

Inklings Forever

Volume 8 A Collection of Essays Presented at the Joint
Meeting of The Eighth Frances White Ewbank
Colloquium on C.S. Lewis & Friends and The C.S.
Lewis & The Inklings Society Conference

Article 17

5-31-2012

'Few Return to the Sunlit Lands': Lewis's Classical Underworld in The Silver Chair

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Recommended Citation

Muth, Benita Huffman (2012) "'Few Return to the Sunlit Lands': Lewis's Classical Underworld in The Silver Chair," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 8 , Article 17.
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol8/iss1/17

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VIII

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Joint Meeting of

The Eighth

FRANCES WHITE EW BANK COLLOQUIUM ON C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

and

THE C.S. LEWIS AND THE INKLINGS SOCIETY CONFERENCE

Taylor University 2012

Upland, Indiana

Few Return to the Sunlit Lands: Lewis's Classical Underworld in *The Silver Chair*

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In re-reading the Narnia books as an adult, classical studies professor Emily Wilson writes that Lewis fails to create a world that “hangs together seamlessly and convinces us of its reality on its own terms. In Narnia, you can see the stitches that patch a chunk from Mallory to a gobbet from Ovid.” John Goldthwaite sometimes finds this mingling of “incompatible borrowings [. . . as] the uncomfortable murmurings of *The Man Who Read Too Much*” (222), taking particular issue with Lewis’ appropriation of classical material to create a Christian world (224). Yet today I wish to examine these chunks and gobbets Lewis chooses, the manner in which he stitches them together, and the final effect of such a compilation. Wilson and Goldthwaite rightly see Lewis’s extensive, multifaceted, and unabashedly displayed borrowing from other texts, but mistakenly pass over these literary allusions merely as a world-building short cut or as evidence of intellectual braggadocio and ideological inconsistency. Instead, Lewis’ multiple literary sources strategically point toward his views of theology and humanity. For example, Underland of *The Silver Chair* reformulates classical motifs and Miltonic references for a Christian purpose: to create an Underland markedly differentiated from the 20th century’s common, trivialized vision of Hell. In doing so, *The Silver Chair* reflects Lewis’ position on what constitutes Hell and

asserts his commitment to individual free will.

As his early interest in Greek mythology and *Aeneid* translation testify, classical motifs resonated with Lewis. A.T. Reyes reminds us Virgil in particular becomes a “personal touchstone” (6) for Lewis. Virgil’s role in the development of literary epic becomes central to Lewis’ scholarly work (9), and Virgil’s standing as a pagan prophet of Christianity made him a compelling model for both general and personal religious parallels, as Lewis found in Aeneas the type of one who finds home after much wandering (7-8).

The Silver Chair’s Underland echoes the classical Underworld: dark, underground, and encompassing immense space. Its first cavern “was full of a dim, drowsy radiance” (125). It is “a mild, soft sleepy place [. . .] with a quiet sort of sadness like soft music” (215). Like the Hades of Homer and the Underworld of Virgil, the Underland is highly populated – there are Earthmen, strange creatures, the Giant Time -- and these inhabitants are either asleep or joyless. Just as Aeneas meets many shades, Eustace, Jill, and Puddleglum meet a hundred “dreadfully pale” (123) Earthmen, who despite various forms were “in one respect [. . .] all alike: every face in the whole hundred was as sad as a face could be” (123).

David Downing traces the similarities in their journey to Aeneas’ in Lewis’ *Aeneid* translation. In both,

travelers encounter a “ghostly multitude” and strange, monstrous creatures. They travel through a silent forest, cross dark water in a leaky boat, encounter fiery rivers, and learn secrets to aid their escape. Downing also remarks that the repeated commentary “Many fall down, but few return to the sunlit lands” echoes Dryden’s translation of the Sibyl’s warning: “Smooth is the descent, and easy is the way: / But to return, and view the cheerful skies, / In this the task and mighty labor lies.”

The invocation of the epic hero’s underworld journey conveys mythic scope and archetypal significance to Lewis’ Underland, and Lewis’ classical echoes do not confine themselves to Virgil. Virgil’s epic itself responds to the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus summons the dead on his journey home. Also, Lewis’ travelers’ mission closely resembles Orpheus’ journey to retrieve Euridyce, Theseus’ plan to liberate Persephone, or Herakles’ rescue of Alcestis. Like them, Jill, Eustace, and Puddleglum come to rescue the presumed-dead Rilian from a shadowy underground realm.

Orpheus’ and Theseus’ failures show the near-impossibility of this task. External and internal dangers threaten its completion. Theseus fails to exercise proper wariness in the underworld. Though he cannily refuses to eat, he gets permanently stuck in his stone seat (Martin 138), reminiscent of the Silver Chair into which Rilian is bound every night. While Orpheus gains Euridyce’s release, that success is snatched away by a failure in virtue, his impatience in looking back (Martin 49). Likewise, this mission is threatened by exterior perils -- capture, imprisonment, and enchantment -- and even more jeopardizing self-sabotage -- their voluntary capitulation to the Lady’s drugging insistence that there is no Sun, no Overland, no Aslan.

None but heroes can expect to return from such a realm, and not all of them, as evidenced by Theseus’ failure.

His eventual rescue comes only at great cost. Herakles rips him out of his imprisoning chair, leaving part of his buttock behind (Martin 138). Rilian, too, had been on a dangerous mission and succumbed to an imprisoning enchantment. Rescue attempts cost the lives of many heroes; Rilian himself loses irreplaceable years with his father. Thus, heroes can become victims, a threat Jill, Eustace, and Puddleglum also face. Such victims may be irretrievable, as was Theseus’ companion Peirithoos. Herakles elects to leave him behind, as wrecking his chair would have caused Hades to cave in (Martin 138). Although freed from his chair, Rilian’s escape remains uncertain, as the Lady’s death precipitates Underland’s destruction.

In spite of classical resonance, Donald Glover finds *The Silver Chair’s* Underland disappointing; not noting its classical sources, he calls it “dull and drowsy rather than sinister” (168). So it is worth noting that Lewis had other underworld models he might have foregrounded. Lewis is certainly not the first to create an underworld with classical flavor to evoke Christian concerns; both Dante and Milton connect their overtly Christian infernal worlds to classical models. More prominent allusions to either would have added more thrill and menace and likely would have more strongly evoked Christian reference for a popular audience. Milton’s Hell in particular with its fire, sulfur, and the “darkness visible” (1.63) of its burning lake has influenced English visions of the underworld. Lewis’ scholarship was firmly grounded in Milton, as his *Preface to Paradise Lost* testifies. He also frequently draws from and manipulates Miltonic sources in his fiction, as in *Perelandra* and *The Magician’s Nephew*, to name only two examples (Hannay 73-90, Baird 30-33, and Muth).

Miltonic echoes are also present in Underland. Milton’s Satan prefers to

“reign in Hell rather than serve in Heaven” (1.262) and thus consolidates power to create a kingdom. He appropriates the region into which he has been thrown, recruits others, and directs their building of Pandemonium. The Green Lady also has claimed an undesirable property and recruited a work force to recreate a kingdom, complete with castle. Like Satan, dissatisfied, she plans a stealth attack on Aslan’s Narnia, beginning with the successful corruption of Rilian. As surely as Adam and Eve, Rilian exchanges his inheritance for self-deluded enchantment. He thus becomes the Lady’s tool for conquering his own country, with puppet rulership as his reward. As with Milton’s Adam and Eve, recognition and repentance are his first steps toward redemption from the severe consequences.

Clearly Lewis can – and frequently does – riff on Milton. Yet the most pronounced and frequent echoes in Underland’s geography are classical, not Miltonic. Even where echoes of Milton’s Hell are present in the geography of Underland, they are evoked only to be instantly reformed. For example, Golg’s description of Bism recalls Milton’s Hell, then sharply differentiates Underland from it. Certainly, fiery Bism initially suggests the traditional English hell evoked by Milton:

A strong heat smote up into their faces, mixed with a smell which was quite unlike any they had ever smelled [. . .] The depth of the chasm was as bright that at first it dazzled their eyes and they could see nothing. When they got used to it, they thought they could make out a river of fire, and, on the banks of the river, what seemed to be fields and groves of an unbearable, hot brilliance. (180)

Yet despite the fire and smell, the full description shows this not Milton’s Hell:

no “darkness visible” here, as the account emphasizes light and brilliance, and viewers eventually come to see. Rather than “ever-burning Sulphur” (Milton 1.69), Bism’s smell is “rich, sharp, exciting, and made you sneeze” (*The Silver Chair* 180). Its colors remind of “a very good stained-glass window with the tropical sun staring straight through it at mid-day” (180). Instead of Miltonic fallen angels ripping “the bowels of their mother Earth” for precious metal (Milton 1.687), gold and gems are “alive and growing” (*The Silver Chair* 182) and may be squeezed for drink. Bism is a wondrous part of a fantastic Narnian creation, and definitively not Milton’s Hell.

Nor is Underland a classical Tartarus. Just as tweaking Miltonic expectations highlights the significant differences between this place and Hell, Lewis’ tweaking of the classical expectations the text more obviously evokes emphasizes the differences between Underland and its more prominent models. *The Silver Chair*’s Underland is not a place of supernatural insight: its characters have not travelled there to receive prophesy. They do not, like Aeneas and Odysseus, consult with the Sybil or Tiresius. While they see much, they meet with no dead spirits, a common feature of Aeneas’, Odysseus’, and later Dante’s journeys. Although a place of imprisonment, Underland is not a place that metes out judgment, as Salwa Khaddam has also noted (93). It holds no earned rewards or punishments, no Elysium Fields, no Sisyphus or Tantalus. While classical echoes connect the text with other epic journeys, marked revisions differentiate this place from any realm of the dead, either classical or Christian.

These differences resonate in a distinctly Christian way. Goldthwaite criticizes Lewis’ classical allusions, claiming they create a “theological morass” (224) and that associating

Christianity with “a dead make-believe” could imply Christianity is itself merely make-believe (235). Yet it is the *revision*, not the mere appropriation, of classical moments, that contribute to Lewis’ Christian themes. As Lewis says in response to what he sees as the shortsighted habit of measuring Virgil by Homer, “Nothing separates him [Virgil] so sharply from Homer” as his “theme of the great transition,” seen most distinctly in “places where they are superficially most alike” (*A Preface to Paradise Lost* 37). In a similar fashion, nothing separates Lewis so sharply from the classical world view as his Christian themes, and those are seen most distinctly in those places which are superficially most alike, such as in Underland.

While superficially classical, this journey into Underland is markedly different from its sources in the independent action and success of its ordinary travelers. *The Silver Chair’s* travelers meet no prophets or teachers. Instead, Jill has much earlier conferred face-to-face with Aslan, and although given guiding Signs, they must otherwise fulfill their task using their own insight, without Odysseus’ rituals to map actions or Aeneas’ Golden Bough to assure passage. They are also, significantly, not warriors or poets, but unlikely children and a melancholic Marshwiggles who nevertheless succeed where others fail. Even Herakles decides leaving Peirithoos is the better part of valor, but Puddleglum does not give up, crushing the drugged fire and holding his faith in Narnia and Aslan. Nor has Rilian become a passive prisoner like Theseus. Instead he participates in his own rescue by destroying the chair and killing the Lady. Thus, their success confirms the power of ordinary people who voluntarily follow Aslan’s guidance and their own consciences.

The differences between imprisoned inhabitants, like Rilian and the Earthmen, are also telling. In Homer’s

and Virgil’s epics, as incidental episodes in the visit, heroes are asked to help spirits rest in death; in *The Silver Chair*, the specific, primary goal of Lewis’ travelers is to free the living to live more abundant life. One set of parallels and distinctions is particularly pointed. In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas’ former companion Palinurus begs Aeneas to help him cross the Styx by either throwing dust on his unburied body or taking him across now by the hand. Lewis translates his plea, “But by thy father’s name, by young Iulus, now /full of thy hopes, by heaven’s sweet light and wind, oh thou / Unconquerable, I thee adjure; out of this woe / Save me” (6.362-365). Bound in the Silver Chair and for an hour disenchanted, Rilian says, “For once and for all [. . .] I adjure you to set me free. By all fears and all loves, by the bright skies of the Overland, by the Great Lion, by Aslan himself, I charge you” (145). Rilian’s language echoes Palinurus’s. Both make commanding appeals for release from a shadowy, marginal existence, and each invoke strong loves and the sun. Palinurus commands Aeneas by “thy father’s name,” Rilian by Aslan’s, surely a subtle connection between God the Father and Aslan.

The listeners’ power to respond marks a key difference between *The Silver Chair* and its classical model. Aeneas cannot respond. He is far from Palinurus’s body and cannot offer him the hand Palinurus requests to cross the river, as the Sybil says that prayers cannot bend eternal wills and calls it a “fell desire” to cross the river unburied and unbid (6.374). Conversely, Jill, Eustace, and Puddleglum *do* have power to act and can in fact free Rilian. Rilian’s use of Aslan’s name is one of Jill’s Signs and the only one they do not mistake. Despite their fear, they can and do act.

In addition, the potential for complete satisfaction and success is stronger. The Sybil does assure Palinurus his body will receive funeral rites: “And

so the dead man's care is stilled, and woes subside in part." Yet Palinurus' "woes subside [only] in part," while Rilian is fully restored to his identity. Neither rescue is yet finished; Palinurus is not yet buried and Rilian has not yet physically escaped, but the difference in eventual destination is clear. Palinurus will cross the Styx and join the dead, his most ambitious desire not to "miss death's quietness" (6.371). Rilian could rejoin the living. Palinurus ultimately has no choice about where he goes. Yet Rilian's destination, as evidenced by his two subsequent bouts of temptation, is from this point largely in his own hands.

Such source revision highlights one of Lewis' strongest spiritual commitments: the ability of humanity to choose their spiritual path. Lewis goes to some trouble to give Underland mythic quality while distinguishing it from either Hell or Tartarus. By doing this he makes in his fictional world the distinction he sees necessary in *The Problem of Pain*: separating the doctrine of Hell from the imagery of it (124) as a physical location of inescapable torment for wrongdoers, an idea so easily subject to self-righteousness and trivialization. In both *The Problem of Pain* and *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, Lewis presents Hell as a place in which "the doors [. . .] are locked from the inside" (*Problem* 127, *Preface to Paradise Lost* 105). To underscore the difference between Lewis' conception of Hell and the popular idea of Hell as a single prison with a divine jailor, *The Silver Chair* offers other potential hells besides Underland into which characters voluntarily enter and from which they have the ability to escape. These include the giant city of Harfang; had they stayed, they would have ultimately been consumed, like Screwtape and Wormwood's patients. The human world has the Experiment House. Previously, Eustace himself has contributed to its character; his current behavior at the book's beginning has started to resist and

change it; and at the book's end, this hell is harrowed by Eustace, Jill, Caspian, and Aslan.

Likewise, other imprisoning places in the Chronicles of Narnia initially seem Hellish, yet prove escapable. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Rhoop spends years on an island tormented, not due to a deity's punishing justice, but due to his own choice to come and his own dreams. The stable into which Jill, Eustace, and Tirian are thrown in *The Last Battle* actually leads them to Aslan's country. The dwarfs find it a prison because they choose. Like these places, Underland could become hell but only incidentally, if characters chose to make them so. This fact highlights the ideal that the combination of Christ's sacrifice and human free will means a soul's residence is not inevitable and largely subject to choice.

This self-imposed mental prison is the real Hell for Lewis; as he writes in a 1946 letter to Arthur Greaves (13 May), the hell which exists in the mind "is actual enough" (508). Any who wish can leave *The Great Divorce's* ever-growing city. That expansive city with ample bus service is later put in new perspective by George MacDonald's revelation of its actual smallness and his explanation of a damned soul, which "is nearly nothing: it is shrunk, shut up in itself" (139). Similarly, the mental hells of *The Silver Chair* are much more dangerous than the physical Underland. Jill and Eustace are closer to Hell on the open moors neglecting the signs than when captured in Underland. Rilian is closer to damnation when riding outdoors but enchanted than when bound in the chair but lucid. Their greatest peril comes not when Underland's sea threatens to engulf them all, but when they start to accept the Green Lady's pleasant pseudo-logic and its much smaller world, devoid of sun, Overland, and Aslan.

Rather than being mere ill-stitched gobbets recycled from other

writers, Lewis' allusion to classical underworlds and his transformations of those allusions emphasize that this fictional place, although dangerous, is not Hell, at least not that geographical imagery so common to and so easily dismissed by the 20th-century imagination; nor is it the more threatening self-imposed, mental Hell of Lewis' thought, unless one makes it so. Here, as in Lewis's other writing, Hell is not a prison into which one is thrown, but mental and spiritual confinement entered voluntarily. As he writes in "The Trouble with X," "It's not a question of God 'sending' us to Hell. In each of us there is something growing up which will of itself be Hell unless it is nipped in the bud" (155). Choosing exit is possible, too, although not always easy. Sallowpad the Raven says it well of the Tisroc's palace: "Easily in, but not easily out, as the lobster said in the lobster pot" (67). Human beings may so embed themselves, as Rilian has done, that they need aid to save themselves. Or they might breathe too deeply of enchantment, move too far from the bus-stop, retreat into too dark a stable, or shrink their souls too small for any but the God's help. As *The Great Divorce's* George MacDonald says, "Only the Greatest of all can make Himself small enough to enter Hell" (139). Our Narnian characters are, thankfully, not so small in soul as to forego their escape, and in that lies the victory of their return.

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