

6-2006

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Recommended Citation

Dooley, Jessica D. (2006) "Ascending and Descending: Suffering, Spiritual Growth and Co-inherence in Charles William's Descent Into Hell," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 5 , Article 26.

Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol5/iss1/26

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Cover Page Footnote

Undergraduate Student Essay

INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume V

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 2006

Upland, Indiana

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Dooley, Jessica D. "Ascending and Descending: Suffering, Spiritual Growth and Co-inherence in Charles Williams's *Descent Into Hell*." [Inklings Forever](http://www.taylor.edu/cslewis) 5 (2006) www.taylor.edu/cslewis

Ascending and Descending: Suffering, Spiritual Growth and Co-inherence in Charles Williams's *Descent Into Hell*

Jessica D. Dooley

*"But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ,
so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."*

1 Peter 4:13

Charles Williams's sixth novel, *Descent Into Hell*, illustrates the nature of reality, suffering, and spiritual growth in vivid, fantastic images. It is illuminating, electrifying, petrifying. Perhaps Williams succeeds so well in communicating about reality because the book is so fantastic: C.S. Lewis proposed "that by casting [spiritual realities] into an imaginary world . . . one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency." Williams's writing is certainly potent; it startles all the fiery skepticism out of his readers' "watchful dragons." His message is one of eternal significance: the individual must surrender the self to the reality God ordains, including suffering and joy, in order to become most wholly who God intends them to be.

The premise that Williams applies to every character in *Descent Into Hell* is that the individual's daily decisions—whether to give the self or relationships primacy, to embrace duty or refuse it, to acknowledge reality or deny it—shape their immediate character and eternal destiny. No one is exempt from these decisions, everyone must either progress or regress; no one is spiritually neutral. Thomas Howard assessed the book's events: "The title tells us what it is all about. Someone is going to hell. But there is an ascent also. The path splits. The two main characters go in opposite directions, the one towards solitude, warmth, ennui, and oblivion; and the other towards co-inherence, joy, fullness, and liberty" (Howard 249). The character who is descending is Wentworth, a middle-

aged military historian who begins to make a habit of dismissing any fact that is inconvenient to him, either in his profession or his daily life. The one who ascends is Pauline Anstruther, who "has a trick," as she describes it, of meeting an exact likeness of herself in the street (Williams 96). The distant appearances of this double leave her paralyzed with a "black panic," her initiative bound. The playwright Peter Stanhope, and Pauline's grandmother Margaret, suggest to her that good, like the *doppelgänger*, is terrifying. Stanhope later introduces Pauline to the doctrine of substituted love, and takes over her burden of fear, freeing her to begin her ascent.

The stumbling block that threatens to prevent these characters from ascending is a fear of loss, fear of relinquishing the self. When Margaret Anstruther is dreaming about the ghostly life of the Hill, Williams writes of one of the ghosts, "His enmity to man and heaven was only his yearning to enter one (heaven) without loss" (Williams 70). Wentworth's descent is precipitated by his refusal to accept any facet of reality that contradicts his preferences, or would require selflessness of him. He furthers his intellectual debate with a fellow-historian, Aston Moffat, by twisting the factual evidence, "preferring strange meanings and awkward constructions . . . [and] manipulating words" (Williams 39). He "refused all joy of facts, having for long refused all unselfish agony of facts" (Williams 81). Wentworth has been vigorously refusing loss for so long, that he cannot even bear to lose something he

didn't have in the first place. He feels an attraction to Adela Hunt, one of the young people who attend his weekly soirees, but his preference is purely selfish—he wishes Adela to flatter him, respect him, and show him deference. He becomes obsessed with her only after she demonstrably prefers Hugh Prescott's company. One of his final decisions to descend, his last small refusal of an invitation to participate in the joy of reality, comes when he learns of his historical rival's knighthood:

There was presented to him at once and clearly an opportunity for joy—casual, accidental joy, but joy. If he could not manage joy, at least he might have managed the intention of joy, or (if that also were too much) an effort toward the intention of joy. The infinity of grace could have been contented and invoked by a mere mental refusal of anything but such an effort. He knew his duty—he was no fool—he knew that the fantastic recognition would please and amuse the innocent soul of Sir Aston, not so much for himself as in some unselfish way for the honour of history. Such honours meant nothing, but they were part of the absurd dance of the world, and to be enjoyed as such. Wentworth knew he could share that pleasure. He could enjoy; at least he could refuse not to enjoy. He could refuse and reject damnation.

With a perfectly clear, if instantaneous, knowledge of what he did, he rejected joy instead. He instantaneously preferred anger, and at once it came; he invoked envy, and it obliged him. . . . He knew that his rival had not only succeeded, but succeeded at his own expense; what chance was there of another historical knighthood for years? Till that moment he had never thought of such a thing. The possibility had been created and withdrawn simultaneously, leaving the present fact to mock him. The other possibility—of joy in that present fact—receded as fast. He had determined, then and for ever, for ever, for ever, that he would hate the fact, and therefore facts (Williams 80-81).

In contrast to Wentworth, who is given opportunities for joy and spiritual growth, but consistently refuses them, is Aston Moffat, who was a "pure scholar, a holy and beautiful soul who would have sacrificed reputation, income, and life, if necessary, for the discovery of one fact" (Williams 38). Moffat had "determined his nature" long ago, like the residents of Battle Hill, who are creating or molding their characters with their daily decisions, choosing joy and self-submission, or demanding self-importance. Margaret Anstruther, too, fears loss; as she approaches

death, she fears the relinquishing of her living identity, and the tremendous burden of knowledge that she would bear after moving into her next relation to the spiritual world. But when in her vision she rejected that fear and assented to the approaching prospect of death, she was returned to her familiar life: "it was as if, having renounced it, it was restored to her" (Williams 73). Margaret's vision suggests what the other characters will discover: that "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39).

Wentworth's demand that the self be all-important sends him into a terrible decline, a descent toward hell, which Howard describes as solitude, warmth, ennui, and oblivion. When the self is central, there is nothing else, and the self becomes nothingness. Wentworth's determination to lose nothing of himself, to submit no possible selfish interest to the overriding joy of reality, isolated him from the rest of humanity, and sealed his descent into hell. Wentworth briefly realized that the danger of what he was doing: "A remnant of intelligence cried to him that this was the road of mania, and self-indulgence leading to mania" (Williams 50), but he preferred to deceive himself, and intentionally continue his descent. His opportunities for reversal were many, but they were not infinite. At last, he responds to his final dilemma with self-focus, and he loses the power of consecutive thought (Williams 219). He withdraws into himself, and finds, beyond madness, absolute nothingness.

The notion that joy, gladness, and spiritual growth, can only be found in what is—in facts—is central. If Wentworth, or any other character, demands what he wants over what is, he is refusing joy, because reality is joy. How is it possible to relinquish what the individual wants and by so doing receive joy? Williams describes the reality that is wholly good and yet fearfully unfamiliar as a "terrible good." Stanhope discloses the idea of a terrible good to Pauline:

"When I say terribly . . . I mean full of terror. A dreadful goodness."

"And if things are terrifying," Pauline put in, "can they be good?"

"Yes, surely," he said, with more energy. "Are our tremors to measure the Omnipotence?" (Williams 16-17)

God ordains the terrible good, the content of reality. The individual must submit their desires to God's sovereign plan—to do otherwise (to demand one's own plan) would place the person in a wrong relationship to God. And as Margaret and later, Pauline, found, God authored their desires as well as reality, and when they

submitted themselves to the terrible good, their desires were fulfilled.

Pauline is terrified of what will happen if she encounters her doppelgänger at close range. “She feared to be drawn [into her other self], to be lost or not to be lost” (Williams 59). But as Stanhope confronts her with the concept of a “terrible good,” she recognizes what her double is: it is her future self, surrendered to God’s will, ascending and growing spiritually, and she contemplates embracing the terrible good. The doppelgänger is Pauline herself, and yet not her; what aspect of herself must she give up in order to accept the terrible good? Her identity itself? Williams describes the doppelgänger as “her manifested joy,” a call to the fuller life promised by Christ. But while she feared what she must give up of herself as a loss, she could not attain the fuller life—could not meet her other self. Williams uses the word joy synonymously with reality, and facts. Pauline’s doppelgänger was “her manifested joy;” it was in fact her real self, her future self, submitted to the terrible good and ascending. Pauline was afraid of suffering and loss if she met her doppelgänger, but suffering is reality, and reality is love and joy. Whatever is, is joy. Because suffering is part of the nature of reality, it is sanctified by joy. This is what Stanhope meant when he said that the good was terrible, not the terror good. In Williams’s cohesive scheme of reality, joy and suffering are not mutually exclusive, but identical; suffering is subsumed in the perfect truth and reality that God designs.

While Pauline feared the doppelgänger, she *could not* meet it; it always turned away because she rejected it. She dreamt and feared that it was pursuing her, but it was always coming to meet her, offering her an opportunity, and when she feared and rejected it, it turned away or disappeared. Each time the doppelgänger confronted her, it was an opportunity for spiritual growth, what Oswald Chambers describes as a “crisis”: “Suppose God has brought you up to a crisis and you nearly go through but not quite, He will engineer the crisis again” (Chambers, August 13). Pauline’s burden of fear prevented her from meeting the doppelgänger and continuing her ascent, until the burden of fear was removed. Clearly, the burden, like the doppelgänger, is Pauline’s alone. But Peter Stanhope demonstrates the love of Christ in Pauline’s life by contracting to bear the burden for her. “When you leave here you’ll think to yourself that I’ve taken this particular trouble over instead of you. And I will give myself to it. I’ll think of what comes to you, and imagine it, and know it, and be afraid of it. And then, you see, you won’t” (Williams 97).

The doctrine of substituted love is the crux of the joy that participates in and defines reality and facts. We cannot save ourselves, so Christ saves us. We cannot bear the burden of suffering, so we bear one another’s. Stanhope takes over Pauline’s burden of fear, freeing her of its crippling paralysis. And Pauline discovers,

with infinite joy, that she had borne the burden of fear all her life, on behalf of her ancestor John Struther, who was martyred four centuries before. He prayed for deliverance from the fear of the martyring fire, and Pauline’s doppelgänger, her free and joyous self, accepted it from him, giving him her joy. As Pauline discovers that “she had lived without joy that he might die in joy” (Williams 171), her joy is fully restored, and she joins with her doppelgänger in one complete entity. “It had been her incapacity for joy, nothing else, that had till now turned the vision of herself aside; her incapacity for joy had admitted fear, and fear had imposed separation. She knew now that all acts of love are the measure of capacity for joy; its measure and its preparation, whether the joy comes or delays” (Williams 171).

Pauline’s fear of the “terrible good” paralyzes her, until Stanhope contracts to bear her burden for her—he will be afraid on her behalf, making her free. Margaret Anstruther, moving in a vision beyond the boundaries of the living world, shows love to the spirit of a workman, freeing him to respond to the love of God. Pauline was able to apply the doctrine of substituted love by bearing the burden of John Struther four centuries after his death. “I have seen the salvation of my God,” John Struther cried, and the salvation came through co-inherence. Williams expanded the connotations of co-inherence to include God’s transcendent ability to unify every aspect of his creation. “[He] uses the term to speak of humanity’s union with Adam in the Fall, with Christ in His reconciling act upon the Cross, and the unity of the Church” (Hynson). In *Descent Into Hell*, co-inherence unites the community of saints, enabling them to bear one another’s burdens and participate in the joy of reality. Pauline’s ascension to wholeness, and her participation in the process of substituted love, are in striking contrast to the nothingness that envelopes Wentworth when he withdraws from the co-inherent fabric of relationships. Each person in the community of the saints must relinquish their burden, and bear that of another. This application of co-inherence sanctifies suffering, lightening the individual’s load, and drawing all of reality—both gladness and distress—under the canopy of a majestic, “terrible good.” Oswald Chambers describes the peace and freedom that come with the terrible good:

“The joy of the Lord is your strength.” Where do the saints get their joy from? If we did not know some saints, we would say—“Oh, he, or she, has nothing to bear.” Lift the veil. The fact that the peace and the light and the joy of God are there is proof that the burden is there too. The burden God places squeezes the grapes and out comes the wine; most of us see the wine only. No power on earth or in hell can conquer the Spirit of God in a human

spirit, it is an inner unconquerableness.—
Oswald Chambers, My Utmost for His Highest, April 14

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