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So You've Always Wanted to Read Charles Williams? *An Introduction to His Plays*

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So You've Always Wanted to Read Charles Williams? An Introduction to His Plays

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Charles Williams (1886-1945) was a prolific writer of prose, poetry, and plays. His prose includes seven novels (written from 1930 to 1945), histories of the Holy Spirit (*The Descent of the Dove*, 1939) and evil spirits (*Witchcraft*, 1941), and literary criticism (*The Figure of Beatrice*, 1944).¹ Williams also wrote plays and poetry.

The Inklings

The two most renowned Oxford Christian writers or Inklings are C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) and J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973). Although Charles Williams was only an Inkling from 1939 to 1945, he has been called "the third Inkling" because of his prodigious literary output.

Of the Inklings, only Charles Williams was a playwright or dramatist. C.S. Lewis, however, was well known for his radio broadcasts. During World War II, C.S. Lewis's BBC radio broadcasts (that later became *Mere Christianity*) made his voice widely recognized, second only to that of Winston Churchill.² In the 21st Century, it is the works of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien that have come to be dramatized. C.S. Lewis's novels, *The Great Divorce* and *The Screwtape Letters*, have been performed as church drama or on stage by Anthony Lawton. *The Screwtape Letters* are just now being performed off Broadway, with Max McLean as Screwtape. Two of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Lion the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and *Prince Caspian*, have been made into full-length films, and the third, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, is in production. J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy has also been made into full-length films. *The Return of the King* won eleven Academy Awards; this is the only time in history that a fantasy film has won the Academy Award for best picture.³ Because their works have been dramatized, Lewis and Tolkien are well-known to modern audiences. Charles Williams, the "third Inkling," is not.

Charles Williams' Collected Plays

Most of Charles Williams' plays have been collected into a single volume, *Collected Plays*, which was reissued as a paperback in 2005.⁴ *Collected Plays* contains two festival plays (*Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* and *Judgement at Chelmsford*), six church dramas (*Seed of Adam*, *The Death of Good Fortune*, *The House by the Stable*, *Grab and Grace* or *It's the Second Step*, *The House of the Octopus*, and *Terror of Light*) and one radio broadcast play (*The Three Temptations*).

Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury

Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury is probably Charles Williams' most famous play. It was commissioned for the Canterbury Festival and was presented at Canterbury Cathedral in 1936. The Canterbury Festival was a prestigious venue. T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, presented at the 1935 Canterbury Festival, commemorated the martyrdom of Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170.⁵ T.S. Eliot was a great poet of the 20th Century and won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948.⁶ Dorothy Sayers'

The Zeal of Thy House was presented at the 1937 Canterbury Festival.⁷ Sayers is renowned for her Lord Peter Wimsey detective fiction. Sayers took on learning Italian and translating Dante's *Divine Comedy* from Italian to English after reading Charles Williams' *The Figure of Beatrice*. Dorothy Sayers rivals Charles Williams as a dramatist. Her cycle of 12 plays about the life of Christ, *The Man Born to be King*, was broadcast on BBC radio from 1941 to 1942.⁸

Why do I like Charles Williams' play *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*? Cranmer was the author of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. We use the *Book of Common Prayer* for worship in our church in Philadelphia. Both Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis were Anglicans who used the *Book of Common Prayer* for worship in their churches.

Cranmer became Archbishop of Canterbury during the reign of Henry VIII (1509-1547). King Henry VIII was obsessed with having a male heir and had six wives altogether. *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* dramatizes the key events in Cranmer's life. Cranmer was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1533 and immediately annulled the marriage of Katherine of Aragon to King Henry VIII.⁹ Katherine was Henry's wife for 24 years. Of their children, only one daughter, Mary, survived. Anne Boleyn became Henry's second wife and queen in 1533. The family of Anne Boleyn had secured Cranmer's appointment as the Archbishop of Canterbury. Anne Boleyn had one daughter, Elizabeth. King Henry VIII died in 1547, and Edward VI became king. Edward was the son of Jane Seymour, Henry's third wife. Cranmer became a leader of the English reformation, and the first *Book of Common Prayer* was published in 1549. Edward VI died in 1553, and Mary (the daughter of Katherine of Aragon) became queen. She restored Roman Catholic worship to England. From 1553 to 1555, Cranmer was tried for treason and heresy. He recanted several times. On the day of his execution (March 21, 1556), Cranmer withdrew his recantations and was martyred by being burned at the stake.

The two main characters in the play *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* are Cranmer and a skeleton. Charles Williams refers to the skeleton as a *figura rerum*, the "shape of things."¹⁰ I wonder if Williams had H.G. Wells' 1933 science fiction novel, *The Shape of Things to Come*, in mind. For Cranmer, the "shape of things to come" is martyrdom and death. A skeleton is a symbol of death. In several of Charles Williams' plays (*Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*, *Seed of Adam*, and *Judgement at Chelmsford*) a figure apparently representing Evil or Death ultimately appears, in the light of eternity, as the instrument of Good.¹¹ The skeleton is first introduced in a type of prologue:¹²

"Fast runs the mind,
and the soul a pace behind:
without haste or sloth
come I between both.
There blows a darkening wind
over soul and mind:
faith can hear, truth can see,
the jangling bones that make up me:
Till on the hangman's day
and along the hangman's way,
we all three run level,
mind, soul, and God or the Devil."

It is ambiguous whether the skeleton represents Christ or devil, or both. Later in the dialogue Cranmer asks the skeleton, "What are you called?"¹³ The skeleton replies,

"Anything, everything;
fellow, friend, cheat, traitor...
My name, after today's fashion, is latinized
into *Figura Rerum*. Anne prized me at first;
later she found my bones and called me a cheat.
King Henry found me a servant, and then a traitor..."

At one point the skeleton refers to himself as the backside of Christ:¹⁴ "...You shall see Christ, see his back first -- I am his back." Williams obviously has Moses in mind (Exodus 33:23).

The House by the Stable and Grab and Grace, or It's the Second Step

To get to know Charles Williams as a playwright, a start would be to read three of his plays -- *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*, *The House by the Stable* (a Christmas nativity play), and *Grab and Grace or It's the Second Step* (the companion play and sequel to *The House by the Stable*).

The House by the Stable is my favorite Charles Williams play. It makes Williams "accessible to the masses", or at least the Christian masses. The play is suitable for production as church drama and as reader's theater (which we did for our Inklings group in Philadelphia). The Christmas nativity play *The House by the Stable* has six characters: Man, Mary, Joseph, Hell, Pride, and the archangel Gabriel. Man is the innkeeper who gives Mary and Joseph lodging in his stable. Man is an everyman who has forgotten where he has lost the jewel of his soul. Hell and man's Pride throw dice to gamble for man's soul. Of course, Hell's dice are loaded! The archangel Gabriel intervenes and makes the dice game fair. Man wins and finds the lost jewel of his soul, which was around his neck the whole time.

Grab and Grace, or It's the Second Step is the companion play and sequel to *The House by the Stable*. Man, his Pride, Hell and the archangel Gabriel are again characters. This time, however, Pride is different:¹⁵

"I am not pride,
indeed ... I have forgotten all that.
I am the old woman on the new way:
look at me, a demure modest self-respect;
Nothing spectacular or dishonourable about me."

The two new characters in *Grab and Grace* are personifications, Faith and Grace. Faith is a brisk and sophisticated woman, while Grace is a mischievous, irrepressible boy. Hell tries to drown Grace in a lake, while Pride tries to trap Faith in a sack. Both Grace and Faith escape. What is the second step? Man must overcome his Pride, even if she is only a "demure modest self-respect."

Descent Into Hell

To get to know Charles Williams as a playwright, one could also read his novel *Descent into Hell*. One of the two main characters, Peter Stanhope, is a poet and playwright. The poet and playwright Charles Williams even used "Stanhope" as a pen name.¹⁶ The story in *Descent into Hell* revolves around the production of a play. All of the characters are judged by their reaction to this play.

Thomas Howard has likened *Descent into Hell* to the Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex*: "a sort of perfect sample of what all art strives for - namely, the shaping of every single element (in the case of stories. it would be elements like words and actions and setting) into one, seamless whole so that it is impossible to pick out lumps..."¹⁷

Descent into Hell contains some wonderful descriptions of the play production process. Of the play's producer, Catherine Parry: "No one has destroyed more plays by successful production. I sometimes wonder - it's wrong - whether she has done the same thing with her life ... she relies too much on elocution and not enough on poetry."¹⁸ She "mastered creation, and told it what to do."¹⁹ There are also wonderful comments about poetry: "What does one need to say poetry? What but the four virtues, clarity, speed, humility, courage?"²⁰ Stanhope is so humble, that he muses that perhaps the theatrical company should have performed Shakespeare's *Tempest* instead of his drama.²¹

The two main characters in *Descent into Hell* are Peter Stanhope (his "hope stands") and Lawrence Wentworth (his "worth went"). Stanhope is the poet and playwright, while Wentworth is a writer of prose (military history). Stanhope is on an "ascent" toward Exchange and Co-Inherence, while Wentworth is on a "descent into hell," toward solitude and incoherence. Stanhope is a burden-bearer, who carries the burden of Pauline Anstruther's fear, while Wentworth refuses to aid Adela Hunt. Stanhope demonstrates Charles Williams' "Doctrine of Substituted Love," while Wentworth prefers the false Adela, a succubus he has created in his mind. One might say that Wentworth demonstrates a "Doctrine of Substituted Lust," the evil counter-part to the Doctrine of Substituted Love.

Descent into Hell is populated with a host of spiritual characters: Pauline Anstruther's "doppelganger", her ghostly twin, her fear of meeting herself (and death?); the ghost of a suicide (at the site of Wentworth's house as it was being built); the ghost of Pauline's distant ancestor, John Struther, a Protestant martyr of the Reformation. For Charles Williams, "the past still lives in its own present beside our present."²² One final spiritual character in the book is Wentworth's succubus, the false Adela that he has created in preference to the real Adela.

The drama of Lawrence Wentworth's descent into hell is truly scary. Wentworth's "mind reduced the world to diagrams, and he saw to it that the diagrams fitted."²³ He "wished Adela to belong to him... His mind made arrangements."²⁴ "It's good for man to be alone" (a complete inversion of Genesis 3).²⁵ "He desired hell."²⁶ Wentworth "dreamed, more clearly than ever before, of his steady descent of the moon-bright rope" down into the black hole of hell.²⁷

There is a chain of burden bearing in *Descent into Hell*. Burden bearing is a particular theme of Charles Williams, an extension of Christ's command to "bear one another's burdens." Stanhope bears Pauline Anstruther's burden, the fear of meeting her "doppelganger." Pauline then bears the burden of the two ghosts, first the suicide and

then her ancestor John Struther, who is about to be martyred. On the other hand, Wentworth refuses to help the true Adela in her moment of horror. He refuses to "bear her burden."

Descent into Hell needs to be read in a particular way:

- (1) Repetitively (more than once)
- (2) Not rapidly. Read it slowly, not like Harry Potter!
- (3) With references in hand. Tom Howard's *The Novels of Charles*

Williams serves as a good set of marginal notes.²⁸ A good dictionary is also helpful. For example, the title to Chapter 1 of *Descent into Hell* is "The Magus Zoroaster." A magus can be one of the Magi; a magician, sorcerer, or astrologer; or a Zoroastrian priest.²⁹ Zoroastrianism's principal beliefs are the existence of a supreme deity, Ahura Mazda, and a cosmic struggle between a spirit of good, Spenta Mainya, and a spirit of evil, Angra Mainyu.³⁰ *Descent into Hell* turns out to be a tale about the cosmic struggle between good and evil. Later on in the story, it is revealed that the phrase "the Magus Zoroaster" is part of a quotation from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*: "The Magus Zoroaster, my dead child, met his own image walking in the garden."³¹

Conclusion

To get to know Charles Williams as a playwright, read three of his plays (*Thomas of Canterbury*, *The House by the Stable*, and *Grab and Grace or It's the Second Step*). Also read one of his novels, *Descent into Hell*, in which one of the main characters (Stanhope, Charles Williams?) is a poet and playwright.

Notes

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4. Williams, Charles. *Collected Plays*, with an Introduction by John-Heath Stubbs. Regent College Publishing: Vancouver, British Columbia, 2005.
5. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_in_the_Cathedral
6. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T._S._Eliot
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10. Cavaliero, Glen. *Charles Williams: Poet of Theology*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1983, p. 41.
11. *Collected Plays*, p. vii.
12. *Collected Plays*, pp. 5-6,
13. *Collected Plays*, p. 34.
14. *Collected Plays*, p. 54.
15. *Collected Plays*, p. 229.
16. *Charles Williams: An Exploration of His Life and Work*, p. 142.

17. Howard, Thomas. *The Novels of Charles Williams*. Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1983, p. 247.
18. Williams, Charles. *Descent into Hell*. William B. Eerdmann's Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 56.
19. *Descent into Hell*, p. 145.
20. *Descent into Hell*, p. 63.
21. *Descent into Hell*, p. 178.
22. *Descent into Hell*, p. 25.
23. *Descent into Hell*, p. 35.
24. *Descent into Hell*, p. 40.
25. *Descent into Hell*, p. 86.
26. *Descent into Hell*, p. 50.
27. *Descent into Hell*, p. 51.
28. *The Novels of Charles Williams*, pp. 247-285
29. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd. ed., unabridged. Random House: New York, 1987, p. 1158.
30. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, p. 2213.
31. *Descent into Hell*, p. 19.