

A Family Dealing with Crisis: The Case of the *Dark Lord of Derkholm*

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I. Introduction

Diana Wynne Jones (1934–2011) is an acclaimed fantasy writer for children. One of the characteristics of her work is that, “although very readable, ... Jones’s fantasies are extremely complex and rich, often requiring several readings” (Reynolds 332). As Charles Butler lamented in his obituary for Jones, it is “both a mystery and, in retrospect, a scandal” that she “never won either the Carnegie Medal or Whitbread/Costa Award.”ⁱⁱ

In 1999, *The Dark Lord of Derkholm* was awarded the Mythopoeic Award for Children’s Literature. In her acceptance remarks, Jones admits that the idea of this story came along with her previous book, *The Guide to Fantasyland*— when she wondered: “how the people who lived in the country that was being toured might feel”ⁱⁱⁱ.

It is a story set in a Fantasyland where wizards and griffins really do exist. As Mendleson has clarified, it is a problematic novel which breaks several genre expectationsⁱⁱⁱ. Though publishers appear to be rather confused by its implied readership^{iv}, the book has a wide readership. As a result, some readers find this book to be unsatisfactory; the length of the book and the abundance of characters seems too much for those who are not familiar with Jones’ styles; others complain that the story line is perplexing and sometimes irritating. I won’t deny that this book has several faults. Still, I think the book is worthy of analysis.

Kaplan has already examined and described that this story’s two protagonists “have two narrative threads, and dual narratives to both a young and adult crossover readership” (206). Though I admit that both Derk and his son are two major protagonists in the story, I still think the book as a whole lends itself to being examined as a “family story,” because Jones has already examined family problems in her books^v. I intend to prove that this book has acquired a new status within the family novel tradition.

II. To examine the Beginning

The story begins when a meeting was held to discuss how to put an end to the Pilgrim-Tour Project for good. One of the difficulties is that Mr. Chesney, the most powerful man in the world, lives in another world. As all of his decisions are supported by a powerful demon, he is able to control people by threat/terror. For example, Querida is possessed by the fear that if Mr. Chesney notices her intent, he will counteract it immediately. Secrecy is essential.

Asking the Oracles, the chair Querida and her colleagues were told that they should appoint the first person they see as Dark Lord and the second person as Wizard Guide. That was when and how we, the readers, are introduced to Derk and his son Blade. (Chapter 1, 14–16)

The first chapter has two meanings:

Firstly, it briefly and fragmentally introduces us to the situation of this Fantasyland and its predicaments. As there are 126 sets of parties, and each party should experience the agenda separately, any events, in turn, should happen simultaneously and repeatedly.

What this means is that a great swathe of land will be “used” and damaged by the tour. People who work for the Pilgrims Party are paid. Some people, such as Old George of the village, think it a way to earn a living. Even though they think it rather stupid, they have no power to change it. As 40 years have passed, the damage they have caused has been accumulating and everything gets harder and everyone gets poorer year by year; the damage has now become more than the reward can compensate for. In addition, the number of casualties is increasing. Still, they are afraid of Mr. Chesney’s power; if his spies have sneaked into the Pilgrims, their reports about demands not being met will cause them additional penalties.

Secondly, when Derk and Blade first appeared in this story, they were presented to us as “chosen victims”; the reader has more information about what is really going on. Derk was not pleased with the arrangement; he had been regarding everything that maintains the Pilgrim business as rotten; he would have escaped if he could have.

Unlike the father, his children, including Blade, were rather ignorant and unaware of how serious the situation was. They simply thought it a challenge. At least the following

statements attributed to Shona support this idea:

“Dad, ... be reasonable. We’ll all help you. We’ll get you through it somehow. Think of it. You’ve got five griffins, two wizards and a bard, who are all going to look after you while you do it. I bet none of the other Dark Lords has ever had help like you’ve got (Chapter 2, 22)”^{vi}

III. Family Business and Fears

3.1 The Case of Derk

Anyway, Derk and his son had no alternative. We can see that it becomes a sort of family business hereafter. But there is a contradiction because the nature of this business itself separates the family in the process. For example, Mara spends most of her time at a house where she acts as “the Enchantress” (Chapter 5, p.57), and she tells Derk that she will hire the village people to prevent them from becoming involved in the battle. Later, she also asks Shona, Callette, and Elda to come and help her there.

Derk couldn’t ask his wife how she acquired the money for hiring the village people. Though he thought she must have borrowed it from someone, he was still afraid to know if that person is her lover. He had always been afraid that: “[w]izards’ marriages almost never lasted.” (67) So Derk suffers from his worries and fears, but he has a weakness; instead of asking Mara and getting the truth, he just tries to forget it.

On top of the previous accidents, from chapter 22 onward, Derk meets problem after problem, for: “[n]othing seemed to be going right for Derk.” (Chapter 22, 257)

“He flew back to the base to find more things going wrong. ... But behind all this, Derk was increasingly anxious about Lydda. She ought to have come back from laying clues long ago.... But Talithan came back within the hour to say that Lydda was not with Mara and Mara was as anxious as Derk.”

“He had just sent the owls off when Scales arrived with the news that Blade had disappeared.” (Chapter 22, 259)

As the quotation shows, when Derk believed that he had lost not only his wife (delusively), but also his three children (in this case, physically), he chose to seal Derkholm off from the rest of the world (284). He regrets that he had let the children be involved this. He also thinks “Kit had been too young, just like Blade and Lydda” (285). His reaction and great sorrow is that of a father. His attitude also supports this contention.

3.2 The Case of Derk and Mara’s Children

As we see in the story, this Pilgrim business is both a new experience and a challenge to Derk and Mara’s children. For example, for the meeting with Mr. Chesney at Derkholm, Lydda prepared ‘godlike snacks’ (Chapter 2) and Shona enjoyed showing off her ability as a bard till she was rudely checked by Mr. Chesney (Chapter 3). Callete also enjoyed making 126 different magical objects; i.e., what she calls gizmos for each party of Pilgrims (Chapter 5). Then the seriousness or difficulty was accelerated.

Firstly, as Querida didn’t keep her promises, Derk decided to summon the demon necessary for the Pilgrim Party, and the children became very upset about it (Chapter 7). They wanted to stop him if they could. What they could do was to follow him by flying, and Shona and Blade were carried away by their griffin siblings.

However, they only arrived there after Derk had summoned the demon. To make it worse, it was not the weaker and therefore manageable one Derek had intended. Instead, Derk found that: “he had never, ever met any being so strong (85). To their dismay, children too, were confronted with this powerful blue demon; at that time, the youngest Elda suffered most and was tended by the others:

On Blade’s next sighting Don and Lydda had got there and were settling, out of instinct, head to tail on either side of Elda, each with a wing thrown across her. Elda’s cheeping dies down a little and turned into words. (Chapter 7, 88; emphasis added.)

Blade went home with Elda by means of translocation, but this powerful demon reappeared. After checking Blade’s thought: “the demon’s laughter went through Blade in

waves and it *hurt*. He felt the demon say, *I shall go now, but I'll see you again soon.*" (89, Italics original)

Therefore, the unpleasant and nerve-racking experience and the threat from the demon shared among children and unite them as a family in crisis.

Let me add that this action of embracing with their wings toward their siblings can be seen later, when Kit and Callete were trying to console Shona in dismay (in Chapter 16).

Secondly, when Derk was almost killed by a dragon named Scales, everyone worried about him (Chapter 8). Since they cannot postpone the preparations, the children were forced to cover for him, too. Here, under Kit's leadership, they all discussed the best way to solve the problem they were facing. Now they had to travel and distribute the clues, arrange the fake attacks and battles; in other words, the activities required them to go and work in different places almost simultaneously.

We are informed later that some of them blamed the dragon. It was both reckless and courageous, and at the same time, a tremendously loyal act. It should be noted that they reacted separately under the same strong family love. It is also interesting to note that both Old George and Fran visited the dragon for the same purpose. The latter act can be interpreted that they become part of the extended family members while they work for Derk and his animals.

To make matters worse, the day after Derk was attacked or 'roasted' and became bed-ridden for days, the murderers of the other world arrived to become soldiers of Dark Lord; children had to drive them to the designated area, too. Unfortunately, it was more than they could handle and they were threatened by the malice of those criminals. In other words, they face the real evil and the terror. It was Blade who, instead of just accusing the dragon, tried to take advantage of the situation and made Scales help with their camping (Chapter 10).

When the time for the scheduled battle against Pilgrim parties began, Blade found that he was both hating this battle as much as he was enjoying it (Chapter 17, 210). Here he found that Don was experiencing the same kind of reluctance in killing, while Kit and Callette enjoyed the battle itself.

As the next quotation shows, when Blade realizes the evilness of “those soldiers” (i.e., murderers in the other world), he was forced to face up to the fact:

“When he thought about it later, Blade realized that this was the moment when his tour started to go wrong. Entirely wrong. The fact was he panicked. At the time, he thought of himself as behaving rather well. Although the one thing he wanted to do was to translocate far, far away from there at once, he knew he could not do that alone, nor try to bring all the Pilgrims and their horses with him if he went. He thought he had controlled his panic. He told himself he was quite calm. ... (Chapter 20, pp241–242; emphasis added.)

Later, we were told that his confusion made him lose his way. Let me add that though Blade is a focalizer in this text, his siblings know him very well and have been worrying about him; that is one of the reason why Shona had accompanied him on the road.

In a way, it was inevitable for a young, inexperienced wizard like Blade to make errors. Like Kit and others, he was eager to cope with the crisis in front of them. He also admits that he wanted to scare Pilgrims and enjoy the Wild Hunt, too^{vii}. Blade is the most talented child among his siblings and his improvising ability is absolutely fantastic. But the more they are involved, the more crises await them. As a result, they are rather submerged in the process. At the same time, it tends to stupefy their heads. Here lies the true danger of conformity; while working hard and becoming too busy, thinking stops. Needless to say, Jones is telling us the importance of putting on our own ‘thinking-caps’.

Here we have to take into consideration of the length of the 40-year tour business. This means that people accept the situation as it is and won’t give it proper consideration. Blade, too, accepted the situation, and it was after he was on the road that he began to think as his father would think, not to destroy this country. Being on the road clarifies Blade’s view. Maybe that is why he had to act as the Last Wizard Guide. Later, he was joined by Kit, who was told by god Ancher that he had “to learn that killing people wasn’t a game” (Chapter. 25, 304). A battle is truly not a game to be play with.

IV. *Dark Lord* as a Family Novel

4.1 Hybrid family

Family novels, or family stories, are described as: “Stories in which the action and interaction center around the family” (Greenlee, 273). As Nikki Gamble has stated, “the concept of family is socially and culturally constructed” (1), therefore the representations of fictional family have shifted in accordance with a change in people’s attitudes and moral values. As a result, now we have varieties in family types: from a core family to an enlarged or a reconstructed one to an assorted or an extended family^{viii}.

Studying the family novel tradition is not my scope^{ix}, but let me just point out several characteristics of Derk and Mara’s family. Firstly, one feature is that it consists of human and ‘non-humans’ (i.e., griffins). As Derk once explained to Querida, he wanted to make “the griffins to be people” (43), and he had succeeded. In other words, griffins are “human-als,” not animals, nor just personified animals. Lydda was right to complain when she was called “an animal” by Fran the help (Chapter 11, 129). Needless to say, the griffin itself can be interpreted as a symbol of hybridity.

Secondly, hybridity has nothing to do with the state of the family before the Pilgrim business started. In other words, no family can rid itself of occasional disputes and rows. As for the relation between Derk and Mara, there is certainly discord and tension. Though Querida made it worse by later placing a spell on Mara, her responsibility is limited to the period of the Pilgrim business. Derk is more responsible for it because of his attitude, such as the under-evaluation of his wife. One example of this can be seen when almost every Wizard was captured by the lining of his cloak, Derk casually answered: “Oh, it’s just one of Mara’s clever little universes, you know.”(28; underline added) Needless to say, here the word “clever,” denies nuances of his praise or recognition. However, in reality, it was the “miraculous lining she had worked so hard to fix [the real sky and real stars] there.” (28)

As for their children, being teenagers, they are now becoming difficult sometimes. But instead of describing it further, I would like to consider children’s characteristics more closely.

Each child has distinct characteristics; some are magical, some are not. One big

difference is that while griffin children can fly, Shona and Blade cannot. The traits of the children are partly genetic and partly based on their individuality. Unfortunately, it was not open to them until Derk was obliged to explain some things from necessity, for example, Callette is a “high energy flier” and her fast flight to the healer was a great help to save Derk. He also informs us that Lydda is apt to the work of delivering clues (140).

Each having a different talent or special ability reminds me of a type of Fairy story which depicts some six or seven people with Magical or Supernatural power. For example, in stories like “The fool of the world and the flying ship” or “Long, Broad, and Quickeye,” they use their special ability to save the protagonist in turn, depending on the situation, or the nature of the crisis. However, the important difference between those fairy-tales and Jones’ story is that while the former, people are only feebly connected with the protagonist; the latter are siblings with different abilities and therefore tied by strong family bonds.

4.2 Parenting

On top of that, they are always treated equally by their parents. In chapter 21, Elda explains to a Pilgrim that the penalty was given equally to both griffins and human children by their parents. Derk isn’t a conventional exponent of wizardry (20); he is a scientist and magician. It is also true that Derek’s parenting was insufficient in certain areas; especially it was unsatisfactory to the griffins with wings. In chapter 11, when Don was harmed during the confusion with the ‘soldiers’, Scales rescued them and blamed Don for not using his instinct (essential knowledge for self-defense); he should have known better, being a griffin. However, it was partly his father’s fault who didn’t know what is important to griffins. Though Derek could produce a griffin, he couldn’t tell Kit and others to fly at the critical moment. On the other hand, Scales, being a dragon that flies, could say that a griffin should rely on instinct like a bird.

Looking back on other books written by Diana Wynne Jones, Mendlesohn asserts that adults “justify neglect and disparagement within a paradigm of their own deservingness” but recently Jones’s mother has retreated, and therefore, she is absent from *The Dark Lord*.”(xxiv). I agree with Mendlesohn that the treatment of Mother has

changed: I hasten to add that Mara was criticized by her children for the coldness when Derk was in bed, but here Querida is responsible for that. As result, *Dark Lord* is for sure a family novel and its uniqueness lies in that, both adults and children share responsibility and also they willingly do that.

4.3 Power outside the family

In this story, other than Mr. Chesney, two characters seriously affect Derk and his family. One is Querida and the other is the God Anscher. Let me focus on Querida first. As for God Anscher, I will go back to that topic briefly later in section 5 of my paper.

Querida has several important roles. As I have mentioned before, her decision to stop Mr. Chesney became the driving force to the conspiracy. Later she notices that Derk might be much more efficient than she had expected. Knowing from experience that “most men responded badly to bullying, and it got them making mistakes” (167), she had put a spell on Mara and tried to separate the couple. Of course her sabotage worked and Derek was partly distracted.

Querida is a manipulator and in that sense, she resembles Mr. Chesney. Though Mara was a comrade of the conspiracy^x, she didn’t notice herself being placed under a spell by Querida. Still, there are big differences between Querida and Mr. Chesney.

Firstly, Querida is an inhabitant of Fantasyland and cares for its future. Mr. Chesney is an outsider and has no interest or concern for the land and its inhabitants: gaining as much profit as possible is what he desires. Secondly, Querida had the courage to admit her error and worked to mend it. That is why she confessed and made an apology in chapter 26. Mr. Chesney has no remorse at all. Thirdly, while Querida acts as observer to the family, she shows human feelings and a sympathetic reaction (see below). However, Mr. Chesney was not only a stone-faced person, but also a person who arranges his stepson’s death in a cold-blooded way^{xi}.

In Chapter 14, Callette delivers important information from her parents about Mr. Chesney and his false act from Derk, and also the miniature universe from Mara (as previously arranged). However, the eyes of Querida were riveted to Callette the griffin:

Querida looked at her, sitting like a great tall cat with her tufted tail wrapped across the pouch between her shapely, taloned feet and her barred wings neatly folded. And Querida longed, yearned, lusted for ownership of Callette. (Chapter 14, 168–69; emphasis added)

Therefore, we are lured to pay more attention to Callette’s safe return home over the meaning of what she had delivered at that moment. However, in truth, it provides a really big breakthrough for her plan.

Later in the story, Querida sees Callette and gets a shock because she has changed so much now:

Querida whirled round. Her mouth dropped open. Callette’s eyes were dull and reddish. Her lion coat was sticky and staring. Under the disordered feathers of Callette’s wings, Querida could see every one of Callette’s ribs. The feathers stuck this way and that from her scrawny neck and her whole body drooped, despairingly. It began to dawn on her that she was intruding on real grief here. (Chapter 24, 289; emphasis added)

Querida watched. She watched Don crawl unhappily to Derk too, and Derk realized that Don was feeling as bad as Callette. She watched him spare an arm from Callette to wrap round Don. (Chapter 24, 292; emphasis added)

It was then that Querida admits her mistake and decided to bring Mara back home, and with that, things began to go again. In total, though Querida sometimes exercises strong power to the family, she wisely knows the limit.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Reunion of the family

To cut a long story short, the reunion of the family is closely connected to the final denouement. It was Fran who started it^{xiii}: she urged Don to call back Mara, shortly

after Elda and Mara came home, Shona at last arriving home. She also brought Blake's Pilgrims (but not Blade) and news of the exploit and betrayal at the mine. Meanwhile, Blade and Kit had met at the arena and were forced to combat each other, and then, as requested by Lydda, they were rescued by Scales. Arriving home:

Blade found himself in the middle of a happier reunion than he would have believed possible that morning. Shona kissed him, kissed Kit. Derk barged Shona aside to hug him and then collided with Mara who was in the middle of turning from hugging Kit to hugging Blade and crying out... (Chapter 27, 317)

With that, almost all the loose ends of the story are tied up; for example, Mr. Chesney's secrets were revealed; the reason the elves were cooperating with Mr. Chesney was because the younger elf prince was confirmed by Mr. Chesney; the case of the demon is similar, only in this case, the demon's wife was trapped. Knowing who was responsible for it, the demon instantly ate up the traitor (Barbanas the wizard) in revenge.

On top of the 're-union' of families, the ultimate "deus-ex-machina" comes true: the god Anshur appeared and revealed that he had been acting as a moral judge toward both Blade and Kit for their misconducts. He also informed the inhabitants of the Fantasyland that they were to be blame for not to chose the harder way (i.e., to fight or try to ask for help) even though they had despised the way of Mr. Chesney. In other words, when at last people decided to take the world back into their own hands, the gods could interfere and help them to rule their own affairs.^{xiii}

Therefore, after Anshur and other gods left them, the new life was waiting for all people involved the Pilgrim business. At the same time, the problems of the family were dissolved; the happy reunion suggests that they will depart from their home to continue their life journey. Well that is a happy ending of the story.

In spite of that, here, I'd like to call special attention to Mara's little universe.

5.2 The meaning of Mara's little universe

In chapter 26, Elda (as the representative of Mara) tells as follows:

‘Mum says she’ll be here as soon as she can. ... and Mum has to help her [Querida] put the people back in the cities, because they’re in one of Mum’s miniature universes and need to be made big again first.’ (Chapter 26, 308; emphasis added)

It is clear that Mara’s device was used to hide people and prevent them from being killed during the battle. That makes a clear contrast with Blade’s thought during the Tour^{xiv}. Though he began to hate the battle and wishes to run away from it, he didn’t make any effort to change the situation completely. He may be too young for that. As for their father, though he had several proposals to lessen the damage (such as horses, or moving of the battlefield itself) Derk didn’t openly resist against the war — until his personal emotions got to him.

What neither Blade nor Derk knew was that the waste and slaughter have been the concerns of Querida and Mara and other women. Therefore, *they* had framed the conspiracy and tried to sabotage as much as they could^{xv}. Those things were mainly taking place behind the scenes, and that is why not only Derk and other men, but also the readers are unable to get a full view until the penultimate chapter. Judging from the previous under-estimation toward his wife, neither he nor other men may have taken enough consideration toward Mara’s inventions from the beginning.

Let me emphasize that (stated in 4.1) when Derk has casually dismissed the topic of cloak: “[h]e saw Mara turn away in irritation.”(28) Here Mara represents women who have some complaint against men’s attitude. Therefore, it is not surprising that such conspiracies were taking place behind those who treat women lightly.

Until now, we thought this is to be a rather traditional story about father Derk, his son Blade, and his siblings^{xvi}; but in reality, it is a rewriting of it, or an overturned version; those women behind the stage undermine not only the traditional plot but also their stiff thinking itself. Yes, it is truly how women rescued the world and how the family contributed to it. As far as I know, the previous family stories never had such a closure^{xvii}.

It may have been dangerous to overlap Jones’s personal experience with the story, but I cannot help thinking that this story is another of her “retelling” of war-time experiences; that you are involved in something bigger than you can solve. At the same

time, it changes your daily life. The child Jones could not object nor escape on her own, but Blade and his siblings are able to deal with the big crisis; they can be strong when they work together as a family unit. The celebrating griffin dance at the end makes a strong impression on us.

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- i Butler, 2011. Obituary in *The Independent*. He also points out that, “She was, however, honored by the wider fantasy and science fiction communities with two Mythopoeic Awards and in 2007 a World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement, while in 2006 the University of Bristol conferred an honorary Dlit.”
- ii Jones, Acceptance Remarks 1999. Mythopoeic Award for Children’s Literature. Mythopoeic Society. Archive.
- iii See Mendlesohn, xvi. Here she is referring to the paper of both Rosenberg and Hill from *Diana Wynne Jones*, 2002.(Rosenberg et al eds.)
- iv For example, this book’s Japanese translation was first published for adults in a Fantasy Novel library; while Amazon in its publishing data now displays it as a book for ages 12 and up. < <http://www.amazon.com/Dark-Derkholm-Diana-Wynne-Jones/dp/0064473368> > (Accessed 2011/11/25.)
- v In Introduction to *Diana Wynne Jones*, Rosenberg try to divide Jones’ books into various categories and points out that some of her early works belong “family category”: “The focus is on tensions within families, whether nuclear families or single parent/step or foster families.” (3)
- vi Jones, *The Dark Lord of Derkholm*. Hereafter, all quotations from the text will be shown with chapter and/or page.
- vii These items are scheduled as a part of Pilgrims Tours. Those items are also found in Jones’ *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*; it is an example of her inter-textual play.
- viii See above note v.
- ix For this theme, see Ann Alston, *The Family In English Children’s Literature*. New York and Abingdon: Routledge 2008, and Peter Hunt ed. *An Illustrated History of Children’s Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- x Mara herself says that “Querida’s nearly as unscrupulous as Mr. Chesney,” in Chapter 14,175.
- xi To arrange his stepson as one of the “expendables” on the Pilgrims’ list. See Chapter 27,320.
- xii As I mentioned earlier, Fran is a villager but became an extended family member (like George) while she worked for the family.
- xiii See 325. Let me add that Mr. Chesney was trapped in a glass paperweight by god Anshur instead.
- xiv See quotation from chapter 20, pp241-242 (in section 3.2).
- xv For example, the ladies at the court were not present when the Pilgrims visited the castle.
- xvi As for the father and son motifs in English literature, see for example, Masaie Matsumura et al. *Father and Son in the Victorian Novels*. (Bictoria-chou Shosetsu ni okeru Chichi to Ko.) Tokyo: Ei-hou-sha, 1991.
- xvii *The Archer’s Goon* (1984) can be read as a family novel, though I feel that the stress is more on Howard and his siblings than the family itself.