his prey. Le Guin states, "The shadow stood behind him in the boat . . . but he was ready, and lunged to seize and hold the thing" (206). Ged's lack of hesitation is testament to how much the repetition of his nightmares has prepared him to face the shadow. Furthermore, his eager attack exemplifies his drive by the power instinct to master the shadow. He does not strike the thing with his staff, but instead attempts to seize it with his bare hands, just as it would have done to him. Though he cannot yet fully overcome it, Ged steadily begins to reverse the balance of power and follow in the shadow's footsteps towards the mastery of prey.

As Ged continues to hunt the shadow, he hears people describe it as "a man who looks like you [Ged]" (Le Guin 217). This resemblance accentuates the role reversal between Ged and the shadow. The shadow slowly stops resembling something monstrous, and begins to resemble its original prey. Its slow change in appearance to resemble Ged, from shapeless to beast to humanoid and finally to Ged's doppelganger, reflects the power that it has lost to him. Thanks to his accumulated apprehension, Ged is now so familiar with the shadow that he recognizes it as easily as he does himself—the entity is no longer an unknown beast to be feared. Just as the shadow becomes the hunted, Ged becomes ever more the hunter. Repetition-compulsion continues to show just as tenaciously through his efforts to hunt the shadow just as it did when he fled, despite that neither action awards Ged any pleasure. He no longer holds apprehension for the shadow attacking him, but instead that if he does not conquer it, it may harm others in the world. While the nature of

his apprehension continues to evolve, it also continues to prepare him for the final mastery of the shadow.

Finally, Ged confronts the shadow and in it sees "a fearful face he did not know, man or monster" (Le Guin 250) and "reached out his hands . . . and took hold of his shadow . . . and [they] were one" (Le Guin 251). In this final confrontation, the roles have been completely reversed. The shadow shows fear of Ged in its true form, and Ged exerts total mastery over it. Le Guin refers to the shadow possessively, indicating that Ged has ownership of it. This possession is directly mirrored to the shadow's desire to possess and control Ged earlier in the novel. That the shadow is referred to as Ged's, and is subsequently absorbed by him, indicates his total mastery of it.

This novel deals heavily with the themes of fear and its mastery, both over us and by us. While most scholars like Slethaug who critique this novel in psychoanalytic terms tend to analyze it in the terms of Jungian theories, it is important to note how readily the novel allows itself to be viewed through Freud's concept of repetition-compulsion. Le Guin's novel lends evidence in favor of Freud's concept of the power instinct and shows how we may approach mastery of fear through repeated exposure and mounting apprehension. There is, however, a significant deviation in the novel from Freud's explanation of the power instinct—In order to fully master the shadow, Ged physically absorbs it into himself. Freud makes no mention of absorbing or consuming the object to be mastered, but this is the only way that Ged can finally master the shadow. Looking at *A Wizard of Earthsea* as a case study shows us that repetition-compulsion alone is not enough to gain complete mastery over fear. **Instead, the novel presents us with evidence that we must embrace our fear and accept it as a part of ourselves to truly master it.**

## WORKS CITED

Carmean, Karen, Donna Glee Williams, and Mark Rich. "Ursula K. Le Guin." *Critical Survey of Long Fiction, Fourth Edition* N/A (2010): 1-9. Literary Reference Center. Web. 6 Nov. 2015.

Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. A.A. Brill. N/A: Chios, 2015. Kindle File.

Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Bantam, 1961. Print.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Boston: Graphia, 2012. Print.

Rawls, Melanie A. "Witches, Wives and Dragons: The Evolution of the Women in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* – An Overview." *Mythlore* 26.3/4 (2008): 129-149. Literary Reference Center. Web. 6 Nov. 2015.

Slethaug, Gordon E. "The Paradoxical Double in Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*." *Extrapolation* (Kent State University Press 27.4 (1986): 326-333. Literary Reference Center. Web. 6 Nov. 2015.