Abstract

Charles Williams has been and will undoubtedly continue to be the third wheel in the literary circle of the Inklings, behind his celebrity colleagues J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. The reasons for this are manifold and partially deserved. Williams was a prolific writer who published books in various genres (novels, poetry, drama, non-fiction) and on a wide range of subjects (theology, literary criticism, history, biography, the occult, etc.). Williams was also an influential editor at Oxford University Press and a respected lecturer. This article will focus on the most well-known area of his writing, his novels, which C. S. Lewis referred to as “spiritual shockers”, not in disdain, but in admiration. Attention will be on what I believe are his most important and accomplished novels: Descent into Hell and All Hallow’s Eve. My particular interest will be on his remarkably realistic treatment of the supernatural.

Keywords: the Inklings, the Occult, Supernatural, Mysticism, Charles Williams

Dedicated to Charlie Hadden, who introduced me to Charles Williams and Dr. Who

Charles Williams (1886-1945) is, of course, not as well known as his fellow Inklings (Tolkien and Lewis), and deserves better. He has been championed by certain individuals who have either tried desperately to fit him into a kind of ‘Holy
Trinity’ of Christian writers or by persons who, perhaps legitimately, are convinced his poetry is more deserving of attention. Finally, there are those who resonate with his occult and esoteric beliefs, for example, his interest in the Holy Grail.\(^1\) I will be limiting myself here to his fiction and would like to focus in particular on his two last published novels *Descent into Hell* (1937) and *All Hallow’s Eve* (1945).

Williams was a late addition to the Inklings group and, although greatly respected, particularly by Lewis, continued to have somewhat of an outsider status. Unlike the majority of the members, he did not have a university degree and was not associated (apart from the series of lectures Lewis organized for him, with an extremely positive response)\(^2\) with Oxford University, but ‘only’ with Oxford University Press. Although certainly a self-professed Christian, he had a deep interest in the occult and the supernatural (in contrast to Tolkien’s orthodox Catholicism and Lewis’ Anglicanism). He was also far from straight-laced in terms of his sexual mores, experimenting with a quite genteel form of sadomasochism with a number of his younger female disciples, despite being married the entire time.\(^3\) Williams, unlike his gentlemen colleagues whose university jobs paid the bills, struggled throughout his life to put bread on the table, often having to produce books at a rapid pace in order to survive financially.\(^4\)

I first came across the novels of Charles Williams in my late teens, after having been exposed at an earlier age to his fellow ‘celebrity’ Inklings. I was a devout Christian at the time and Williams was respected due to his association with Lewis in particular, but far from as well-known. I read all seven of his published novels, dipped into his poetry (without much success) and also tried to make something out of his theological books (*He Came Down from Heaven*, *The Under the Mercy* by Robert Peirano. For another thorough discussion of the occult and mystical influences on Williams, see *Charles Williams: Alchemy & Integration* by Gavin Ashenden Kent.

2 Discussed in detail by both Grevel Lindop in *Charles Williams: The Third Inkling* and Humphrey Carpenter in *The Inklings*.

3 Evidence is provided from letters from both sides in Lindop’s scholarly account of Williams’ life and work. This aspect tends to be ignored or whitewashed by both his early American evangelical publisher Wm. B. Eerdmans and by conservative Christian scholarship, exemplified by Wheaton College near Chicago which has much of the Inklings archives and which has practically ‘canonized’ Lewis in particular.

4 Williams actually found a parallel between his own predicament and that of William Shakespeare, exploring the theme in a poem “I Saw Shakespeare” depicting Shakespeare as a modern commuter riding the Tube in London, “but his chief wish was to be earning more money.” (Carpenter 95). I have dealt elsewhere with Williams’ play *A Myth of Shakespeare* from 1928 (Livingstone, 73-78).
Descent of the Dove). I was also a big fan at the time of the horror genre (Stephen King in particular) and Williams provided me with a ‘righteous’ alternative to the devil’s literature. I found myself particularly intrigued by the way Williams was able to describe supernatural beings and states in such a casual, matter-of-fact, fashion. T. S. Eliot, in the preface to All Hallow’s Eve, describes this particular gift with much insight. “But whether credulous or incredulous about the actual kinds of event in the story, we come to perceive that they are the vehicle for communicating a para-normal experience with which the author is familiar, for introducing us into a real world in which he is at home.” (Eliot xiii). I was also fascinated by his concept of ‘substitution’ dealt with in his novel Descent into Hell, even going as far as to attempt to incorporate it into my own spirituality.5

Having reread a number of his novels of late for this present paper, I was curious as to how they would impact me. I am no longer a Christian, although not completely convinced of the non-existence of other worlds and states of being. I wondered if the books would still speak to me and have an appeal. I was struck once again by his rare, if not unique, ability to describe the supernatural and the afterlife with great psychological plausibility and without resorting to spine-tingling cheap scares. In his well-known book on the Inklings, Humphrey Carpenter describes Williams’ unusual supernatural proclivities and sensibility.

He had never fully accepted the conventional distinction between natural and supernatural, or ‘Arch-natural’ as he preferred to call it; and as the years passed he came to feel that no barrier really existed between the two states, and that the supernatural was constantly present, requiring only extra awareness from the beholder to make it visible. (Carpenter, 85)

All seven of Williams’ novels explore supernatural themes often involving depictions of occult practices, witchcraft, seances, cultic objects (grails in particular), otherworldly beings of various sorts (succubi, doppelgangers, demons, angels, etc.) and the afterlife. His first published novel War in Heaven sets the tone for the whole of his work with the memorable sentence: “The telephone was ringing wildly, but without result, since there was no-one in the room but the corpse.” (War 7) C. S. Lewis actually coined the term “spiritual shockers” to describe Williams’ particular genre of fiction (Lewis 258). They have also been wittily referred to as “theological thrillers”.

5 I met a young woman in 1990 who, like the heroine Pauline in Descent into Hell, lived in mortal fear of her own doppelganger. I tried to take the role of the wise Peter Stanhope and ‘carry her burden’, but she never allowed me in the end, which is probably for the best.
Descent into Hell takes place in a fictional suburb of London, Battle Hill, which had been the site of, amongst other things, the burning at the stake of religious ‘heretics’ in the 1600s, with the female protagonist Pauline’s ancestor, John Struther, having been one of the victims. The most famous inhabitant of the village is Peter Stanhope a middle-aged poet and playwright, loosely based on both T. S. Eliot and Williams himself. A number of the cultured locals are preparing for a performance of Stanhope’s latest play in verse, which the author himself benevolently participates in. The young woman Pauline is one of the key actors in the play and develops a friendship with the playwright, enabling her to share her ‘burden’, this being an ongoing ‘haunting’ by a doppelganger. Even if one is skeptical of the existence of such a creature, Williams masterfully captures Pauline’s crushing fear and her obvious legitimate struggle.

Her heart sprang; there, a good way off—thanks to a merciful God—it was, materialized from nowhere in a moment. She knew it at once, however far, her own young figure, her own walk, her own dress and hat—had not her first sight of it been attracted so? changing, growing . . . It was coming at her pace—doppelganger, doppelganger: her control began to give . . . two . . . she didn’t run, lest it should, nor did it. (Descent 22)

Pauline lives in almost constant mortal fear of encountering this ghost of sorts, only for Stanhope to encourage her to actually embrace the supernatural meeting and offering to help through ‘substitution’ and carrying her fear, inspired by the biblical maxim: “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).6 To Pauline’s great surprise, Stanhope approaches the entire affair with an almost cheeky nonchalance: “And what can be easier than for me to carry a little while a burden that isn’t mine?” (Descent 98). He also encourages her to think of her affliction as “a dreadful goodness” (Descent 16), in other words, something which can help her grow and perhaps even open up more doors. He describes his philosophy in more detail as follows: “To bear a burden is precisely to carry it instead of. If you’re still carrying yours, I’m not carrying it for you – however sympathetic I may be.” (Descent 98). When Pauline objects as to the unseemliness of such an act, Stanhope puts her in her place gently and wisely, making one wonder if Williams himself had had this very same conversation with one of his younger female disciples. “But if you will part of the best of us, and live and laugh and be ashamed with us, then you must be content to be helped. (Descent 99). Williams is writing this, of course, at a time when mental health was still very much taboo and kept ‘in the closet’.

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6 The biblical quotes are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible.
There are additional supernatural characters in the novel, including one of the locals named Lily/Lilith, a primordial she-demon who is eventually ‘exorcised’. She often seemingly appears out of nowhere seductively crooning vapid phrases about escape and self-help, very much along the lines of a New Age quack or conman: “There are tales that can give you yourself completely and the world could never treat you so badly then that you wouldn’t neglect it. One can get everything by listening or looking in the right way; there are all sorts of turns.” (Descent 61) She is also very much reminiscent of the increasingly popular depiction of a psychic or energy vampire.

The second most respected member of the village is a renowned war historian Lawrence Wentworth who has unreciprocated romantic feelings for yet another of the young women, Adela, involved in the theatre production. When passed over for a younger, more handsome, man, Wentworth experiences another kind of perverse form of substitution. He manages to conjure up a ghostly doppleganger of his love interest, who ends up as another succubus, draining eventually both his mental and physical life force. “Since that night it had come to him often, as on that night it had been all that he could desire. It had been an ape of love’s vitality, and a parody also of its morality.” (Descent 130). In his monograph on the writer, Grevel Lindop interestingly speculates as to not only a connection between Williams the author and the saintly poet Stanhope, but also with the selfish historian: “Both Peter Stanhope and Lawrence Wentworth are, in their extreme contrasts, polarized self-portraits of Williams.” (277) Lindop also provides evidence in a letter where Williams even admitted this less than flattering characterization about himself. (277)

The ghost of a day labourer who recently committed suicide in the village also plays an important role as well as the deceased Protestant religious martyr who Pauline is able to comfort while at the stake in yet another form of ‘substitution’. This section is incidentally connected with another one of Williams’ favourite themes involving a blurring and blending of time. “That past existed still in its own place, since all the past is in the web of life nothing else than a part, of which are not sensationally conscious.” (Descent 77).

Williams’ own ‘intimate’ attitude and approach to the supernatural is embodied not only in Stanhope, but also in Pauline’s elderly grandmother, Margaret, who has a kind of ‘second sense’, to use contemporary jargon, and who passes away peacefully near the end of the novel. Margaret actually encourages Pauline to leave the house in the middle of the night in order to meet with the ghost of the labourer and experience her final epiphany: “Would you be so very charming as to get out and see if anyone wants you?” (Descent 159). Although the nurse dismisses the elderly woman’s request as senility, her granddaughter obeys and in the climax to the novel, Pauline not only substitutes for her ancestor, taking
away his fear of death and torture, but rids herself of her own fear and even provides the forlorn labourer with comfort.

Pauline sighed deeply with her joy. This then, after so long, was their meeting and their reconciliation: their perfect reconciliation, for this other had done what she had desired, and yet not the other, but she, for it was she who had all her life carried a fear which was not her fear but another’s, until in the end it had become for her in turn not hers but another’s. (Descent 170)

Unknowingly, Pauline has been carrying or bearing the burden of her martyred ancestor, who has thereby been able to face his torture with resolve and bravery. Lindop discusses how the concept of ‘substitution’ became a key concept in both his writing and his personal life. “He speculated that when we suffer, it is perhaps so that some other may benefit. When we are happy, someone else, perhaps quite unknown to us, has earned our happiness for us by their pain or effort. We live, quite literally, from and in one another; and all of us from and in God.” (157).

*Descent Into Hell* could be read as a kind of exorcism of Williams’ monsters, ridding himself of his Wentworth tendencies and embracing the virtues of Stanhope. His particular account of purgatory is portrayed as a temporary state of being, leading to either heaven or hell, although certainly not in the old-school fire and brimstone sense. His final novel *All Hallow’s Eve*, although sharing a number of themes not only with *Descent into Hell*, but with his other novels and non-fiction, attempts something even more lofty. Carpenter describes Williams’ ambition behind the book, “He wanted to progress beyond the achievement of *Descent into Hell*, and a logical sequel to that book with its graphic account of damnation would be (as he remarked to a friend) a kind of *Paradiso*, an account of heaven.” (Carpenter 193)

*All Hallow’s Eve*, published in 1945, begins with a description of the afterlife, depicting once again very matter-of-fact two young women, Lester Furnival and Evelyn, who have died in one of the bombings of London and who now roam the streets of the capital in a kind of state of purgatory. The opening of the novel convincingly describes Lester’s gradual realization that she is no longer among the living while standing on Westminster Bridge in a seeming homage to

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7 In *He Came Down from Heaven*, Williams elaborated on both his theory of the practice of substituted love dealt with in *Decent into Hell* and his notion of the city as paradise developed in his last novel *All Hallow’s Eve*.

8 According to Humphrey Carpenter, this was one of the books, along with *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Lord of the Rings* which was first read aloud during the meetings of the Inklings. (Carpenter, xiii)
William Wordsworth and his celebrated poem “Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802”.

She could not tell how long she stood there, shocked and impotent to move. Her fear was at first part of her rage, but presently it separated itself, and was cold in her, and became a single definite thought. When at last she could move, could step again to the parapet and lean against it and rest her hands on it, the thought possessed her with its desolation. It dominated everything—anger and perplexity and the silence; it was in a word—‘Dead,’ she thought ‘dead.’ (Hallow’s 23)

The portrayal is very much in the spirit of the times, having been published, of course, in the final year of the war and the year of Williams’ own death. Carpenter describes its relevance poignantly: “All Hallows’ Eve was topical: set at the end of the war, still actually some months away, its representation of the experience of the newly dead, in a timeless, shadowy version of drab wartime London, was remarkably convincing.” (Carpenter, 413). The description of the afterlife/purgatory in the city is arguably one of the finest accomplishments of the book: “It lay there, as it always does,—itself offering no barriers, open to be trodden, ghostly to this world and to heaven, and in its upper reaches ghostly also to those in its lower reaches where (if at all) hell lies.” (Hallow’s 80)

The villain in the novel is the so-called Prophet, Simon LeClerc, who has been painted by Jonathan, a close friend of Richard Furnival (the widower of Lester). The Prophet has incidentally two identical doppelgangers of sorts living and preaching in Russia and China. He is also a kind of vampire and warlock/magician, who has eternal life and a wide range of supernatural powers, including sending his daughter Betty (the child of Lady Wallingford, the Prophet’s right-hand woman and follower) into the future and the afterworld in order to provide him with useful information to assist him in his plans for world domination. The painting apparently hits too close for comfort and would serve as an apt description for a number of prominent politicians today: “This man looks as if he were being frightfully definite and completely indefinite at the same moment—an absolute master and a lost loony at once.” (Hallow’s 45) To complicate things, the painter, Jonathan, is in love with the daughter, Betty.

Williams is once again astute at reviving the meaning of certain words which have lost their original impact and meaning. All Hallows’ Eve is very much interested in the actual notion of what it means to be ‘damned’. Richard Furnival, Lester’s still living husband, comments as follows upon witnessing the interaction between the Prophet and the ghost of Evelyn, who is irresistibly drawn to his dark powers.

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Richard shut his eyes; still, through those shut eyes, he seemed to see the two smiling at each other. The exchanged smile, the mingled sound, was an outrage. He felt himself to be a witness of an unearthly meeting, of which the seeming friendliness was the most appalling thing. If he had known the word except as an oath, he would have felt that this was damnation.” (Hallow’s 112)

The characterization of Evelyn may be the most disturbing in the entire book, as she loses herself in a perverse desire to inflict torture and bullying on her old schoolmate Betty. Lester, in contrast, is very much saved by the end of the novel and even able to reconcile with her still living husband Richard, but only after becoming aware of her own failings. She recognizes that she is very much in mortal danger upon discovering certain selfish thoughts in her post-mortal state: “This was she, damned; yes, and she was damned; she, being that, was damned. There was no help, unless she could be something other, and there was no power in her to be anything other.” (Hallow’s 90). Of interest is the fact that Williams seems to be arguing that one continues to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12) even in the after-life.

This book and to a lesser extent, Descent into Hell, frequently delves into power relations between children and parents, between partners and even between friends and not only in this world, but also in the afterlife. Particularly horrific is the characterization of Betty’s mother, Lady Wallingford, who murderously pursues the death of her daughter in her mad obsession with the Prophet, not wanting to share him with anyone. She is finally engulfed in a living hell of her own making. In the final scene when the Prophet is defeated, she comes to realize that Betty is actually more important for his evil plans than she is and this is not to be tolerated.

She had but one thing to ask and that unvocally; that he should strike to kill before the doll had become evenmore she than Betty. She had a vague and terrible fear that the substitution might be so complete that Betty would not die. Let him stab before that happened! let him strike both of them into whatever waited! let her have but the chance to meet her daughter there, and see which of them could rule! (Hallow’s 218)

The malice described here is ferocious, involving, once again, another variation on the ‘substitution’ theme. Williams masterfully peels back the masks of everyday humans to reveal the demons beneath. Despite the exotic plots and supernatural developments, the books provide a great deal of insight into human dealings and relations and are just as relevant as when they were written, if not more.
Williams was championed of course, not only by Lewis, but even by T. S. Eliot. While Lewis tended to excuse some of Williams’ poetic excesses, Tolkien had some definite reservations.

Tolkien did not specify what it was in Williams’s work that he found distasteful, but once in his old age he referred to Williams as ‘a witch doctor’. Certainly he was aware—perhaps more than Lewis was—of the importance of black magic and devilry in some of Williams’s books. Tolkien himself had a profound belief in the devil and all his works, and he did not think that such things should be bandied about in popular novels. (Carpenter, 121)

While Lewis and Tolkien have had countless artistic followers, attempting to write fantasy, dungeons and dragons, allegorical Christian tales, etc., Williams’ legacy has been much more limited. One could argue that his style anticipates to some degree the approaches of Magic Realism. I would personally see the greatest affinities with the critically and popularly acclaimed children’s author Madeleine L’Engle of *Wrinkle in Time* fame.

When first meeting Pauline during the preparations for the play in *Descent into Hell*, the playwright (very much expressing Williams’ own cherished beliefs) clarifies something he has said earlier “‘Yes,’ Stanhope said again. ‘Very. Only—you must forgive me; it comes from doing so much writing, but when I say “terribly” I think I mean “full of terror”. A dreadful goodness.’” (*Descent* 16). This paradoxical concept is at the heart of Williams’ achievement in his novels. Without resorting to ‘dreadful’ cheap scares along the lines of pulp fiction, Williams infuses his books with righteous fear, fear which needs to be faced in order to achieve mental and spiritual health. T. S. Eliot describes this distinct ability with much admiration and obvious respect.

For him there was no frontier between the material and the spiritual world. Had I ever had to spend a night in a haunted house, I should have felt secure with Williams in my company: he was somehow protected from evil, and was himself a protection. He could have joked with the devil and turned the joke against him. To him the supernatural was perfectly natural, and the natural was also supernatural. And this peculiarity gave him that profound insight into Good and Evil, into the heights of Heaven and the depths of Hell, which provides both the immediate thrill, and the permanent message of the novels.” (Eliot xi)

Eliot’s generous acknowledgment of Williams’ work, and to a greater extent his remarkable personality, illustrates the core of my argument. Regardless of whether one shares the author’s Christian faith or vision of the supernatural, the books, far from displaying a morbid obsession with the creepy and grotesque, radiate light and health; “a dreadful goodness” or “a terrible good” (*Descent* 22). Regardless
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of whether we believe in the existence of a succubus or a doppelganger, Williams makes them psychologically credible and relevant. The books speak very much to the ills of twenty-first century society and have lost little of their spiritual shock value.

One of the most disturbing passages in the books captures and embodies much of what has been discussed above. Williams is about to introduce the suicide of the nameless labourer and sets the scene as follows.

The whole rise of ground therefore lay like a cape, a rounded headland of earth, thrust into an ocean of death. Men, the lords of that small earth, dominated it. The folklore of skies and seasons belonged to it. But if the past still lives in its own present beside our present, then the momentary later inhabitants were surrounded by a greater universe. From other periods of its time other creatures could crawl out of death and invisibly contemplate the houses and people of the rise. The amphibia of the past dwelt about, and sometimes crawled out on the slope of this world, awaiting the hour when they should either retire to their own mists or more fully invade the place of the living. (Descent 25-26)

Williams’ voice and style is unmistakable here, but without descending into zombie-like cliches so overly familiar to us at present. The terror is tempered with joy and hope, encouraging one to face the unknown and one’s own personal nightmares.

Works Cited

BIONOTE

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