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Battle Hill: Places of Transition in Charles Williams' *Descent Into Hell*

Margaret R. Purdy

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Abstract

Notes that Williams uses many elements of the traditional ghost story in *Descent Into Hell*, especially in the story of the suicide. However, Williams “touches [the ghost story] with the numinous, giving its symbols a sacramental meaning.”

Additional Keywords

Ghost stories—Relation to Descent Into Hell; Williams, Charles. Descent Into Hell

BATTLE HILL

PLACES OF TRANSITION IN

CHARLES WILLIAMS' DESCENT INTO HELL

MARGARET R. PURDY

Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien all wrote mythopoeic fiction, but whereas Tolkien and Lewis drew their form and imagery from the realm of romance and fairystory, Charles Williams' novels, especially Descent Into Hell have more of an affinity with supernatural literature and ghost story. Indeed, Descent Into Hell presents to the reader of supernatural fiction a veritable embarras de richesses of supernatural elements. Besides a conventional apparition (more or less), it boasts a doppelganger, a succubus, and Lilith herself. Yet it is much more, of course, than a simple story of the supernatural. (It is not, indeed, "simple" in any sense of the word.) Woven into the basic framework of ghost story is Williams' own peculiar theology and Christian symbology. Although he uses many of the traditional trappings of the ghost story, he infuses them with new meaning.

There are three main threads to the story: the damnation of Lawrence Wentworth, which gives the book its title; the salvation of Pauline Anstruther; and the story of the suicide. I will deal primarily with the last in this paper, since the suicide comes closest to the traditional revenant, and also because it is in this part of the story that most of the traditional ghost-story images are found. Of these images, the most striking are those of the otherworld in which the ghost moves, and the places of transition from the earth to the otherworld, be it heaven or hell.

The setting of the entire story is a place called Battle Hill. It is as a whole a place of transition. It is a suburb of London, and thus a place that lies between country and city, between wilderness and civilization. It has also seen many men pass from life to death, being, as its name suggests, the site of much bloodshed in the past. Williams says of it:

The Hill's chronicle of anguish had been due, in temporalities, to its strategic position in regard to London, but a dreamer might have had nightmares of a magnetic attraction habitually there deflecting the life of man into death.¹

The Hill is thus a place where this world and the next are very close. It is "a cape, a rounded headland of earth, thrust into an ocean of death." (p. 25) "Here there had, through the centuries, been a compression and culmination of death as if the currents of mortality had been drawn hither from long distances to some whirlpool of invisible depth." (p. 67) The dead surround Battle Hill and pervade it, and from time to time "from other periods of its time other creatures could crawl out of death, and invisibly contemplate the houses and people of the rise." (p. 26)

Battle Hill is much like the setting for many other ghost stories; it is a place that has seen death, and is thus receptive to the world of the

dead. So are many of the haunted houses of supernatural fiction. But Battle Hill is more. It is not only a suburb of London, but an outpost of the City which figures even more prominently in Williams' All Hallow's Eve: the City of God, of which London is only a reflection. It is a place of transition between the outer darkness and the light within the City wall. If it is a site of earthly battles, it is also the site of the spiritual battle between Lilith and the Omnipotence for the souls of men. And if it is a hill of death, it is also a "Hill of skulls" (p. 25), a reflection of Calvary where Life met Death and God became man.

To this place of death comes a poor, sick, starving laborer whose name "no one troubled to know" (p. 25). He comes for work, to help construct the town in which the story takes place (for times are coexistent in some measure on Battle Hill, as in many other ghost stories), but he is not good for much and he is discharged. Faced with the seemingly hopeless prospect of returning to London and his nagging wife, he decided to kill himself rather than continue walking down the gutter in which he has lived all his life, haunted by his wife's perpetual voice. In one of the unfinished houses he remembers having seen a rope, and for this place he sets out.

He passes into a region where construction is going on. This area is symbolic of the weakened or incomplete barriers between our world and the otherworld that exist on Battle Hill. It is described as "a place which might have been an overthrown rather than an arising city" (p. 28); by his resolve to die, the man has already broken down some of the barriers between the living and the dead. But the houses themselves reflect death; they are skeletons, symbols of destruction, and in this respect they mirror the man himself. He too is hardly more than the bare bones of man, not only physically but spiritually. All his life he has been deprived of the spiritual nourishment of love, and it is this which has driven him to the brink of destruction.

He comes to the house where he had seen the rope, and there indeed he finds it. Now all that remains is to perform the actions that will lead to death. He comes to the foot of the ladder that leads to the upper floors. This particular house now reflects him. The rungs of the ladder are "bone-white in the moon," and as he climbs it he mounts "on the bones of his body...he clamber/s/ through his skeleton to the place of his skull" (p. 29). He is an unfinished man seeking an untimely finish: "The roof was not on, nor his life built up" (p. 29), never having been completed by love.

At the top of the ladder the man reaches the platform, the "stage between earth and sky" (p. 33) that is his ultimate point of transition between life and death. Here he prepares his rope, and even in the moment of indecision when he finds that

there is still something in him which does not wish to die, he sways and falls, passing the barrier.

At first he does not know it. He finds himself, it seems, at the base of the same ladder. Up he climbs again. Here one might detect a pattern of repetition beginning, as in so many ghost stories; it is easy to envision the poor man going through his suicide again and again, endlessly. But this suicide is not so damned. When he arrives at the platform once again, the rope is not there. He is placed, for the moment, in the shadowy world of the dead, and for a little while he is given peace and quiet, alone. But he cannot stay in this place forever. It is no permanent abiding place; it too is in transition. The land is in twilight, but now they are waiting to be finished, not destroyed. The man must choose between the light and the shadows, between salvation and damnation.

He is eventually saved, with the help of the love of Margaret Anstruther, Pauline's grandmother. Mrs. Anstruther is herself near death, a death long awaited and contentedly prepared for. She is thus more than half in the otherworld already, and able to reach out easily to the dead man with Christian love, telling him to wait for the light. With the help of her love he now has the courage to face it, and he returns again to the house of his transition. Once more he mounts his ladder of bone to the high platform--and he is in Lawrence Wentworth's bedroom. The house is now complete, and he too is complete. Margaret Anstruther's love has fulfilled him, and now he is ready to set out for the City, directed by Pauline.

Thus, as in the traditional ghost story, the basis of Descent Into Hell is the meeting of this world and the otherworld, and of the traffic between them. Its setting is a place where the worlds lie in close proximity, as in many a haunted house, where the barriers between them are incomplete. Yet the battle of Battle Hill is the battle of salvation and damnation, and through the Omnipotence the incompleteness of the soul is completed. Charles Williams takes his ghost story, and touches it with the numinous, giving its symbols a sacramental meaning.

¹ Charles Williams, Descent Into Hell (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), p. 24. All other references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.



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After more than a year and a half, Mythprint has resumed publication with a new staff. The Editor is David Bratman; the Managing Editor is Lisa Deutsch. It is published in a four-page format that primarily features Discussion Group meeting information and information about other groups that have related interests, as well as Society news, book announcements, and Editorials and Reviews.

Mythprint is published monthly. Subscription, including membership in the Society, is \$4 for 12 issues (one year). Please add \$1.80 for First Class delivery, if desired. Checks should be made payable to The Mythopoeic Society.

The address for all mail concerning Mythprint is Post Office Box 28427, San Jose, California 95159.



THREE SONGS FROM The Bubbling Sky

The Song of the Fountain

*A fountain falls
on the black mountain.
The rocks are cool
in the pool of fury.*

*High is the spray
high is the mountain
high is the day
high is the fountain.*

*In a shower of sun
in a golden dower
your peace shall fall
and your pain shall cease.*

The Song of the Doors of the North

*Where did you bathe
O bird brightly plumed
That your feathers
are diamond-dewed?*

*The doors of the North
were open wide
and through a fountain
I flew.*

The Song of the Bubbling Sky

*Between my toes
the bubbling sky
in beauty grows
and grows a tree
of silver rain
that showers on me.*

--Ian McMurdo

