

**THE WORLD IS CHANGING: ETHICS AND GENRE  
DEVELOPMENT IN THREE TWENTIETH-CENTURY HIGH  
FANTASIES**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines three genre high fantasy texts published between 1954 and 2001: J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* cycle and Patricia A. McKillip's *The Riddle-Master's Game*. The emphasis is on examining how the three texts use a common set of structures to articulate a developing argument about forms of human engagement with the physical world in the face of environmental crisis.

Using theories of literary ecology and narrative paradigm, I examine the common structure shared by the three high fantasies and the weight of ethical implications it carries. The texts position the transcendent impulse of the mode of tragedy, and the behaviour it generates, as the source of crisis, and posit as a solution to the problem the integrative ethic characteristic of the comedic mode. They argue that a transition between these two ethics is necessary for the continued survival of the Secondary World. This thesis examines each text's use of narrative paradigm to articulate methods by which this ethical transition may be achieved.

An argumentative trend is documented across the three fantasies through the representation of situation, problem and solution. In each text, as the Secondary World becomes more completely a closed physical system, the source of the solution to the problem caused by the transcendent presence and the achievement of ethical transition are both relocated within the control of human actors. The three fantasies express a gradual movement toward the acceptance of not only human responsibility for, but the necessity for action to remedy, the damaged state of the world.

I argue that the texts' dominant concern is with the human relationship with and to context. Indeed, I argue that the three fantasies reflect the developing understanding of the human

role in not only precipitating, but responding to, environmental crisis, and may function as both a reflection of and an intervention in that crisis.

## DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopy.

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‘ “It is sad that we should meet only thus at the ending.

For the world is changing:

I feel it in the water, I feel it in the earth, and I smell it in the air.

I do not think we shall meet again.” ’

—Tolkien, III:229.