

**A CHILD OF POWER AND THE QUEST FOR SUSTAINABLE
ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS IN ORSON SCOTT CARD'S
ALVIN MAKER SERIES**

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The product of the last four decades, the environmental awareness, has had an impact on all areas of modern life, including literature. In children's and young adult fiction, issues pertaining to pollution, environmental responsibility, attitudes to animals and the planet in general have been articulated with special force as relevant, even vital, to the quality of life we create, if not to the survival of human species on the planet. Thought-experimenting on components of a new value system based on sustainable environmental ethics, an increasing number of recent works addressed to child and adolescent audience have thus expanded, consciously or not, on the claims and postulates made by Riane Eisler in her 1988 *The Chalice and the Blade* and by Millicent Lenz in her 1990 *Nuclear Age Literature*. Eisler's proposal of a partnership, the gylanic model and Lenz's arguments for a biophilic heroic pattern are facets of the same quest for the life-affirming ethics. My concern in this paper is how this quest is represented in Orson Scott Card's Alvin Maker Series, and especially how and why Card makes his child protagonist the focal point of this quest. What Card achieves, I believe, is an imaginative construction in which his "child-of-power" protagonist becomes an operational metaphor for the empowerment that people of any age can develop from living according to sustainable environmental ethics.

Key words: a child of power; environmental ethics; Orson Scott Card's Alvin Maker Series.

I

The conceit of a child of power and the power of a childⁱ have long currency in children's literature. They have also been put to numerous uses: a child of power can outsmart villainous adults, expose hypocrisy and other vices of the adult world, remind other characters, and readers as well, of the joy of being human, or keep alive the hope that a better future is possible. In all those and other ways the concept of a child of power can be used as a socializing device. To children's audience it may exemplify certain qualities, imperatives or patterns of behavior that our society values and acknowledges as morally or socially desirable. To adult audience, additionally, it may also suggest what *kind* of socialization a writer, and perhaps his or her culture, deems as particularly important at a given point of time.

What concerns me in this paper is socialization in sustainable environmental ethics and, specifically, the use of the child-of-power conceit for this purpose. I believe that a number of contemporary children's literature authors consciously incorporate in their stories elements of the search for environmental ethics – a kind of ethics that is becoming an increasingly important facet of modern western society's mental make-up – and many of them do it through the child-of-power conceit. Among genres which belong to children's literature, or can be said to include child-oriented fiction, this strategy is perhaps most

evident in fantasy genres. Especially in mythopoeic fantasy the child of power or the power of a child is often represented as something which, in a sense, “saves” the world. Cases in point are, for example, Tolkien’s Frodo, Le Guin’s Tehanu, L’Engle’s Charles Wallace, Cooper’s Will Stanton or Card’s Alvin Smith. In this connection my focus will be on Orson Scott Card’s Alvin Maker Series.

II

Before I suggest ways in which Card’s protagonist can be seen as enacting a poetic education in environmental ethics, I would like to situate the discussion in a broader context and point to aspects of environmentalism that have been especially relevant for literary-critical discussion.

Perhaps the most important among them is the awareness that our modern technological civilization has developed means for the exploitation of the earth’s natural resources to the extent that we can irreparably disturb the planet’s life support systems and exhaust the deposits of non-renewable minerals. This awareness coupled with the growing appreciation of the extent to which human life, physically and spiritually, is dependent on the natural environment has already been implicit in the works of the British Romantics of the 1790s and of the American Transcendentalists of the 1840s. I blush to admit, however, that the study of the relationship between the natural world and literature has acquired respectability in literature departments only in the last decade or so – that is since the publication of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm’s 1996 seminal *The Ecocriticism Reader*. If this collection can be said to be the culmination of the movement toward establishing ecocriticism as a legitimate literary-critical school, the foundational argument for the modern study of the rapport between literature and nature was formulated by Joseph Meeker in his 1974 *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*. In my opinion, Meeker’s book posited claims so vital for literary ecology that a plethora of works that have since followed it, including *The Ecocriticism Reader*, may be said to expand on his book’s central issues rather than add new ones.

Meeker’s groundbreaking contribution lies in the fact that he was the first to challenge a pernicious misconception according to which ecological guilt belongs to the sciences rather than to the humanities. Literature, he claimed, offers some of the most persistent templates for the relationship between humans and the natural world and does so in two predominant modes: tragic and comic. The “maladaptive” tragic mode is geared to domination and extermination; the “adaptive” comic one—to reconciliation and survival. As it is the former that has been receiving consistent intellectual support, embedded in most Western philosophies, aesthetics and arts is a legacy that Meeker calls “the tragic view of life”: an assumption, legitimized already in the Greek tragedy, that humans stand above nature and can command it. No matter how flattering such supremacy might have felt earlier, Meeker contends that “the tragic view of man has led to cultural and biological disasters” [1, p. 24] culminating in modern environmental crisis. The alternative is, he says, “the comic view”: an assumption that humans are part of nature, that they are “subject to all natural limitations and flaws” [1, p. 37], and that their social, cultural and ideological constructs are “adaptive” only if they assist humanity in a more conscious *participation in* rather than *manipulation of* nature’s process. The respect for life and humility toward the greater ecosystem humans are part of make this view relevant, even vital in the present circumstances. “If the integrity of the earth disappears,” Meeker concludes, “no other kind of integrity can have any meaning” [1, p. 185].

Indeed, in the decade following Meeker’s pioneering book, the awareness of this fact was becoming almost universal throughout the humanities, leading – by mid 1990s – to the emergence of a new literary-critical school. Like feminism or Marxism, ecocriticism aims

at changing the world by changing human attitudes to it. Unlike any other literary-critical orientation, however, “the world” means not just a social and cultural sphere but an ecosphere, a total life system of the planet. This puts ecocriticism in sharp contrast with other theoretical schools in two more respects. The first is that, as opposed to the theoretical orthodoxy which sees the world as socially and linguistically constructed, ecocriticism asserts that the natural world really exists, that it cannot be reduced to an abstract concept or a human projection, and that it affects us and is affected by us. The second is that, as opposed to the Western cultural tradition of anthropocentrism enshrined in religion, science, and humanities – including literary theory – ecocriticism asserts that man is *not* the measure of all things. It promotes a humbler, ecocentric rather than anthropocentric perspective.

Even before the arrival of ecocriticism, however, or along with it though independently of it, intimations that undergird Meeker’s work have been voiced by other scholars. In 1985 Don D. Elgin expanded Meeker’s idea of the tragic and comic views inscribed in literature and argued that the fantasy novel lies within the comic tradition. In *The Comedy of the Fantastic* Elgin explored how the ecological perspective informs the works of Tolkien, Lewis, Williams, Herbert, and Chant, concluding that the uniqueness of fantasy lies in the fact that it presents “humanity as part of the total environment or system [...], acknowledging the absolute dependence of humanity upon that system” [2, p. 23]. Two years later, in 1987, a feminist scholar Riane Eisler linked an androcratic mind frame “which imprisons both halves of humanity in inflexible and circumscribed roles” [3, p. 173] with current ecological imbalances and environmental damage. In her groundbreaking *The Chalice and the Blade* Eisler argued that western civilization is currently going through “a major and unprecedented cultural transformation” [3, p. XIV] from the dominator, androcratic model of society to the partnership, gynanic one; for Eisler we are moving toward “a world animated and guided by the consciousness that both ecologically and socially we are inextricably linked with one another and our environment” [3, p. 202]. 1990 saw the publication of Millicent Lenz’s *Nuclear Age Literature for Youth: The Quest for a Life-Affirming Ethics* which stressed the cultural importance of a new heroic pattern rooted in ecological consciousness. Lenz contended that at the time when “the very fate of the earth depends upon finding a value system equal to the demands of our nuclear and global age” [4, p. XI], authors of children’s and young adult fiction have been in the van of our culture’s ongoing attempt to revise the traditional perspective on heroism and to come up with an up-to-date heroic role model—what Lenz calls a biophile: “a person with holistic vision and reverence for the totality of life on earth” [4, p. XIV]. A glance at arguments and driving assumptions in, for example, biologist Rupert Sheldrake’s 1991 *The Rebirth of Nature*, spiritual writer Bede Griffiths’s 1994 *Universal Wisdom*, social historian Meredith Veldman’s 1998 *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain*, or physicist Fritjof Capra’s 2002 *The Hidden Connections* suggest that issues related to ecological awareness have become an important part of current debates not only about literature, but also about religion, politics, economy, education and other spheres of life.

III

Looked at against this broad background, it does not come as a surprise that issues related to environmentalism have also been articulated in modern children’s and young adult fiction. Inasmuch as this “class” of literature has always included a more or less explicit didactic component, and inasmuch as the promotion of environmental attitudes has become one of the leading educational concerns of modern western civilization, I believe that an increasing number of recent works addressed to child and adolescent audience have expanded, consciously or not, on the claims made by Meeker, Eisler and Lenz. Thought-

experimenting on components of a value system based on sustainable environmental ethics, these works have asserted that environmental responsibility, our attitude to animals and the planet at large, are vital to the quality of life we create, if not to the survival of the human species as such. Such books, in other words, have been offering a poetic education in a life-affirming ethics that constitutes the core of Meeker's "adaptive," comic mode, of Eisler's partnership, gylanic model, and of Lenz's biophilic heroic pattern.

Orson Scott Card's Alvin Maker Series is a case in point. A six-volume mythopoeic fantasy saga—*Seventh Son* (1987), *Red Prophet* (1988), *Prentice Alvin* (1989), *Alvin Journeyman* (1995), *Heartfire* (1998), and *Crystal City* (2003)—tells the story of a child of power, the eponymous Alvin, and tells it by raising fundamental questions about the impact of human life upon the Earth in general and upon the American Continent in particular. On the one hand the series is thus clearly concerned with the quest for a value system which may assist humans to reconnect with each other and with the natural world; but on the other hand, it is a mythopoeic on the American myth's basic premise which accepts America as the new Promised Land but puts a moral obligation of righteousness on those to whom it is given. In their "universally human" and "specifically American" aspects, the books image forth the challenges involved in accepting environmental responsibility and the consequences of abrogating it.

The focus of this multifaceted quest is the child of power, protagonist Alvin. Especially in the first two volumes, the seven- and then the ten-year-old boy can be seen as undergoing socialization in sustainable environmental ethics; a socialization especially instructive in view of the fact that Alvin is the child of power. As I see it, Card's usage of the conceit of the child of power for this purpose amounts to stressing the case that humans ought to be environmentally conscious, and the more so, the more power over nature they have.

Alvin's—and a reader's—environmental education begins with nature-alienating assumptions together with the values and behaviors they support. Among those, the most environmentally detrimental is the belief that the natural world is devoid of consciousness and thus can be manipulated for human purposes. This fatal assumption is challenged for the first time in the cockroach episode of the *Seventh Son*. A seven-year old Alvin—the seventh son of a seventh son, thus endowed with superhuman potential of controlling the forces of nature—has been played a trick on by his sisters and he wants to get even. To do that he tells the cockroaches, with whom he has so far had a kind of non-aggression pact, that they will find plenty of delicious food in his sisters' room, on his sisters' bodies. He also tells the cockroaches that it is going to be safe food and they will be in no danger while enjoying it. This is, of course, a lie. In a minute the girls' room is in uproar: whoops, screams, and shouts accompany the squashing of cockroaches. Alvin pretends to be asleep but immensely enjoys the spectacle and continues to do so until the house quiets down. Shortly later, however, Alvin has a visitor, a Shining Man, who gives him a series of visions, including a cockroach's view of what happened.

In his vision he was scurrying, filled with hunger, absolutely fearless, knowing that if he could get up onto those feet, those legs, there'd be food, all the food he'd ever want. So he rushed, he climbed, he scurried, searching. But there wasn't no food, not a speck of it, and now huge hands reached and swept him off, and then a great huge shadow loomed over him, and he felt the hard sharp crushing agony of death.

Not once, but many times, dozens of times, the hope of food, the confidence that no harm would come; then disappointment—nothing to eat, nothing at all—and after disappointment, terror and injury and death. Each small trusting life, betrayed, crushed, battered [5, p. 61].

Some of the visions Alvin gets are those of the roaches who got away from the stomping boots and fled from the room of death. None of those roaches, however, return to

Alvin's room, because it is no longer safe. "That was where the lies came from. That was the place of the betrayer, the liar, the killer who had sent them into this place to die." Thinking through other beings' minds Alvin then understands that while death is a fearful thing, worse than death is the condition of the world gone crazy, "where anything could happen, where nothing could be trusted, where nothing was certain" [5, p. 62]. There and then Alvin realizes that no life, human or animal, should ever be used in a way that manipulates life's basic principles, especially by setting trust and interconnectedness *against* each other. He also makes "the most solemn promise of [Alvin's] whole life" [5, p. 64]: to use his knack, his power of commanding natural forces, for helping rather than hurting.

This episode is the first of the many suggestive of *environmental responsibility* and one among innumerable others which set *environmental ethics* in the context of the books' narrative theology. The responsibility amounts to recognizing the natural world as not a mute object which the humans can use but as a multi-voiced subject from which they can learn and with which they can build a dialogic relationship. The ethics, by extension, is part of the awareness that our decisions and actions are either environmentally adaptive or maladaptive. In view of the fact that Card's alternative America is an arena of an eternal conflict between the forces of entropy and the forces of creation, environmental ethics belongs, theologically, to the Makers rather than to the Unmakers.

If the young Alvin's lesson in *Seventh Son* is about respect for every life, what he learns in *Red Prophet* is the interconnection with everything in existence. Among other things, this involves the appreciation of the fact that the land is a palpably living entity—something more than the sum of its flora and fauna. The land can be well, can be sick, can be hurt, and can be healed. It has will, emotions, memory, identity, and strong preference for its own vision of life. And it singsⁱⁱ. All those characteristics make Alvin, and perhaps the reader, aware of the extent to which human life and fulfillment are contingent on the health of the land.

The suggestions about the land as filled with consciousness translate into how, in this alternative universe, Card conceives of human beings. Subversive of the two dominant concepts of a human being in the Western traditionⁱⁱⁱ—the Christian one which sees human physicality as insignificant at best and as a curse at worst, and the enlightenment conception which takes physicality as the total picture and sees man as a rational animal—Card in the Alvin Maker series sees humanity through the lens of mythic, pre-Christian and non-European traditions, such as Native American ones. This humanity is an integral part of the natural world and participates in the qualities of this world: its consciousness, its immanent mysteriousness, sanctity, and its powers. Thus what in our world would be considered magic or folk belief in Alvin's universe constitutes a living reality to be reckoned with.

As Alvin's example shows, it matters whether one is a seventh son of a seventh son. Endowed thus with extraordinary potential, Alvin is a quintessential Maker whose almost superhuman capacities are due to a combination of a number of special abilities called knacks. If almost every person in Card's universe is gifted with a knack—some of those knacks so plain and ordinary that "a lot of folks had no idea what their own knack was" [6, p. 161]—Alvin is unique in possessing a powerful combination of them. This being so, all knacks derive from the same principle: Card's characters live in a universe permeated by conscious energies and those energies, when filtered through individual consciousness, find expression in what is seen as "special powers"^{iv}. Like knacks, hexes, beseechings, charms and other manifestations of magic are also specific uses of the land's powers by those who establish an affinity with some aspect of the natural world making, perhaps, the most powerful theme of the series which has to do with this connection too^v.

Alvin's story may also be seen as a poetic education in environmental ethics since it forms a framework in which Card explores the components of a value system conducive to bonding people with each other and with the environment. Within this framework, Card's characters may be seen as enacting either adaptive or maladaptive environmental ethics. Although it would be a simplification to say that with the battle lines drawn between Making and Unmaking, Card's characters clearly belong to one or another, it is interesting to note that all negatively portrayed characters share the qualities which reinforce divisions between them and others and which make those characters especially susceptible to the Unmaker's influence. Nor is it coincidental that attitude to life in all its forms is elevated in the series to perhaps the most reliable indication of a character's worth. After the cockroaches episode it becomes clear that the Makers' side cannot accommodate anyone who would be disrespectful of life – human, animal, or plant – and Alvin, Arthur Stuart, and Ta-Kumsaw always act out of elementary respect for life. The Makers' environmental imperatives stand in sharp contrast with Napoleon's, Quill's, and Harrison's disregard for human lives or with Calvin's enjoyment of causing pain to animals^{vi}.

In this way the division between the Makers and Unmakers amounts to the delineation of two radically opposed world views. The characters who exploit the natural world and see it as the collection of objects whose value lies in their usefulness to human purposes follow the template of the ecologically unsustainable ethics. They embody Meeker's "tragic view of life" – based on the imperatives of domination and extermination – which alienates them from the land and from other people. Harrison, Thrower, Planter and Quill may be feared, even obeyed, but they will never be loved or trusted, and so the communities they try to build are stillborn parodies. By contrast, the characters who see the natural world as the infinity of presences from which they can draw physical and spiritual strength follow the template of the ecologically sustainable ethics. Their actions and attitudes reflect Meeker's "comic view of life" – geared toward reconciliation and cooperation – conducive to bonding them with other people and with the environment. Ta-Kumsaw, Tenskwa-Tawa, Alvin, La-Tia, Gullah Joe, and Abe Lincoln are some among those who are loved, who evoke trust, and who build human communities. Their concern for others embodies the principle of ecosystemic interconnectedness and proves that the ability to establish an intimate connection with the environment is the same ability that enables people to connect and form a community. In Lenz's terms, these characters are biophiles who stand as models of new, environmentally informed heroism.

IV

What all those environmental motifs, concerns, and positionings – in characters and natural laws of Card's alternative universe – amount to is a consistent picture of human interaction with the environment whose focal point is the child protagonist. In depicting this protagonist's education in the use of his powers and in the knowledge of how they affect the natural world, Card captures important aspects of a modern civilization's search for a sustainable environmental ethics; if humankind can be metaphorically seen as children of the earth, we are also children endowed with frightening power who need to learn how to use it responsibly. On this level, Card is successful in at least three respects. The first one is that his vision of the natural world as alive and conscious – and of people as an integral part of the ecosphere – makes scientific sense and speaks about perhaps the most troubling concern of modern humanity. The second one is that his narrative touches upon the most ancient dream of humanity which is to be part of the Garden and close to nature. The third one is that in his use of the child-of-power conceit Card achieves an imaginative construction in which his child-of-power protagonist becomes an operational metaphor for the empowerment that people of any age can develop living according to environmental ethics.

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**ДИТИНА З НАДПРИРОДНИМИ ЗДІБНОСТЯМИ ТА ПОШУК
“ПРИЙНЯТНОЇ” ЕТИКИ ДОВКІЛЛЯ В ЦИКЛІ ОРСОНА СКОТТА
КАРДА ПРО ЕЛВІНА МЕЙКЕРА**

Марек Озєвіч

Проблеми, що стосуються довкілля і які стали актуальними тільки останні сорок років, впливають на всі сфери життя і на літературу також. У художній літературі для дітей і молоді важливими і навіть життєво доконечними для виживання роду людського на планеті стають, передусім, твори, які розглядають питання про екологію та відповідальність за її забруднення, про ставлення до тварин і планети в цілому. Отже, дослідження окремих виявів нової системи цінностей, яка ґрунтується на засадах охорони довкілля, та дедалі більша кількість художніх творів для дітей і юнацтва, свідомо чи ні, поглибили думки та постулати, висловлені Раян Айслер у романі “Чаша та лезо” (“The Chalice and the Blade”) (1988) та Міллісент Ленц у романі “Література ядерного віку” (“Nuclear Age Literature”) (1990). Запропоновані Р. Айслер “партнерство”, гіланічна модель та аргументація М. Ленц на користь біофілійної героїчної моделі. Головною темою статті є показ того, як ці пошуки описано в циклі романів Орсона Скотта Карда про Елвіна Мейкера. Особливу увагу зосереджено на тому, як і чому О. С. Кард зробив головним героєм дитину. О. С. Кардові вдалося створити образну конструкцію, в якій головний герой – дитина з надприродними здібностями – стає справжньою метафорою того, що люди різного віку можуть набути надприродної сили завдяки втіленню в життя норм збереження довкілля.

Ключові слова: дитина з надприродними здібностями; норми поведінки щодо довкілля; цикл романів Орсона Скотта Карда про Елвіна Мейкера.

While each concept opens up a whole field of possible meanings and while the two may, and often do, overlap, for the purpose of this paper I will distinguish between a child of power and the power of a child. I will take a child of power to mean a child protagonist exceptional for his or her physical, mental, or spiritual capacities which either significantly excel those that are taken to be “normal” for children of a given age—in which case the child of power is a prodigy child—or clearly go beyond what is taken to be “normal” of human beings in general—in which case the child of power is seen as endowed with supernatural, or superhuman gifts. Baby Hercules bare-handedly strangling the snakes that Hera sent to kill

him would be the example of the former, Peter Pan in his flouting of gravity would represent the latter. The power of a child, by contrast, will be an idea behind which human children possess certain inherent, perhaps inborn qualities which are either totally lost or powerfully dulled during adolescence so that recovering them or reconnecting with them during adulthood poses a major challenge and requires a conscious effort. In an almost archetypal way, the power of a child is linked with some form of innocence—moral, aesthetic, intellectual—whose most important practical benefits include: 1) the freedom to be oneself in a spontaneous, natural way, 2) the ability to see through pretensions that is especially piercing to all forms of adult hypocrisy, and 3) the freshness of perception blended with the capacity for wonder untainted by skepticism or unbelief. Andersen's unnamed child from "The Emperor's New Clothes" who sees the emperor's nakedness and Lewis's Pevensie children who can enter Narnia only until they reach a certain age are just two among the many literary uses of the power-of-a-child concept.

ⁱⁱ The idea of the greensong is perhaps Card's most telling concept in the series to underscore the fact that the natural world is a holistic, vibrantly alive, conscious entity. Introduced in *Prophet* and growing throughout the sequels to one of the most fundamental principles of the natural law of this alternative universe, the greensong is something like a symphony sung by the infinite number of voices: plants, minerals, insects, animals, and elements. It is the circulation and pulse of life of the land, its bloodstream to such an extent that when the greensong is muted or stifled, the land dies. Although in most cases the greensong is presented as dependent on "unbroken living forest" [6, p. 98] and on living Indian presence, by *City*—set largely in plains and partly in deserts—it becomes obvious that "[t]he greensong doesn't depend on the color green," as Alvin explains, "[but] comes from life" [8, p. 258]. Tuning in with the greensong allows humans to experience deep inner peace and almost mystical unity with all creation, besides enabling them to travel at incredible speed, covering incredible distances by running for hours or days without the slightest sign of fatigue.

ⁱⁱⁱ Both traditions alienate human beings from the natural world: the former by attributing to humans a unique quality called "spirituality," the latter by doing the same with "rationality." Both traditions suggest that human beings do not belong to the natural world: in the former humans *come from somewhere else* and have to suppress nature in order to return to their true home; in the latter humans *are something else* than the rest of the natural world and have to dominate nature in order to assert their human distinctiveness.

^{iv} This, in fact, is the explanation given for knacks throughout the series. In Alvin's understanding, "knacks come because of a natural affinity between a person and some aspect of the world around him. It's not from God *or* Satan [...]. It's just [...] a matter of winning the trust of some part of reality" [6, p. 127].

^v See [6, p. 52].

^{vi} See, for example, [7, pp. 113-14].