

The Tombs of Atuan Study Questions

Prologue

1. What narrative purposes does the Prologue serve—why do you think Le Guin chose to include this as a kind of introduction to the story? How is the perspective from which the Prologue is written different from that of the rest of the story?
2. Discuss the reactions of Tenar's parents to her being chosen to be the Priestess of the Tombs. How would you explain their different reactions? Is Tenar's father uncaring? Explain your answer.

Chapter 1: The Eaten One

3. Discuss the meaning and symbolism of the ceremony of the Remaking of the Priestess. What is the psychological significance of the "dry, unceasing drone" of the priestesses' repetitive chanting—what purposes does this kind of ritual serve? Consider this description of the chanting: "the word that was repeated over and over was a word so old it had lost its meaning, like a signpost still standing when the road is gone."
4. Why do you think Tenar's name is changed? What does the name *Arha* mean? Based on the information in the chapter, in what sense(s) do you think she is "eaten"?
5. Describe Arha based on the information presented in this chapter. How does she react to the events of the day, and why?

Chapter 2: The Wall Around the Place

6. What purposes does the wall around the Place of the Tombs serve, and what do you think it might symbolize?
7. How is the One Priestess of the Tombs chosen, and why? What purposes might this practice serve?
8. Describe Manan and his relationship with Arha. What role does he play, and what is his attitude toward his life like?
9. Describe Arha's life. What are its defining characteristics? How does she feel about it, and in what ways does it affect her? Consider her relationship with Penthe and the incident that occurs in this chapter.
10. At this point in the novel, what do we know about the Nameless Ones? What evidence of their power is there?

Chapter 3: The Prisoners

11. How does Arha's life as it is at the beginning of the chapter compare to her life when she was younger? What change takes place in this chapter, and how is it significant to Arha?
12. In what ways is Arha powerful, and in what ways is her power limited? In what ways does she exercise her power in this chapter, and what motivates her to do so?

Chapter 4: Dreams and Tales

13. What does Arha dream about, and why do you think she has these dreams? What do they tell us about her?
14. What things do we learn about Penthe through her conversation with Arha in this chapter, and what insights does this give us into Kargish culture and society? In what ways is the conversation both revelatory and disturbing for Arha—how does it affect her?
15. What is Arha’s attitude toward the Undertomb and the Labyrinth—what do they mean to her?
16. Describe the Kargish view of the Inner Lands and their mages. Based on what you know from *A Wizard of Earthsea* and from the presentation of Kargish culture and society in this book, what do you think of this view?
17. What evidence is there that the Ring of Erreth-Akbe is especially valuable?
18. What conflicting opinions do Kossil and Thar express at the end of the chapter, and in what ways is their conversation significant? Consider what it reveals about them, as well as Arha’s reaction to the information Thar shares with her.

Chapter 5: Light Under the Hill

19. How does Thar’s death complicate Arha’s life? What insights does Arha have into Kossil’s character and motivations? How does she cope with her new circumstances?
20. Discuss Arha’s reaction to her discovery of an intruder in the Undertomb. Interpret Le Guin’s description of the light under the hill as being “strange beyond thought, beyond fear.” After her initial reaction, how does she respond to the sacrilege of his presence?
21. What unexpected irony is there in the appearance of the Undertomb as revealed by Ged’s light?
22. How does Ged react to his plight? What impression do you think he makes on Arha?

Chapter 6: The Man Trap

23. What purpose does the Labyrinth serve? How is it designed, and what psychological effects can it have on those who are in it?
24. Discuss the irony of Ged’s plight. Why do you think Arha takes such a keen interest in Ged—what pleasure does she take from the situation?
25. What emotions does Arha experience in this chapter, and why? How does her attitude toward Ged seem to be changing? Identify specific details that support your interpretation. Why do you think this change occurs?

Chapter 7: The Great Treasure

26. In speaking with Arha, what does Ged seek to accomplish? Analyze his strategy for doing so, considering his words and behavior in both Chapter 6 and Chapter 7.
27. Why do you think Arha decides to save Ged’s life?
28. Explain the significance of Ged’s last words to Arha at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 8: Names

29. Interpret the meaning of Arha/Tenar's dream at the beginning of the chapter. What might the "hawk or desert eagle" she sees the next morning symbolize?
30. What mistakes does Tenar make in her conversation with Kossil? Why is she in a position of vulnerability despite being the First Priestess? Why do you think she does not take Manan's advice despite her vulnerability?

Chapter 9: The Ring of Erreth-Akbe

31. During their conversation in the Great Treasure (the tombs' treasury), what does Ged reveal to Tenar about the Dark Ones? What are the implications of this revelation?
32. Why is the Ring of Erreth-Akbe so important? What is ironic about Ged's receiving half of it from the woman on the island?
33. Do you think Ged has a right to take the Ring of Erreth-Akbe from the Tombs? Why or why not?
34. Why do you think Arha chooses to go with Ged—what factors influence her decision, practical and otherwise?

Chapter 10: The Anger of the Dark

35. Why do you think Tenar has such a difficult time remembering the way out of the Labyrinth, and why does she sometimes express a sense of futility about their escape? What theme(s) do their escape and the manner of their escape express?
36. What signs are there that the Nameless Ones have awakened? When Tenar begs their forgiveness, what does it mean that "There was no answer. There had never been an answer"? Why do you think she suddenly tries to go back into the Tombs just as they emerge from the doorway?

Chapter 11: The Western Mountains

37. How does the situation Tenar is now in seem to affect her, and what feelings does she seem to have toward Ged? Cite details from the text.
38. What feelings and attitude does Tenar have regarding her future, and why?

Chapter 12: Voyage

39. How does Tenar react to the sound of the sea, which she has never heard? How does the sea contrast with the places of the earth that she is familiar with, and what might it symbolize?
40. What sudden urge does Tenar have as they are waiting to embark from the cave, and what factors do you think drive her to feel this urge? How does Ged respond to it?
41. What symbolic meanings does Ged's boat have? Consider its name and the description given here.
42. How does Tenar react to the feeling of freedom, and why?
43. How did the man and woman who gave Ged half of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe end up on the island, and why? In what ways is the prophecy about the descendants of Thoreg likely to come true?

44. Why does Tenar want to be left alone on an uninhabited island instead of staying among the beautiful and powerful people of Havnor—what factors influence her attitude? How does Ged change her mind? How is his plan appropriate for her?

Review Questions

45. What ideas about the nature of power does the novel explore? Among other things, consider that despite Ged's tremendous power as a wizard, it is only with Arha's help that he succeeds in his quest.
46. What strategies does Ged use over the course of the story to influence and persuade Arha/Tenar?
47. Why do you think Le Guin chose to discuss Ged and Tenar's journey to Havnor in detail—what is the purpose of the last two chapters? Why did she not choose to describe what happened after their arrival in Havnor?
48. What influences does her conversation with Penthe in Chapter 4 have on Arha/Tenar's later thoughts and decisions—what conceptual seeds does Penthe plant in her mind?
49. In what ways is *The Tombs of Atuan* different from *A Wizard of Earthsea*? In what ways is it similar?
50. As the One Priestess of the Tombs, is Arha powerful? Why or why not?
51. In what senses does Arha die, and in what senses is Tenar reborn?
52. Why do you think Tenar doesn't consider trying to return home and see her family?
53. What are the major themes of the novel? Choose one and discuss how Le Guin develops that theme through the characters and the plot (and possibly through other vehicles such as symbolism and figurative language).
54. What does the novel have to say about what it means to be a good person? Is Manan a good person? Why or why not? What about other characters in the novel?
55. Discuss Le Guin's use of symbolism in the novel. What might the Labyrinth and the Ring of Erreth-Akbe represent? (Consider the significance of the ring's two parts being joined.) Identify other symbols and discuss their meaning.
56. What does the novel tell us about Kargish history and culture? If the Nameless Ones are evil, why do you think the Kargs worship them, and how are unjust traditions such as taking girls away from their families sustained? Why do you think they consider things like magic, the people of the Archipelago, and writing evil?