Unlike most children’s novels, Ursula Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) features a deeply flawed and often downright unpleasant protagonist. Arrogant, insecure, and desperate to prove himself, Ged is not very likeable at first and makes serious mistakes with catastrophic consequences. Yet somehow, we readers understand Ged and root for him as he matures and eventually achieves self-realization. Why do we side with Ged? How can we relate to him, even though we don’t wield magic or raise malicious spirits from the dead?

According to stylistics scholar Susan Mandala, “readers are more likely to ‘remain’ in [alternative worlds] if they find there characters with which they can identify” (119), and “style as well as content” can contribute to such characterization (125). I contend that Le Guin gets readers to sympathize with an initially unsympathetic protagonist by granting us intimate knowledge of Ged’s character though shifts in her writing style that occur as Ged “find[s] out what it means to be himself” (Le Guin, “Afterword” 266). Early on in his apprenticeship, Ogion tells Ged, “When you know the fourfoil in all its seasons root and leaf and flower, by sight and scent and seed, then you may learn its true name, knowing its being: which is more than its use” (*Wizard* 23). Like the fourfoil, Ged evolves over time, and Le Guin’s prose matures with Ged through his many seasons of ignorance, learning, error, and resilience, culminating in his
eventual acceptance of his own full, flawed humanity. Le Guin’s style and syntax subliminally encourage readers to empathize with Ged by imbuing even his callow youth with a tenor of heroic grandeur; by evoking how evil enchantments mist his mind; and by contrasting his youthful chatter with Ogion’s sage-like silence as long-winded and breathless indirect discourse gives way to more sober, simple, self-reflective cadences as Ged seeks to unite with his shadow.

From the outset, Le Guin’s epic epigraph establishes a legend-like tempo through which we instinctively cast the unassuming Ged as the archetypal hero, prompting us to stand by him even before we begin to learn about his flaws. In contrast to most novels, which employ quotations from other writers and works as epigraphs, Le Guin includes an excerpt from “the Creation of Ea… the oldest song” from her own alternative world: “Only in silence the word, only in dark the light, only in dying life: bright the hawk’s flight on the empty sky” (Wizard 254). With inverted syntax, the epigraph has a decidedly mythological and heroic quality, foreshadowing Le Guin’s deep dedication to world-building through style—“because in fantasy there is nothing but the writer’s vision of the world” (Le Guin, “From Elfland” 154). Moreover, the poem’s reference to the “hawk’s flight” primes us to notice that Ged’s childhood name is Sparrowhawk, which cannot escape us as a mere coincidence. Thus, from the beginning, we cannot help but see Ged as the hero of this legendary poem. Since we assume Ged is the hero, we automatically view his flaws with compassion and forgiveness. The epigraph also foreshadows Ged’s loneliness by describing a singular hawk’s solitary voyage across a vast “empty sky,” already provoking sympathy for a character we have not even met yet.

Primed in this way, we embark on a personal journey alongside Ged during his initial season of ignorance. While narrating the misadventures of a young Ged who doesn’t understand much about magic, Le Guin imbues her prose with a hazy, bewitching texture that evokes his
still-befuddled state. As a neglected village boy with enormous untapped potential, Ged delights in manipulating nature using petty spells learned from witches and weather-workers. Accordingly, an early description of Ged rings out like a short, punctuated spell: “\textit{He grew wild, a thriving weed, a tall, quick boy, loud and proud and full of temper}” (\textit{Wizard 2}). This sentence features a trochaic rhythm (stressed syllables are underlined) with two consecutive stressed beats before and after the last comma (“boy” and “loud”) and a drumbeat-like rhyming of “loud” and “proud.” This forceful rhythm likens Ged’s description to an intense incantation in which powerful adjectives such as “wild,” “loud,” “proud,” and “temper” are inflicted upon a mere child. The spell-like syntax reinforces the idea that Ged is a victim of his harsh upbringing, a notion supported by narrative descriptions of his grim, solemn, abusive father. Moreover, Le Guin’s metaphor compares young Ged to a “thriving weed,” an analogy that attests to his status as a powerful being who grows in the absence of nurturance and appreciation. Together, the rhythm and metaphor in this terse sentence illustrate Ged’s unlikely origins and partially absolve him of his flawed nature, eliciting our sympathy while exposing his flaws.

Le Guin additionally underscores young Ged’s unenlightened status by filling the first chapter with long, convoluted sentences that represent his environment as a confounding place to live. For example, Le Guin depicts the Kargs floundering in Ged’s fog as they “chased the wraiths straight to the High Fall, the cliff’s edge above the springs of Ar, and the shapes they pursued ran out onto the air and there vanished in a thinning of the mist, while the pursuers fell screaming through fog and sudden sunlight a hundred feet sheer to the shallow pools among the rocks” (\textit{Wizard 15}). This run-on sentence is challenging to parse, mimicking the mist that blurs all action. Moreover, because of the lack of imposed punctuation, we read the sentence according to its natural rhythm and observe repeated assonance: “chased,” “wraiths,” and “straight”; “Fall”
Phadnis 4

and “Ar”; “air” and “there”; “thinning” and “mist”; “fog” and “rocks.” Assonance makes the sentence sound poetic and even more cryptic and spell-like. Also, variations in rhythm further contribute to this impression. For instance, the iambic rhythm describing “cliff’s edge above the springs of Ar” transitions to a pseudo-dactylic rhythm: “in a thinning of the mist” and then to trochaic rhythm: “shallow pools among the rocks.” Reflecting the inconsistencies of Ged’s environment, just as one metrical pattern begins to take hold, another rhythm displaces it. As a result, reading such sentences baffles readers, drawing us closer to Ged’s mental state. Again, these stylistic choices reflect the initial season of Ged’s journey, where his magical powers are beginning to manifest, but his judgment is still shrouded in the mists of youthful ignorance and untrained power.

When Ged begins his wizard apprenticeship and season of learning under the silent, wise guru-figure Ogion, Le Guin’s style takes a sharp turn, trading spell-like rhythms for clear, nonmetrical prose that highlights differences between Ged and his master and reveals Ged’s relatable emotions. The shift away from a spell-like style is especially appropriate, reflecting Ogion’s exercise of restraint in using magic. In a chapter with far more discourse than description (another deviation from the previous chapter), Le Guin varies sentence length to contrast Ged’s long-winded, youthful, racing thoughts with Ogion’s careful, wise, meditative nature. Cleverly, Le Guin juxtaposes descriptions of Ogion with windows into Ged’s thoughts: “But Ogion let the rain fall where it would. He found a thick fir tree and lay down beneath it. Ged crouched among the dripping bushes wet and sullen, and wondered what was the good of having power if you were too wise to use it, and wished he had gone as prentice to that old weatherworker of the Vale, where at least he would have slept dry” (Wizard 24). This juxtaposition crystallizes the contrast between Ged and Ogion. The two sentences describing
Ogion are simple and straightforward, reflecting Ogion’s ideal, unruffled temperament. Meanwhile, Ged’s single sentence, written in indirect discourse, is more than twice as long and ridden with comma-separated complaints in his immature, finicky internal dialogue. The contrast reveals just how much Ged will have to mature to achieve his master’s level of calmness. At the same time, glimpsing Ged’s imperfections makes him more relatable—we can understand the sources of his frustration and better put ourselves in his (wet) shoes. In this way, with long-winded sentences focalized around Ged’s thoughts, we distantly admire Ogion’s mysterious stoicism but closely partake in Ged’s minor struggles.

Similarly, Le Guin later spends a long-winded sentence describing Ged’s reactions to Ogion’s silence, also underscoring how much Ged has yet to learn: “And the Mage’s long, listening silence would fill the room, and fill Ged’s mind, until sometimes it seemed he had forgotten what words sounded like: and when Ogion spoke at last it was as if he had, just then and for the first time, invented speech” (Wizard 25). Starting with and smattered with the word “and,” this sentence again highlights Ged’s immature, lengthy thought process via indirect discourse. Le Guin’s use of hyperbole with regard to Ogion “inventing speech” further emphasizes how little Ged can handle silence at this stage in his character development. But beautiful figurative speech describing silence filling the room and filling Ged’s mind helps us empathize with Ged by vivifying the effects of his master’s silence.

More generally, noted Le Guin scholar Mike Cadden observes that Le Guin intentionally employs indirect discourse from Ged’s point of view at specific points in the story: “when it is important that the reader […] should stay caught up in Ged’s immature emotion, the narrator slips not only into Ged’s consciousness through focalization but blurs the boundary between himself and Ged through free indirect discourse to reinforce the legitimacy of even the most
unwise thought” (181). Thus, Le Guin strategically uses narrative style to pull readers into Ged’s psyche when he is at his most childish and misguided: precisely when we must empathize with him the most. Interestingly, toward the end of the book, Le Guin demonstrates that Ged comes full-circle by describing Ged’s silence in terse sentences: during his long voyage, he “would fall silent, and ponder, hour by hour” (Wizard 239). We can fully appreciate this transformation only because we see where Ged starts out, which is illustrated most directly by the rambling syntax Le Guin uses to chronicle his youthful experiences during his season of learning.

Le Guin’s style transitions yet again after Ged catastrophically unleashes the shadow upon Roke; as Ged falls from the peak of youthful arrogance to the ocean trench of lackluster shame, ushering in his season of error, Le Guin’s prose drops from pompous and dramatic to sober and lifeless. Within this novel’s symmetric narrative structure, Ged visits the Master Namer’s Isolate Tower both before and after unleashing the shadow, and Le Guin’s different descriptions of the same landscape through Ged’s eyes reflect the magnitude of his transformation. Before the shadow incident, Le Guin describes the Isolate Tower with pomp and drama: “Grim it stood above the northern cliffs, grey were the clouds over the seas of winter, endless the lists and ranks and rounds of names that the Namer’s eight pupils must learn” (Wizard 62). Multiple reversals in traditional English syntax (“grim it stood,” “grey were the clouds,” “endless the lists…”) give the sentence an epic, lore-like texture. And the three parts of the sentence, each marked with a stressed word (“grim,” “grey,” “endless”), sound thundering and foreboding like stormy winter clouds. The cinematic appeal of this sentence underscores Ged’s liveliness and self-importance so evocatively that it almost endears readers, in a convoluted way. Before, the omniscient narrator’s epic style led us to view Ged as a budding hero, but at this point in the story, the narrative’s focalization around Ged identifies the same
epic style with Ged’s own thoughts, which sound pretentious to the point of being funny. Making
us feel for Ged and see him as young and foolish rather than depraved at this point in the story,
when he is at his most unlikeable, is an important and difficult feat that Le Guin accomplishes
partially through stylistic choices.

Following Ged’s physical recovery from the shadow incident, he returns to the same
tower, but Le Guin’s description is much more sober in this season of resilience: “he was bone-
weary when he came in sight of the Tower above the spitting, hissing seas of the northern cape”
(Wizard 97). While the imagery remains vibrant—the onomatopoeia of “spitting” and “hissing”
lends the sea an adversarial appearance—Ged’s “bone-weariness” is reflected in the more
conventional syntax of this sentence. Somber and scathed, Ged has lost the wonder of youth, and
we feel sorry for him, remembering his excitement and vigor from his last visit to the Tower. In
this way, Le Guin’s style paired with her intelligent narrative structure ushers us through Ged’s
transformation with him.

Later in Ged’s season of resilience, before Ged consciously grasps that the shadow is a
part of him, Le Guin sprinkles in short sentences with symmetrical, self-reflective structures that
hint at this forthcoming revelation. We delight in reaching Ged’s conclusion with him in the final
phase of his quest, guided by these syntactical hints. For instance, in his third encounter with the
shadow, Ged forges a bond with it and feels that “He was neither hunted nor hunter, now”
(Wizard 207). Later, he also admits, “If I lose it I am lost” (Wizard 242). The close apposition of
the words “hunted” and “hunter”, and “lose” and “lost”, which are normally connected by a
unidirectional relationship, emphasizes that Ged and the shadow are closely linked. Moreover,
the conciseness and gravity of these sentences convey a new maturity in Ged. In fact, we are
proud to see that Ged has internalized some of Ogion’s wisdom, reflected by his use of short and simple syntax that echoes Ogion’s dialogue and narrative descriptions.

To highlight how Ged’s ultimate union with his shadow represents an inner acceptance of his own worst impulses after he has experienced his seasons of development, Le Guin composes brilliantly short, balanced, and pausing sentences endowed with an almost spiritual quality. For instance, a mirrored sentence depicts the final meeting of Ged and his shadow: “In silence, man and shadow met face to face, and stopped” (Wizard 251). The word “met,” positioned in the precise middle of the sentence, serves as a syntactical reflection point: on either side of “met,” “man and shadow” and “face to face” are equivalent phrases, and “in silence” and “and stopped” both evoke halting, breathless feelings. The apposition of “man and shadow” and “face to face” paints an image of Ged in profile, looking at his own reflection. Here, Ged embraces the truth that he is his shadow, so the mirroring in this sentence synchronizes perfectly with its meaning. Subtly, Le Guin also eliminates character specificity in this sentence: rather than saying that “Ged and his shadow met face to face,” she chooses to abstract them as “man and shadow.” By generalizing the description beyond Ged, Le Guin invites readers to join in this spiritual revelation and gives the scene an ancient, lore-like finish. Moreover, the grammatically unnecessary comma before “and stopped” gives the sentence a pausing quality that unveils the action in slow-motion, allowing us to participate in Ged’s awakening.

Similarly, later in the description of this scene, Le Guin writes, “Light and darkness met, and joined, and were one” (Wizard 251). This simple, slow sentence is an unusual way to represent a climax. Yet this unexpected style exactly conveys its meaning—Ged’s conflict is neither violent nor fast-paced because he and his shadow are one. He grapples with an internal struggle. Accordingly, the slow and rich escalation of the sentence, punctuated by commas and
monosyllabic words, allows us to participate in this gradual yet revelatory experience with Ged. Broadly, Le Guin’s concise and mirrored sentences help us partake in Ged’s spiritual union with his shadow, beautifully culminating our journey beside him. Like the fourfoil, having observed himself in all his seasons of ignorance, learning, error, and resilience, Ged now knows himself.

Syntax and style are often overlooked, even in high-level analyses of literature. According to Le Guin expert Brian Attebery, most critics who write about *A Wizard of Earthsea* “concentrate on the themes rather than style, in spite of Le Guin’s obvious interest in both” (private correspondence).¹ But prose constructed as artfully as Le Guin’s deserves close analysis; after all, in Le Guin’s own words, “the style, of course, is the book…If you remove the style, all you have left is a synopsis of the plot” (“From Elfland” 154). Le Guin argues that style is not an accessory but the very substance of fantasy literature, the key element that draws readers into alternative worlds—and she epitomizes this principle in her own work. Subtly yet masterfully, Le Guin’s evolving and immersive style and syntax show us the world through Ged’s eyes during different phases of his development, engendering understanding by inviting us to journey with him. We experience Ged’s immaturity, pride, and vulnerability with him, reassured that even imperfect individuals can find themselves.
Notes

1. Attebery cites James Bittner and Christopher Robinson as exceptions to this rule (see Works Cited for references).
Works Cited


