

## Naming, Magic, and the Balance of Nature

Le Guin has stressed that *A Wizard of Earthsea*—indeed all her fiction—is suffused with Taoism and the principles poetically set down in Lao Tse’s *Tao-Te-Ching*. The *Tao-Te-Ching* is one of the most beloved books in the world. Tao (pronounced “dow”) means “way,” as in a path, road or direction; Te (pronounced “duh”) refers to individual power, integrity and spirit; Ching (pronounced “jeang”) is the Chinese word for a classic. Thus the book’s title has sometimes been rendered “The Book of the Way and its Power” or “The Way of Life” or “The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way.” Any of these various renderings, but especially the last, might be an apt one-phrase description of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, a classic about integrity and the way.

Like Ged’s first master Ogion, the poetic and paradoxical sayings of the *Tao-Te-Ching* ask us to practice modesty, stillness, and spontaneity, to trust in the natural rhythms of life, to live harmoniously with our self and the universe, to go with the flow. In particular, the *Tao-Te-Ching* asks us to cultivate non-action (wu-wei), to recognize the value of emptiness and nothingness. The famous yin-yang symbol—made of interlocking light and dark semi-circles—represents this Taoist unity of opposites: In the dark feminine yin is a dot of white; in the white masculine yang is a dot of black. The name Earthsea is itself a kind of yin-yang word.

From the very opening epigraph—“The Creation of Ea”—*A Wizard of Earthsea* announces that Taoist mutuality, not western duality, is fundamental to Le Guin’s imagined world:

Only in silence the word,  
only in dark the light,  
only in dying life:

bright the hawk’s flight  
on the empty sky.

In fact, this little poem, properly read, sums up the entire novel. Things are not wholly right or wrong, black or white, and we are not required to choose between them: They are aspects of a larger whole. Apparent polarities actually need each other to be complete. As the mage Ogion says to Ged, “to hear, one must be silent.”

In the Old Speech spoken by dragons—Confucius once compared Lao Tse to a dragon able to ascend into heaven—a name and the thing denoted are one. Magic itself is simply knowledge of these words and thus an understanding of the true nature of things. So to speak a spell is to intrude upon the balance of the universe. The hermit-like Ogion tries to teach Taoist quietism to his brash young apprentice, for “what I have is what you lack.” To no avail. Again, at school on Roke, the proud Ged dismisses his teacher’s caution that the use of magic requires responsibility and awareness. One can change a thing by changing its name, the Master Hand tells him, but by doing so one changes the world—and the wise man needs to weigh the consequences.

Ged is nearly destroyed by temptation before he begins his long process of coming to understand his full nature and what he should be. He must, in a sense, become worthy of his true name, of what he is. In the end, the chastened Ged comes to embody what are sometimes called the Three Jewels or Treasures of the Tao: Compassion, moderation, and humility. He learns to act appropriately, not simply to master. Of course, these are virtues needed by all men and women, not just wizards of Earthsea.