

**Redefining the American Dream through American Children's Fantasy Literature:  
A Comparative Study of *Taran Wanderer* and *A Wizard of Earthsea***

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## Abstract

Because scholars typically study children's fantasy literature with an international focus, the themes pertaining to a particular culture, such as the American Dream, often become distorted or ignored. When examining the children's fantasy literature by American authors, key elements of the American Dream and its cultural implications become evident such as the desire for class mobility and self-improvement. However, under those implications is another set of subversive elements that call attention to the potential problems with the American Dream: struggles with identity, gender, race, and education that may inhibit the class mobility the Dream appears to promise. By conducting a comparative study of two children's fantasy novels published in the 1960s, I explore how the subversive elements of two novels, Lloyd Alexander's *Taran Wanderer* and Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*, come to light as they challenge the idea that one's social class depends upon identity, gender, race, and education and instead present the alternative idea that one can achieve social mobility despite the limitations placed by society. Application of the Marxist theory to these two novels reveals the weaknesses they expose in the American Dream, but the two authors offer a redefinition of this myth that values community over individual gain, promoting the idea that the American Dream is an individual achieving social mobility while also using that new social mobility to benefit the community as a whole.

## Introduction

Though a popular genre for adults and children alike, fantasy literature presents a range of problems in its social and critical reception. Because American society has “a deep puritanical distrust of fantasy, which comes out often among people truly and seriously concerned about the ethical education of children” since “fantasy, is to them, escapism,” children’s fantasy literature often becomes the target of suspicions and censorship (“The Child and the Shadow” 147). Even more problematic is that “finding a critical language in which to speak about children’s fantasy texts” can be challenging since much of the language centers on “critical and theoretical hand-me-downs” that are not always “entirely appropriate to their tasks” (Gooderham 171). Certainly some authors like J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, J.K. Rowling, and George R. Martin have come under the critical lens and received increased attention over recent years, but how much of that more recent attention results from Hollywood adaptations of their fantasy writings? Their popularity<sup>1</sup> over especially the last twenty to twenty-five years attests to the appeal of fantasy literature for a wide audience that encompasses both children and adults. Though children’s literature scholars have addressed children’s fantasy literature, the rise in popularity of children’s fantasy has increased scholarly focus on the role of the fantastic in more popular writings like *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and the Harry Potter series and to more popular authors like Susan Cooper, Ursula Le Guin, and C.S. Lewis.

For nearly forty years, various critics have addressed the potential subversiveness of fantasy and science-fiction for both children and adults, and the rise in popularity of dystopian

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<sup>1</sup> The Tolkien Estate’s *The Lord of the Rings* franchise based on book sales, box office movie sales, games, and merchandise has an estimated worth of \$10-\$15 billion (Parker). The C.S. Lewis *The Chronicles of Narnia* movie franchise has an estimated revenue of \$1.5 billion (“Chronicles”). The Harry Potter franchise based on book sales, box office movie sales, games, and other merchandise has an estimated revenue of \$25 billion since 1997 (McCreary). George R.R. Martin’s *The Game of Thrones* franchise has an estimated revenue of \$2.2 billion (Guy).

young adult novels in more recent years has only encouraged such scholarship, particularly in children's literature studies. As early as 1971, Ursula K. Le Guin began writing about the subversive themes found in children's fantasy literature in her article "The Child and the Shadow" when she describes fantasy's potential as a training ground for young minds learning to navigate the world around them. She identifies fantasy's subversive potential because it offers "the language of the inner self" and "speak[s] *from* the unconscious to the unconscious, in the *language* of the unconscious—symbol and archetype" (148; 141). While he makes his reference more to adult fantasy, S.C. Fredericks echoes this recognition of the subversive nature of fantasy as he asserts "that Fantasy should make us sensitive to the bad beliefs that we already have and open to new, better ones" (40). More recent scholars like Fredric Jameson, Rosemary Jackson, and Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak continue this analysis of radical subversiveness by analyzing how children's fantasy frequently challenges its young readers to examine social structures, identify issues within those social constructs, and begin to address problem areas through their own action. Danielle Forest expresses the need to study children's literature more closely "because American children live in a country with a range of different classes, and the presence/absence of groups of people in children's literature convey which groups society values/devalues" (592-93). Even though it seems this challenge to identify problems within social structures and address problem areas through action appears mostly in more recent children's fantasy literature, radical subversive children's fantasy literature has been a part of society for many years, and its message has been influencing readers for just as long. Even as early as the 1960s and 1970s, the characters and the plots used by two children's fantasy novelists, Lloyd Alexander and Ursula Le Guin, offer radical representations of class mobility.

First published in 1967, Lloyd Alexander's *Taran Wanderer* is the fourth book in the *Prydain Chronicles*, a children's fantasy series that traces the adventures and maturation of a young assistant pig-keeper, Taran. The entire series centers on Taran and his band of friends as they struggle against the evil manipulations of Arawn Death-Lord and concludes with Taran choosing to remain behind, to marry the princess, and to become the new High King. In this particular volume of the series, the battle against Arawn becomes much less important as Taran goes on a quest to learn about his lineage because he has fallen in love with the princess, Eilonwy. Adopted at birth by the wizard Dallben and retired warrior Coll and with no real sense of his parental heritage, he feels that he does not have the social status required to marry a princess. While the entire series is a fantasy *bildungsroman*, this particular volume focuses more on Taran's maturation and his understanding of social hierarchies and social mobility. *Taran Wanderer* offers the framework for the title character to eventually become king in the final book because Lloyd Alexander uses it to explore Taran's insecurities, growth, and leadership potential that centers not on the big battles but instead the everyday crises that a leader might encounter.

Just a year after the publication of *Taran Wanderer*, Ursula Le Guin published *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the first book in her *Earthsea Cycle*. This particular series follows the rise of Ged to the role of Archmage, and this first book relates his early childhood and his journey of self-discovery. He grows up in a small village, the youngest son of the village blacksmith, and he shows very little promise in the trade; however, his life takes a sudden turn when he uses magic to protect his village from an attack and receives attention from more powerful wizards who wish to train him in the use of his powers. Ged is a flawed and relatable character who succumbs often to his own pride, but readers see him eventually learn from his hubris and reconcile his broken, shadowy identity. While Taran is more the traditional heroic character adventuring

through a more western European setting, *Ged* is a heroic person of color adventuring through a more southeastern archipelago setting like the Polynesian islands. In both of these novels, the setting and the hero archetypes are important aspects to consider when comparing *Taran* and *Ged* since in representing two very different cultures, a multifaceted myth of the American Dream emerges.

Because the American Dream affects every facet of American society, its effect upon literature becomes an area that calls for scholarly discussion and study, especially when considering how it appears in children's literature. While literature in general often reflects aspects of societal norms, fantasy literature both reflects and responds to issues in society in a unique way because it has the ability to take the audience out of reality and place them in the world of the fantastic where they can examine reality from a distance and with no fear of personal repercussions. Or are there repercussions when readers take those steps to examine the issues of society exposed in the fantasy world, consider the ramifications of those issues, and resolve to address those same issues in the real world? Fantasy literature challenges readers, whether adults or children, to examine and improve the world around them, a tradition that dates back to the earliest foundations of fantasy through the legends, fairy tales, and morality stories passed from one generation to the next. As a result, most fantasy scholarship sees fantasy novels as simply fantasy without distinguishing between motifs found in American versus European versus Asian fantasy, and until the past thirty years, most fantasy scholarship lumped all fantasy together regardless of the audience. One of the main issues with failing to distinguish between the different cultural fantasy writings is that no real examination of the role of and effects of the American Dream on children's fantasy has been thoroughly explored. Additionally, even when it does analyze the literature of an American author, much of the current scholarship focuses on

more modern fantasy and science fiction children's novels rather than examining the children's fantasy of the 1960s and 1970s, an era that has greatly affected our current fantasy literature by subversively encouraging its young readers to dream beyond the American Dream, to challenge the social system, and to seek their own identity beyond what others demand. Lloyd Alexander's *Taran Wanderer* and Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* are novels from this influential era of political and class upheaval in the United States, never directly challenging the issues of civil unrest and gender and racial inequalities but instead exploring them subtly in character identity, class conflict, gender roles, and education opportunities. An examination of the ideologies of these two authors as exhibited in their respective novels reveals their challenge to the American Dream myth, reflects the changing times and the changing American Dream, and shapes the potential of children's fantasy literature to continue evolving its radical subversive possibilities. Thus, by analyzing these two novels through a Marxist lens, the flaws and strengths of the American Dream myth appear as Taran and Ged, the subversive main characters of the novels, subvert the American model of social mobility in favor of a model that focuses less on the individual and individual needs and more on the role of and importance of the community upon the individual's social development.

Because of its focus on issues of social mobility and social constructs as a means to control the lower classes, Marxist literary criticism is one of the most common critical lenses used to analyze children's fantasy literature. This focus becomes apparent when considering the radical subversive ideas of children's fantasy literature and its call to identify problems within social structures and address those problem areas through action. As Marxist theorist Terry Eagleton points out, ideologies present in literature have often been used to shape the ideas and attitudes of the reader, and because literature can be seen "as a liberal, 'humanizing' pursuit, it

could provide a potent antidote to political bigotry and ideological extremism” (2017). What Eagleton ultimately illustrates with his criticism of literature is that often the upper social classes use literature to control the lower classes and indoctrinate them into accepting the status quo. Angela Hubler emphasizes the need for historical materialist methodology as an additional piece in analyzing children’s literature because “children often suffer most from the inequalities that capitalism creates” (XXIII). Mervyn Nicholson echoes this idea when he proposes that “capitalism is inherently hostile toward children” and children are often “outside the process of capital accumulation” even though their labor does “produce surplus value” for the upper classes (3-4). In analyzing the development of children’s literature, Nicholson traces how early children’s literature tends to be more didactic and then progresses to a source of entertainment that develops the children as consumers. Children’s literature as entertainment then indoctrinates them into capitalistic consumerism perpetuated through the publication of children’s literature and the desire to purchase more books, especially if they are part of a series or adapted into movies (6-7). In regard to the popularity of these two books and their respective series, Alexander’s *The Prydain Chronicles* has over two million copies in print and a fiftieth anniversary edition released in 2014 (Alexander et al.). Ursula Le Guin’s *Earthsea Cycle* has over one million copies in print as well as a recent illustrated edition published in 2018 (Lodge). Thus, with this understanding, *Taran Wanderer* and *A Wizard of Earthsea* become part of the capitalistic consumerism aimed at children since both are part of a series, and for *The Prydain Chronicles*, Disney adapted one of the earlier books into a movie with the same name, *The Black Cauldron*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It is also important to note here that both books are parts of series that have won a variety of literary awards such as the Newbery Medal, Newbery Honor, the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for Fiction, and the National Book Award for Children’s Books, yet they have not maintained their popularity over the years as well as other similar



Examining these novels with a Marxist lens reveals their subversive nature particularly when studying social status and social controls. Karl Marx designates social status and controls as “society as a whole [...] splitting up more and more into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat” (8). He claims that “the bourgeoisie [...] resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms has set up that single, unconscionable freedom—Free Trade” (9). As Mervyn Nicholson describes, the bourgeoisie and proletariat are the “two fundamental classes: one class derives its income from owning, and the other survives by selling its labor” (Nicholson 3). Nicholson’s arguments regarding class and class structures prompt a series of questions to consider when analyzing fantasy children’s literature:

- What is the class struggle, and which classes are involved?;
- Who represents the machine, and how does the exploitation appear?;
- What is the “magic exit”?;
- Who is the subversive character?

In answering these questions, the subversive natures of Taran and Ged become more evident because the texts encourage the adolescent to not only challenge the status quo and the promises of social mobility but to explore other options that are more unique to the individual. Frederic Jameson supports this encouragement of subversive natures in his article, “Radical Fantasy” when he argues that one must “realise that the emanations and capture of other people’s desires and fantasies are [...] at the very centre of this narrative, which monsters notwithstanding, can be ranked in the tradition of the various theories of image culture, the simulacrum, spectacle society and the like” (276). Firstly, both novels involve lower class characters who appear to be

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series and while they seem to have been ignored, critics continue to praise the value of these contributions to the world of children’s fantasy literature.

forgotten or seen as useless by upper class characters, and in both novels, the plots include the oppression of working class people by the upper class or an outside threat and the upper class not showing an interest in that oppression until it threatens their own livelihoods. In the case of both characters, their natural abilities gain them the notice of the upper classes who in turn train them and to some extent exploit their abilities before each rejects that control in favor of his own individual path. The machine presented in both books is the social pressure to succumb to the wishes of the upper class in order to achieve a goal or to overcome some great evil. That machine also represents what Nicholson calls the “motif of the magical exit” often present in children’s literature, because for Taran, gaining a higher social rank allows him to leave behind hardship, and for Ged, developing his magical abilities to increase his power means he can escape the bullying and manipulations of the upper classes (12). The rebellion aspect for both of these novels becomes evident through the quests of both characters: Taran rebels against authority and class structures when he embraces and accepts his own identity while Ged’s rebellion focuses more on his refusal to follow established rules and his desire to always push the limits of his power even when it is to his detriment and his eventual understanding of responsibility to self. These aspects of rebellion against the proposed myths and expectations of class structures demonstrates how these two novels challenge the idea of the American Dream.

The idea of the American Dream permeates to the very depths of American society and offers the dream for social mobility, freedom, and achieving personal goals to everyone no matter their race, religion, creed, or class. As Jim Cullen points out, “the term seems like the most lofty as well as the most immediate component of an American identity, a birthright far more meaningful and compelling than terms like ‘democracy,’ ‘Constitution,’ or even ‘the United States’” (5). Cullen’s description of the Dream focuses on its “ambiguity [as] the very

source of its mythic power” and the “sense of agency, the idea that individuals have control over the course of their lives” (7; 10). These descriptions of the Dream vary from one individual to the next, allowing a range of possibilities to arise based on what the individual desires. Since both Alexander and Le Guin are American authors, it makes sense that the American Dream myth becomes a primary theme of their respective novels. For both Taran and Ged, they desire social mobility to raise their social status but for two very different reasons: Taran to marry the princess and Ged to gain more power and respect. However, their paths are similar in that they achieve those goals in later books while also learning and later understanding that hard work leads to success. This “rags to riches” theme, often referred to as the American Dream, presents the social mobility myth in the minds of young readers, and in doing so creates a false sense of how frequently social mobility actually occurs. Ideas of the knight-in-shining armor, the poor boy or girl turned prince or princess, the lower class character becoming the hero of the story all permeate fantasy literature whether for children or adults, and these ideas have become major aspects of fantasy literature. Each time a child hears or reads fairy tales like “Cinderella,” “Beauty and the Beast,” “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” “Aladdin,” and “Rumpelstiltskin” or chooses a fantasy children’s novel such as C.S. Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia*, J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books, and L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, the myth of the American Dream extends to the next generation of readers.

However, just how real are these expectations of social mobility and achieving the American Dream? And even more importantly, how can perpetuating that myth in the literature we hand to children create a false sense of possibility for them? With these concerns in mind, it becomes evident that by considering Lloyd Alexander’s *Taran Wanderer* and Ursula Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea* as radical subversive texts which address the myth of the American

Dream, young readers learn that access to the American Dream may not be as possible as the myth purports and that pursuing the Dream may not have the results they wish without sacrificing other ideals along the way. Additionally the period settings, the plot, and the use of the fantastic highlight the subversive radical nature of fantasy children's literature by rejecting industrial evolution and embracing communal work. The application of the Marxist lens to children's fantasy literature helps to not only identify its radical potential but also reveal issues inherent within American society such as class inequality and the manipulation of the lower classes by the upper classes through capitalism and the myth of the American Dream.

While the two novels' characters meet basic tenets of social mobility and the American Dream myth, they also subvert it by refusing to follow the more traditional routes to success and instead create and embrace their own identities within the social structure. By using the American Dream as a major theme of the novels, the novels also adapt it into something far more subversive and realistic when compared to the reality of social mobility as it appears in the Dream. As Brian Attebury points out in his assessment of fantasy's genre techniques and development, "an unexpected result of questioning realistic standards of narrative reliability is that fantasy can thereby cast doubt on the social realities that underlie those standards" and in that casting of doubt, fantasy can also shape the way that readers view their class status, especially in the case of children, and the role of the class mobility myth (39). In many cases, the children's fantasy novel centers on lower class characters who must face some great evil in the world, and once they have faced that evil, the upper classes reward them with titles, money, or marriage (sometimes all three) which, in turn, improves their social class. These novels often appear to support the ideas of popular society—work hard, do what is right, follow the rules and in return receive a reward—but appearances can be deceiving.

As already mentioned, many times critics discount the fantasy genre as a viable literature for critical review since it offers an escape from more realistic possibilities. Sanjay Sircar proposes that fantasy literature for children is “more universally enjoyable *across social spheres* than ordinary novels” which can lead to further dismissal of it (439), but this attitude of dismissal allows it to become subversive in its ideological messages, providing a range of ideas on class mobility especially when examining American children’s fantasy literature. Sircar’s idea on fantasy reaching across social spheres becomes an important observation because it supports how children’s fantasy literature does in fact appeal to a much wider audience to include lower, middle, and upper class child audiences as well as to some adult audiences. These novels provide children (and some adults) the chance to escape from reality but it also prompts them to question reality and entertain ideas of other potential realities. Thus it becomes an even easier vehicle to deliver propaganda and ideologies that can either challenge or support capitalistic ideas and the myth of social mobility.

By examining Lloyd Alexander’s *Taran Wanderer* and Ursula Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea* as radical subversive children’s literature and analyzing it through a Marxist lens, it becomes evident how the two novels challenge social mobility and the American Dream. They subtly offer one’s ability to reject the definitions of class and the constraints of a social class structure in favor of a more community based identity that also allows for individuality as an alternative to that myth. These two novels, despite being over fifty years old, still maintain their relevance in today’s society because they challenge children to examine the world around them, see the problems in the world, and not just dream of a solution but work toward addressing those problems. Just as importantly, they encourage children to be the heroes of their own story and to use their own experiences and observations to grow as an individual.

## Identity and Class

For both Taran and Ged, their quests to change their identities become examples of the class mobility proposed by the American Dream ideal. Their social class determines aspects of their identity, and both characters spend a majority of their respective novels fighting to improve their social class as a way to establish their own individuality and identity rather than embracing the identity thrust upon them by society. They seek to embrace more capitalistic values, believing that hard work would allow them to raise their social status and change their identity from assistant, apprentice, or student to that of royalty or master. For both characters, their exposure to the upper classes allows them to dream of class mobility, much like the class mobility proposed within the American Dream where those in the lowest classes can achieve a place in the upper classes through their own hard work. They demonstrate through their quests that it is within their power to “advance confidently in the direction of one’s dreams to live out an imagined life” and that “anything is possible if [one] wants[s] it badly enough” (Cullen 10;5). In seeking their identities, they begin to see and understand the class struggle more adeptly and to identify how lineage can dictate one’s status only if one allows that lineage to do so.

Because he is an orphan taken in by more powerful social classes, Taran becomes exposed to the benefits of those upper classes, though he has none of those privileges. From the beginning of *The Prydain Chronicles* until *Taran Wanderer*, Taran identifies only as an Assistant Pig-Keeper who constantly gets himself into precarious situations; he seeks out a different identity that does not tie him to his status as an orphan and pig-keeper. Though he asks the questions of his caretakers, no real knowledge exists of his life before he joined them at Caer Dallben, and Taran longs for that knowledge. For Taran, his lower class status defines his identity, causing his feelings of inadequacy when interacting with upper class characters and

preventing him from marrying Princess Eilonwy whom he loves. Any time he interacts with those of the upper class or who have any type of political power, his feelings of inadequacy become evident as he often second guesses his decisions only to find that his ideas are not only appropriate but the best for the situation. Thus, his quest to find his real parents becomes his chance to discover his identity and his true class status beyond what he has gained under the protection and care of the wizard Dallben and the warrior Coll. It also becomes a story of maturation as Taran learns to trust more in his own abilities because they distinguish him as a leader and someone that can help with solving problems while also learning from others.

With each act of loyalty and sacrifice, Taran proves that his identity centers more on his ability to lead and to serve others rather than on his class status. Each time Taran has the opportunity to save himself or to gain something for himself, he often rejects that opportunity in favor of saving or helping others even if it means that his well-being is at risk. He could easily refuse to assist Craddock when he finds him injured and dying or to help the Commot people when the raider Dorath attacks, yet each time he puts his own life at risk to save them. This willingness to sacrifice for others even when it means he himself may suffer demonstrates his potential as a leader, an idea that culminates in the final book of the series when the Commot people come to his call for aid in the fight against the Arawn. Taran's quest for identity culminates not at the Mirror of Llunet as he hopes but in Master Potter Annlaw's cottage where he finally admits that the Mirror has given him what he sought:

“I saw myself,” Taran answered. “In the time I watched, I saw strength—and frailty. Pride and vanity, courage and fear. Of wisdom, a little. Of folly, much. Of intentions, many good ones; but many more left undone. In this, alas, I saw myself a man like any other.

“But this, too, I saw [...] alike as men may seem, each is different as flakes of snow, no two the same. You told me you had no need to seek the Mirror, knowing you were Annlaw Clay-Shaper. Now I know who I am: myself and none other. I am Taran.” (216).

With this revelation, *Taran Wanderer* returns to the more didactic nature of children’s literature as Taran begins to describe the further lessons that he now comprehends though others have tried to relay those messages to him in the past. Taran finally understands that men are as “different as flakes of snow, no two the same” and that this idea also applies to him (216). He has spent so much of his quest attempting to be like others or to become what he believes others want him to be that he has actually lost sight of his individuality and his own goals. In his reflections, he now sees that his “parentage [...] makes little difference” and that “kinship has naught to do with blood ties” but instead people “are all kin, brothers and sisters one to the other, all children of all parents” (217). He also recognizes that “manhood is not given but earned” just as the folk of the Free Commots and King Smoit of Cantrev had tried to teach him (217). His final observations in Annlaw’s cottage reveal the depth of understanding that Taran has finally achieved:

“Llonio said life was a net for luck; to Hevydd the Smith life was a forge; and to Dwyvach the Weaver-Woman a loom. They spoke truly, for it is all of those. But you,” Taran said, his eyes meeting the potter’s, “you have shown me life is one thing more. It is clay to be shaped, as raw clay on a potter’s wheel.” (217)

Once he has learned these truths, he achieves his dream since he knows his identity is something that he can not only determine but that he completely controls.

While Lloyd Alexander describes Taran’s quest to find his identity since he does not know his lineage, Ursula Le Guin creates a character that has a connection with his family yet



wishes to not only leave that family but to also replace it with a different family and with power. In Ged's case, he is the youngest child of a bronze-smith's family. He is also at the mercy of his father since his mother "died before he was a year old" and his "six brothers were older than he by many years and went one by one" to become farmers, sailors, or smiths in other towns (*A Wizard of Earthsea 2*). Ged's identity is that of "smith's boy, at a high cost in blows and whippings" and once his aunt realizes he has magical abilities, he also becomes an apprentice of sorts for her (2). Because of the very basic magical education he receives from his aunt, Ged quickly realizes that his abilities offer him the opportunity to achieve "the glory and the riches and the great power over men that a sorcerer could gain" (8). Once his potential power becomes noticed by a more powerful wizard, Ogion the Mage, he begins to see those abilities as a way to improve his social status and change his identity to something more than apprentice in a small town.

In contrast to Taran's journey to discover identity and improve his social standing to feel worthy of companionship with the upper classes, Ged's journey for identity centers on his desire to become more powerful and to gain entrance into the higher classes as a result of that power. Much like Taran, Ged rejects the wisdom and training offered by the parental surrogates around him, particularly Ogion the Mage, and chooses instead to travel his own path. While Taran's decisions typically only affect himself and his traveling companion Gurgi, Ged's rejection of authority threatens the safety and well-being of the entire world of Earthsea because his search for identity and power results in the splitting of his identity and the perverting of his abilities.

Because Ged focuses on his search for power, he falls victim to his character flaws and demonstrates the consequences of not accepting responsibility for his actions. One of Ged's

character flaws is the jealousy that stems from his search for power and the other major character flaw is his constant suspicion of others. These flaws highlight his disregard for his own safety or the safety of others, demonstrating a more rebellious streak, a common stereotype for those in the capitalist system seeking to raise their social class especially when considering Karl Marx's assertion that the bourgeoisie consistently "pitilessly [tear] asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors,' and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'" (9). Both of these flaws result in the ongoing power struggle between him and Jasper, a struggle that culminates in the splitting of Ged's identity into a shadow version, one that only seeks to destroy, and a light version, one that seeks to help others and become a part of a greater community. Ged's insecurities about his social class make him an easy target for Jasper's demeaning comments, such as when Jasper refers to him as "sir." While the form of address could simply have been one of polite respect for a fellow student, "it seemed to Ged, a mountain villager who had never been among the sons of rich merchants and noblemen, that this fellow was scoffing at him with his 'service' and his 'Sir' and his bowing and scraping" (*A Wizard of Earthsea* 49-50). Since Jasper is of the upper class and from a well-known and prosperous area, Ged becomes more defensive and almost immediately dislikes his fellow student, jealousy toward Jasper's status as the major driving force behind this dislike and suspicion.

This initial interaction, whether ill-intended or not, between the two boys sets up an ongoing competition between them. Their jealousy, dislike, and suspicion for one another finally comes to a head in a forbidden match of magical power on Roke Knoll, and Jasper baiting Ged into a wizard challenge:

Presently, moving a little aside as if to be heard by Vetch alone, Jasper spoke, with his cool smile: "I think you'd better remind your goatherd friend again of the law that protects him. He looks sulky. I wonder, did he really think I'd accept a challenge from him? A fellow who smells of goats, a prentice who doesn't know the first change?"

"Jasper," said Ged, "what do you know of what I know?" (78)

Jasper's continued baiting of the younger Ged finally becomes a true test of wills which culminates in Ged dangerously summoning a dead spirit and "a clot of black shadow, quick and hideous" that attacks Ged and very nearly kills him had not Archmage Nemmerle sacrificed his own life to save him (84-87). It is not until his severe injury and the sacrifice of the Archmage that Ged finally begins to understand that in creating a more powerful identity, he must also accept responsibility for the consequences of his careless past actions and strive to correct the damage done. In accepting responsibility, he begins to understand how placing his desire for power, a more capitalistic value, over the welfare of the community, a more Marxist value, leads to the endangerment of all, including one's own identity and safety. Ged begins to see the effects of self-sacrifice for others as a way to become a part of the greater community because he appreciates the fear that his actions create in his fellow students. This then is yet another way that the weaknesses of the American Dream become evident and the more radical aspect of the novel comes to the forefront. Through Ged's experiences, power becomes something dangerous when wielded for the betterment of one but when wielded to benefit the whole, power can be benevolent and protective, granting equal protection and status to all.

The other aspect of identity and class that both Taran and Ged struggle to overcome is their actual parental backgrounds since that also determines their class identities and the amount of power they have over their class mobility. Additionally, this class identity and potential for

mobility dictates the type of community in which they not only belong and thus offers another piece of their individual identity and class status. Both of these characters are part of working class familial units that have great respect in their individual communities, but both dream of breaking away from the constraints that their current class places upon them while also valuing the lessons they learn from those familial units. Because they dream of improving their class and enjoying the benefits of a higher class, both view their parental figures as surrogates, and rather than accepting the class status of the surrogates, they work to improve that class status and reject the surrogates as part of the power struggle and search for identity (Trites 61). For Taran, he seeks out a different family or community than the one that has adopted him into its ranks, while Ged seeks out knowledge of self and the world that will help him overcome his shadow and his feelings of disconnectedness. Both characters understand that their community directly ties to their identity so that the community they choose or that accepts them must also reflect their individual values and value their natural talents.

As Taran seeks out his true lineage and family, the issues of identity and class become central to his quest since he seeks to meet his need to belong within a certain family or within a certain class structure. His need to belong often clouds his judgement in trusting others, and his naiveté often allows others who have more power or greater class status to exploit him, an issue inherent within the class system in the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Because he so desperately wants to know not only who his true parents are but also what community he may claim as part of his lineage, he becomes a victim of those who would use that desperation to manipulate him. His intense desire to find his true parents and identity allows the farmer, Craddock, to deceive him into thinking that he is Taran's true father and that he had given Taran as a babe to Dallben as an act of love to save Taran's life. Craddock's lie serves to humble

and embitter Taran, who has assumed from the beginnings that he must be the child of royalty, though he has no reason to believe that assumption; Taran's bitterness comes to a head when he rejects Gurgi calling him master, admitting bitterly that he is "no master [...] but a low-born churl" (*Taran Wanderer* 144). His great dreams of marrying Eilonwy become nothing more than dreams with his belief in his lower rank, even though he resists fully embracing this new identity as Craddock's son and a farmer. It is not until Craddock's death that the truth finally comes to light, that Craddock's true son had died with his mother on the day of his birth and that Craddock has "needed [Taran's] strength to keep what remained" of the farm and the sheep (155). Taran has the opportunity to abandon Craddock at this point of the novel, yet he remains by the man's side and fights to save his life even as Taran endangers his own. This simple act of loyalty to those in need, despite his desire to leave and embrace his new freedom, highlights a part of Taran's identity already evident throughout the earlier books and throughout much of *Taran Wanderer*. It also provides readers with insight into Taran's overall character and hints at the later revelations Taran receives at the Mirror of Llunet regarding his lineage and community. By demonstrating this loyalty despite the hardship and his own desires, Lloyd Alexander foreshadows the loyalty that Taran will earn in the Free Commots from the people and shows that class moves beyond traditional economic roles. Taran discovering his identity through his experience with community support and his freedom to choose his community demonstrates how identity and class become indicative of the community and its people, of how the lowest and highest classes come together to better the community through communal work rather than abusing the labor of the proletariat for the wealth and gains of the bourgeoisie.

Just as Taran struggles to find the truth of his identity, how that identity affects his class, and then claims a community as his own for family, Ged also must come to terms with

understanding how the lineage he rejects when he chooses magic over the blacksmith's forge places him within a community of mages but also places him outside of the community he so desires. Le Guin presents an interesting trope of the American Dream here because she shows the limbo state of the American Dream when one seeks to improve class status but instead fits into no social class; in rejecting one social class to improve class status, one rejects identity and often becomes rejected by that class. Yet by the same token, the desired class also rejects the social climber because that individual has not yet done enough or made enough to enter the new class. This tendency becomes evident through Ged because, by rejecting his lineage and embracing the world of magic, Ged believes that he raises his class status when in fact, he remains stagnant and experiences no real change in status because he remains an apprentice at the whim of a master. After rejecting his father's work and failing to find any real community within the magic school when his identity splits between light and dark, Ged spends his every effort in trying to overcome the shadow that he sees as a deadly enemy, even as he discovers and develops more of his own identity. This shadow he so fervently attempts to outrun is a constant reminder that, in that separation of light and dark, he has lost a piece of his real identity and that through losing that piece, he cannot be happy in any family or community nor can he have any shift in his lower class status until a reunion of light and dark occurs. As Ebony Thomas describes in *The Dark Fantastic*, "darkness must be destroyed, or there *is* no story," and Ged's story certainly focuses on the destruction of his darkness, though destroying his shadow is more about rejoining the split to form a complete identity (27). As part of his search for identity through family and community, Ged must first see his pride as a flaw before he can eventually understand that his *hubris* has brought him to his struggles and that in order to resolve his problems, he must also come to terms with that flaw.

Just as Taran faced the Mirror of Llunet to come to terms with his identity, Ged also has to face a reflection of himself by confronting and overcoming the shadow in a final battle. Using light to guide him, Ged finally finds the shadow in the closing pages of the book, and it is only then that he understands how his past has shaped his identity:

“At first it was shapeless, but as it drew nearer it took on the look of a man. An old man it seemed, grey and grim, coming towards Ged; but even as Ged saw his father the smith in that figure, he saw that it was not an old man but a young one. It was Jasper: Jasper’s insolent handsome young face, and silver-clasped grey cloak, and stiff stride. [...] It brightened, and in its light the look of Jasper fell from the figure that approached, and it became Pechvarry. [...] Ged saw in it for an instant Skiorh’s white face, and then a pair of clouded, staring eyes, and then suddenly a fearful face he did not know, man or monster, with writhing lips and eyes that were like pits going back into black emptiness. [...] Aloud and clearly, breaking that old silence, Ged spoke the shadow’s name and in the same moment the shadow spoke without lips or tongue, saying the same word: ‘Ged.’ And the two voices were one voice.” (250-51)

Once this joining of voices occurs, Ged finally takes “hold of his shadow, of the black self that reached out to him” and a “light and darkness met, and joined, and were one” after years of being parted (251). This joining reflects what Ebony Thomas describes as “the final step of the dark fantastic cycle [of] *emancipation*[, ... that moment] reached only when the Dark Other is liberated from spectacle, embodied hesitation, violence, and haunting” (28). Just as Taran used the potter’s cottage to reveal his new understanding of his identity, Ged uses Vetch’s boat as the site for his epiphanous moment, revealing to his friend: “The wound is healed. [...] I am whole, I am free” (253). However, the lessons he learns remain more private as the narrator reveals that

Ged began to see the truth, that Ged had neither lost nor won but, naming the shadow of his death with his own name, had made himself whole: a man: who, knowing his whole true self, cannot be used or possessed by any power other than himself, and whose life therefore is lived for life's sake and never in the service of ruin, or pain, or hatred, or dark. (253-54).

Ged's reunion of self, his shadow side and his light side, allows him to then assume the identity that he has desired so long. He can now embrace his abilities more fully by rejecting his *hubris* and hypersensitivity and by understanding that his power and his identity do not center on the opinions of others but instead on his own merits and beliefs. It also allows him to more fully embrace the community of mages and friends that he can claim as true family, another important aspect of his identity that does serve to complete his character.

These ideas on identity that allow for class mobility both reflect and challenge the myth of the American Dream because both Taran and Ged realize that it is in their power to achieve their ultimate dreams of belonging to a great community while also maintaining their own individuality and not becoming lost in the great mob. Both characters also demonstrate that birthright is unimportant to one's desire for success, even though the idea of social mobility is a major aspect of the American Dream birthright related to each new generation of Americans. While Cullen's assertion that "there is no one American Dream" is true, it is also true the American Dream often provides "a dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man" (7); that dream of success for all is not always achievable, asserting an ambiguity that encourages "those striving for, but unsure whether they will reach their goals" (7). *Taran Wanderer* rejects this part of the American Dream, choosing instead to stop striving for his goal of higher class status and identity in favor of embracing his individualism and the new



community he has found in his quest, while *A Wizard of Earthsea* records Ged striving for higher class status and identity by embracing his power and the community he has chosen. This power struggle and the search for identity lends itself to the more radical nature of children's fantasy literature. It recognizes that in order for one to become more than what the status quo demands, the individual must rebel against the social constraints imposed by the limiting class system and embrace his or her own place within the greater community, thereby also embracing his or her own individual identity.

### **Gender and Class**

In embracing individual identity, gender also becomes an important aspect of both identity and class status since the main characters of these novels are male, revealing patriarchal societies that mimic the era when written. When viewed using Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality of gender, race, and class, these two novels reveal how social identities both overlap and how "exploring the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence" toward those who society sees as other (1244). Both Lloyd Alexander and Ursula Le Guin take unique and radical stances when it comes to portraying this intersectionality of identities in the men and women in their two series: the main characters are male members of the proletariat and struggle to find their identity within their respective societies while the female characters are members of the bourgeoisie and struggle to grasp the lack of power they possess despite their higher class status. Alexander chooses to never reveal Taran's exact social class other than his lower class role as Assistant Pig-Keeper and his acceptance that social class does not truly matter but makes the upper class

Princess Eilonwy<sup>3</sup> both an object of desire and a heroine while Ursula Le Guin chooses to make Ged part of the proletariat but creates mainly upper class female characters who represent a forbidden temptation that draws attention away from goals.<sup>4</sup> In developing these characters, Alexander and Le Guin appeal to their readers since the characters represent different classes and different genders, and a reader usually chooses a book to which he or she can relate and see something of self within the characters, some character trait or some experience that he or she can claim. Malin Alkestrand and Christopher Owen describe this desire of self-reflection in the characters of a children's fantasy novel as the "mimetic dimension" that "relies on the assumption that characters are 'images of possible people'" (66). However, this often proves to be difficult with fantasy literature because, generally speaking, the main character is a male whose primary goal is to defeat some great evil, and, as a reward for his service, the hero marries the princess. If the hero typically is male, then that leaves the numerous female readers who enjoy fantasy with a major issue because it relegates them to either the position of side-kick or idealized princess who must be saved. However, even though the female does often become relegated to what seems a less important or more stereotypical role, that does not mean that these females do not have a significant role to play nor does it mean that authors cannot use the male and female genders in more subversive ways to examine the world and the effect gender has upon class status.

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<sup>3</sup> In *Taran Wanderer*, Taran's wish to marry Princess Eilonwy relegates her to the object of his desire because he wishes to be of equal class status to make the marriage possible. However, in previous books and in *The High King*, Eilonwy takes on a much more active role as a heroine in her own right, often rejecting the more traditional princess role in favor of fighting alongside Taran against great evil.

<sup>4</sup> The books following *A Wizard of Earthsea* include Tenar, a young woman who joins Ged both as an equal and as his partner. She takes on a much more substantial role as a heroine in the series after being "rescued" by Ged from the shadow religion in her home country.

The juxtaposition of the male and female characters in both of these series provides a contrast in gender treatment in most fantasy novels whether for child or adult audiences especially when considering the publication period of the series and gender of the two authors. Both Alexander and Le Guin published their respective series in the early 1960s through the early 1970s, a time when American society struggled with racial, gender, and class equality. While both authors appeared to follow the general traditions of children's fantasy—male hero who saves everyone from the great evil with magic—they actually performed a magician's sleight of hand and called attention to the major issues within both children and adult fantasy literature.

Through Taran, Alexander demonstrates that a person's gender and class do not dictate the path that individual must take. Taran's journey to find his parentage and to see himself as worthy of Eilonwy provides insight into the myth of the American Dream: often, people seeking that achievement have something they wish to prove to others and in the seeking, they become much like Dorothy, jaded and willing to hurt others in gaining the Dream. In Taran's character and quest, the idea of class mobility becomes a central idea that highlights the potential for rejecting class as a determining factor in one's social status as Taran realizes his class does not matter, he can marry Eilonwy if they both wish to marry, and he has both the ability and willingness to help others through his own experiences. As part of a traditionally patriarchal society, the would-be hero must be male to reveal this knowledge since such knowledge from a female would most likely be dismissed or overlooked.

However, Lloyd Alexander uses the women found in the books to demonstrate wisdom and guidance as well as to model their heroic potential. While Taran's counterpart Eilonwy only appears in brief mentions or in Taran's imaginings in *Taran Wanderer*, her impact on Taran

drives him to be worthy of her affections. Because Eilonwy's identity and class have already been determined, Alexander focuses more on Taran's journey. While this might appear to suggest the American Dream is more male-oriented, with Eilonwy not having a greater role, it instead demonstrates the need for one to have and work for a dream that is one's own rather than focusing solely on what others desire. All of the other four books in the series describe the adventures of Taran, Eilonwy, Gurgi, and the rest of their small band of friends, and in each subsequent novel, Eilonwy performs as heroically as the others, fighting alongside them as an equal. Eilonwy's headstrong nature and refusal to be treated as a weak princess, despite the absence of her character in *Taran Wanderer*, still permeate the book as it is her strength of character and heroism that drives Taran to discover his own parentage to be worthy of her. Each time someone mentions the princess to Taran, her effect upon both his quest and himself becomes evident. At the beginning of his journey, Dallben mentions Eilonwy's well-being as a way to reassure Taran. Then when the witches suggest he trade his memories of Eilonwy for knowledge of his lineage, Taran balks and refuses to relinquish those, demonstrating the value that he places upon his friendship and love for the young woman. Even in her absence, each of Taran's reflections on the Princess Eilonwy reminds readers that gender should not dictate roles or class, and that often a character's absence remains just as powerful as her presence, especially when it encourages the growth of others.

Alexander also spotlights other female characters in the novel with more questionable class roles and class mobility such as the witches Orddu, Orwen, and Orgoch<sup>5</sup> who serve as

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<sup>5</sup> Because Alexander bases much of his *Prydain Chronicles* on the Celtic legends found in *The Mabinogion*, the three witches are an archetype of the witches often found in different mythologies: "the Three Norns, the Moirae, the Triple Goddess, and very likely some other transformations they decline to admit [...]; even the three witches from *Macbeth* are related" (Tunnell 205).

traders of knowledge and seers of the future and Dwyvach Weaver-Woman who serves as a teacher and guide. The three witches always appear in the novels to offer vague wisdom and riddles that first confuse Taran but then eventually show their truth by the close of the story. At the beginning of *Taran Wanderer*, Taran seeks them out believing they will offer a quick and easy answer to his question, but when he insists that he desires the truth, the women evasively reply: “[...] for the finding of that, nothing is harder [because] there are those who have spent lifetimes at it, and many in worse plight than you” (14). In conversation, the women offer him a different challenge and in doing so provide insight into what the quest for his parentage actually holds as they reflect on his past deeds:

“There are heroes and heroes. I don’t deny he’s acted bravely on occasion. He’s fought beside Lord Gwydion and been proud of himself as a chick wearing eagle’s feathers. But that’s only one kind of bravery. Has the darling robin ever scratched for his own worms? That’s bravery of another sort. And between the two, dear Orwen, he might find the latter shows the greater courage.” (14)

By the close of the novel, Taran finds the truth of the witches’ words after the hardship he endures at Dorath’s hands and at Craddoc’s farm because he learns to defend that which he most values and to work with his own hands rather than dreaming of a title or a status that he does not have. For these particular characters, Alexander follows the more typical female witch stereotype with their ability to shift shapes and to change their forms from that of hags to beautiful women. By including these three, he connects his story to older mythologies and archetypes, giving the three greater power over the characters and their actions by speaking wisdom through riddles. The witches remain outside of the class system in Alexander’s novel, yet the characters regard them with the same reverence (and distrust in some cases) they have for the upper classes since

the witches offer insight for a price. Their hag to beauty potential demonstrates how the upper classes treat the lower classes, sometimes only concerned with how the lower classes can benefit them while other times only concerned with how they can assist the lower classes. Regardless, the witches represent the tendency of the upper class to think primarily of their own needs and what they may receive from their bargains. Because the witches have a higher class status due to their wisdom and magical abilities, Alexander demonstrates that gender should not and does not determine class; instead it is what one decides to do with the power one has that determines one's class status and role in society.

In what appears to be a male dominated world at first glance, Dwyvach Weaver-Woman also serves as a reminder of the role of females in the trades especially considering she is a master of her work and generously teaches her skill to those who wish to learn. Taran describes the work he does at her weaving loom to be just as difficult as the work he does at Hevydd the Smith's forge, demonstrating that Taran understands how the work each member of a community does contributes to the overall class structure and can be equally difficult because of the range of skills used. However, it is upon leaving Dwyvach's loom that Orddu's words about the robin and the worms finally makes sense. The weaver's lessons of patience and wise choices help Taran to understand the role that both men and women play within the workings of the world, and it also opens his eyes to the effect his own choices have upon others and himself as a pattern "not so easily unraveled" (*Taran Wanderer* 188). By blending and blurring the gender roles within *Taran Wanderer* and the rest of *The Prydain Chronicles*, Lloyd Alexander subverts the stereotypes of men's work and women's work such as the men working in the trades and outside of the home while women remain within the home as a caretaker for the home and those in it as

well as demonstrating that anyone no matter their gender has an important role to play within the workings of society.

Ursula Le Guin adds to this argument but does so in a very different way by providing a much starker contrast between the genders in her novel: focusing on the patriarchal system and reducing women to the role of seductress. Throughout *A Wizard of Earthsea*, a patriarchal society decrees everything from who can attend magic school to who may hold power in government. This clear distinction begins early in the novel when Le Guin describes education Ged receives from his aunt versus the education he receives from Ogion. Under the tutelage of his aunt, Ged learns the very basics of magic and he quickly learns that she is “an ignorant woman among ignorant folk [who] often used her crafts to foolish and dubious ends [because] she knew nothing of the Balance and the Pattern which the true wizard knows and serves” (*A Wizard of Earthsea* 7). He also discovers that she uses him for her own benefit, having no real use for him until she finds he can use magic and that she can mold him into what she desires. The aunt represents the master who promotes the idea of the child as a slave in a capitalist society who must follow the laws and purposes of those in power. She also represents the master who sees the apprentice as a means to gain more power and to raise her own class status with little to no regard for how that may affect the child. On the other hand, the male wizard, Ogion, takes a very different stance. In contrast to the aunt, he offers Dunny the chance to break the bonds of slavery and to embrace his own identity: first he gives Dunny “his true name, Ged” before allowing him to become his apprentice and learn from a true wizard (19). Thus Le Guin presents a system early in the novel where a patriarchal society reigns supreme with women being weaker and less educated, only wanting to use men with power to their own benefit. The patriarchy sets men in places of power, rejecting the woman’s ability to have equal power or

ability and reducing them to two choices, a role as wife or a role as a hedgewitch. With either choice, the woman's power comes into questions since as a wife, she becomes subject to her husband's demands even when fulfilling the role of seductress, and as a hedge witch, she becomes subject to her client's demands for spells or potions for everyday needs despite the amount of power she may actually wield. The patriarchy denies her the ability for education no matter her role and reduces her to meeting her needs through manipulations and disregard for others.

This contrast continues when Le Guin introduces two other female characters in the novel: the Lady of O and Serret. With these two upper class characters, Ursula Le Guin directly demonstrates the seductress archetype present in fantasy literature as well as the dangers such an archetype presents for the novel's hero. In the case of the Lady of O, she attends the Winter Festival with the Lord of O, and her presence meets with stark disapproval from the older wizards and great appreciation from the young wizards:

“his lady, slender and young, bright as new copper, her black hair crowned with opals. It was seldom that any woman sat in the halls of the Great House, and some of the old Masters looked at her sidelong, disapproving. But the young men looked at her with all their eyes” (68)

It is here that the danger of women as seductresses, especially if they are of the upper classes, appears in the novel as Ged remarks that “she's only a woman” to which a much wiser Vetch warns with a legend: “The Princess Elfarran was only a woman and for her sake all Enlad was laid waste, and the Hero-Mage of Havnor died, and the island Solea sank beneath the sea” (69). This particular scene also helps to explain and foreshadow the problems Ged also has with another female, Serret.



Serret appears early in the novel as a young girl of the upper class, the daughter of the old Lord of Re Albi, who tempts Ged into using dangerous magic (the same magic that eventually causes the splitting of his being into the shadow), and only Ogion's quick reaction and thinking saves him at that point. She relies upon her class status and her beauty to control others and convince them to do her will; however, she is also a victim of her mother's desire for greater power and status since she uses Ged to gain information and power. Even this early in the novel, Le Guin introduces the interplay of the genders and develops the idea of male versus female and the manipulations of the female toward the male. She reappears later in the novel, as a very attractive young woman, married to the Lord of the Terrenon, who uses Ged's desire for power and his desire to capture the Shadow as a temptation into using his powers for great evil. However, she fails in this pursuit and it is only Ged's desire to protect her that saves her from her husband's anger:

“I told you,’ the Lord of the Terrenon said dry-voiced to his lady, ‘that he would slip from your hands Serret. They are clever fools, your Gontish sorcerers. And you are a fool too, woman of Gont, thinking to trick both him and me, and rule us both by your beauty, and use the Terrenon to your own ends. But I am the Lord of the Stone, I, and this I do to the disloyal wife’ [...] and Bendersk’s long hands were raised to shape the cowering woman into some hideous thing, swine or dog or driveling hag.” (166-67)

Le Guin consistently presents her female characters as weaker, dependent upon the patriarchal society that always thwarts the woman's plans for independence or increase in power. Serret becomes the best example of this since she does appear twice in the novel; her manipulative tendencies never change in the novel other than the brief moment when she seeks to help Ged

because he saves her from her husband's wrath and even in that moment she seeks to save herself before him.

Even though Le Guin portrays her female characters in such a light, this portrayal also offers a sense of radical subversion because in the female characters' weaknesses, the author exposes the weaknesses inherent in the patriarchal society. As a known feminist, Le Guin's choice to create a patriarchy with male protagonists allows her to highlight several issues within 1960s social structure that led to the second-wave feminist movement in American society. By developing seemingly weak female characters so easily dismissed by their male counterparts, she highlights the lack of equal rights, opportunities, and personal freedoms enjoyed by women of the era and encourages her audience to be just as bothered by the lack of respect shown for women as the lack of heroes of color in fantasy. She subtly demonstrates the failure of the men to see women as true challenges to their power except in the case of Ogion who recognizes early in the novel that Serret and her mother both do not serve "the power [he] serve[s]: [he] does not know her will, but [he] know[s] she does not will [him] well" (31). Ogion understands the range of power and its dangers present in the world and attempts to warn Ged of those dangers, but Ged instead ignores those early lessons in search of greater power. By developing this clash of the genders and allowing the patriarchal society to dismiss the true power and potential of women, Le Guin promotes a more radical view of social mobility and status in which one group believes they wield greater power over another gender than they do in reality by demonstrating the manipulations the females use with the men and the power and status they gain as a result of those manipulations.

Within both novels, the contrast of the male and female characters provides additional insight for the class struggle by demonstrating that the characters all have the same potential but

instead have become victims of a socially constructed bias that creates a male versus female world and one gender as stronger or weaker based upon both gender and social status. Because society focuses on exercises of power and control over others especially in the political and economic realm to establish dominance, a system of competition between same gender and opposite gender not only develops but also encourages division and mistrust between the genders. Rosemary Jackson's assertion that "a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by, its social context [... and despite its] struggle against the limits of this context [...] it cannot be understood in isolation from it" provides additional insight into the radical subversive nature of children's fantasy literature because even as one gender develops as the superior class in a novel the other gender behaves as a foil, highlighting the social context and its struggle against the social norms (3). In creating this sense of competition, both Taran and Ged must confront socially manufactured gender inequalities and gender bias that results from those inequalities as a personal and societal conflict, and the two characters struggle throughout their respective storylines to come to terms with those inequalities and bias as they learn more about themselves and their society itself. Through exposing the gender inequalities, Alexander and Le Guin describe how those inequalities also relate to the class power struggle. If a patriarchal society views the women as powerless and denies them any real power within the class system, the lower class, in this case the women, will eventually learn ways to manipulate the social classes and power structure in exchange for equality and power at least in some form. Essentially, Alexander and Le Guin present the idea that gender inequality is less about any imbalance of power between the genders but more about the perception of inequality and the system of tradition and belief regarding such inequality within that society as perpetuated through the class system bias. In essence, these two characters and their female counterparts

become radical subversives simply in their character development and in their juxtaposition in the text by highlighting how subversive techniques like manipulation or even more obvious techniques like rebellion against traditional social roles serve to begin equalizing gender roles and class status.

### **Race and Class**

Rebellion against social roles regarding gender also intersects with issues involving racial inequalities and prejudice, an issue frequently seen in fantasy novels as the different races and cultures meet in epic battles for domination of their world. In most high fantasy, a range of races and cultures abounds from dwarves, elves, fairies, humans, demons, dragons, trolls, and orcs. For each of these different races and cultures, there are numerous sub-cultures and traditions such as in the case of the elves: typically high elves remain aloof in their intellectual pursuits, wood elves often interact with humans and engage with nature, dark elves usually engage in dark magic and take on more evil aspects<sup>6</sup>. However, in the fantasy genre, these different races and cultures often take sides either against or with some great evil creating a greater divide between race and class. This struggle between the races compares with the struggle of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie as each strive to either gain or maintain wealth, power, and equality. In translating these ideas to children's fantasy literature, the race and class elements of the myth of the American Dream become radical subversive features that "highlight child and adolescent characters' participation in abolishing existing power structures and building new networks of social relationships in communities marked by alienation and distrust" ("Reading About Solidarity" 145). One aspect of the American Dream is the desire to break social class barriers

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<sup>6</sup> These are generic descriptions that appear most commonly in fantasy novels. However, depending on the author, these descriptions may vary greatly.

and to encourage all people to pursue their ultimate dreams, and as Cullen asserts, “the American Dream is closely bound up with freedom” in a variety of contexts especially when it centers on the potential for social mobility and overcoming racial barriers offered in the basic concepts of the American Dream (9). By abolishing those power structures and building a new sense of community, these novels challenge the social roles described in Marxist theory as proletariat and bourgeoisie reverse, challenging the power structure, and the myth of the American Dream becomes more evident as a possibility in American society if humankind is willing to overcome past prejudices and views.

As such, the proletariat often becomes the “dark fantastic,” the lower classes marginalized for their race as described by Ebony Thomas, and the bourgeoisie becomes the traditional, the upper classes who do the marginalizing of the lower classes and who prosper as a result. By establishing this juxtaposition, race becomes not only a radical aspect of the fantasy novel, but its presence also encourages the reader to examine both the light and dark aspects of the literature, considering both of these aspects as viable and worthwhile elements of the class struggle. As Ebony Thomas discusses in her book, “stereotyping, caricature, and marginalization of people of color, poor and working-class children and families, gender and sexual minorities, immigrants, and other minoritized groups have been persistent problems in children’s literature” and “Cooperative Children’s Book Center’s annual reports show a troubling trend of books that feature diverse characters not being written by authors from that background leading to questions about how has the right to tell diverse stories” which further complicates the race issues found within fantasy especially during the earlier periods from the 1900s to the 1980s (5). Thomas also makes certain to highlight that “the fantastic has need of darkness, for these innocent ‘stories about stories’ require both heroes *and* villains, fair princesses *and* evil crones, valiant steeds *and*

nightmarish beasts” (24). Without these different opposing forces, the “binary oppositions of self and other, of the good and the evil, and of achievement for the good self through the negation of the bad other” cannot take place, and within children’s fantasy literature, the use of common racial differences like elf versus orc, human versus demon, or dwarf versus troll helps to create that segregation of light and dark (Gooderham 181). This dichotomy then lends itself to examining the way the different races interact within *Taran Wanderer* and *A Wizard of Earthsea* and the message this contrast provides for younger readers.

While both *Taran Wanderer* and *A Wizard of Earthsea* do lack many of the more fantastic creatures found in the more classic children’s fantasy literature such as orcs and trolls, enough of the other fantastic creatures appear to remind readers of the fantastic nature of the world and work. However, with the exception of Le Guin’s novel, a majority of early fantasy literature focuses more on a white hero overcoming the great evil rather than having a more balanced racial representation of humans. This tendency to feature a white hero tends to be a common occurrence among children’s fantasy novels during this period,<sup>7</sup> and several different ideas can explain this commonality: the novel’s author, consumerism, and the American Dream. In many cases, authors of early fantasy were from Europe, particularly Great Britain in the case of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis,<sup>8</sup> and the tropes of fantasy gradually spread to the United States with the rise of Tolkien’s and Lewis’ popularity. Generally speaking, most of these early authors were white, and in their writings, they reflected their own race in the heroic function.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Refer to the Pevensies of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Aragorn of *The Lord of the Rings*, and Will Stanton of *The Dark is Rising*.

<sup>8</sup> Both Tolkien and Lewis have been credited with helping to shape high fantasy and their fantasy works and talks on such works have provided many aspiring fantasy authors with general guidance on shaping fantasy worlds and established a generally accepted range of fantastic races. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* appeared in 1937 and his *The Lord of the Rings* appeared between 1954-1955; C.S. Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia* appeared between 1950-1956.

<sup>9</sup> This is not to say, however, that Tolkien and Lewis are the only fantasy authors of note; American author L. Frank Baum had success with *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and subsequent novels in that series, but generally speaking,

Consumerism also helped to determine the race of main human characters in American fantasy since typically the primary consumer for early children's fantasy tended to be white middle-class children; these early novels also became part of a series of novels, which meant that the family would need to continue purchasing the subsequent novels for their children to read. If the main consumer is a white middle-class child, then the author of the novel in appealing to the main market would create a main character that reflected the main audience. However, it still remains that even in targeting the main audience, often the authors would include a variety of races or at times create a hero of a different race to create a new story that targets a less recognized or prominent audience. By including fantasy creatures in a world controlled primarily by humans, both Lloyd Alexander and Ursula Le Guin establish a racial hierarchy between the realistic and fantastic, developing the idea that human beings control everything while the fantasy beings are of a lesser class or segregated even though the different races often work together.

The races present within *Taran Wanderer* remain quite simple: Taran appears as a generic human boy and most artwork depicts him as white, Gurgi is a dark hairy creature of unknown origin, Doli is a dwarf of the Fair Folk, the three witches are of unknown race but appear mostly human, and Fflewddur Fflam, Dorath, Morda, and other major characters are humans as well. Any further breakdown of race within the humans does not occur in this novel, and in most cases, Alexander offers no real description of exactly what the human races are but implies through hair and eye color that they are mostly white. Within *Taran Wanderer* especially, race does not determine class as it does in other fantasy works other than in the case of Gurgi who frequently becomes the target of prejudice since he cannot be classified as any particular race and that earns him the disrespect and mistrust of many, especially earlier in *The*

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fantasy novels had not yet achieved the greater levels of popularity and most publications tended toward realism during the early 1900s through the 1950s until the rise of Tolkien and Lewis.

*Prydain Chronicles*. Gurgi becomes the Dark Other within the novel, and Nancy Lou Patterson describes him in her article as “a monster, of a species well known in literature and folklore [, ...] an ambivalent being, half animal and half human, half enemy and half friend” (25). Patterson also discusses the racism toward Gurgi when she describes the dismissive attitude some of the characters have for Gurgi’s more simplistic behaviors, likening it to “the ambivalence of the treatment accorded these [people of color]” and the dependence Gurgi has upon Taran who he identifies as master (26). When the monstrous Gurgi first discovers Taran’s proposed journey, Lloyd Alexander describes it as

Before he could finish the door burst open and a shaggy figure sped across the chamber and flung itself at Taran’s feet. “No, no, no!” howled Gurgi at the top of his voice, rocking back and forth and waving his hairy arms. “Sharp-eared Gurgi hears all! Oh, yes, with listenings behind the door!” His face wrinkled in misery and he shook his matted head so violently he nearly sprawled flat on the floor. ‘Poor Gugi will be lone and lorn with whinings and pinings!’ he moaned. ‘Oh, he must go with master, yes, yes!’”(7)

However, though Gurgi identifies throughout the novel (and the other novels of the series) as Taran’s servant, Taran identifies their relationship not as master and servant but as two friends. He constantly worries over Gurgi’s well-being, often seeking to protect him and seeing him as an equal, not as an inferior being, an idea that promotes equal class status regardless of what society may dictate. Granted, earlier in the series, Gurgi does tend to take a more servile role, but by *Taran Wanderer*, he has become part of the familial unit at Caer Dallben.

Gurgi also often serves as a foil for Taran because he focuses on the more basic needs they have rather than the more idealized values that constantly pull Taran into dangerous situations. Alexander prompts readers then with the radical idea that appearance and race should



not offer a barrier for relationships nor should it determine one's class status but instead that the differences should strengthen the friendships and inspire loyalty between them. This philosophy appears in his speech "Future Conditional" when he challenges individuals to consider the following:

"Is the human role merely that of docile consumer of packaged goods and packaged ideas? Shall we see ourselves only as overgrown infants, obedient to self-appointed guardians of our virtue, with no questions asked? We already have too many examples, past and present, of human beings perceived as nothing more than bodies to be kept voiceless, prisoned, tormented, or made to disappear altogether.

Do we see ourselves as angels or devils, builders or destroyers, or simultaneously all of the above? We are clever enough to find ways we can all die together. Are we also wise enough to find ways we can all live together?" (165)

Alexander's series of rhetorical questions here challenges readers to consider their role in breaking racial barriers and in revamping the class system to develop equality no matter one's race or class. As Ebony Thomas points out, "the fantastic has need of darkness [because these stories] require both heroes *and* villains, fair princesses *and* evil crones, valiant steeds *and* nightmarish beasts" because this balancing of the light and the dark reminds readers that both elements exist within humankind and that "darkness lingers just beyond the turn of a page, the flicker of a frame, or the click of a thumb" (24-25). Thomas's comments echo those of Alexander as both highlight the idea that all ideas and all individuals have a purpose and a value within society regardless of whether others believe in those ideas. For Alexander and Thomas, they see the value in questioning society's edicts, in valuing all people, and in embracing the ideas of others because it creates a balance in the world and refuses to allow one group to have

more control or say than another. In Gurgi's case, he serves as both the nightmarish beast because of how he looks but he also serves as the hero's friend and foil, demonstrating that how the Dark Other may be a part of both the light and dark based on the viewer. By encouraging young readers to see the humanity in Gurgi rather than his differences, in challenging them to identify with the friendship that forms between Gurgi and Taran, and in creating a story that celebrates that friendship, Lloyd Alexander illustrates how racial barriers can be overcome and destroyed and how the Dark Other that may appear as a threat may actually be a valuable connection to one's own identity.

Ursula Le Guin provides a much more direct challenge to the status quo of fantasy by creating a main character who does not fit into the white human fantasy character who saves the world from great evil<sup>10</sup>. Instead, she creates a world that centers on people of color and places the three main characters—Ged, Jasper, and Vetch—at the center of the action. She describes the three young men when they first meet at the school in a communal food scene:

“Jasper took Ged to sit with a heavysset fellow called Vetch, who said nothing much but shoveled in his food with a will. He had the accent of the East Reach, and was very dark of skin, not red-brown like Ged and Jasper and most folk of the Archipelago, but black-brown. He was plain, and his manners were not polished.” (52)

Le Guin describes this choice of main characters in an afterword for *A Wizard of Earthsea* when she says that her choice “was bucking the racist traditions” even though “a great many white

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<sup>10</sup> Many of the heroes of fantasy are white males, and Le Guin's choice to have a character of color as her protagonist in a children's fantasy novel is controversial. In recent years, the myth of a white Middle Ages has become a topic of debate among medievalist scholars as white supremacists have laid claim to the theory of a white Middle Ages. In his article “Race-ing the Dragon: the Middle Ages, Race and Trippin' into the Future,” Cord Whitaker discusses how “at the turn of the twenty-first century, medievalist scholars struggled with whether race matters to the Middle Ages” and argues that “denying blacks medieval coevalness allows Euro-centric cultures to relegate modern blacks to a *strictly* modern status in which their history appears to be without the authorizing length and depth available to whites” (6-7).

readers in 1967 were not ready to accept a brown-skinned hero” nor were they expecting one (264). In contrast to the main characters being people of color, many of the side conflicts occur at the hands of people with lighter skin such as the Kargs, “a savage people, white-skinned, yellow-haired, and fierce,” or Serret, “a tall girl of about his own age, very sallow, almost white-skinned” (9; 27). Both the Kargs and Serret threaten Ged’s freedom, safety, and identity, calling forth the ideas of colonialism and forced servitude that often came as a result. Le Guin tells a different more radicalized version of the colonial story, however, as she shows Ged fighting back against his potential oppressors and thwarting their attempts at controlling him. The typical colonial story generally shows the native population of an area failing to win the fight against the colonizers, but Ged’s magical abilities allow him to subvert the attack on his village and Serret’s manipulations while also protecting those who would fall to the colonizers. By presenting this retelling of the colonial story with a very different outcome, Le Guin does manage to defy those racist traditions that she addresses in her afterword.

In developing a bourgeoisie versus proletariat conflict through racial inequality, the use of the dragon as the bourgeoisie and humankind as the proletariat becomes evident in the conversation between Yevaud and Ged. Le Guin presents the dragons as symbols of both destruction and wisdom as well as developing them as foils for humans. Through the interaction between the dragon Yevaud and the wizard Ged, the weaknesses of humankind become evident, primarily the weakness of greed. Ged seeks assurance that Yevaud and the remainder of the dragon brood will leave the island and people of Pendor in peace, reflecting the more traditional conflict between the dragon and human races—dragons covet treasure and must eat, humans have treasure and are prey. The conflict between the dragons and humans is two-fold because it is one both of race and of class struggle. The dragons have more power than human beings for a

variety of reasons—age, size, and natural abilities like flight and breathing fire—which correlates the dragons with the bourgeoisie since they maintain a more ruling class status that has little regard for the proletariat and the hardships they suffer. Also, as Susan Hepler reminds us, dragons “represent chaos and disorder and wherever they are present evil results,” and because of that chaos, disorder, and evil, “humans must conquer the dragon by facing the mighty power with their own poor talents, which, nonetheless, prove to be enough” (224). Through the interactions of Ged and the dragon Yevaud, Le Guin provides an additional conflict between the races, the seeking of wisdom and the lengths humans will go to obtain that wisdom. The conflict never fully resolves itself mainly because Yevaud demonstrates his willingness to save his race by offering a trade of wisdom rather than of a potential food source; however, Ged’s education and wisdom has provided him with more power than Yevaud realizes and does allow him to gain the information he needs from Yevaud. In effect, Ged does “conquer the dragon” with his “own poor talents,” but he also proves Yevaud correct that he will go to extremes to gain wisdom. In developing this racial conflict, Le Guin highlights the role of education and power in creating the racial divide and the jealousies that arise from that division. Instead Le Guin suggests a balancing of the races through compromise and trade of knowledge that will empower both sides rather than creating greater inequality. She does not go as far as Alexander in an expectation of friendship, but she does identify the need for mutual understanding and tolerance.

In considering the ideas both Alexander and Le Guin present around race and class, a common theme of understanding and equality becomes a major radical element of their novels especially when examining the historical periods during which both published these novels. S.C. Fredericks proposes that true radical fantasy “should make us sensitive to the bad beliefs that we already have and open to new, better ones” so that readers, whether children or adults, will begin

to challenge the bad beliefs and create new ideas and beliefs that will better overall society (40). In essence, Alexander and Le Guin indirectly challenged the racial conflicts that they witnessed within American society during the 1960s and 1970s by either creating friendships between the hero and the Dark Other or by establishing a person of color as the hero of the novel despite whether the fantasy literary world was ready. While a majority of Americans dreamed of achieving the Dream, racial discrimination and inequality remained a major issue within American society and created challenges for many people of color in achieving said Dream, another aspect that helped to determine race and race distribution in early children's fantasy novels. This challenge then becomes a subversive element that dares readers to take action regarding their views on racial inequality while also challenging the myth of the American Dream as not just an idea for middle-class America and particularly white society but instead as a Dream for any citizen to achieve.

### **Education and Class**

Another aspect of the American Dream is the idea that education is a necessary piece of achieving upward class mobility, and in more recent times, that education includes a more traditional primary and secondary school as well as some type of degree after the secondary program. As a result, education is often a multi-faceted key component of children's literature, frequently relying on a long history of didactic writings to bring information to younger readers. In this sense, education becomes a very broad term that can apply to education systems featured in the books themselves or the lessons that these books purport to teach. Children's fantasy literature in particular seems to rely very heavily on this didacticism and, in many cases, on the

school motif to deliver its overall ideologies<sup>11</sup>. In such novels, education becomes an exertion of power over the student that forces the student into a more submissive role until the controller judges the student's accomplishment of predetermined goals. Marxist theorist Louis Althusser provides the following assessment of the education system: "the school [...] teaches 'know-how', but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* or the mastery of its 'practice'" (1287). He further claims that even beyond the 'know-how' schools also demand that "children at school also learn the 'rules' of good behavior, i.e. the attitude that should be observed for every agent in the division of labour" (1287). He breaks these rules down into categories that encompass "morality, civic and professional conscience, which actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination" (1287). In considering Althusser's assertions, the didactic nature of children's literature and the appearance of education systems like schools, churches, or military bodies become suspect in their purpose because it is yet another example of the upper classes (adults) controlling the thoughts and ideals of the lower classes (children) by instilling a certain ideology (the American Dream).

In both *Taran Wanderer* and *A Wizard of Earthsea*, using education as a way to instill ideological systems and to demonstrate a delineated class system is clearly present both in the education systems described in the novel as well as in their didactic natures. *Taran Wanderer* is far more explicitly didactic, but this characteristic is present through the entirety of *The Prydain Chronicles* series and often appears more frequently at the closing of the novels in the words of a

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<sup>11</sup> Early children's books such as *The Pretty Little Pocketbook* and *The Happy Family* and various fables and fairy tales such as "Hansel and Gretel" and "Pinnochio" became well-known for their didactic nature, and that tendency continues into more recent children's books such as *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Charlotte's Web*, and *Red Ridin' in the Hood: and Other Cuentos*. Scholars such as Perry Nodelman, James Fraser, and Jean Shaw all address this trend of didacticism within their various articles.

particular character such as Annlaw in *Taran Wanderer*, such as when he expresses ideas like “Stale water is a poor drink. Stale skill is worse. And the man who walks in his own footsteps only ends where he began” to encourage Taran to look at a wider range of how to learn new things, relying not only on one’s own discoveries but also embracing the wisdom and education received from others (197). These instructional moments for Taran become an informal education from the masters of a particular trade rather than the more formal education as described in Le Guin’s novel. *A Wizard of Earthsea* does feature some didacticism, but it is far more subtle and does not come often in the words of the characters; instead, it comes through omniscient narrator observations about the characters, as if the narrator serves as the school described by Althusser.

Another Marxist theorist, Terry Eagleton, takes Althusser’s ideas regarding education a step further by examining the literature as an additional piece of the control exerted over the working classes. Eagleton presents the literature itself as way to “communicate to [the masses] the moral riches of bourgeois civilization, impress upon them a reverence for middle-class achievements, and, since reading is an essentially solitary, contemplative activity, curb in them any disruptive tendency to collective political action” (2017). Eagleton’s idea that literature is an “ideological enterprise” that could reach a wider audience and provide “a kind of vicarious self-fulfillment” for those of the lower class becomes another extension of control over the worker and a promotion of the bourgeoisie’s superior class status (2017-18). In other words, these works of children’s literature have the potential to have two effects, depending on how the audience decides to interpret them. They can either serve to indoctrinate children into the myth of the American Dream and the capitalist state as Althusser and Eagleton suggest, or they can convey a more radical underlying message that encourages readers to challenge that myth and view social

mobility as raising the status of others as one raises one's own class status. Because both books are part of a larger series, they reinforce middle and upper class values by promoting the purchase of another book or books for children to read the entire story, developing a greater divide between the lower and middle/upper classes. However, for those readers who choose to see the didactic tendencies of the two texts, the more radical underlying message that addresses the American Dream myth as a way for capitalist society to appease the lower classes and the need for the upper and lower classes to move beyond class barriers to see all people as valuable contributors to society becomes more important than the more capitalistic push to see the literature as a commodity that provides greater wealth for big business.

A closer examination of the education system in these novels suggests that the systems present do serve more radical ideas because there are no concrete capitalist ideological themes at play; instead, the idea of community and the well-being of all takes precedence while those who seek only to serve themselves or destroy the community suffer greatly. While both characters do gain power through their newfound knowledge of self and community, they do not gain that power through capitalist means. Instead they must rely on the community around them and the help of others to achieve their new knowledge. Those individuals such as Dorath or Jasper who seek to use their power to take by force what they desire from the community or who belittle the weak become representations of how individuals exploit the capitalist society, and because they do not succeed in their exploitations and abuses expose the weaknesses inherent in such practices. Such characters provide one aspect of Taran and Ged's education in the workings of society and social class structures, highlighting the ways that education can mold and shape individuals based on individual values and individual choice on using that education.



By denying education and opportunity to the lower classes, the upper classes prevent social mobility and promote a more feudal system where one may never raise his or her social status, forcing a stagnation in the class system and promoting unrest and distrust in the lower classes. In *Taran Wanderer*, the characters of Arawn Death-Lord, Lord Goryon, Lord Gast, and Dorath become those who only desire to serve themselves and cause destruction to the greater community through their actions. Arawn Death-Lord's control over Prydain has "choke[d] the life from Prydain" and "blight[ed] the land" because he stole "plows that worked of themselves, scythes that reaped without even the touch of a man's hand" from the people (*Taran Wanderer* 27). While Arawn's action brings forth aspects of capitalism since it increases competition within the various industries and appears to equalize the workers' opportunities for success, his theft ultimately results in extreme hardship for the working class, forcing them to work harder for less reward, and demonstrates the evil of keeping knowledge from the worker, a theme that permeates all of *The Prydain Chronicles*. The farmer Aeddan states the effect of Arawn's actions best:

"Our toil grows heavier, and all the more because our skills are few. Enchanted tools did Arawn steal? Many secrets there were of making the earth yield richly, and of these, too, the Lord of Annvin robbed us.

[...] My granary is empty. And the more I must toil for others, the less I may work in my own fields. Even so, my knowledge is too slight. What I most need is locked forever in the treasure hoard of Annvin." (27)

Even though the magical tools are a regrettable loss, it is more the lost knowledge that Aeddan and other tradesmen mourn. Denying education to the lower classes creates the potential for unrest within and eventually an uprising against the upper classes, and this unrest does

eventually lead to the overthrow of Arawn in *The High King*, the final book of the series. As an aspect of the American Dream, the more successful upper classes often cite education as an important tool to success, whether that is economic, political, or personal success, and by featuring the denial of education to the lower classes, Alexander shows the suffering that lack causes and the many ways that it keeps the lower classes from becoming more self-sufficient and less reliant upon the ruling classes. Lord Goryon and Lord Gast work in concert to take from the working class and to undervalue the work of the proletariat. Goryon and his men attack and steal Taran's horse, a steed given to him by Prince Gwydion; when Taran demands his horse be returned, his lower class as a pig-keeper calls his word into question. Taran relies on his own manipulative abilities to regain his horse, but then must deal with the pride of Lord Gast and his miserly ways. Taran's experience with the worker Aeddan's generosity serves as a foil to the behaviors of the bourgeoisie as he realizes "Gast thinks himself openhanded, as Goryon thinks himself valorous; and as far as I can judge, neither one has the truth of it" (44). The issues of identity and self-perception plague Taran from the beginning of his quest, even as he desires to become a part of this upper class that he critiques so openly.

Lloyd Alexander demonstrates through his character, Taran, that wisdom does not limit itself only to those in the upper class, but it also appears in the young and the lower class. Society frequently equates wisdom with education and age, but Alexander proves that the upper classes do not have a monopoly on wisdom or common sense. The initial dealings with Goryon and Gast are only a piece of their disrespect and abuse of the lower class as evidenced by the battle between them over cows. This battle destroys Aeddan's crops and his chance of a harvest that would feed him and his wife for the winter; Goryon and Gast show little concern for their hand in his suffering, just as Arawn shows little concern for the working class that depended on

the secrets he stole. King Smoit wants to throw the two lords into the dungeons and keep the cows for himself, but Taran asks a boon of him and instead proposes that the two lords and their men be made to work Aeddan's land to repair their battle's destruction. He furthers that proposal by saying that the main cow that has caused so many issues be given to Aeddan with the two lords receiving her next calves, and that "Lord Goryon shall divide the herds in equal portions," but to keep the division fair that "Lord Gast shall be the first to choose his half" (62). Taran, an uneducated pig keeper, proposes an idea that one would assume should come from the "wise" king or his lords if following the rules of education means greater wisdom. Through Taran, Alexander illustrates that wisdom coming from observation, compassion, and logic does not depend upon formal education, but instead wisdom may spring from experience and human interaction.

Taran's wisdom and life experience become necessary again when dealing with Dorath's crimes and greed against the proletariat of the Free Commots. As a direct foil to Taran's wisdom and willingness to sacrifice to help others, Dorath's actions are the worst abuse of the worker even when compared to those of Arawn, Goryon, and Gast because he is of the proletariat and chooses to attack and steal from them. Taran has multiple run-ins with Dorath from mid-way in the novel until the final pages, and each time Dorath seeks to take what does not belong to him. In the first encounter, Taran discovers that Dorath is a cutthroat and a bandit who will do whatever it takes to win a battle. The bandit who calls himself a king admits that it is not so much that he desires anything, but instead that "the getting pleases [him ... and] the taking pleases [him] all the more" (*Taran Wanderer* 131). The second encounter involves a battle in the Free Commots where the people of Commot Islav decide to protect their small village from Dorath's raids and Taran chooses to stand by the people and to defend them against the man as

“cruel as the Huntsmen of Annuvin” (201). Taran’s wisdom comes into play again as he advises the men how to best fight against Dorath’s band, identifying the people’s strengths and weaknesses, and then his own skill leads them to defeat Dorath’s men. At the end of the novel, Dorath makes a final appearance as he attempts to steal the treasure he believes Taran seeks; Taran manages to defeat him once more by shattering the sword that Dorath had stolen from him, using the sword he had worked to forge himself. Though Dorath escapes yet again, his crimes and greed remain a condemnation of the worker that betrays his fellow workers and show that his ill-gotten spoils fail him in the end. For the child reader, Taran’s constant defeat of Dorath encourages them to also use their own life experience to navigate problems and to rely on their own wisdom and education rather than constantly depending upon a system that may not have their best interest at heart. Taran’s wisdom rejects the idea that wisdom and education must come from a traditional setting and embraces the idea that conscience is a skill best learned from one’s interactions and does not have to adhere to the ruling ideology as described by Althusser.

Taran’s education is far different from that of Ged’s yet both receive much of their education from the hardships they endure during their quests. Throughout *Taran Wanderer*, Taran receives his education at the hands of workers like Aeddán the farmer, Craddock the farmer-herder, Llonio the lucky gatherer, Hevydd the Master Smith, Dwyvach Weaver-Woman, and Annlaw Clay-Shaper. Each of these workers teach him lessons about his identity and the value of hard work and struggle. Aeddán, Craddock, and Llonio all offer Taran a permanent home where his toil would be valued; Hevydd, Dwyvach, and Annlaw offer Taran the chance to learn a trade that he could use to support himself monetarily. From these men and women, Taran learns far more than trades because he begins to finally recognize his place in the community of man. His education culminates in the idea that he is a friend, a wanderer, an Assistant Pig-Keeper, an

adventurer, a loyal master, a worker, a student, a teacher, a listener, and a defender who must use the skills he learns in each of these roles as well as his fierce, wise, cunning, and loyal nature to become a productive member of the larger community.

Through Ged's educational experience, Le Guin demonstrates that power and education do not have to serve the goals of the upper classes as Althusser suggests but that they may instead thwart those initial goals and benefit the lower classes. By developing Ged's education as multi-fold, she shows his journey to becoming a master magician as he has the opportunity to be an apprentice for a trade, to attend the Wizard School at Roke, to learn from ancient dragons, and to experience the toil of his own hands. Apprenticeship for Ged comes in three different ways in this novel: at the smithy of his father, at the cottage of his witch-aunt, and at the side of Ogion the Mage. Ged takes no interest in apprenticing as a smith with his father because he has been forced into it and because he has no interest in the work; he does take an interest in the teaching of his aunt but only inasmuch as her limited knowledge can provide. Once she has taught him everything she can, she attempts to use his abilities to her own purposes and tries to use her knowledge to control him. In the case of Ogion the Mage, Ged has been disenchanted with previous apprenticeship experiences and he feels his magical education is not progressing as quickly as he would like. When offered the chance to attend the Wizard School, Ged chooses that option because while grateful for Ogion's lessons he desires access to more formal education with many masters and believes it will be a quicker path to power. Upon graduating from the school, he receives his assignment as a mage with the Isle-Men of Low Torning near the dragon island of Pendor. At these two islands, he receives education beyond that of his apprenticeships and the Wizard School; it is here that he learns the value of restraint, of valuing the lower classes, and of understanding his own flaws and weaknesses. He learns the value of working

with his own hands and not relying quite so fully on his magical abilities; he also learns the value of patience and listening. As he slowly learns these lessons, Ged chooses a different path for his identity and education, refusing to become the bourgeoisie of Marx's sorcerer metaphor in *The Communist Manifesto*:

“Modern bourgeois society with all its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells” (12).

It is after all of this education and experience that he finally learns much of the wisdom others had attempted to teach him much earlier: that with power comes responsibility, that power has the potential to corrupt those who seek it, that often people choose to trade freedom for power and knowledge, and that knowledge can often grant greater power. Through these lessons in Le Guin's novel, the reader witnesses how education may subvert the upper classes' desire to control by ironically providing the lower classes with the opportunity to rise above their current status, an idea that permeates the American Dream. However, even as this novel appears to support some aspects of the American Dream, it also exposes its flaws in relation to the role of community in improving social status.

While the education system in *Taran Wanderer* reflects a more medieval style of education and the system in *A Wizard of Earthsea* reflects a more modern version, both of these novels suggest that opportunities to learn exist not only in a classroom or through an apprenticeship but in everyday life. Both of the main characters gain wisdom through experience, suggesting that a formal education may not always be as vital as society purports; instead, the idea that the world itself and needs may be the best teachers for survival. In both

Taran and Ged's cases, they have no real access to education (until they choose it for themselves), yet in their times of greatest danger or need their natural instincts lead them to safety. With these ideas in mind, education does demonstrate an exertion of power—teacher over student, government over citizens—and it is ultimately up to the teacher and the student how the power balances throughout the education; in the Marxist view, education is a control over the lower classes, while in the capitalist view, education is a gateway to success. Taran and Ged both prove that controlling knowledge is a dangerous task because as Eagleton reminds us, “if the masses are not thrown a few novels [and education], they may react by throwing up a few barricades” (2017).

### **Conclusion**

In considering the myth of the American Dream and its role in American children's fantasy literature, authors like Lloyd Alexander and Ursula Le Guin both struggle with the social issues like identity, gender roles, race, and education and their connections with class struggle. Under the Marxist theory, community and its well-being becomes the primary focus with the “proletariat [...] mak[ing] itself the ruling class and [...] sweeping] away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class” (28). Through their respective novels, Alexander and Le Guin effectively reject the more capitalist traditions present in the myth of the American dream and create a new tradition that centers on lower-class characters who not only learn to embrace their beginnings while also rising above them but also give a voice to countless future generations of similar heroes. While this may seem like a support for the myth of the American Dream, this rise serves as a paradox: the characters do achieve their goals but rather than fully embracing their successes, they choose to share it and to better the conditions of those around them. Through

these characters, Alexander and Le Guin redefine the American Dream, focusing on the Dream's adaptability based on the dreamer rather than what society may demand or portray as the essential Dream. In essence, rather than only focusing on the "dream of the good life" with the goal "to end up with more than [we] started with" and then forgetting where we started, Taran and Ged remind readers that in dreaming of success, one only sees success when others also succeed, effectively subverting the American Dream or at the very least redefining what the American Dream could be for current and future generations (Cullen 160). By creating this new tradition, Lloyd Alexander and Ursula Le Guin also open the genre by encouraging other authors such as Robin McKinley, Anne McCaffrey, Catherine Paterson, Brian Jacques, and Philip Pullman to break the old and create new traditions and to consider other possibilities for the children's fantasy genre.

In both of these series, the role of the hero changes. Taran nor Ged fight any impressive monsters like dragons or chimeras; instead they battle against a far greater foe: self-doubt and desire for social status. Both suffer because of their social class and because they desire more than what they currently have. While Taran and Ged both do not necessarily live in the capitalism of the United States, they do reflect the suffering and inequality that many children experience, an idea with which American authors like Alexander and Le Guin would have a familiarity. As Mervyn Nicholson points out in his article, "there are two fundamental classes: one class derives its income from owning, and the other survives by selling its labor," and under this understanding of social class, children are often seen as property that "serves adult needs" (3). This attitude, known as "childism," when taken to an extreme results in children being seen as "outside society [leading to them being] idealized or demonized" (4). Under this perception, the child becomes the "'Other' [who] must be tamed, must be 'assimilated', adapted to the real



world, the world of adults, of parents [because] children do not ‘become adults: they must be shaped’ (4). Thus with such a hostile view, whether intended or not, for many children, an escape from reality into a fantasy world can be the encouragement they need to dream of something more for themselves. Both Taran and Ged represent a paradox: both of the characters encourage child readers to dream of class mobility while also encouraging them to look beyond class mobility to their own ability to effect change. By enabling children to dream about the ideas presented in *Taran Wanderer* and in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the subversive potential of the novels comes full circle as it allows them to view the world around them as full of possibilities and endless opportunities where they may become part of the larger community while also addressing social issues and maintaining their own individuality. Fantasy allows them to dream about potential realities and gives them the tools to begin making those potentials into something more tangible. In “Future Conditional,” Lloyd Alexander says of literature and its creation:

“Even in literary creation, nothing comes from nothing. There is no output without input. We may seemingly create out of whole cloth, but our cloth is woven from a variety of threads; from all the experiences and information we have absorbed, consciously or otherwise in the course of our lives. [...] No matter how fantastic a fantasy world may be, there are, at one level or another, sometimes obviously, sometimes heavily disguised, resonances of our primary world.” (164-165)

Often, fantasy authors must heavily disguise the resonances Alexander speaks of because the issues they address are so inflammatory and divisive within the social frame of the time period that without a subtle layering of ideas and events the book might never reach the hands of readers. These “resonances of our primary world” as described by Alexander appears in Ursula Le Guin’s development of a character of color as the main character and the hero of her series

during the 1960s and 1970s when the Civil Rights Movement was at the forefront of social issues as well as in Alexander's own work when he introduces a character who comes to view community as more valuable than achieving social mobility. In this same article, Lloyd Alexander challenges authors and readers alike to consider how they see themselves and their roles in the world; he pushes them to not fall into the status quo "as nothing more than bodies to be kept voiceless, prisoned, tormented, or made to disappear altogether" (165). In designing Taran, Alexander chooses to give him a voice that expresses the frustrations, the worries, the joys, and the triumphs of his existence; in designing Ged, Ursula Le Guin chooses to create a character of color who becomes the hero of his own story after realizing that he is in charge of his identity and that he has a voice to also express his beliefs and triumphs.

By examining Lloyd Alexander's *Taran Wanderer* and Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* as radical subversive children's literature and analyzing it through a Marxist lens, it becomes evident how the two novels begin to establish a trend in American children's fantasy literature to redefine the myth of social mobility and the American Dream. They more subtly offer one's ability to reject the definitions of class and the constraints of social class structure in favor of a more individualized and personal social identity as an alternative to that myth. These two novels, despite being over fifty years old, still maintain their relevance in today's society because they challenge children to examine the world around them, see the problems in the world, and not just dream of a solution but work toward addressing those problems. Just as importantly, they encourage children to be the heroes of their own story and to use their own experiences and observations to grow as an individual. Danielle Forest expresses the need to more closely study children's literature "because American children live in a country with a range of different classes, and the present/absence of groups of people in children's literature

convey which groups society values/devalues” (592-93). With the need in mind, radical children’s fantasy literature has been a part of society for many years, and its message has been influencing readers of all ages for just as long. Through a closer analysis of such literature, it becomes evident that many fantasy stories dismissed as simple entertainment or as another support for the status quo may deserve a closer look and may even have subversive ideas just waiting to be discovered. Studying American children’s fantasy literature, especially those books that have lost their popularity over time, might also help shed even more light on social class and the effect it has upon the future.

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