

Ursula Le Guin's Comment on War as a Theme



In the afterword of the pioneering novel, *EarthSea: the Wizard of Earthsea*, the author Ursula Le Guin explains why she does not use war or military heroes as a framework for her novels.

She writes: “My story took off in its own direction, away from the tradition, also in the whole matter of what makes heroes and villains. Hero tales and adventure fantasies traditionally put the righteous hero in a war against unrighteous enemies, which he (usually) wins. This convention was and still is so dominant that it’s taken for granted ---“of course” a heroic fantasy is good guys fighting bad guys, the War of Good against Evil.

But there are no wars in Earthsea. No soldiers, no armies, no battles. None of the militarism that came from the Arthurian saga and other sources and that by now, under the influence of fantasy war games, has become almost obligatory.

I didn’t think and don’t think this way; my mind doesn’t work in terms of war. My imagination refuses to limit all the elements that make an adventure story and make it exciting – danger, risk, challenge, courage – to battlefields. A hero whose heroism consists of killing people is uninteresting to me, and I detest the hormonal war orgies of our visual media, the mechanical slaughter of endless battalions of black-clad, yellowed toothed, red-eye demons.

War as a moral metaphor is limited, limiting and dangerous. By reducing the choices of action to “a war against” whatever-it-is, you divide the world into Me or Us (Good) and Them or it (bad) and reduce the ethical complexity and moral richness of our life to Yes/No, On/Off. This is puerile, misleading, and degrading.

In stories, it evades any solution but violence and offers the reader mere infantile reassurance. All too often the heroes of such fantasies behave exactly as the villains do, acting with mindless violence, but the hero is on the "right" side and therefore will win.

Right makes might, or does right make right?

If war is the only game going, yes. Might makes right. Which is why I don't play war games.

To be the man he can be, Ged has to find out who and what his real enemy is. He has to find out what it means to be himself. That requires not a war but a search and a discovery. The search takes him through mortal danger, loss, and suffering. The discovery brings him victory, the kind of victory that isn't the end of a battle, but the beginning of a life."