

SUMMONING FANTASY:
THE REAL MAGIC OF *THE DARK IS RISING* SEQUENCE



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ABSTRACT

Published between the fantastically innovative years of 1965 and 1977, Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising* sequence balances on the threshold of radical change, poised between the conservative constructions of its genre and the subversive undercurrents of a real and changing world. Like many English fantasies of the era, the sequence is rooted in the real places of Britain, depicting their actual natural landscapes, cultural histories, and legendary and mythic intersections in vivid, atmospheric detail. However, in a subtle but radical shift from the traditional Romantic constructions of nature, locality and mystic spectrality, Cooper challenges the underlying structures of fantasy, summoning her magic from the real and immanent material world rather than presenting it as an external or oppositional force. Though similar trends towards 'real magic' can be found across post-war children's fantasy, the sequence is unique in the prevalence and power of its fantastic summonings. As a classic of the genre, it also embodies the influential potential of children's literature to inspire cultural and artistic change. Through its awakening of the landscape to *fantastic immanence*, *The Dark Is Rising* sequence presents new forms of empathic connection to natural energies; in its intimate, corporeal engagements with a shifting *fantastic timespace*, it offers a subjective and relational approach to culture, history and locality through its child protagonists; in its intertextual allusions and awakening of *fantastic intuition*, it points young readers to the real and subversive powers of creative and intellectual engagement, enhancing their awareness of the intrinsic connections between mind, body and material world. By exploring the radical potential of Cooper's text, I hope to illuminate its inherent structural and thematic tensions, as well as encourage a new mode of critical engagement with post-war children's fantasy.

Keywords: Susan Cooper, fantasy, landscape, oral tradition, Celtic studies

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CHAPTER I

IMMANENCE:
LANDSCAPE AS FANTASY

(excerpt)

The relationship of childhood to the natural world continues to evolve, with feminist critics such as Chawla (1994) and Curry (2013) parting from Romantic arguments for an intrinsic connection between children, nature and creativity (Cobb, 1977) while investigating their strong cultural relationships and representations. Through its prominent use of landscape and underlying ethical engagement (Molson, 1982), children's fantasy presents an early and influential social construction of environment. As Curry proposes, this "storied empathy" has the potential to facilitate empathic child engagement with the natural world (p. 12). However, the constructed landscapes of these texts may also reflect the conservative traditions of their genre or engender new problems of representation. In tracing the emergence of *fantastic immanence*, I therefore hope to open a conversation on its possibilities as well as its limitations as a restorative form of literary engagement with the natural world.

Though the quality I wish to discuss is in dialogue with the responsive, interconnected material world of Thrift's theories (2002, 2004) as well as the Gaia theory of James Lovelock (1979), I have chosen the term *immanence* for its philosophical flexibility, its relationship to ecofeminism's ecological immanence, and its spiritual overtones. *Immanent*, by definition, is that which is "indwelling, inherent; actually present or abiding *in*; remaining within" ("immanent, adj.," 2014). As a philosophy, immanence developed in opposition to transcendence; in place of an external creator, the divine is regarded as existing within the world itself: "permanently pervading and sustaining the universe" ("immanent, adj.," 2014). Material nature, in all of its manifestations, is thus of intrinsic, rather than instrumental, value. Connecting human perception to this immanent world, Edmund Husserl proposes a *life-world* "whose concreteness thus extends farther than that of 'things'" to a unity of world and consciousness (1954, p. 130). In many ways, the contemporary application of this concept to a fragmented, fluctuating, living world reclaims a Romantic-like sense of spiritual wonder (Thrift, 2004, p. 123). But rather than attributing this awe to an external divinity, modern theories celebrate the rich, sensuous power of materiality itself, and its turbulent release of creative energy through implicit relational connections. While the rational world tends to dismiss earlier and parallel worldviews (Chawla, 1994, pp. 145–146), current models reframe animistic and syncretic philosophies as aspects of reality.

Lovelock's Gaia theory (1979) is perhaps the most contested of these views, presenting the natural world as a unified, self-regulating organism with the agency to destroy as well as create. As Butler explores, this unsettling and embodied interpretation of immanence has, perhaps more than any other, captured the imagination of fantasists (2006, pp. 125–136).

However, despite its prevalence in the work of post-war fantasists such as Cooper, Le Guin, and Wrightson, among others, the turn towards immanence and Gaia-inspired awakenings has been studied primarily for its ecological rather than structural or fantastic function (Curry, 2013; Spivack, 1987, pp. 14–15). Nonetheless, this trend positions landscape as not only an affective power in the text but an active agent of magic and plot, a literary *fantaseme* as defined by Nikolajeva, “used to introduce the extraordinary into the narrative” (1988, p. 23). Though traditionally a variant of the ‘magical passage’ fantaseme, the concept of immanence extends the function of landscape much further, to both a ‘magic space’ and ‘magic time’ in its shifting connectivity, as well as a ‘messenger’ in its numinous, awakened form. Within *The Dark Is Rising* sequence, the literary portrayal of *fantastic immanence* manifests in three distinct, accumulative phases: 1) realistic description of biology, geology and topology, 2) affective aesthetic enhancement, and 3) supernatural embodiment of natural agency. While the first two manifestations may also apply to realistic fiction, the third phase is unique to fantasy. Whether or not these supernatural conjurings are *impossible*, the critical moment of hesitation described by Tzvetan Todorov (1975) occurs and is moreover, following Manlove, an intentional narrative effect (1999, p. 3). However, these fantastic constructions are also grounded in the real agency and mystery of the material world, radicalising the historically subversive religious and political landscapes of golden age children’s fantasy and offering an alternative to conventionally accepted models of spirituality and nature. But rather than looking backwards towards a naturally innocent or childlike world, this trend moves forward into unstable, uncanny, and frightening terrain. By acknowledging the intrinsic power of the material world and thus endowing it with agency, *fantastic immanence* positions this power as a chaotic force outside of human control that not only cannot, but should not, be contained. Instead, by literally embodying this quality, radical children’s fantasy gives it voice, pushing at the very boundary of the genre by

enhancing, rather than reversing, the natural world order so that its intrinsic ‘real magic’ may be truly seen.

The Landscapes of The Dark Is Rising Sequence

Though frequently commended for their strong sense of place (P. Hunt, 2001a, p. 160; Schmidt, 1989) and even their literary agency (Watson, 2000, pp. 153–169), the specific, local landscapes of *The Dark Is Rising* sequence have largely been passed by. Although Butler (2006) explores Cooper’s use of place in detail, the focus is cultural rather than natural, and landscapes appear only briefly as archaeological or environmental sites. Similarly, while Carroll (2011) offers an extensive and insightful study of the morphological functions of *The Dark Is Rising* sequence’s landscapes as a guide to the symbolic uses of landscape across children’s literature, her discussion does not typically extend to Cooper’s realistic representations of the actual landscapes of the books, firmly rooted in the real places of Buckinghamshire, Cornwall and North Wales. While my focus on the specific landscape of Craig yr Aderyn is necessarily narrow in scope, it works towards a more complete understanding of the actual landscapes of Cooper’s settings, in their topological, geological and biological details as well as their aesthetic and fantastic awakenings.

The Details of Reality: Topology, Geology and Natural Biology

The natural features of Craig yr Aderyn and the surrounding Dysynni valley overwhelm the text of *The Grey King*. Will’s first view of the rocky promontory is of a “great grey-black crag rising, a lone peak, lower than the mountains and yet dominating all the surrounding land” (1999b, p. 20). Its strange topological position on the horizon, “at a right angle to the mountain just behind it, jutting into the flat valley floor” is emphasized repeatedly, as are its bare “jutting shelves of grey rock” (p. 57), “holes and crevices, round corners and crags” (p. 60) and the “rough stairway of grass and rock” (p. 59) Will and Bran are forced to climb. Its geological distinctness from the low-lying, fertile valley culminates in Will’s discovery at the summit of “a long slit broadened and eroded by frost and wind and rain” (p. 62) which leads into the rock. The Craig’s biological uniqueness is similarly depicted; Bran introduces it as a rare breeding ground of cormorants as well as the many

mountainous birds of Snowdonia, and Will later finds one of their nests (p. 59). Though the mountain Cader Idris ultimately dominates the landscape of *The Grey King*, brooding under fog and tattered clouds at the head of the valley (see Fig. 4), Cooper's protagonists never reach its summit; instead, the windswept peak of Craig yr Aderyn with its circling black birds and bare granite ridges functions as a narrative counterpart, the local geological and natural representation of power and height.

Cooper's descriptions of Craig yr Aderyn are informative and precise, establishing a realistic local geological and biological uniqueness. Emrys Evans suggests the presence of the real author behind the voice of the narrator: "a close observer of this particular scenery, this particular part of Wales, at this time of year" who "knows the birds, the plants, the houses, and the weather and who wants to share her enjoyment" (1989, p. 94). While this assumption can be verified biographically – Cooper was introduced to the area as a child and hung ordnance survey maps while writing (Cooper, 1996, p. 193) – her observational voice extends far beyond personal enthusiasm. As Carroll observes, the landscapes of *The Dark Is Rising* sequence are closely tied to the writings of the British landscape history movement (2011, pp. 8–10), a connection emphasised by the prevalent natural and historical depictions of landscape across post-war British fantasy as well as Lively's contribution to the field (1976). Cooper herself learned the 'footfall' practice of landscape history from her friend and mentor Jacquetta Hawkes (Carroll, 2011, pp. 8–10), and the formative influence of this practice on her writing extends from the coastal path traversings of *Over Sea, Under Stone* and *Greenwitch* to the detailed Panorama Walk of *Silver on the Tree*. Through Hawkes's *A Land* (1952), Cooper also developed a geological awareness of the landscapes of her texts, revealed in her brief allusions to the Chiltern's fossilised flint as products of the Cretaceous sea (Cooper, 1999a, p. 148; see Hawkes, 1952, pp. 87, 135) and her association of Craig yr Aderyn with "the oldest hills" (ii) – a poetic flourish grounded in Hawkes's description of the Caledonian folding of the Welsh and Scottish mountain ranges, the oldest in Britain (p. 23). Even the geological distinctiveness of the Craig has its origins in the "cracking of the Cambrian and pre-Cambrian crust" which formed Cader Idris and its surrounding outcrops in a series of molten underwater eruptions (pp. 50–51). However, the most significant impact of the movement on Cooper's writing is, I believe, the gently educational and observational voice they share. Chawla (1994)

proposes a cyclical and holistic pattern of natural awareness in which an adult mentor guides a child through the landscape; in *The Dark Is Rising* sequence, Cooper passes down the scientific, historical and aesthetic awareness she absorbed from Hawkes to a new generation. Far from being indulgent, her own vivid childhood memories of the landscapes are subjective, generational and restorative contributions to an evolving dialogue with the living memory of the land and its natural history.

As literary constructs, the landscapes of *The Dark Is Rising* sequence have significant structural functions in addition to their natural content. Cooper's attentive imagery of the physical world shares a philosophical approach with 'primary' poetry, as defined by Yeats, and is similarly written "out of objective experience" (Chawla, 1994, p. 76); Watson compares the text to a "Wordsworthian narrative," perceptive and dynamic in its observations (2000, p. 165). In her detailed rendering of the "fierce prickling stalks" of gorse, the "slate-topped drystone wall, curving with every contour," the skylark "pouring out its rippling, throbbing song," and the "outcrops of white rock glimmering" of Will's first walk towards Craig yr Aderyn (p. 20), Cooper engages directly with the visual, tactile, and aural presence of the landscape as Will experiences it, drawing attention to the connected sensory impact of its features as well as their intrinsic values. But though this is the real world, drawn from Cooper's intimate experiential knowledge of the Dysynni Valley, it is simultaneously the fantastic setting of the parallel or 'sleeping' world, in which this immanent land awakes, and the observational voice of *The Grey King* fosters credence in this world, contributing to a "primary level of belief" (Wolfe, 1982, p. 12). As the novel moves into fantasy, the powerful energetic surfacings and lyric connectivity Thrift (2004) proposes between the human body, human consciousness and the material world lead to the land's creative awakening, through the aesthetic 'songlines' of Cooper's landscapes as well as the fantastical world they conjure.

The Aesthetics of Unreality: Palette, Lighting and Tone

In their analysis of fantastic art, George P. Landow (1982) and Terry Reece Hackford (1982) emphasize the importance of "persuasive naturalism" (Hackford, p. 146) for visual fantasy: built from realistic details, heightened through a hallucinatory preciseness, and extended through imaginative atmospheric uses of colour, lighting

and tone. Though Cooper paints in words rather than pigments, she employs these aesthetic techniques strongly throughout *The Dark Is Rising* sequence, achieving a sophisticated and affective level of visual fantasy in the tension between her naturally precise landscapes and their emotive descriptions. From the moment Will turns from coastal Tywyn inland to Craig yr Aderyn, a sense of unease permeates the text. Like Will, the reader awakens to this feeling gradually, as depictions of reality subtly shift and bend. At first it is merely the silence of the town and muted sky (p. 6) which, though mysterious in their opacity, are not in themselves fantastic. But as the road winds through the narrow hedges and Will's mounting awareness grows of entering "a part of Britain like none he had ever known before: a secret, enclosed place, with powers hidden in its shrouded centuries" (p. 7), the uncanny absence of colour, light and sound in his initial encounter become pervasive, menacing and unreal.

The palette of the novel, hinted in its title, is overwhelmingly and irreducibly *grey*. The colour appears nearly once a page, and though it reflects in part the natural Gwynedd landscape as well as the seasonal shift from autumn to winter, it does so by heightening the intensity of individual features and extending their influence, through repetition, into the associative atmosphere of the text. The granite outcropping of Craig yr Aderyn is presented as simply grey, as are the farmhouses and their slate-topped roofs; the weather is grey, a mixture of rain, heavy clouds, gusts of wind, and mist; the Brenin Llwyd or 'Grey King' is grey, in his name, his physical presence, his *milgwn* and the peak where he broods under tattered clouds. Even the raging fire on Craig yr Aderyn has "little colour in it" (p. 51), depicted instead in the smoke, cinders and charred ashes of its destruction. Similarly, Bran is "drained of all colour" (p. 23). While other colours are set against this subdued palette, they are either correspondingly subtle: "muted colours changing with every hour of the day from brown to green to purple and softly back again" (p. 36) or in stark contrast to it, as in the blue skies of the Indian summer day (p. 36) which though initially reassuring actually underscore the pervading unease, a mounting feeling that the world as depicted is more than the world as it is.

Where there is an absence of colour, there is also a diminishment of light and sound. While the second novel, *The Dark Is Rising*, is built starkly between the bright light of snow and flame and the fierce darkness of night, an aesthetic tension evocatively

mirroring the metaphysical battle between Light and Dark, the lighting of *The Grey King* is much more ambiguous, full of dim, shifting shadows and mist. When Will first awakens to the valley's menace, it appears like "a great shadow across the world" (p. 22) until, by the end of the novel, it is an ever-present, throbbing malevolence accompanying the sun's low path across the sky (p. 136). With this dimness in lighting comes a silence of tone, a stillness in the material world as though the land itself is holding its breath:

The fields were deserted, and oddly silent. No birds sang today; even the sheep seemed quiet, and there was seldom the sound of a car drifting from the valley road. It was as if all the grey valley waited for something. (p. 101)

While these effects, like the novel's colours, are drawn from the remote location of the landscape, they are similarly enhanced to the exclusion of all else in a deliberate aesthetic conjuring.

The culmination of *The Grey King*'s visual fantasy is the haunting descent of its grey, shadowed silence from the height of the mountains into the heart of the valley:

The air seemed suddenly colder, and across the fields, all around him, he could see creeping in a low ground-mist that he had not noticed before. Slowly it came pouring over the fences, relentless, like some huge crawling creature . . . obscuring everything, even the ground beneath his feet. . . . He staggered giddily, and a terrible chill struck into all the length of his body. (pp. 104–106, 109)

Like the sequence as a whole, this scene is terrifying above all else in its affective quality. Though the Brenin Llwyd speaks menacingly through the mist, the atmosphere depicts the true battle. The world is no longer real. The aesthetic descriptions of the text carry a precision that exceeds everyday perception, the same "hallucinatory effect" Landow observes in hyper-realistic paintings and photographs: "a fantastic vision of shimmering, unnaturally precise reality which we never perceive with our waking eyes" (1982, p. 109) in a summoning of the intrinsic immanence of the land. The result of this heightened awareness is the physical presence of the mist itself, encroaching and alive against Will's skin, a moving, numinous presence that is also deeply, chillingly, blindingly *real*. Against this immense natural power, Will's body has little defence. Like the sudden north wind at the top of Craig yr Aderyn or

the ruthless raging fire, the strength of the mist is the raw, nonhuman power of the living world.

Yet the immanent power of the valley is not solely destructive. The end of *The Grey King* reveals a very different local landscape as its aesthetic potentials are woken, along with its Sleepers, from their muted grey silence by the harp of the Light:

And so the world changed . . . a strange glow seemed very subtly to begin shining out of the lake and cloud and sky, mountain and valley, bracken and grass. Colours grew brighter, dark places more intense and secret; every sight and feeling was more vivid and pronounced. (p. 157; see Fig. 5)

While this description of the land is similarly affective in its description, reversing the palette, lighting and tone of the preceding text in the same hallucinatory language of precision, it serves a different master. Though Carroll compares Cooper's use of wilderness to its medieval role as "something actively opposed to human life" (2011, p. 80), this passage suggests a more holistic vision. Here, the land's potential for creation as well as destruction awakes, emphasising its immanent power regardless of use and instilling an active sense of the numinous across the small Welsh valley and its Craig.

Numinous and Embodied Lands: Movement, Agency and Sentience

Though depicted as naturally immanent in its geology, biology and aesthetics, the landscape of Craig yr Aderyn becomes *fantastically* immanent in its intersection with the impossible. Following Manlove (1999), who suggests the text often signals its own supernatural or impossible nature, the fantasy of *The Grey King* begins with a shrug, as the Land-Rover carrying Will gives a "strange jerking leap" (p. 7) and its occupants are forced to question their own sanity (p. 13). Though narratively insignificant, this single impossibility opens the text to the supernatural, dramatically heightening the affective immanence of the land by suggesting an agency in its movement. Events that might be interpreted as merely natural – fire, storm, and mist – thus become supernatural in the minds of characters and readers. When the land shrugs for a second time, plunging Will down the steep slopes of Tal y Llyn in a clearly impossible and antagonistic act (p. 121), its sentience is confirmed; the landscape is not only alive and aware, but moving.

Like Cooper's numinous figures of Wild Magic, the Brenin Llwyd of Cader Idris embodies the raw energy of his landscape in unified, sentient form. Though a Lord of the Dark, he is place-bound to the mountain in a physical "symbiosis with the landscape" (Carroll, 2011, p. 82):

The figure was so huge that at first he could not realise it was there. It stretched wider than the field, and high into the sky. It had shape, but no recognisable earthly shape; Will could see its outline from the corner of his eye, but when he looked directly at any part of it, there was nothing there. Yet the figure loomed before him, immense and terrible. (p. 106)

Like Carroll, Butler views Cooper's manifestations of wilderness in active competition with humanity, observing echoes of her adult novel *Mandrake* (1964), in which the earth is "preparing to drive humanity to extinction" (C. Butler, 2006, p. 131) and anticipating her later representation of Gaia in *Greenboy* (2002). But though the Brenin Llwyd's terrifying power is fuelled by the Dark, which channels the land's intrinsic forces of destruction just as it augments the irrational anger of the human mind, Cooper's figures of Wild Magic are much more ambiguous – from the antlered, owl-eyed Herne the Hunter of *The Dark Is Rising*, who storms the sky with his hounds of doom, to the uncanny and unbounded deep sea goddess Tethys in *Greenwich*, to the Greenwich itself, an awakened fertility effigy of rowan, hawthorn and hazel. Though these uneasy natural embodiments destabilize human anthropocentrism, they do not work punitively against humanity, but in stark independence of its needs, intrinsically amoral, chaotic, and wild:

Thunder and storms and earthquakes were there, and all the force of the earth and sea. [The Greenwich] was outside Time, boundless, ageless, beyond any line drawn between good and evil. (2000a, p. 34)

Moreover, though Carroll aligns these figures with a *genius locus* or "spirit of the topos" of traditional children's literature (2011, pp. 79–83), the anthropomorphic figures she cites as forces of nature, such as Kipling's Puck (1906) or Grahame's Pan (1908) pale in comparison to these nonhuman, unbounded embodiments. Moreover, where the *genius locus* traditionally works on behalf of the protagonists, following the Romantic legacy of instrumental use of the natural world, these natural figures, though some perform individual acts for the Light, are inherently unpredictable, as the Greenwich's ruthless storming of its village makes clear. Indeed, the fantastic agency

of the immanent natural world is arguably the strongest actor in the sequence, with cosmic outcomes frequently dependent on the volatile actions of its wakened, numinous embodiments.

In a strong break from the pastoral traditions of golden age children's literature, then, *The Dark Is Rising* sequence's representation of nature is neither safe nor subjugated, but it is also not focused directly against humanity. Instead, Cooper offers a fantastic model for human engagement with the natural world. As her vivid landscapes awaken fantastically to their own immanence, their intrinsic agency transforms into a sentient physical being which can be faced, opening a dialogue with the natural world otherwise inaccessible to its characters, as exemplified in the protagonists' empathy for the Greenwich as well as their uneasy reverence for Tethys and Herne. Though this embodiment also carries dangers of representation, its power can be reversed. Thus, when Will and Bran look up at the sky through the great, mystical cavern of Craig yr Aderyn, it takes a moment for Will to understand his own position:

He and Bran were not standing in a timeless dark night observing the stars in the heavens. It was the other way around. They themselves were observed. Every blazing point in that great depthless hemisphere of stars and suns was focussed upon them, contemplating, considering, judging. (p. 66)

Crucially, in the realms of fantastic immanence, it is not always nature which is Other.

Immanence in Children's Fantasy

In a subtle but radical shifting from the traditional transcendent representation of landscape in children's fantasy to *fantastic immanence*, *The Dark Is Rising* sequence transforms the natural power of the land itself into a conduit of fantasy – grounding its depiction in detailed geological and biological description, aesthetically enhancing its affective power, and awakening it to embodied, numinous form. Rather than opposing reality, this summoning of 'real magic' encourages a deeper awareness and respect for the raw energy and infinite materiality of the natural world. Though filled with a similar sense of wonder as the Arcadias of golden age authors, this post-war landscape of the second golden age ultimately destabilises human centrality and control, redefining children's cultural perspective of the land. However, as radical as

this natural immanence is, in both its upheaval of conventional fantastic structure and its unharnessed representations of nature, Cooper's fantastic summoning of the material world is not confined to nature. In the following chapter, I will extend Cooper's immanent landscapes to their inscribed cultural histories, revealing an intimate and subjective portrayal of locality through the 'real magic' of the child body as it interacts with the land.