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Object and Character in The Dark Is Rising

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end, pulls the family together. Moving to Wales has not helped Peter to adjust to the loss of his mother.

No one understood how lonely and frustrated he was. Becky had already found friends of her own, and David was preoccupied with work. Peter hadn't made any friends at all. Many of the boys at school went straight home afterward to work in their fathers' shops or on their farms, and the ones who didn't all played games he didn't know, like cricket which looked silly, or more often something they called football that wasn't football at all. Peter stayed aloof and continued to feel strange. (24-5)

Ironically, it is the finding of the Key which puts Peter in touch with Wales. He begins to learn about the country's history, first-hand from Taliesin and second-hand from books loaned to him by Dr. Rhys. And he begins to be interested in the people around him, like Mr. Evans and Dr. Rhys, who share his growing feeling for the magic in the land. And his final act with the Key, returning it to the barrow where Taliesin is buried, makes him a part of Wales; from just watching the scenes the Key shows him, he moves to become, in a brief but extremely important way, a participant in Taliesin's own life story.

Even more important, perhaps, than his adjustment to Wales, is Peter's adjustment to his family's new configuration; and the Key is the focal point of the crisis which brings the family back together. Each member of the family, though perhaps least of all Becky, has been wrapped up in his or her own grief since the death of Ann Morgan. With David surrounded by work (a means for him to forget), Jennifer in the States until Christmas, and Becky and Peter adjusting (or not adjusting) to Wales in quite different ways, there is, as the book opens, no common ground on which the members of the family can meet. The Key provides this. Becky, the youngest and the one with the fewest preconceived notions of reality to overcome, is the first to notice the change the Key has made in Peter and the first to support and believe him. Jennifer, after much agonizing about her own beliefs and about her concern for Peter's sanity, is the second one to come around. The children keep the knowledge of the Key and its possibilities from their father until they have to tell him at least some of what has been happening, and so David is the last to back Peter. Peter, especially, is unsure of whose side his father will take; he and his father have, after all, been on opposite sides ever since they arrived in Wales. But David does support Peter, and strongly, too.

The catalysts for David's support are both Dr. Rhys and Dr. Owen. Dr. Rhys' belief in the importance of the object to Peter and Dr. Owen's unpleasant insistence that David force the children to hand over the treasure that

they might have found both encourage David to Peter's side. In addition, David's own desire and need to trust his children with even more responsibility now that their mother is dead move him to allow Peter to have things his own way for a time. In the end, of course, the Key is gone, and Dr. Owen has to be content with believing that he was chasing only a rumor.

The final sign that all is going to be better with the Morgan family is their decision to consider staying on in Wales for another year. David has been offered another year at the University of Wales in Aberystwyth but is not intending to stay, feeling that the children, and perhaps Peter most of all, need to get back to more familiar surroundings. Significantly, it is Peter who speaks for all three of the children when, after facing Dr. Owen about the Key, he suggests to David that the whole family decide what to do for the coming year. Although Bond puts none of it in words, the reader gets the impression by the end of the novel that the Morgans have adjusted to Ann's death, that the family is operating as a family again and will stay in Wales for another year.

The Key is, in fact, the key to the novel; it is the device which connects the world of Peter Morgan, twentieth-century child, with the world of Taliesin, sixth-century Welsh bard. And Nancy Bond is, in all senses, the holder of the key, the one who takes traditional Welsh materials and interweaves them with a twentieth-century situation so that each is affected by the other, each is enriched by the other. Without the traditional Welsh materials, *A String in the Harp* would be just another adolescent problem novel; the traditional materials make it a novel about understanding on many levels, levels which would not be present without those traditional materials.

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Object and Character in *The Dark Is Rising*

by Raymond L. Plante

Shortly after *The Dark Is Rising*—the second book in Susan Cooper's fantasy series by the same name—was published, one critic wrote, "With a cosmic struggle between good and evil as her subject, Susan Cooper

invites comparisons with Tolkien, and survives the comparison remarkably well" ("Imaginary" 685). In fact, Cooper's accurate and often subtle employment of Arthurian legend reflects scholarly research that follows the example of the hobbit-creator and Oxford don she

once studied under (McElderry 369). And like *Lord of the Rings*, *The Dark Is Rising* is about the battle between good and evil—except here, a strange difference appears. A metaphysicist coming upon such a profound topic is sure to ask what the nature of the struggle is. Numinous objects—referred to as the “Things of Power”—are integral to the plot, but mostly mechanically, not thematically. The self-motivated action of the characters seems second to their predetermined destinies; their roles as pawns of the Light are more important to the plot. Cooper’s battle between good and evil emphasizes fate—mixed with intuition—and ritual, while de-emphasizing free will and man’s capacity to act against the power of evil.

The five books that make up *The Dark Is Rising* follow the quest for the Things of Power by the forces of good, known as the Light. In the first book of the series, *Over Sea, Under Stone*, three children—Simon, Jane, and Barney Drew—help their great-uncle Merriman obtain the first Thing of Power: the Grail. In the book called *The Dark Is Rising*, eleven year-old Will Stanton learns that he is the last of the Old Ones—the guardians of the Light. With the help of Merriman, Will develops his powers and obtains the second Thing of Power, the Six Signs. *Greenwitch* sees Will and the three Drews working to obtain the secret of the Grail from a seasonal spirit of the sea. In *The Grey King*, Will goes to Wales to search out Bran, King Arthur’s son brought to the present century, and to find the Golden Harp, the third Thing of Power. In the conclusion, *Silver on the Tree*, the Light obtains the last Thing of Power, the Crystal Sword. Here, Merriman, Will, Bran, and the Drews join together to meet the final rising of the Dark and to defeat it forever.

The large number of powerful objects tempts the metaphysicist to see them as symbols whose meaning describes their sources of power. Malory’s symbols in his *History of King Arthur* achieve this: the familiar sword-in-the-stone suggests its symbolic meaning by its interaction with people:

And upon new years day the barons let make a justes and turnement, that all knights that would just and turney here might play. And all this was ordained for to keepe the lords together and the commons, for the archbishop trusted that God would make him knowne that should win the sword. (10)

During this tournament, Arthur brings the sword once in the stone to his brother, Sir Key.

And assoone as sir Key saw the sword, hee wist well that is the sword of the stone, and so hee rode to his father, sir Ector, and said, “Sir, loe here is the sword of the stone; wherefore I must bee king of this land. (11)

In this tale, all mistakenly believe that the king is one of the great knights of the land; no one suspects that a mere squire is the long hidden heir to the throne. This suggests that the sword does not judge men by their outward appearance, but can detect an inherent quality unseen by all but God.

The meanings behind Cooper’s Things of Power, however, are not so clearly defined. For example, the role

of the grail, as seen in *Greenwitch*, seems very mechanical. In one instance, it reveals a recipe of spells that have the power to aid the Dark (73), and in another, its inscriptions reveal prophetic clues to aid the Light (140-1). Similarly, the Golden Harp found in *The Grey King* is used to wake Six Sleepers. The power of these Things does not reflect anything in man. They are merely of the Old Magic; they do not need to mean anything to complete their purpose.

One way to determine the possible meaning behind the Things of Power is to look at their roles in the final conflict between the Light and the Dark. The Grail and the Harp do not appear. The Six Signs (collected in the second book, *The Dark Is Rising*) do return. In this climatic scene, the six representatives of the Light race to the midsummer tree. At one point, Will recalls a line of a poem—“Six Signs shall burn”—and then directs the others each to take a sign and circle the tree (*Silver* 256). The order of events suggests that the prophecy—and not the conditions of the situation—provides Will with both the motivation and the manner in which to act. If the Signs are supposed to represent some form of unity, one would expect consistent clues to such a meaning throughout the series. This does not happen, as one reviewer notes:

We never did figure out the lessons of the six elemental signs which Will wears attached to his belt, but we are promised three more chances [books] to get it all straightened out. (“Younger” 685)

The role of the signs seem to play down the role of man, free-willed and capable of effecting change.

The crystal sword acts similarly. When it is obtained from the king of the Lost Land, the sword seems to symbolize hope—as described in the poetic prophecy, “I am the tomb of every hope/I am Eirias!” (*Silver* 198) Will and Bran, in order to receive the sword, must overcome the king’s despair. However, this interpretation does not hold, for the king, once he has relinquished the sword, becomes apathetic, as seen by his listless words, “Lost. . . lost. . .” (201). The sword also seems to have the power to identify the Dark, as seen by Arthur’s words, “And still it flames for the Dark. Still the warning” (238) and by the way it helps reveal Mrs. Rowland as a spy (232). But neither of the above characteristics have much to do with the sword’s use in the final conflict, when Bran cuts the blossom from the tree. One might argue that the sword represents a number of virtues which are all necessary to overcome evil in the end. But it is difficult to learn of the sword’s true meaning without some consistency in its use. Without a meaning for the sword, the reader merely sees magical—although exciting—ritual that overcomes the Dark.

One might argue that the individual objects themselves are not of prime importance; rather, the way the story fits into the Quest motif might explain the role of the objects, following the example of the Arthurian Quest for the Holy Grail and the numerous fairy tales that originated during the Middle Ages. W. H. Auden outlines the elements of this genre in order to analyze *The Lord of the Ring*:

- 1) A precious Object and/or Person to be found and possessed or married.
- 2) A long journey to find it, for its whereabouts are not originally known to the hero.
- 3) A hero. The precious Object cannot be found by anybody, but only by the one person who possesses the qualities of breeding or character.
- 4) A test or series of tests by which the unworthy are screened out, and the hero is revealed.
- 5) The Guardians of the Object who must be overcome before it can be won. (83)

It happens that each of the stories fits fairly well into the Quest model. The Object (1) in each is one of the Things of Power. (For *Greenwitch*, the Object is a manuscript that holds the secret of one of the Things of Power, the Grail.) The journeys (2) take the characters through lands both real—like Wales and Cornwall—and fantastic—like the Lost Land and the Thames of hundreds of years past. The heroes (3), the ones who obtain the Objects, vary. For *Over Sea, Under Stone* and *Greenwitch*, the role is shared by the Drew siblings. For *The Dark Is Rising*, Will is the “hero.” He shares the role with Bran in *The Grey King*, and Bran takes it over in *Silver on the Tree*. Each Object has its Guardian(s) (5), like the Walker and the *Greenwitch*. The stories also satisfy the fourth criterion, the most important in showing how the hero succeeds; however, it is satisfied in a strange way.

In fact, the successful comparison between Cooper’s *The Dark Is Rising* and Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* ends in an analysis of the fourth criterion. In one test, Tolkien’s hero, Frodo, is confronted by one rival, Boromir. By wanting to take the ring and use it to save Gondor, Boromir shows that he lacks the foresight to know it would only destroy him. On the other hand, Frodo has the virtue of foresight and realizes the danger. In this scene that ends in the breaking of the fellowship, “the unworthy”—Boromir—“is screened out [killed], and the hero, revealed” (*Ring* 413-5, *Tower* 15-6). Frodo succeeds by making use of virtuous qualities.

In contrast, the Light succeed at their quests due to qualities predetermined at the hero’s birth. The Old One awakes in Will as he obtains one of the Six Signs:

Driven by some unfamiliar part of his mind, without quite knowing what he was doing, Will gripped the iron circle on his belt, and he stood up as straight and tall as he could and pointed at the Walker, and called out, “. . . The moment for giving up the sign is now. . . Unless you would carry it for ever, obey the Old Ones now. Now!” (*Rising* 54)

Merriman shows how simple obtaining the Sign actually was when he says, “[The Walker] has been waiting for you to be born, and to stand alone with him and command the Sign from him, for time past your imagining” (59). When obtaining the Golden Harp, Will answers the riddles put to him like quiz questions:

The riddle was not impossible; he knew that the answer lay somewhere in his memory, stored from the Book of Gramarye, treasure book of enchantment

of the Light that had been destroyed as soon as he, the last of the Old Ones, had been shown what it held. (*Grey King* 93)

Bran requires no logic or wit to answer his question; it just slowly comes to mind.

Bran struggled. The Three Elders of the World. . . somewhere he knew. . . it was strange and yet familiar, as if somewhere he had seen or read. . . the three oldest creatures, the three oldest things. . . he had read it at school, and he had read it in Welsh. . . Bran stood up straight and cleared his throat. “The Three Elders of the World,” he said, “are the Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd, the Eagle of Gwernabwy, and the Blackbird of Celle Gadarn.” (92-3)

This is not the most obvious first guess. Bran receives the crystal sword in a similar fashion. He uses the argument of destiny to persuade the King of the Lost Land to give up the sword: “Eirias is my birthright, made by you at my father’s bidding” (*Silver* 196). Bran convinces the King of this by reciting one of the King’s dreams, an action that in itself fulfils it (198). The reader is told nothing of this dream beforehand, and one is led to believe that Bran’s knowledge was built into his mind because of his noble birth. At these crucial points in the battle between good and evil, superhumans succeed through ritual action, unlike ordinary humans who succeed through virtuous action.

It should be said that not all the Quests follow some apparently predetermined pattern. The detective work of the three Drew children shows true originality of thought. Their action is de-emphasized, however, in a manner that will be explained later.

Besides the nature of numinous Objects, the other magic element of the series that sheds light on the good-evil conflict is the nature of the important action of characters. Much of the motivation of the Old Ones and Bran comes from some prophecy or the design of some spell. When Simon reveals what Barney had seen in the Grail while under the enchantment of the Dark (*Greenwitch* 73-4), Will and Merriman rush to the sea to work three spells that will help retrieve the needed manuscript. In *Silver on the Tree*, Bran and Will move to seek out the Lost Land in response to instructions to do so from the Lady (*Silver* 95). Decisions are predetermined, and once an action is carried out, magical fate or destiny takes over.

The Drew children, on the other hand, seem a little more free-willed. But many times, uninspired intuition acts as their motivation. In *Greenwitch*, the children see themselves in a potential crisis but have nothing to do:

And Merriman and Will had still not appeared at all.

“But what could [Merriman] be doing? Something must have happened!”

“I don’t know quite what we can do, except wait.” Simon was subdued now too. “I mean, we could go out to look for him, but where would we start?”

“The Grey House,” Barney said suddenly.

“Good idea. Come on, Jane” (43).

Needless to say, not only do they find Merriman in the first place they look, they—in doing so—have a confrontation with the agent of the Dark which advances the story. On another day, Barney and Simon have nothing to do, so they go for a walk. They soon run into Rufus the dog, who leads them to the hideout of the dark agent (54-5). This leads to other plot-advancing events. In *Silver on the Tree*, the Drews are trying to help Will and Bran find “singing mountains.” After a few guesses as to where to start looking, they come up with no conclusive answer. The line, “We have to start somewhere” motivates them (68-9). The first place they look turns out to be the proper location. Though the Drews exercise a little more free will, their intuition seems to tell them that as long as they keep moving, fate will lead them to success.

A few notable resolutions do come out of virtuous action inspired by original thought. The mortals of the story—the Drew children and John Rowlands—perform such action. But the importance of these resolutions is de-emphasized in two ways.

First, the significance of such a resolution is lost amidst all the magical and ritualistic happenings that also work to advance the story. Jane’s unselfishness wins her the manuscript in *Greenwitch*, but the spells of the Old Ones take control of the spirit. In the *Silver on the Tree*, John Rowlands emphasizes the importance of “loving bonds” when he is forced to judge Bran’s role in the Light’s quest (250-1), but his decision does not defeat the Dark; the ritual of the Signs circling the tree and the sword snipping off the bud defeats the Dark. One would expect these possible themes, instead of the ritual, to be the central turning point of the episode; they are not.

It should be noted that the above episode—when John Rowlands puts his judgment on the Light-Dark conflict—is somewhat complex. While explaining his decision, Rowlands makes a point about free will:

I do not believe any power can possess the mind of a man or woman, Blod—or whatever your name should really be. I believe in God-given free will, you see. I think nothing is forced on us, except by other people like ourselves. I think our choices are our own. And you are not possessed therefore, you must be allied to the Dark because you have chose to be—terrible though that is for me to believe after all these years (250).

Here the reader gets a sniff of a possible theme about free will. The idea is later emphasized symbolically during the bud-snipping scene, when Rowlands grabs Bran’s Sign to ward a “rearing attack” from the Dark so that Bran can use two hands to snip the bud from the tree (257). All the characters seem to share this ability to choose sides; yet this ability alone does not constitute free will. The reader must consider the familiar saying that good intentions are not enough; people demonstrate their free will through a sequence of choices—their means to an end. The characters in *The Dark Is Rising* choose sides, but the rest of their choices have already been made for them by the various spells and prophecies; therefore, they actually have no free will at all. If one argued that choice of sides is enough to define free will, the overpowering presence of magic certainly de-emphasizes its importance.

The possible themes are de-emphasized in a second way when the mortals (including Bran) in the end lose all memory of their part in this grand battle, and thus the lessons they have learned (268). People learn lessons about overcoming evil because they can recall experiences in which their own actions proved to be good ones. When the mortals in the *The Dark Is Rising* lose their memory, they don’t get to realize the consequences of their actions. They acted—acted quite virtuously—yet they do not get the benefit of using the experience again sometime in their lives. The lessons they demonstrated are useless.

It seems that the lessons learned are not what is central to Cooper’s battle. Merriman hints at this in his final words:

“For remember,” he said, “that it is altogether your world now. You and all the rest. We have delivered you from evil, but the evil that is inside men is at the last a matter for men to control. . . . And the world will still be imperfect, because men are imperfect. Good men will still be killed by bad, or sometimes by other good men, and there will still be pain and disease and famine, anger and hate. But if you work and care and are watchful, as we have tried to be for you, then in the long run the worse will never, ever, triumph over the better. And the gifts put into some men, that shine as bright as Eirias the sword, shall light the dark corners of life for all the rest, in so brave a world.” (267)

It seems that the job of the Light was to deliver man from the evil outside of him. The evil inside still exists, and the lessons of unselfishness, hope, and “loving bonds” can conquer it. As for the evil outside, fate, destiny, prophecy, and the “Old Magic” are more effective.

When Merriman reveals the antagonist of five books’ worth of text as the evil from without, theme-hunters can’t help but feel disappointed. Perhaps they expect a hidden moral statement when confronting an adaptation of King Arthur or the familiar battle between good and evil. The fact that the story goes against expectations provokes a serious question: what is the purpose of good children’s literature? One purpose—with or without a moral—should be to send the child back to the bookshelf with some idea of what to look for in literature: conflict and plot, setting, character, theme—signposts that have made the great works rewarding. Through conflict, plot, and setting, each book in *The Dark Is Rising* series ignites strong feelings as if the reader were part of the story, sending him or her back to the shelf for the next installment. But Cooper’s emphasis on fate breaks down the effectiveness of character and theme, keeping the work from being everything it could.

The over-ruling power of fate eliminates the necessity of character. Cooper has put much effort into defining her characters, as seen by the two sides of Will, the mysterious Merriman who provokes the reader’s curiosity, and the identifiable Drew children. Even the minor characters—the Stantons and the various locals of Cornwall, Wales, and the Thames—are made real and recognizable. But it doesn’t matter what they are like if they follow pre-ordained paths and choices. For example,

the concept of character is essential to understanding the story of *Hamlet*: it would not be the great work that it is if, after five acts of the prince's self-examination, the audience discovered that the ending had been pre-ordained and that his choice didn't matter. Consider other works and their heroes: *Huckleberry Finn* and Huck, *The Scarlet Letter* and Hester Prynne, *Great Expectations* and Pip. Each hero affects the outcome by making a choice that is directly related to his character. When fate controls the events, as it seems to in Cooper's work, character is diminished, along with much of what readers get out of literature.

The importance of fate in *The Dark Is Rising* causes another problem: one of the crucial concepts—the battle between good and evil—is central to the plot, yet the idea's significance is not, and the conflict between good and evil seems no longer an effective theme. In coming upon a story of such a conflict, the reader usually knows which side will win before turning the first page. He continues, however, in order to discover *why* good wins. In Cooper's fantasy, the Dark is clearly the undesirable side, as seen by its power to corrupt men and to instill fear and terror. On the other hand, it is not so clear why the Light is entirely desirable, when this side denies the importance of free will. The Light wins by following a prefabricated set of instructions—as intricate and fabulous as they are—and had these instructions not been written long ago, the Dark could have just as easily taken the other's place. In the light of fate, the significance of the battle disappears; if there were some other point to be made, the story's outcome would appear to have little effect on it.

The answer to "how?" for a story is important because it can ultimately answer the question "why?" If fate is the answer to "how?" then no answer to "why?" is necessary. Perhaps Cooper's intended theme lies in the setting or in the rendering of a legend. Whatever the answer, she chose a tale about Arthur and the battle between good and evil and therefore attracts theme-hunters who look to the "Things of Power" for meaning. They will examine how the action of the characters affects the end. Finally, however, they will find a familiar but very confusing device: pre-determined destiny.

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