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## The Concept of Twilight in the Writings of C.S. Lewis

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Undergraduate Student Essay

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### **The Concept of Twilight in the Writings of C.S. Lewis**

**Sky Vanderburg**

Honorable Mention, Student Essay Contest

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## The Concept of Twilight in the Writings of C.S. Lewis

Sky Vanderburg

Darkness is the absence of light. Shining unabated, light invades even the darkest corners to illuminate reality. Never, though, do we see so clearly, where all shadows are banished. Even at high noon, the light we consider so bright must pass through the filters of air, water, or our own eyes before one can perceive it. And so for the times when the light shines imperfectly, we are left with a clouded awareness of reality. We are in Twilight.

There are many examples of Twilight woven throughout C.S. Lewis' most acclaimed works. Not all denote the literal or even abstract representation of dawn or dusk. The concept is often more than a mere setting for many of his stories and is employed to represent confusion, mundanity, anticipation, and obscurity. These four states, by no means exhaustive of all the possible applications of Twilight in Lewis' writing, describe powerfully the present human existence or perspective in its half-illuminated, limited state.

In *The Great Divorce*, Lewis offers a direct comment on the nature of Heaven and Hell and the immense implications of their separation for the fate of humans. Following conversations between individuals from a city of constant Twilight and those in a land of approaching illumination, Lewis describes the great physical and spiritual divide between the two habitations. In doing so, he places Hell so far away from Heaven that it is next to nothing, stating that an entire world came out of one small crack in Heavenly ground (137).

Lewis' illustration of this grand division effectively characterizes the Twilight of impending Hell as a temporary experience of unpleasant confusion wrought by falsehood. As the seat of light, Heaven is accordingly cast as the true reality and the land of coming day. Its

inhabitants and environment are termed Solid. The residents of the gray town, by comparison, are ethereal Ghosts living and thinking in the shadows of sunset. From the Ghost's perspective, one Solid gnat would be as a bullet—just as one glimpse of fully-lit truth would inflict great pain (145).

When given the chance to become Solid by yielding fully to a new logic of selflessness, the Ghosts are understandably fearful given their context. The choice requires a rejection of self-obsession, a sentiment that melds so nicely with the dim, inverted logic of the familiar Twilight. According to scholar Thomas Ramey Watson, when speaking of damnation in Lewis' terms the "choice of every lost soul can be expressed in the words 'Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven'" (163). In such a mindset the circumstances of Twilight have one so confused that he cannot recognize what is truly good.

Uncertainty pervades the half-lit city and the minds of its people. The phantasmal citizens cannot even agree whether sunrise or sunset is on the horizon. Nonetheless, the inhabitants all anticipate, albeit nervously, something not yet complete. The fullness of Heaven or Hell has yet to be revealed, and so night or day has not completely settled. Until the Twilight is gone, the Ghosts retain the ability to reach beyond the grayness and choose the salvation of brightening day:

If they leave that grey town behind it will not have been Hell. To any that leaves it, it is Purgatory. And perhaps ye had better not call this country Heaven...Ye can call it the Valley of the Shadow of Life. And yet to those who stay here it will have been Heaven from the first. (68)

In this conversation between the transparent narrator and his Solid guide, the power of a final decision amid the Twilight to penetrate backwards and erase or exacerbate every past fault in one's life is felt like a Heavenly raindrop to the Ghostly heart.

The parallels between the presence of pure light and the influence of Good (God) are clear to the Christian reader. By that same token, the existences of darkness or Evil (Satan) subsist only as they are allowed by the absence of their respective counterparts. Between these two extremes, Lewis situates Twilight as the mixture of opposing realms—the milieu where souls are saved or lost.

Lewis does not believe that this struggle takes place in a vacuum or that humans make their momentous choice without influence. In *The Screwtape Letters*, he creates a dialogue between two demons about the most effective way to condemn the soul of a particular “patient.” The most striking element of their chosen strategy is not to entice the human into committing a horrendous act but to delicately maintain his state of self-delusion. In this sense the Twilight is created by Satan and his minions, and as Gilbert Meilaender states in his article “The Everyday C.S. Lewis,” the “high stakes are played out in the most mundane of decisions” (29).

Just like the necessarily partial revelation of Hell in *The Great Divorce*, encountering the fullness of damnation would abolish the state of Twilight and give one a sobering dose of reality. As scholar Chad P. Schultz observes, the most effective tactics for tempters are “the stuff of shadows and whispers, of inner depths of mind and heart...the kind of thing for which words like ‘evil’ and ‘sin’ seem almost too grandiose” (218). This idea is reflected in the letters of Screwtape, the elder and wiser demon, as he stresses the importance of preventing the “patient” from any honest self-encounter with the potential for eternal significance (29).

As the story recounts the significant moments in the spiritual life of the “patient,” the reader should soon realize that those events are actually quite commonplace. Although the human endures the Second World War, there are no life-changing trials to mark a turning point in his salvation. In fact, just as the gradual descent to condemnation, the salvation of a soul, Lewis implies, is also without earthly fanfare. Whether a person is pursuing Good or drifting to Evil, these ordinary, unremarkable roads characterized by Lewis are almost always lit dimly.

Twilight does not, however, characterize solely the plight of individual souls in a postlapsarian world. In Lewis’ *Perelandra*, the half-lit sky seems to represent the fate of a whole world. Like early Earth, all of Venus waits in anticipation of the choice of Eve’s equivalent to repeat the Fall of Man or continue in God’s planned Paradise. When she outlasts her temptation, enduring the influence-ridden Twilight just like any of Lewis’ humans, the dull light of the atmosphere suddenly brightens to pure daylight:

All was in a pure daylight that seemed to come from nowhere in particular...For as the light reached its perfection and settled itself, as it were, like a lord upon his throne or like wine in a bowl, and filled the whole flowery cup of the mountain top, every cranny, with its purity, the holy thing, Paradise itself...(174-175)

This representation of Twilight most clearly resembles the same potential that reigns in the gray city in *The Great Divorce*; the Venusian Eve could choose two diametrically opposing paths. By yielding to Satan’s overtures made through an utterly Evil character, she would have spoiled her innocence and irreversibly altered a planet’s creation. Instead, the first female obeyed God by surviving her own pride.

Lewis’ view of the relationship linking Good and Evil or light and darkness is often considered commensurate to dualism where two extremes are equal and opposite (Purtill 185).

In light of his simpler characters in earlier works such as *Perelandra* or its sequel *That Hideous Strength*, one could certainly make such a case. Pure Good and Evil are ensconced in individuals or the influence on actions and events are clear. However, as Lewis produces more realistic, complex personalities and concepts in *Till We Have Faces*, the reader is given a vision of Twilight as the field for a necessary struggle among shades of meaning and complexity rather than a battle between clearly-defined, rival persuasions.

In this retold myth of Cupid and Psyche, Orual, her possessive and smothering half-sister, is the narrating character building a complaint against the gods. As one event after the other turns sour in her estimation, she becomes even more embittered against the deities and Psyche herself for not remaining by her side. To Orual, her own love is perfect and committed, but to another it is self-centered and consuming. She frequently overestimates the merit of her own goodwill and does not fully appreciate that of others, failing to sense her own wayward path through the confusing Twilight of human experience. Indignant and questioning the justice of the gods, Orual charges that they make life unendurable:

I say, therefore, that there is no creature...so noxious to man as the gods. Let them answer my charge if they can. It may well be that, instead of answering, they'll strike me mad or leprous or turn me into a beast, bird, or tree. But will not all the world then know (and the gods will know it knows) that this is because they have no answer? (249-250)

What Orual fails to realize, though, is the obfuscation stemming from her own narrow perspective. The veil which masks her unattractive face becomes a symbol of the self-deception and slow loss of personal identity that mars her life after the loss of Psyche. Actions meant to



obscure physical ugliness from others function to shield the repulsive distortion of Orual's selfish love from herself. She has, as it were, no face.

Orual's character is used by Lewis to lay bare the pretenses by which humans fall prey to the illusory counter-claims of pride. Without a coherent countenance to meet the gods face-to-face, she is unable to see her motivations in an honest light. Her world and visage are lit only dimly by the logic of Twilight. She was, as Meilaender writes, "striving to isolate her natural loves from the only context in which they could ultimately flourish...making war on the reality principle of the universe" (33).

Yet when Orual is at last allowed to question the gods, she understands the acrimony heard in her own voice is the answer of the gods, or more precisely the singular Divine Nature that is the only answer (294; 308). Recognizing now that her true appearance is elucidated only by the pure light of the Divine Nature, Orual finally experiences her half-love of Psyche made whole by loving her sister as she "once would have thought impossible" (307). And along with her love, her face was restored as a reflection of true, illuminated beauty.

From these examples it is clear that Lewis envisioned the Twilight as a visual representation of the human soul in self-determined progress to some end. As each person is challenged with countless decisions, theologian Richard B. Cunningham says of Lewis' belief, "each choice represents a step on the road toward the perfection of good or evil of which heaven or hell will be the culmination" (125). At this suggestion, a journey through Twilight takes on a maze-like quality where one wrong turn to the left or right could lead to eternal damnation. Why the slow, dreary process riddled with obscurity and confusion? There must be some reason why God, the eternal Good, chooses not to burn away the clouds of Twilight with his own radiance and gather all souls to Himself.

The answer is, in Lewis' view, the preservation of free will. The removal of all space or time for voluntary action on the part of humans would, it seems, render life and the manner it is lived inconsequential in determining the final resting place of the soul. Lewis believes that a person does something freely only when he retains the ability to do otherwise and, like other incompatibilists, maintains that no choice is the product of causes beyond the decision-maker's control (Talbot 175). In the context of *The Great Divorce*, for instance, each Ghost intentionally queues for the bus ride to Heaven and some engage a Solid person when they arrive. Regardless of the outcome, no endangered soul is forced to leave or stay. In fact, it is only after a genuine plea for help from a transparent visitor that the reader witnesses the only Solidification of the whole account (110-111).

Interestingly, Lewis' view of free will seeks to establish through the idea of Twilight a certain tension between the tenets of predestination and the Universalism of George MacDonald, a great influence on Lewis and the revered guide in this characterization of the division of Heaven and Hell (Cunningham 126; *Great Divorce* 66). Both theologies discount, whether tacitly or explicitly, the eternal significance of a personal resolve or failure to pursue Good. Although Lewis may wish this to be true on an emotional level, his words suggest otherwise:

What are you asking God to do? To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does. ("*Pain*" 116)

It is the very edge of light that Twilight is found. If God were to eradicate the shadows and fully enlighten the human existence, individuals would be compelled by their encounter with full reality to follow Him, thus cheapening their allegiance.

Although Lewis' characters are not forced to elect a life in light, they are also not impervious to certain inklings of a brighter reality. The Twilight fails to conceal all uneasiness or incompleteness in the souls of its inhabitants; however, there is a sense of comfort in resisting difficult change. Considering Psyche's claim that she wed a god, Orual, though receiving peace from the thought, was never completely sure of her sister's madness until it was disproved in the face of that god (141-142; 306). And, true to form in Lewis' writing, the gift of that vision was painfully wonderful, like brilliant, piercing arrows (307).

Brightening to day, the end of Twilight seems to transform Lewis' human characters into more substantial, lovely creatures with unmistakably individual identities. In fact, the enlightened souls are more completely themselves as their iniquities become distinguished features of a true face (*Great Divorce* 111; *Faces* 307-308). The darkening of Twilight to night, however, can only be the opposite. The path to darkness may focus on self, but its end leads to nothingness. Given the cases of the Un-Man of *Perelandra* and Screwtape's nephew, Lewis' damned creatures are entirely gone, wholly consumed (*Perelandra* 124; *Screwtape Letters* 171). In such ends, there is no room for free will or choice. All is finished.

The balance of the future hangs, therefore, on the everyday choices that humans make in the dim uncertainty at present. Absolute fulfillment or utter annihilation both threaten to unmake the current, half-lit existence, but only one offers growth in self-knowledge and beauty instead of writhing, shrinking extinction. It is to provide context and contrast for the exercise of free will

and the colorful transformation of a soul that the dull Twilight lingers in the works of C.S. Lewis.

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