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Sion and Parnassus: Three Approaches to Myth

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Abstract
Compares how the three authors shaped their mythopoeic literature—Tolkien as a true creator, Lewis as an allegorist, and Williams as a Christian symbolist—and why they may appeal to different tastes.

Additional Keywords
Lewis, C.S.—Mythopoeis; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Mythopoeis; Williams, Charles—Mythopoeis
The Mythopoeic Society may be one of the few cases on record in which the whole is a good deal less than the sum of its parts. By this I mean that there are surely more admirers of Tolkien, Williams, and Lewis individually than there are admirers of all three. First of all, there is the large body of Tolkien fans who neither know nor care about the other two writers. And there are also quite a few people, Professor Wayne Shumaker among them, who admire Tolkien and Lewis but find Williams unreadable. I would guess that there are probably, in addition, admirers of Williams—especially those primarily interested in mysticism and the occult—who do not read the other two. I would like to suggest some of the different ways in which these writers are "mythopoeic," and why they may appeal to quite different tastes.

As one considers Tolkien, Williams, and Lewis as a group, it becomes quite obvious that the central figure, the focus of the union, is C.S. Lewis. Superficially, they form a group because they were all at Oxford during the war years (Lewis and Tolkien, of course, were there both before and after), and because they were all members of a literary club, the Inklings, which met to read and criticize one another's work in progress. The work of Williams and Tolkien, however, has little in common, but both men influenced and were influenced by (though superficially) Lewis. It might be argued that, just as many "Victorian" writers have nothing more in common than the fact that they flourished during the reign of one queen, so these three writers form a group only by accident. But, on a deeper level, this is not really true; and Glen has very discerningly come up with the precise term under which all three may be subsumed: mythopoeic.

All these writers are makers of myths, or perhaps more precisely, shapers of myths. As the author of Ecclesiastes observed, "there is no new thing under the sun"; and there is probably nothing in any of these authors that a diligent folklorist could not find foreshadowed somewhere. But each of them approaches myth in a different way.

Tolkien is a true mythopoet, a maker of myths. His materials are traditional archetypes: the Quest, the Evil One, the Lost King who returns to save his people, the Longevi, the Wizard, the Hero, the Forest Perilous, the Waste Land. His direct literary sources are primarily Teutonic and Celtic legend. However, he is engaged not in a retelling but in a recombing of old elements into a new whole. Theoden is not to be equated with Hrothgar; Gandalf is not Merlin. Indeed, sometimes the archetype is reinterpreted: Galadriel is not the sinister Morgan le Fay, though the unwise of Rohan may view her as such. The Lord of The Rings is not based on older myths, but joins with them in imitating common archetypes.

Lewis' method, in those books that are purely his own (the Chronicles of Narnia, Out of The Silent Planet, Perelandra...).
The Pilgrim's Regress, The Great Divorce), is that of the allegorist. He is concerned with building a small and secular myth that will imitate a great and theological mythos, Christianity. He draws widely on classical myth, medieval legend, and English folklore as well as inventing his own symbols. As Rosemond Tuve has pointed out (Allegorical Imagery, Princeton, 1966), in a true allegory there is a natural and necessary relationship between tenor and vehicle, substance and shadow; if one is merely manipulated artificially in the service of the other, the work is dead. Spencer loved chivalric romance as well as Christian virtue; Lewis dreamed a world of floating islands before he thought of using it as a setting for a retelling of Paradise Lost. The Lord of The Rings is "pagan" in the sense that it is to be read only in terms of itself: it does not point outwards to a greater reality, thus admitting its own insufficient reality. Lewis' worlds are shadows of something more real, as the "real" world itself was to the medieval Christians, who believed that God had created the pelican to be an image of Christ just as C.S. Lewis created Aslan for the same purpose. Lewis' myths are designed to present Christianity without theology to the secular mind. They are an attempt to show how such things can be, rationally and consistently, without making an a priori demand for belief by claiming divine revelation and this repelling the non-Christian reader at the outset. The story is subordinate to the doctrine as truth, but is equally whole and consistent on its own level. It can be enjoyed on both levels by Christian readers and on the fictive level alone by non-Christians.

The novels of Charles Williams are a different matter. Williams uses religious and mystic symbols from our world -- the Grail, the Tarot, the Stone of Solomon -- with their primary-world meanings intact, where Lewis creates secondary-world symbols for primary realities, like the Stone Table and the Fixed Lands for the Cross and the Tree of Knowledge. Not all of Williams' symbols are primarily Christian, but those that are not are given a Christian interpretation. This, I believe, is why so many admirers of Lewis and Tolkien do not like his books, which demand an assent to his religious beliefs, or at least a suspension of disbelief, belief, before the story can be enjoyed on its own terms. Readers unwilling to make this commitment have often accused him of espousing madness and cruelty as ideals; and indeed it is hard to justify an episode like the suffering and death of Chloe Burnett in Many Dimensions to a non-Christian reader in terms of his values. Dante does something similar, but in providing a complete panorama of eternity, showing all aspects of the Christian whole, he makes less of a demand on his readers. Williams, by assuming Christian theology as a starting-point and going on from there, sometimes makes his readers feel as if they were expected to understand long division without ever having been taught addition and subtraction. Christians, perhaps Jews, and occultists have learned their fundamentals elsewhere, but other readers cannot be blamed if they decide to drop the course and take something else.
These three writers are each "mythopoeic" in a different sense. Tolkien creates a self-sufficient myth; Lewis imitates a primary mythos in the creation of a secondary myth; and Williams weaves primary myths into a new combination which is not independent of the primary world. I predict that even in The Mythopoeic Society he will always be the least popular of the three; while Lewis can be enjoyed by all but the most virulently anti-Christian reader, and Tolkien by any reader responsive to fantasy.

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### Here an Orc, There an Ork

by Ruth Berman

When I first read J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of The Rings*, I was startled to find "orcs." I already knew "orks" from L. Frank Baum's *The Scarecrow of Oz*. But the orc and the ork were very different creatures, and I put it down to coincidence, supposing both men had independently hit on the same nonsense syllable. But then I ran across the same word in John Milton's epic, *Paradise Lost*. In *Book XI*, lines 831-835, he has the angel Michael describing to Adam, after the Fall, how the Mount of Paradise will be dislocated at the time of Noah's Flood:

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pushed by the horned flood,
With all his verdue spoil'd, and Trees adrift
Down the great River to the op'ning Gulf,
And there take root an Island salt and bare,
The haunt of Seales and Orcs, and Sea-mews clang.
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