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Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea and Its Place in the American West's Literary Landscape

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ABSTRACT
As a writer that incessantly directed her efforts towards raising her readers' awareness of social, racial, and gender issues, American writer Ursula K. Le Guin's fantasy work has been rather overlooked by literary criticism. Thus, the present paper seeks to claim this writer's prominent position as a writer of the American West, as well as proposing her Earthsea saga as a rightful contribution to the literature of the American West. With this in mind, the paper will argue that Le Guin achieves this by combining elements that belong to the more traditional literature of the West, as is the idea of mobility, with some of the more modern proposals made by the regional perspective of the second half of the past century.

KEYWORDS: Ursula K. Le Guin; fantasy; American West; literary tradition; mobility; regionalism.

1. INTRODUCTION

"I am a granddaughter of the American frontier. My mother's family moved and bought and farmed and failed and moved on, from Missouri to Wyoming to Colorado to Oregon to California and back. … I am grateful. My heritage is the wild oats the Spanish sowed on the hills

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of California, the cheatgrass the ranchers left in the counties of Harney and Malheur. Those are the crops my people planted, and I have reaped" (Le Guin, 2004, p. 30). These words, written by Ursula K. Le Guin as the closing remarks of a short essay where she briefly delves into the idea of the frontier, reveal a key element in this writer's literary production and her formation as an individual. This feeling of belonging to the West is conspicuous in Le Guin's fiction and non-fiction, and is equally a trait that aligns her with other prominent writers of the American West, such as Wallace Stegner and Wendell Berry. In this regard, the former states Berry's emphasis on the necessity of having a strong psychological and physical attachment to a given place as follows: "If you don't know where you are … you don't know *who* you are" (2002c, p. 199). Stegner goes on to write that Berry "conducts his literary explorations inward, toward the core of what supports him physically and spiritually" as a "[lover] of known earth, known weathers, and known neighbours both human and non-human. He calls himself a 'placed person'" (2002c, p. 199). Quite similarly, Le Guin was an advocate for the type of mindfulness that allows us to know where and when we stand and where we come from, as this knowledge is particularly important to understand where we are heading. In this regard, this is what we can read in her essay, "A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be": "With all our self-consciousness, we have very little sense of where we live, where we are right here right now. If we did, we wouldn't muck it up the way we do. If we did, our literature would celebrate it. If we did, our religion might be participatory. If we did—if we really lived here, now, in this present—we might have some sense of our future as a people. We might know where the center of the world is" (Le Guin, 2004, p. 84). And, indeed, Le Guin was someone who was very much aware of the place –geographical, temporal, and social– that she inhabited and, hence, made sure that this was recognisable in her writing.

Nevertheless, it seems that Le Guin's "placed" –to use Berry's term– writing has barely been acknowledged or even studied as such, that is, as truly Western literature. Unfolding the reasons behind such a phenomenon is not this paper's aim, but the fact that she has mainly been known for her science fiction and fantasy might have played a role in it. After all, it is well known that, for many years, this kind of literature in general has not been seen as "serious" literature by a great part of academia. However this might be, something we can see is that Le Guin's contribution to the literature of the American West has been overlooked by many critics. One of these is the well-known scholar and critic Richard Etulain, who, in his work *Re-Imagining the Modern American West: A Century of History, Fiction, and Art*, offers an "engaging and extensive study of the general trends in the literature, history, and art of the twentieth-century American West" (Short, 1998, p. 354). In this volume, Etulain divides the cultural history of the West into three main categories that spread from the late 19th century to the end of the 20th. Among the plethora of Western writers whom he includes, such as John

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Steinbeck, Navajo Scott Momaday, Wallace Stegner and Larry McMurtry, Le Guin's name is nowhere to be found. The disregard for Le Guin's work is perhaps more conspicuous in other volumes that study the literary production of women in the American West as well as their experience of the region, such as *The Stories that Shape Us: Contemporary Women Write About the West* or *Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement, and the West*. A collection of essays that does actually include a chapter on Le Guin is *Updating the Literary West*. Interestingly, the author of this chapter, Heinz Tschachler, writes that "the centrality of western themes and ideas" (1997, p. 281), like mobility and the frontier, is quite clear in Le Guin's work, although he focuses only on her science fiction novels and leaves her fantasy aside. All in all, it is rather curious to see that the work of an established writer like Le Guin, who felt so attached to the American West and whose writing was so concerned with wider social questions, is not even hinted at in the work of several commentators on Western American culture and society.

William Bloodworth writes that "'Western novels' as a category can include literary works that vary greatly in intent, setting, audience, and popularity" (1996, p. 44). Thus, this paper will highlight those elements that can lead us to considering Le Guin's Earthsea saga as a "modern" Western novel, or series of novels, by means of a study that will rest on two main lines. On the one hand, it will emphasise the presence of mobility, a key determinant of "western writing and western life", according to Stegner (2002a, p. 138), as an important factor in the personal development of several characters in said saga. Historically, Stegner traces the perpetual presence of mobility back to the first communities that inhabited the American West, who would constantly move following the seasons, water sources, or herds, because doing otherwise would seriously affect their chances for survival (2002b, pp. 69–71). Thus, we should understand movement as an essential element of Western life that can be propelled by an array of factors like the need for adaptation, as was the case for those first communities; as the individual's free will; or as an imposition upon an individual or community. On the other hand, we will be able to see how these novels feature certain characteristics fitting for the regionalist current of the literature of the American West. This literature is that which results from an aim to debunk the myths of the Frontier and the West and focuses, instead, on geographical regions and their specific characteristics, in order to provide a faithful representation of what the "small and private lives" (Crow, 2003, p. 1) and struggles of their inhabitants really are like. Additionally, it understands region as "place and people in social interaction" (Wilson, 1997, p. 146) where "movement and adjustment" are fundamental (Wrobel, 2003, p. 397).

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2. EVOLUTION OF WESTERN LITERATURE

Since literature, as well as any other mode of artistic expression, is often a product of the artist's social, historical, cultural, and geographical environment, it would be interesting to briefly look at the American West as an idea and at the historical implications that this has had for its inhabitants. It is safe to say that, ever since the first pioneers and settlers set out to make a home for themselves in that ever-advancing western frontier, the American West as a place has gained an almost mythical status, often blurring the distinction between idea and reality. One of the oldest and most important factors that contributed to this is what John L. O'Sullivan coined as "Manifest Destiny" in 1845, that is, "the supposed inevitability of the continued territorial expansion of the boundaries of the United States westward to the Pacific and beyond" (Heidler & Heidler, para. 1). This certainty that whatever land lay to the west, "unclaimed" as far as the white coloniser was concerned, was available for them to grab and exploit, led to the belief that this was an essential part of the rights and freedoms of (white) Americans, and, as Virginia Scharff puts it, constituted something like the "right to the mythic westerner's taken-for-granted power to move freely" (2003, p. 154). Another factor that contributed significantly to western expansionism was the frontier itself. Frederick Jackson Turner, in his 1920 seminal work *The Frontier in American History*, catalogues it as "the line of most rapid and effective Americanization" (p. 3) and highlights its lure as a place ridden with possibility. In a similar line, Wallace Stegner, focusing on the spaciousness and emptiness of the American West, alludes to the appeal of the idea of the West and the way in which it still shapes the Westerner's psyche: "Space … continues to suggest unrestricted freedom, unlimited opportunity for testings and heroisms, a continuing need for self-reliance and physical competence. The untrammelled individualist persists partly as a residue of the real and romantic frontiers, but also partly because runaways from more restricted regions keep reimporting him. The stereotype continues to affect romantic Westerners and non-Westerners in romantic ways" (2002e, p. 111). Something that we can extract from these ideas of freedom and opportunity that have apparently resided in the concept of the West from the very beginning is that they contributed to putting a whole nation in motion. Going back to Turner, he wrote that "the western frontier worked irresistibly in unsettling population" (1920, p. 30) and that, although, perhaps, "forced upon" the American experience, "[movement] has been its dominant fact" (1920, p. 37). American scholar Harold Simonson offers an insight into why the promise of the frontier was so strong for 19th century Americans: "[It] meant keeping ahead of oppressive complexities. It meant separation from the past, new adventure, new history, new being. It meant the American Dream, a virgin land, a golden gate, an open road. In short, it meant Eden" (1989c, p. 54). In turn, this can itself be a

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reason for the prominence that mobility has played and still plays in American life (Tompkins, 1992; Le Guin, 2016b), and especially in the West (Hepworth, 1995). The historical presence of movement in the Western lifestyle and mindset is emphasised by Stegner (2002b), who writes that it underlines much of the American experience of the 19th century, at the same time as he believes its current prominence can be seen in American highways and roads, and every single piece of infrastructure that has developed around them. As the American West transcended its geographical limitations and became a myth that endures still today, it is reasonable to think that there is a fair amount of people for whom, historically, the experience of the West has been far from an idyll in a golden land. Turner himself already wrote in his frontier thesis that the golden period of the frontier was somehow over, in that it had entered a phase where the frontier was already closed; it did not exist anymore. So, according to Harold Simonson, this new phase of America's westward expansion was characterised by "limitation, fate, tragedy, age, and countless ramifications sometimes associated with maturity and wisdom, and at other times with despair and eschatology" (1989b, p. 170). Continuing with the idea of disillusion, Simonson writes the following about those individuals who arrived in the West and realised there was nothing for them there:

> Wherein lies the tragedy? Simply and profoundly in the disparity between illusion and reality, between the promise and its denial. In the American Westward Movement, California came to symbolize the logical conclusion of America itself … [,] a civilization more uniquely American than anything in the Ohio Valley or the Virginia Piedmont. But if at the trail's end there was only fool's gold, if fulfilment failed to square with expectation, if with unabated frenzy Californians were *still* seeking their Promised Land, then what follows must be despair, first mute, then violent, according to the extent of hope originally proffered. It is this scene of the American Westerner with nowhere left to go, with the frontier closed, with only California at its feet, … that the pioneer never dared to imagine. … He now confronted the reality that his transcendental self, which had previously been supported by the metaphor of the open frontier, no longer found a safety valve through which to escape. Space had closed in upon him. (1989a, p. 104)

This is precisely the scenario where writers of the American West like Wallace Stegner and Ursula K. Le Guin wanted to make their voice heard. Stegner warns of the need to fight some people's resistance to letting go of the promise and illusion of the American West, writing that "[the] outside never got over its heightened and romantic vision of the West. The West never got over its heightened and romantic notion of itself" (2002e, p. 102), while Le Guin sought to write stories that take place in that "impassively dangerous and beautiful landscape" (2016b, p. 225) that is the real West, and tell "about people on the [losing] side of capitalism: housewives, waitresses, librarians, keepers of dismal hotels. The people who live, you might say, on the rez, in the broken world the conquistadores leave behind" (2004, p. 30).

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Nevertheless, authors like Stegner and Le Guin, together with many others who show a deep concern for the stories of those who have been deprived of the glory and glitter of the American West –the people who live simple and honest lives of struggle– belong to one of the most recent phases of the literature of the West. Regarding the evolution of the literature that has been produced in the American West since the late 18th century, we can make use of the thorough and concise explanation of the evolution of the hero of these stories that Martin Simonson and Raúl Montero offer in their 2019 study, *El Western Fantástico de Stephen King: Hibridización y Desencantamiento de la Tradición Literaria Europea en El Pistolero*. From the end of the 18th century to the first half of the 19th, the prominence of individuals lifted to an almost myth-like status such as Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett suggests a preference for a type of literature that emphasises the hero's courage, individualism and self-reliance (Simonson & Montero, 2019). In a similar vein, the second half of the 19th century crowned Buffalo Bill, originally William F. Cody, as its particular hero. As Etulain writes, Cody "did more than any other medium … to synthesize pre-existing ideas about the frontier" (1999, p. 5), while he also embodied "*the* invented West Americans held in their mind's eye and in their hearts when they spoke of an Old West that seemed to be disappearing" (1999, p. 5). By the end of that century, and for a relatively long time into the 20th century, Etulain (1999) comments, the godlike figure of the cowboy claimed an almost exclusive domination of the Western literary landscape. The so-called *dime novels* were the first type of literature incorporating this figure in stories that explored the themes of courage, independence and perseverance (Simonson & Montero, 2019). From that moment until the second half of the 20th century, literary production exploited "the Wild West storyline" (Etulain, 1999, p. 107), providing readers with stories that talked about how the West was not for the faint-hearted and highlighted an element of fight and competition (Simonson & Montero, 2019).

It is at this point that two new cultural and intellectual currents arose and gradually turned the focus of Western literature away from the image of a dangerous and restless West and its lonesome and, more often than not, violent hero. The first of these was the regionalist current in the literature of the West, which was certainly linked to the feeling of reality and disillusionment that Harold Simonson attributes to a closed frontier, or, as Thomas J. Lyon puts it, the fact that "[the] bloom is long gone; the specialness and remoteness are long gone" (1997, p. 962). Etulain marks the beginning of this movement around the decades of the 1920s and 30s, when several literary actors started to "urge writers to stop writing sensational yarns about movement *to* the West and take up stories set *in* the West" (1999, p. 108). Commenting on this phenomenon at the turn of the 20th century, Lyon suggests that writing with a clear feeling of belonging to a specific place ultimately implied "re-inhabiting the 'plundered province', showing that the region's riches may turn out to be an earned understanding of humanity's diversity, the environment's crucial

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importance, and the gains to be found in self-awareness" (1997, p. 963). Of course, not everything that belonged to the previous tradition was directly disposed of. This was the case, for instance, of "the journey motif" (Etulain, 1999, p.142), which continued to be prominent in the literary production of the 20th century. But it was perhaps the intention with which the theme was employed that changed. If until then it had been used as little more than a premise for the stories to unfold, it now acquired an additional element of "psychological and cultural adjustment" (Wrobel, 2003, p. 400). Most importantly, this regional take on literature brought in perspectives and ideas that had previously rarely been taken into account. Among these, those that happen to be most interesting for our study are the inclusion of the other, the rejection of individualism, and the individual's psychological struggle. Briefly explained, the first of these gained prominence around the 1960s, when writers of various ethnic minorities –with a winner of the Pulitzer like N. Scott Momaday among them– began to be acknowledged for "[portraying] the West through non-Anglo experiences … and broadening the meaning of the American West" (Etulain, 1999, p. 136). As for the second, Stegner strongly claims that the need of being part of a community and working towards a common goal "was one lesson the West enforced, and it was learned hard" (2002d, p. 50), although the myth of the West still works against it with its banner of individualism (2002e). Last, one of the major and, perhaps, first exponents of the theme of psychological struggle can be said to be Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*, a "metamyth" and "a magnificent retelling of the western story through a complex, provocative reweaving of many of the familiar ingredients of the [Western] narrative" (1999, p. 141), according to Etulain, where its author emphasises "the inward skies of its major characters" (1999, p. 147).

A little later, another likeminded cultural and intellectual force was formed around what has become known as New Western History. Born in the 80s, this movement, whose most visible figures could be said to be Patricia Nelson Limerick and Richard White –albeit accompanied by a plethora of other academics working from perspectives of ethnicity, gender, and environmentalism (Etulain, 1999)– sought to offer an alternative view of Western history that "would not shy away from the disappointments and disasters that marked much of the history of the West" (Etulain, 1999, p. 126), while also aiming at defying "the triumphalist tone of too much previous writing" (Etulain, 1999, p. 126). Consequently, some of the most prominent pillars of the movement would be themes like "the complex, polyphonic history" (Etulain, 1999, p. 127) of the region, or, again, "failure and defeat" (Etulain, 1999, p. 128).

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3. THE EARTHSEA SAGA AS A WESTERN

Turning now to Le Guin, it must first be noted that all the novels that constitute her Earthsea saga are not the same and do not contribute equally to the aim of the present study. The series is made up of five novels and a collection of short stories. The first three novels –*A Wizard of Earthsea*, *The Tombs of Atuan* and *The Farthest Shore*– lean closer to archetypal fantasy stories in that they are all structured around the journey of a hero and their coming of age. It was from the fourth book onwards that Le Guin changed the stories and characters that she presented in these works, walking away from that classical fantasy story and hero. Hence, *Tehanu*, *The Other Wind* and the collection *Tales from Earthsea* do not focus as much on action and traditional heroes, as on average people who live challenging lives behind the scenes. Nevertheless, the idea of the bildungsroman, that of personal development, is still at the core. This study will look mainly at these later volumes.

We have seen above how movement has been an essential part of life in the American West, and has, as a consequence, featured in much of the literature written in and about that region. Equally, it is also an element that plays its part in the personal stories of several of Le Guin's characters. In this sense, and although there are some characters that do move to other places attracted by their promise, as was the case with many migrants that moved westwards in North America, others change places merely because of their destiny, or because other people have decided so. The clearest case of a character moving as a consequence of believing that a better future can be found in another place is that of Ged, the main hero of a few of these novels. Ged was born in the isle of Gont and showed promise of becoming a powerful wizard from a very early age. Once his mentor in Gont, Ogion, had taught him everything he could, Ged, hungry for knowledge and power, was admitted to the School of Wizardry of Roke, which is the centre of wizardry and power in Earthsea. Here, after a few adventures and some mistakes, Ged becomes one of the most powerful wizards to ever have lived and is also appointed Archmage of Earthsea. Nevertheless, there comes a point in Ged's life when, once he has spent his power, he feels that something has gone amiss in the way in which wizardry is used by the wise of Roke; so, disillusioned, he decides to leave wizardry behind and starts his journey back home, to Gont. Another character who voluntarily seeks a better future in another land is Irian, who appears both in *The Other Wind* and the short story that tells of her life, *Dragonfly*. Irian's is the story of an individual who feels that she does not know everything about her being and believes that the only place where she can acquire the necessary knowledge is Roke. Consequently, she leaves her birthplace of Iria and travels to the Isle of the Wise. Contrary to Ged's experience in Roke, Irian's is more positive because she will find the help she needs to learn about her true nature from the hand of the Master Patterner. Additionally, the short story *On the High Marsh* provides

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us with a third character that sets on a journey, in this case by necessity. This story of redemption features the powerful wizard Irioth, who finds himself having no other choice but to travel to a remote island of the archipelago where, through working with animals, he will try to find a new beginning and leave behind his life of wizardry and all the regrets that it embodies. In the case of Irioth, this journey will prove to be useful, as he will receive the forgiveness of the Archmage, namely Ged, and finally find peace. Lastly, I must mention Tenar, a character central to the *Tombs of Atuan*, *Tehanu*, and *The Other Wind*. Tenar's movements, which occur primarily in the first of the novels where she appears, are different to those of the characters mentioned above, because they are all mostly imposed on her. The first of these took her from her hometown in the isle of Atuan to the Place of the Tombs of Atuan, where she would be instructed to become the reincarnation of Arha, the Priestess of the Tombs. From here she was rescued by Ged, who afterwards decided that the best for her would be to travel with him to his birthplace of Gont, where she would be able to start a new life. Later in life, Tenar did finally move consciously towards the mountainous area of the island, to Re Albi, where she would finally find healing and a true home. All in all, recalling Wrobel's words about movement in the American West's regional literature, what the movements performed by Le Guin's characters show is that they serve a purpose and can be highly beneficial for the individual when done consciously. In the end, all of these characters see their lives and conditions improve, thanks to arriving at a place where they will eventually find the answers they are seeking. Jane Tompkins captures this very same idea as she talks about the American West in her book *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, writing that "[the] desire to change places also signals a powerful need for self-transformation" (1992, p. 4).

Heinz Tschachler, writing about Le Guin's science fiction, states that this writer's work "testifies … to an evolution within western American literature, from a more literal concern with values and conditions inherent in exploration and colonization, to a reworking of these in new and surprising ways" (1997, p. 281). To this we can add that her fantasy reflects the very same transition. In this regard, one of the main reasons why we can establish links between Le Guin's philosophy and Western American regionalism's agenda is their fierce criticism of our Western capitalist society and the deceiving glitter of the American Dream. Le Guin saw clearly that our system of incessant production and creation of apparent wealth benefitted only a very few, and that many others were left behind and outside (2019). Thus, she felt it necessary to use her position as a writer to raise awareness for the marginalised. There is a very poignant passage in her public address to Mills College's Class of 1983 that captures this idea: "Success is somebody else's failure. Success is the American Dream we can keep dreaming because most people in most places, including thirty million of ourselves, live wide awake in the terrible reality of poverty. No, I do not wish you success. I don't even want to talk about it. I want to talk about

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failure" (Le Guin, 1989a, p. 116). With this in mind, it is no surprise to see that quite a few of her characters are outcasts at some point in their lives, who eventually overcome their identity and psychological issues by relying on others, or even, in some cases, on each other.

Le Guin herself stated at one point that one of the goals that she wanted to achieve with her writing was for her readers to have "the experience of 'the other,'" (Wray, 2013, para. 12) which is why many of her characters in the Earthsea saga are presented as "the powerless, the disempowered,—women, children, a wizard who has spent his gift and must live as an 'ordinary' man" ("Chronicles of Earthsea", 2004, para. 32), and stand apart from the more classic fantasy hero. The references in this last quote are clearly directed to the characters of Tehanu, Tenar and Ged, but there are also others like Irian or Irioth who can be included in this same category. Since the marginalisation of these characters is tightly linked to the identity issues that they suffer from, this essay will study them together[i]. Starting with Tenar, her otherness stems from the fact that her real identity is taken away when the identity of Arha, the Priestess of the Tombs, is imposed upon her. This implies that years of instruction will lead her to forgetting almost everything related to her family and early life. As John Crow and Richard Erlich describe it, she "gives up personal identity in the service of a social order" (1979, p. 205). She is newly introduced to her true identity when Ged arrives in Atuan and gives her back her true name, that of Tenar. However, she is not able to relate to this new identity immediately, and the process of "[finding] individuation" (Byrne, 1995, p. 152) will actually take her quite a few years, because the knowledge that there are different bits that make up her self (Le Guin, 2016c) will take some time getting used to. As a consequence, for a great part of her life, Tenar will be a powerless character who shows a tendency to always follow the lead of others, usually men. This is what she says to Ged, reflecting on her life: "I was made, moulded like clay, by the will of the women serving the Old Powers … Then I went free, with you, for a moment, and with Ogion. But it was not *my* freedom. Only it gave me a choice: and I chose. I chose to mould myself like clay to the use of a farm and a farmer and our children. I made myself a vessel. I know its shape. But not the clay. Life danced me. I know the dances. But I don't know who the dancer is" (Le Guin, 2016c, p. 861).

If we look now at Ged, a character who has been labelled an "alien" (Slusser, 1986: 74), his otherness stems from the fact that the role of Archmage was imposed on him, and he never managed to fully relate to it. In turn, this implies that he was forced to silence some other bits that composed his self, mainly, the much-cherished identity of the shepherd. Unlike Tenar, Ged will always be aware of these different identities that he harbours, and will be powerful enough to make a decision to go back to his roots and leave the world of wizardry behind, once he has been forced to spend his power to save the archipelago. As mentioned, Ged travels to his birthplace of Gont, but, upon his arrival, his identity issues are enhanced, because he finds it

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impossible to relate to any of the identities that he has at hand; he cannot go back to being a wizard, because his power is gone, and, more importantly, the mere thought of going back to being what he once was "shows the desolation of his voice" (Le Guin, 2016c, p. 731). At the same time, he still feels severed from his identity of the shepherd, although he has started taking care of goats up on the mountain. As a result, during this time, others see Ged as "a shadow man, no good to anyone, a dead man forced to be alive" (Le Guin, 2016c, p. 772). In a similar way to Ged, Irioth is another character who has a troublesome past, from which he is trying to escape (Le Guin, 2012b). In his case, it is the realisation that his whole life has been nothing but a thirst for power that makes it difficult for him to relate to the identity that he has built for himself. This will consequently lead him to seeking a place where he can start from scratch and make an appropriate but minimal use of his power.

Last, Tehanu and Irian's stories are closely related because of their shared background. The two of them belong to a powerful, though minority, race of Earthsea, namely those who are born with half-dragon and half-human characteristics. Due to this, they inhabit marginal social spaces from the very beginning of their lives. Besides, none of them receive a true name, which in Earthsea prevents them from possessing a real identity. In Tehanu's case, what we read is that either "she did not know it or would not say it" (Le Guin, 2016c, p. 646), and, as a result, Tenar, who adopts her and looks after her, gives her a use name. As for Irian, she is aware that, although this is her true name, there is something missing from it (Le Guin, 2012a). Since she has more information about herself, this affects her behaviour, in that she will be a stronger character all throughout her life than Tehanu, whose lack of true name leads to her being "blank, unanswering, docile in the way an inanimate thing, a stone, is docile" (Le Guin, 2016c, p. 672). The fact that all these characters have considerable problems understanding their identities, be it due to impositions, ignorance, or regrets, implies that they will quite often lack a voice of their own, and will consequently lose the opportunity to take a stance and secure a position of power for themselves. Ultimately, they will be forced to inhabit the peripheral spaces on the edges of their societies and cultures.

Despite their having to navigate such complicated situations, not everything is doom and gloom for Le Guin's characters. This is because Le Guin believed that if an individual was placed on the periphery, that is, away from central positions of power, it was then that they would really have the means and opportunities to develop themselves on their own terms and avoid being conditioned by the impositions of the system. In this regard, this was her advice to Mills College students: "when you fail, and are defeated, and in pain, and in the dark, then I hope you will remember that darkness is your country, where you live … where the future is. Our roots are in the dark … What hope we have lies there … in the dark that nourishes, where human beings grow human souls" (Le Guin, 1989a, p. 117). Likewise, her Earthsea characters also find the

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means to overcome their problems, and develop positions from which they will be able to affect the world around them. In this process, none of the aforementioned characters manage on their own, but cooperation with others is essential for their success, which allows us to study the idea of community in her writing. As mentioned before, the American West's mythical individualism was a trait that regionalist writers sought to fight, as can be seen in acclaimed novels like Stegner's *Angle of Repose*, Silko's *Ceremony*, or Proulx's short story "Brokeback Mountain".

In this regard, the family formed by Ged, Tenar, and their adopted child, Tehanu, is one of the clearest examples. All three characters converge in Gont at a point in their lives when all three of them still suffer from a lack of a fixed, relatable identity. What is interesting to see in the interaction between these three is that, although Ged and Tenar have a history together that goes quite far back in time, neither of them shows any hesitation when it comes to taking Tehanu, a rejected child, under their wing. The culmination of their community-building arrives when they move to the mountainous area of Re Albi, in Gont, to live in the old house that belonged to Ged's mentor, Ogion. Here, the simple idea of being able to have a herd of goats and plant an orchard where there will be plenty of fruit and vegetables seems a prospect strong enough to guarantee the wellbeing of all three of them (Le Guin, 2016c). Besides, this place that they can now call home grants each of them the opportunity to know themselves better. To Ged, it gives the chance to understand, accept and strike a balance between his identities of goatherd and wizard; Tenar is finally strong enough to decide by herself that this is the place where she wants to be, and these are the people with whom she wants to share her life; and Tehanu finally feels loved and understood, so much so, that she decides to remain with Ged and Tenar even after the dragon Kalessin, the supreme being of Earthsea and Giver of Names, gives her her true name and offers her the chance to fly to where her race lives (Le Guin, 2016c). The moment when she receives her true name from Kalessin is a key event in Tehanu's development, together with the help that she receives from Ged and Tenar. Gaining this knowledge means that she is able to learn a little bit more about her real identity, but she will still need quite some time until she finally gains a total understanding of who she is. This happens at the closing of Le Guin's last Earthsea novel, *The Other Wind* (2012c), when she finally adopts the form of a dragon and flies away with Kalessin and Orm Irian. In Tehanu's story, we can see how the help that she receives from several individuals sets her on the track to finding herself.

Turning to look now at Irian, there are two other characters that contribute crucially to her overcoming her identity problems. The first of these is the Master Patterner of Roke, who is the only one of the Wise to really offer any help to Irian when she arrives at the School of Wizardry seeking aid. The way the Master Patterner helps her is by, somehow, daring her to use the power that she has within herself and become what she is meant to be, that is, a dragon (Le Guin, 2012a). Similar to what happened to Tehanu, Irian still knows that there is something else that

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she has to learn, which is why –now become a dragon with "great gold-mailed flanks, the spiked, coiling tales, the talons, the breath that was bright fire" (2012a, p. 375)– she sets off west to find those who will finally give her her true name. In *The Other Wind*, which chronologically comes after *Dragonfly*, Irian reappears with her complete name, Orm Irian, which she received from Kalessin, and an identity that she can fully relate to (Le Guin, 2012c).

Lastly, Irioth's story also shows people offering him the help he needs to start a new life and to try to balance all the wrong that he did when he was younger. In his case, he also receives help from two individuals. First, there is Emer, who upon his arrival gives him shelter, feeds him, clothes him, takes him into her home indefinitely, and gives him a chance to integrate himself into the society of the village by curing the murrain that affects the farmers' herds. Even if his past behaviour and his misuse of power haunt Irioth, Emer never questions him, because she can see through him and feel that "[he] meant no harm to her. She thought there was kindness in him, the way he spoke of the animals" (Le Guin, 2012b, p. 237). In a way, Emer's attitude towards Irioth allows him to see that there is still goodness in him, and that she is offering him an opportunity for redemption. This finally comes with the arrival of Ged as Archmage, cleansing Irioth's past and granting him forgiveness. With the prospect of a new life in a community, to which he feels he can do good and contribute, Irioth decides to stay in Emer's house.

By depicting characters who clearly benefit from establishing a relationship with different places of Earthsea and the communities or individuals that inhabit them, Le Guin follows the tradition previously established by regionalist writers of the American West, in that she emphasises the idea that humans "need other people in order to be people" (Le Guin, 1989c, p. 158), and that we inevitably feel psychologically attached to different geographical spaces.

4. CLOSING REMARKS

In conclusion, the present study has shown how, as the product of an individual deeply rooted in the American West, the fantasy universe of Earthsea granted Le Guin a geographical space where she was able to structure, among other things, certain elements that she believed characterised what living in that area meant for the majority of its population. In her created world, the material and factual references to and parallels with the American West are, at best, very difficult to locate, as references to those prominent vast and empty landscapes of the West are extremely scarce. However, thanks to her literary genius, Le Guin succeeded in conveying the essence of the experience of the West. In a genre –the western– that has been historically dominated by realism, Le Guin encourages us to seek, beyond the four walls of our reality, that which defines our human existence. After all, she believed that it is through fantasy's defiance of reality as the

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sole valid reference "that we fantastic humans may arrive, in our peculiar fashion, at the truth" (Le Guin, 2018, p. 35). For this, it was necessary for Le Guin to walk away from the constructed myth and idea of the West, as this focused only on a few chosen elements that failed to convey the ultimate and more complex reality, of the experience of the West. Of course, this implied that Le Guin found much of the literary tradition and its material that had been produced up to her time rather useless to complete her task, unlike the regional take that had developed around the second and third decades of the past century, which did offer her the necessary tools. Thus, to motifs of traditional westerns like mobility, she added other elements that were more akin to the regionalist perspective. Among these, we have seen that she discarded the classic image of the hero as a strong and determined individual, in favour of characters that were often marginalised and presented both psychological and identity-related difficulties that were eventually, as we have seen, overcome through their cooperation with others. These are indeed tools that were useful for Le Guin to shape and share what she felt living in the American West was really all about, and more importantly, the main reasons why we believe she should be granted a place among those writers who belong to the group of America's Western novelists.

NOTES

[i] For a more thorough study of the identity issues of Tenar and Tehanu, see my articles "'Beware Her, the Day She Finds Her Strength!': Tehanu and the Power of the Marginalized to Affect Social Change in Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea Saga" and "Gender and Old Age as Sources of Empowerment: Tenar's Case in Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea Saga".

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