Images of the Numinous in T.H. White and C.S. Lewis

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Online Winter Seminar
February 4-5, 2022 (Friday evening, Saturday all day)
https://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/ows-2022.htm

Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien
Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022
http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-52.htm

Abstract
Sees the search for the mythic, numinous image or experience as one strong motivation for reading fantasy (and other literature). Contrasts T.H. White and C.S. Lewis in terms of the presence of the numinous in their work.

Additional Keywords
Fantasy readers—Motivation; Lewis, C.S. Till We Have Faces; Myth in literature; Numinous in C.S. Lewis; Numinous in literature; White, T.H. The Once and Future King; Bruce McMenomy; Bg Callahan

This article is available in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol4/iss4/1
Why do we read mythopoeic fantasy? Some of us may consider it a silly question to ask. We simply like it, and that's all, and there's no need to apologize for reading stories that take us out of this depressing, late twentieth century madhouse -- this boring, plastic wasteland that our great grandparents thought would be a land of milk and honey. But, on the other hand, some others of us like to ask the question and spend hours trying to answer it. I'm simply going to point out some of the obvious answers and offer one that isn't so obvious, but maybe ought to be. The obvious answers are that we like magic, romance, pastoral moods, enchanted islands, haunted forests, mist covered mountains, not to mention heroism, swordfights, heroines, villains, and necromancers. We have a love of the banquets and terror in old myths, and we like a universe that inspires awe or an imagined world more lovely and more challenging than this one. Some of us are also amateur or professional linguists, enthusiasts of the Middle Ages, or Celtic myth, or students of Christian theology -- or all of the above.

The less obvious reason that some of us like the form of mythopoeic fantasy is our desire to confront "numinous" images in literature. This is like being a devotee of myths, or a particular mythology, but it is not quite the same thing. It is one thing to like myth in the abstract, and quite another to meet a myth as a living image in a novel or romance. This is to encounter the "numinous" or the "awe inspiring" image or the sacred being in a "living" context, a created or secondary world of course, but the next best thing to meeting the goddess in the woods, or seeing the burning bush on the mountain.

Evidently, C. S. Lewis felt that his famous encounter with George MacDonald's work had brought him into contact with the "numinous" world, or at least with some experiences of the "numinous. 2 Most of us, I would guess, have had the same experience, if not from MacDonald, then from certain moments in reading The Lord of the Rings. But we probably would not have used the word "numinous" to describe our response -- or at least I wouldn't, for it is only in the last two years that I have begun to think of my literary experience, and especially my reading of writers like Tolkien, MacDonald, and Lewis, in a way that made use of this word, "numinous." I've had a lot of academic training in literature, and, since my last years in graduate school were times when "myth criticism" was coming into vogue, I've spent a lot of time tracking down fertility myths, sterility myths, subconscious image clusters and the like. We found myths about the fall of man in Faulkner, redemption myths in Hawthorne, and Faust myths in everything. But detecting mythic analogies is an exercise like sorting fruit. By looking for analogies with myths, we can make every work of literature become a romantic myth, a tragic myth, a comic myth, or an ironic myth, as in Northrop Frye's scheme.3 The Way of the World, an elegantly nasty Restoration comedy, becomes a fertility myth, thereby, and so does Oscar Wilde's holiday of whimsey, The Importance of Being Earnest. Well, maybe ... but I don't feel any specifically mythic experience in reading these things, or seeing them acted -- unless you can call it a "mythic experience" to see how the ladies and gentlemen of Congreve's or Wilde's ages wished they might act, if they had the poise and the wit to do so.

No, I think the presence of myth in literature ought to mean something more than that. I read Tolkien or Lewis, or The Faerie Queen, partly because I want to encounter myth, not because I want to contemplate social behavior in a given context, as I would if I were to read War and Peace again. But I want the myth to be in some sense "alive" or a significant presence in the story's plot, and not just a pattern in the background, as the legend of Odysseus is just a kind of ghost in the background of James Joyce's Ulysses. (After all, the important thing about Ulysses is not that Joyce was following the events of The Odyssey, but that, like Frodo, Molly Bloom lives.)

It's easy to see that I am here arguing for a specialized purpose in the use of myth in imaginative literature, and I'm talking about myth in a more restricted way than some of our myth critics and theologians usually do. For Northrop Frye, any kind of meaningful plot pattern is a "myth," and for Mark Schorer or the late Paul Tillich, any important structure of ideological beliefs might be a "myth." For the literary theorist, George Whalley, "A myth is a direct metaphysical statement beyond science. It embodies in an articulated structure of symbol or narrative a vision of reality. It is a condensed account of man's Being and attempts to represent reality with structural fidelity, to indicate at a single stroke the salient and fundamental relations which for a man constitute reality."5 Despite the abstractness of this language, I find much to agree with here in Whalley's definition, especially when we find that Whalley's idea of the symbol is one which seems to claim numinous overtones. Whalley's use of the term "vision" also suggests the numinous dimension; but while Whalley includes the numinous in his definition, I am not sure that he makes it a necessary requirement for his concept of myth.

These are all useful definitions, and at least superior to the vulgar popular notion that a myth is simply a fanciful falsehood exploded by science, and hence cannot be "true." This latter stupidity is still abroad in these times, as I found to my regret when I taught a seminar in Tolkien and Lewis last spring and asked a group of apparently intelligent juniors and seniors in college to define a "myth." But I want to bring us back to what C. S. Lewis thought a myth to be, and I shall do this by referring to Lewis's late and little read (apparently) book, An Experiment In Criticism (1961).5 Lewis's definition at least has the advantage of being much closer to what the ancients, or even the Medieval and Renaissance men of education, would have considered myth to be.

In attempting to define his conception of myth, Lewis acknowledged that he intended a narrower meaning than the anthropologists usually had
for the word, and that he was working with an idea inspired by stories that had a "mythical quality," like that of Orpheus or Balder, or by such literary works as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, or Kafka's The Castle, which actually create "modern" myths. There are six characteristics that help to identify a myth for Lewis. First, the story exists exclusive of the art of its telling; we may get the same myth from either Hawthorne or Robert Graves, but the myth survives the experience. Second, the myth is enthralling for its own sake and not the narrator's skill at building suspense. Third, "Human sympathy is a minimum," for we do not "project ourselves" into the actors and characters, but merely observe them (as Orual observes Psyche in her dream). Fourth, myth deals with the creatures of fantasy, with "impossibles and preternaturals," much as Tolkien's fairy tales must contain magic and the realm of "Faerie." Fifth, the experience of such myth is solemn, even if the experience is "joyful": there can be happy myths, but not comic myths (that is, fantastic stories arousing a primarily humorous response). Finally, and sixth, "The experience is not only grave but awe-inspiring. We feel it to be numinous." Our response includes the feeling that something terribly important has been explained to us.

It may seem to us that Lewis's six characteristics tend to overlap a little; but, at any rate, he wanted us to think of myth as something to be experienced, not simply as an intellectual concept, an abstract pattern, or a story to be allegorized. And he wanted an authentic myth to be identified by our sense of sacred or numinous awe as a response. In fact, Lewis tended to value romantic stories and poems to the degree that they possessed a "mythical quality," or managed to create a sense of "numinous" awe or in Coleridge's phrase from "Kubla Khan," "holy dread. As we know, this is a large part of George MacDonald's power over Lewis, and an area where MacDonald is superior to what is supposedly the greatest Victorian children's book, Alice in Wonderland. (In fact, Carroll seems to me much overrated, more a satirist than a mythmaker, except for an occasional passage.) Similarly, Lewis much preferred H. Rider Haggard's She with its mythopoetic power, moments of numinous power, and "mythical quality." Lewis cites the episodes involving the Ents and the section on Lothlorien, in a casual reference in An Experiment in Criticism, as revealed into the day of serious Tolkien study, and written an extended essay on The Lord of the Rings, he might have elaborated on and extended these comments. (iii)

"Numinous" is a word invented by Rudolph Otto to describe our religious experience, or an aspect of it, which is "sacred," or the "holy" -- or the Being Who inspires the feeling of the "holy." Otto employs the word in The Idea of the Holy, first published in Germany in 1917, and then translated into English for publication in 1923. Otto's book influenced Lewis, as Corbin Scott Carnell tells us in one of the finest studies of Lewis to have appeared in recent years -- Bright Shadow of Reality, which belongs on the same level as Kathryn Linskoog's fine study of the Narnia books. Rudolph Otto uses the word "numinous" to describe our primary religious experience, or what he considers to be our primary religious experience, namely the sense of a "sacred awe," or a mysterium tremendum. "Numinous" refers first to the object or being who causes the experience; then it extends to the kind of descriptive of the experience; and finally, it can be used for those images and icons that symbolize the experience -- and perhaps again are a cause for renewing the experience. It is hard to keep these separate distinctions in mind, just as it is with many other words denoting religious experience. We should remember that Lewis, in An Experiment in Criticism, uses "numinous" to describe our response to true myth; here in this paper, however, I am primarily talking about numinous mythic images, or images that cause the numinous response. Rudolph Otto's study of the "numinous" image or object is in some ways brilliant, but in some ways disappointing. For Otto develops his ideas through a study of our emotions in confronting the "numinous" image, rather than through a study of the image itself. Perhaps he had no choice, for one man's numinous icon may be a "dead object" to another. At any rate, he has some important descriptions of our reactions to confronting the "numinous"; we experience fascination, majesty, awfulness (in its meaning of being filled with awe), and a kind of dread as well. As Otto says, "The 'mystery' in the 'divine-daemonic object' involves more than simple wonder for the worshipper or seeker; "besides that in it which bewilders and confounds, he feels a something that captivates and transports him with a strange ravishment, rising often enough to the pitch of dizzy intoxication; it is the Dionysiac-element in the numen." For studying a literary treatment of myth, however, Otto's pursuit of the emotional response may lead us away from the books we want to talk about. A more helpful approach may be a recent study by Francis Huxley, The Way of the Sacred, which studies myth in its religious meaning, and deals with or transmitting a sense of the holy or the "numinous." Unfortunately, though, since we are here interested in the Arthurian myth and in T. H. White and C. S. Lewis, Huxley's book is not so helpful because it is a comparative religion study which attempts a "universalist" view.

More to the point is W. H. Auden's comment about the imagination's relationship to numinous myth. Meditating on the poet's goals, which is one of the obsessions of the modern age of plastic and concrete, Auden writes that the "concern of the Primary Imagination, its only concern, is with sacred beings and sacred events. The sacred is that to which it is obliged to respond; the profane is that to which it cannot respond and therefore does not know. The profane
is known to other faculties of the mind, but not to the 
Primary Imagination. Poems or works dealing with the se­
cular are written by the author's Secondary Imagination (A­
den is using Coleridge's terms, as we all have probably noticed). A­
den then quotes from Charles Williams's book on 
Witchescraft, "mythopoeic" as Frye (and William B­
Blake) would argue, when it presents both man and nature in a 
visionary way, as for instance the Greeks did when they imagined tree nymphs and river 
ymphas as the ruling spirits of trees and streams. 
Blake was mythopoeic in Frye's view when he de­
veloped his myth of man and nature having originally 
been part of one giant human body, like the 
Adam Kadmon of the Hebrew Cabba­
la. 

Similarly, I would argue that Kipling is 
being mythopoeic when he endows animals with vari­
ous kinds of human awareness in The Jungle Books; and Richard Adams is being mythopoeic in giving 
speech and quasi-human spirits to his rabbits in 
Watership Down (although the awareness Adams gives 
the rabbits is fairly consistent with the behavior of 
rabbits as naturalists have described it). Neither has satire as a primary aim, by the way. 

Obviously, then, both T. H. White and C. S. 
Lewis present a good deal of mythopoeic, or 
"mythical" 

"mythopoeic" in 

"numinous" myth. I now intend 
to make a brief survey of the 
presence of the 
"numinous" mythic quality 
in T. H. White and C. S. 
Lewis. I've been stimulated into taking this ap­
proach by a remark by a friend of mine that he had re­
called last year a controversy in Mythprint over whether 
Watership Down was a mythopoeic work, and I felt that Mr. 
George Colvin's queer notion that the presence of 
talking rabbits made Watership Down a bad book and there­fore not mythopoeic was an instance of mistaken as­
sumptions. If a fantasy presents a 
numinous kind. If we must choose despair or pessimism, 
our choice will probably be despair, Sartrean exis­
tentialists. His biographer, Sylvia Townsend Warner, is 

Now that White while apparently less of a 
"mythopoeic" writer than Lewis, was less a scholar as well. Though there is some religious feeling in White's 
work, he had evidently no firm commitment to 
Christianity or any other religion. A kind of 
resigned worldly acceptance, at once pessimistic and 
melancholy, runs through much of The Once and 
Future King, a romantic feeling very different from 
philosophic pessimism, although sometimes 
mistaken for it. There is very little of this 
kind of emotion in Lewis, who was always on guard against self-indulgence, and who seems to have 
never found the kind of emotionally engaging fable that does not seem to me to be an especially admirable 
kind. If we must choose despair or pessimism, 
then let us courageously choose to be stoics like 
the Anglo-Irish in his novel 
Sartrean existentialists. 

Moreover, White appears to have had sexual 
and emotional problems that he was never able to 
transcend. A friend hinted at White's difficulties in his 
autobiographical 
Journal. His biographer, Sylvia Townsend Warner, is 

Actually, what Auden seems to be describing here is 
an imaginative response that all of us have had or 
experienced, probably from some passage in Tolkien, 
Lewis, Charles Williams, or George MacDonald. I would argue that this response is what the true 
fantasy writer must create in his readers. Otherwise, he is only a hack or an impostor using secondary imagination. In fact, I would say that the degree to which a 
 fantasy writer creates (or recreates) a myth to 
which we experience an intensely numinous response, 
is a measure of his status as a fantasy or mytho­
poeic writer. For my imagination at least, there 
is little that is numinous in an industrious hack 
like Andre Norton, no matter how clever her plot­
ing is. Similarly, Thomas Burnett Swann and 
Katherine Kurtz are accomplished writers, and I do 
not doubt their good will, devotion to fantasy, or 
interest in myth; but their work has little of the 
uminous. On the other hand, I find this quality 
in writers whose conceptions and talents seem 
rather primitive by comparison with Swann or Kurtz: 
I mean in some of the swaggering fantasies of 
Robert E. Howard, of which I am no great fan; and 
in the goofy but remarkable early science fiction 
novels of A. E. Van Vogt, like 
That Hideous Strength, and wrote criticism dealing with 
Arthurian romances, as well as editing and writing a 
lengthy commentary on Charles Williams's unfinished 
cy cle of Arthurian poems.

But there are limits to these parallels. We 
know that White while apparently less of a 
"mythopoeic" writer than Lewis, was less a scholar as well. Though there is some religious feeling in White's 
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the Anglo-Irish in his novel 
Sartrean existentialists.

When we compare T. H. White and C. S. Lewis 
as fantasy writers, we can start with the obvious 
point that as men they shared much in common. 
Both were lovers of the Middle Ages, especially 
the High Norman French Middle Ages, with their 
cathedrals and chivalric romances. Both had sim­
ilar English educations, and a similar attitude of 
dislike for the modern world. Both were profes­
sional bachelors, although Lewis of course did 
marry late in life, and both had much of the born 
tutor or lecturer in them. Both were very much 
involved with the Arthurian legends, and used them 
in their imaginative 

Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere are some of the 
instances in White. But their mythopoeic works 
do not show the same concern with the "numinous." I now turn to a further exploration of this point.
more candid: White was a homosexual. This would not be relevant if it had not affected his writing; but if it did, or at any rate, White's emotional problems are obvious in The Once and Future King, at least in his treatment of male/female relationships. Both the mature Arthur and the mature Lancelot have Oedipus complexes, and Lancelot's relationship with Guinevere barely begins his initial view of her as a mother figure. White was obviously influenced by Freud here, but I suspect that he was influenced more by his own childhood and his own psyche, much as D. H. Lawrence was.

The last three books of The Once and Future King seem to me to be almost one vast Freudian dream imposed on the Arthurian material, with White identifying most strongly with Lancelot.

To be fair to White, I must acknowledge that he has humanized Lancelot and Guinevere, and made them more likeable today than they were to their modern readers. By bringing them into Lance and Jenny, he is perhaps too successful, for they lose much if not all of the archetypal stature they should have as characters. Given White's misogyny, he does a remarkable job with Guinevere in making her sympathetic and credible. However, Guinevere seems to me to be a much malignant character, whose life was poignant and tragic, and she deserves more moral awareness, compassion, and intellectual maturity than White has given her. Neither Guinevere nor Lancelot have very much toward emotional maturity in White's novel. They age and they become more stoic, but their emotional dignity and moral awareness does not develop much: they leave the impression finally of two likable human beings caught in the trap of an adolescent or at any rate a youthful passion.

For this reason, I cannot conceive of rereading the last three books of The Once and Future King except for the purposes of research, although I enjoyed them when I first read them fifteen years ago. I think the eternal adolescence of White's lovers is what makes them endearing to young people, and less impressive to older people. In this, it would appear that Lancelot and Guinevere shared some of the limitations of their creator, who was clearly an eternal adolescent, even though in later years White fitted nicely into the role of the eternal bachelor uncle.

By contrast with Lancelot and Guinevere in The Once and Future King, I would cite Yeats in Edwin Arlington Robinson's case. As in Robinson's narratives, this poem has many faults; particularly, Robinson gives the impression that his characters talk interminably in empty rooms. Yet Yeats is a memorable and haunting character whose sense of life and the tragic nature of the "human condition" is expressed vividly. I might find White's lovers more tragic and more impressive if they showed some of the hard won wisdom of Robinson's Yeats.

If you have inferred that I do not like The Once and Future King very much, you are correct. The Sword in the Stone appears to me to be the best book of the lot, partly because White is free from his sexual obsessions here. Thus, the nature of the whole and the successful hunt which become so tiresome in the other three books are not out of place. In addition, White here, in The Sword in the Stone, presents some effective numinous images. These are sorely lacking in the other books. The Arthurian legend provides an immense range of possibilities for numinous imagery. Malory has great success in making Merlin and the Grail legend numinous. Tennyson at least makes the death of Arthur a powerfully numinous event. But White does little with these events; Merlin is always just becoming the bumbling clown of the Walt Disney film. For the story of the Grail, White says, we must go to Malory. This is an abysmal confession of defeat. White succeeds in making the Arthurian material numinous only a few times. Once is when Lancelot finally performs his miracle. Another time is in The Spoon in the Stone, when we meet Marian and Robin and see them as gods of the greenwood. The best instance of all, and one of the times when White successfully invents something not in Malory or another source, is the Wart's experience with the migrating geese. Here White has not just tacked on a by-now-typical flight of the geese as a natural event until it becomes truly mythic and numinous. I had read about the flight of migratory geese many times, but I had never experienced imaginatively what a flight with wild geese might be like. Let us avoid a mistake here: White doesn't necessarily show us what a goose feels on his long flight; but he shows us what a human would feel and see if he could fly with the geese. This is a great imaginative achievement, and it gives new life to the old human dream of living a free existence beyond all boundaries and the restraint of gravity.

It's a pity that White was not inspired like this more often in his Arthuriad. Too often, though, he merely romanticizes an imaginary Middle Ages, in a way that is at least acceptable. But though the book is a great commercial success and apparently much admired by many reviewers, The Once and Future King does not give much of a numinous dimension to the Arthurian legends. For that reason, I would contend that it is not in the front rank of mythopoeic fantasies, however wrong with Charles Williams's or Mary Stewart's treatment of the Arthurian theme, their versions at least preserve the numinous character of the legend.

By contrast, one way of looking at C. S. Lewis's achievement as a fantasy writer is to see the growing importance of the numinous quality in his work, and Lewis's attempt to present powerful images of numinous myth in his fantasy. In making a brief survey of Lewis's use of numinous images, I shall be forced to rely on bald assertion, for I do not have the time or space to support my comments with quotation and analysis. This, of course should at least have the virtue of leaving plenty of room for disagreement.

We should remember more often than we do that Lewis began his literary career as a romantic poet in the tradition of Keats, Shelley, and William Morris, those nineteenth-century anti-romantics from Lewis championed against the scorn of twentieth-century anti-romantics like T. S. Eliot and Frank R. Leavis, the Cambridge don and editor of Scrutiny, who tried to relegate Milton and the Romantics and many of the major English novelists to a relatively minor importance. After his initial book of lyrics, Lewis published the narrative poem Dymer (1926), a readable but undistinguished attempt at quest romance in the manner of Keats's Endymion and Shelley's Alastor, both fairly early narrative poems which suggest the future development of those two poets. In the tradition of the quest romance, a romantic seeker or quester revolts against the mundane world and sets off on a journey which takes him into a numinous or mythic realm, where he eventually experiences some revelation about the purpose of life. The "quester," however, may pay for his knowledge or discovery with his life, as Shelley's poet does in Alastor, or as Keats's poet and knight may do in the ballad "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." Lewis's Dymer also revolts and journeys into a mythological realm, and after discov ery of the falsity of many of the images he encounters, Dymer finally meets a truly numinous being, and then dies. But despite following this romantic pattern of Lewis's's encounter with the numinous realm is not very satisfactory in this poem. Although Lewis had already read George MacDonald, he was not yet certain what the meaning of the numinous realm was, for it
would be some years until he announced his conversion to Christianity. Or at least that's the way it seems to me, for I remember Lewis's caution against reading autobiography into an author's performance. 36 Maybe it's safer to say that Lewis simply inherited Keats's concern over the stature of his own visionary powers, and so he was wise to turn to prose for his later works. Or we might note that the quest romance in verse has become an obsolete form by the twentieth century, as the fact that Tolkien continued to produce stories for his great romances may indicate. Anyhow, Lewis is better at exposing the falsely numinous -- the romantic myths that delude -- in Dymer than in projecting a vision of the real numinous image.

Some similar criticisms can be made of The Pilgrim's Regress, a spiritual autobiography disguised as intellectual allegory in the tradition of Bunyan. This major imaginative effort is not as successful as it might have been, not because allegory is an archaic form in the twentieth century (although it is), and not because Lewis was not charitable in the book toward what he disliked, as he later said. Bunyan was not charitable toward some segments of English society, yet he wrote a great allegory. The major fault of The Pilgrim's Regress, as I see it, is simply that Lewis satirized intellectual fraud well, but was less successful in creating his religious beliefs in a visionary or numinous way. Bunyan has some homely but mythic images like "The Delectable Mountains" and "The Celestial City" which inspire numinous contemplation, Lewis has "Mother Kirk," which should be a guiding tutelary lady like one of George MacDonald's mythic mothers, but which doesn't quite cease to be a female don lecturing John and the reader. Bunyan is both more homely and more mythically convincing than Lewis. Had Lewis been able to create numinous images as good as his satire, or even to improve on Bunyan's humor, it might have been better, but the book was never a satire, and so it is not quite in the right tone to be wholly successful. Lewis's "chronicles" of Narnia might be called the best passages in any modern fantasy writer, with its haunting mythic images of the "world's end." After that fall, "... with outwind in her shrouds or foam at her bows, across a waveless sea, the Dawn Treader glided smoothly east. Every day and hour the light became more brilliant and still they could bear it. No one ate or slept and no one wanted to, but they drew buckets of dazzling water from the sea, stronger than wine and somehow wetter, more liquid than ordinary water, and pledged one another richly in its draughts..." And one or two of the sailors who had been oldish men when the voyage began now grew younger every day. Everyone on board was filled with joy and excitement, but not an excitement that made one talk. They neither they sailed the legs, they spoke, and almost in a whisper. The stillness of that last sea laid hold on them..." 39

Numerous events occur near the end of both Out of the Silent Planet and Perelandra, when Ransom confronts Oyarsa in the first, and when he sees the "Great Dance" in the second. Moreover, Perelandra takes place on a planet which is by its very nature sacred or numinous (and wholly convincing as such), and the mere creation of Perelandra allows the novel to triumph over Lewis's unsatisfactory resolution of the plot, with the interminable fight between Weston and Ransom. 38 That Hideous Strength, the second Ransom novel, abounds in numinous beings and events, despite a large portion of satire. Ransom and Merlin both have a mythic and numinous stature here, and there are brilliant set pieces like the chapter called The Descent of the Gods. However, the intention of creating a numinous scene and the achievement are not the same thing, and the epiphan with which the novel ends, "Venus at St. Anne's," is not quite in the right tone to be wholly successful.

If numinous mythic images play a large part in the Ransom trilogy, they plan an even greater role in the Narnia series. The Narnia series follows the tradition of Victorian children's stories as developed by Lewis Carroll, MacDonald, and James Barrie, where on one level the child is the symbol of the soul in its quest for the divine. Lewis's "chronicles" of Narnia might be called without too much exaggeration the "Bible of Narnia," for Lewis fills the series with numinous and sacred events in the history of Narnia that recreate many of the sacred and numinous events in our Christian Bible. The primary numinous conception is Aslan, the transcendent Christian God who becomes immanent and incarnate in Narnian time, and Whose appearances in Narnia become progressively more solemn and arouse greater awe as the Narnian books continue. Like the revelation of God to Peter, the appearances of Aslan in Narnia tend to "play off against each other," if I may use so awkward a metaphor, so that our awareness of Aslan's earlier actions adds resonance and power to each new act.

In fact, by his treatment of the numinous event in Narnia history, Lewis has helped to renew the numinous power of our own Bible for us. This result is much the same as that which Milton hoped to get by writing Paradise Lost; but there is perhaps more tact in Lewis's method, for Lewis does not pretend to be "recreating," or re-envisoning the Christian Bible, as Milton did, but rather presenting a Narnian mythic event analogous to the Biblical event.

The most important numinous events in the Narnia books are fairly obvious: the crucifixion and resurrection of Aslan in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe; the creation of Narnia in The Magician's Nephew; the apocalyptic end of Narnia in The Last Battle. In addition, Lewis's demons have a mythic and numinous quality in the Narnia books, an aspect they seldom have in the Ransom trilogy: at least this is so of the White Witch and of Tash in the first and last books of the series.

However, my personal selection for the most successful numinous vision in the Narnia books is a passage inspired by the Celtic myths rather than the Christian Bible. This is the end of The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, with its numinous and visionary images of the "world's end." After that fall, "... without wind in her shrouds or foam at her bows, across a waveless sea, the Dawn Treader glided smoothly east. Every day and hour the light became more brilliant and still they could bear it. No one ate or slept and no one wanted to, but they drew buckets of dazzling water from the sea, stronger than wine and somehow wetter, more liquid than ordinary water, and pledged one another richly in its draughts..." And one or two of the sailors who had been oldish men when the voyage began now grew younger every day. Everyone on board was filled with joy and excitement, but not an excitement that made one talk. They neither they sailed the legs, they spoke, and almost in a whisper. The stillness of that last sea laid hold on them..." 39

Limitations of space preclude further quotation, but the entire concluding chapter of this book is a series of wonders and marvels equal to the best passages in any modern fantasy writer. Lewis brings alive in us our dreams of a lost earthly paradise in the "uttermost west," and combines it with our longing for a last happy passage to God's Country, the Christian -- for a permanent home in a land beyond time or death. The "mythic quality" of this final chapter would have pleased Lewis himself, I think, had he found it another writer.

The children's books may have been the perfect medium for Lewis as an imaginative writer, with its requirements of compression and story at the expense of intellectual exposition. Nevertheless, Lewis's growing mastery in the presentation of numinous myth -- demonstrated throughout the Narnian series -- perhaps made a final gamble in the recreation of a classic myth inevitable. That daring gamble is, as we know, Till We Have Faces, where Lewis faced his most severe challenge as a
creative writer, and triumphed.

Here Lewis took on the task of recreating a myth that has the numinous quality he spoke of in An Experiment in Criticism, and a myth that is by common consent a potent story greater than any like it in the treasure-house of it. The Golden Ass of Apuleius in Latin and from Keats and William Morris in English, very little has been done with the numinous story which combines much of the best in the pagan and Christian worlds.40 As we know, part of Lewis's success comes through his use of imaginative achievement. In a dream vision of Psyche's trial is one of Lewis's surprising ways, Galahad discovering the Grail — and much like the demption story much like the story of Parzifal or participant in a ritualized re-enactment of the transcendent realm. This dream scene is especially effective since Ungit has not appeared as a numinous world is also conceived as transcendent realm. This dream scene is especially effective since Ungit has not appeared as a numinous realm. But the greater power and beauty of Till We Have Faces is a measure of how much Lewis had grown as an imaginative writer from his unsuccessful effort with Dymer.

I would conclude by saying that perhaps not all will agree with me on what is or is not numinous in the work of Lewis or T. H. White, or any other fantasy writer. But I think we ought to use this conception of myth, or rather Lewis's conception, in order to think about the aesthetic achievement of the mythopoeic writers we study. This idea of the "numinous" can have the feeling of the numinous about it all the time. It is something that is like to be there only on special occasions, as it is in Till We Have Faces. As Lewis wrote in another context, "In life and in art both, as it seems to me, we are always trying to catch in our net of successive moments something that is not successive."42 Although Lewis meant then a certain kind of excitement, I think this is also true of that solemn awe we should reenact when we meet the truly numinous event.

FOOTNOTES

1 "Secondary world" is a phrase from Tolkien's frequently quoted essay on fairy stories. I explain "numinous" below; the term is used by C. S. Lewis occasionally, but he got it, as did everyone else from Rudolph Otto's book The Idea of the Holy, which appeared in Germany in 1917. I use the translation by John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923; reprinted in paperback, 1969).

2 As is well known, Lewis's contact with George MacDonald was with Phantastes in his late teens. See the biography by Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper.


6 Cambridge, England; Cambridge University Press, 1961. The fact that Lewis made this little book an attack on F. R. Leavis and his followers, the "Vigilant School of Critics," and Lewis's proposal that we judge a book by the different ways it can be read, both worked against much notice being taken of the full myth.

7 An Experiment in Criticism, p. 42.

8 An Experiment in Criticism, p. 44.

9 An Experiment in Criticism, p. 44.

10 An Experiment in Criticism, p. 44.


12 An Experiment in Criticism, p. 42-43.


15 An Experiment in Criticism, pp. 42-43.

16 Otto, p. 31.

is an American paperback reprint from Dell Laurel Books, New York, 1976.

22 I do not mean to disparage Thurber's work, however, which I admire (in small doses) a great deal. Thurber's didacticism is presented in biting satirical images and sharp verbal wit. The same cannot be said of Beatrix Potter's work, though, at least so far as I am familiar with it.


24 Adams credits the work of R. M. Hockley for much of his information about rabbits.

25 Lewis's most extended discussion of the Arthurian material is in his commentary on Williams's unfinished cycle of Arthurian poems in the book called Arthurian Torso, originally published in 1948, after William's death. These commentaries, together with Williams's important poems on the Arthurian material, Taliessin through Logres, and The Region of the Summer Stars, are published together in paperback volume by Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1974.

26 Sylvia Townsend Warner's biography is a remarkably candid and compassionate study of the troubled T. H. White, and especially his religious, sexual, and literary struggles: it is T. H. White: A Biography (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), and it sets a standard so high that there may never need to be another biography. On White's flirtations with Romanism during his Irish years, see Warner, 118-174; 170-171 discusses White's final exasperated rejection of the faith.

27 Perhaps I am unduly harsh here in this statement, but what I call a "soft, romantic melancholy," seems to be a major flaw in many English writers, and White seems to be much closer to Tennyson in spirit on this point than would appear at first to be the case. White's characteristic pessimism seems to me to be partly a result of his childhood, when he was not a child, and is full of much love, and partly the result of his adult loneliness and inability to find a stable relationship with a woman. White was rather courageous, maybe because of his melancholy, and perhaps it is pointless to complain about a writer's temperament. But among fantasy writers, E. R. Eddison, Poul Anderson, and David Lindsay are not Christians, but their works espouse a courageous stoicism that I find admirable.

28 See David Garnett, "Introduction," to America at Last: The American Journal of T. H. White (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1965, pp. 11-12. Also, see Warner, pp. 28-29 for a discussion of White's homosexuality. Most of the time, White seems to have been a closet homosexual rather than a practicing one, at least as far as his biographer's information is concerned.

29 This is clear from White's own journal in America at Last, where he was accompanied by a niece on the trip to America. But David Garnett also points out in his introduction that White had a tendency to drink excessively, and a niece helped to control his tobing (Garnett, p. 9). See also Warner, pp. 200; and 317. Obviously, White in his later years was a man of abundant lore on many themes, much like Merlin in The Sword in the Sowrd.
On March 21-24 a conference celebrating the achievements of the Oxford Christian Writers was held on the Messiah College campus in Grantham, Pa. Held in conjunction with a course on the Oxford Christians (taught by Dr. Robert B. Ives), the conference featured a variety of speakers and a potpourri of additional activities designed to foster hobbit-style fellowship. Dr. Ives, the conference coordinator, must be a wizard in disguise, for he managed to bring together Dr. Clyde S. Kilby of Wheaton College, Dr. James T. Como of York College (CUNY), Dr. Nancy Tischler of Penn State’s Capitol Campus, Dr. Thomas Howard of Gordon College, and Miss Cheryl Forbes, assistant editor of Christianity Today.

Rather than presenting “academic pedantic dichotomies,” each of the speakers gave both helpful surveys of the current scholarship on C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, J. R. R. Tolkien and Dorothy L. Sayers, as well as stimulating papers on key topics related to these writers.

On Monday, Jim Como gave an extensive review and assessment of books about C. S. Lewis. At the morning chapel Tom Howard spoke on “The Moral Mythology of C. S. Lewis.” The afternoon and evening were pleasurably spent over tea, songs, readings, and a hobbit dinner which included enough mushrooms to satisfy the most voracious appetite. Cheryl Forbes capped the evening with her able survey of Dorothy L. Sayers’ life and works.

Tuesday morning was as we heard Tom Howard, in his inimitable fashion, review the literature available on Charles Williams; Nancy Tischler discuss Sayers’ BBC passion plays; and Clyde Kilby forcefully plead with us to read Lewis and to discover anew the power of myth and the reality that “the heavens are not dead -- they are alive! The afternoon brought a special treat: a reader’s theater production of Charles Williams’ play “The Three Temptations.” In the evening Tom Howard captivated the conference with a lucid overview of Williams’ use of Arthurian elements. For many, the paper itself embodied some of the glory of Logres.

By the time Wednesday came, the conference was in “high gear” and eager to hear Nancy Tischler’s presentation on “God, Women and Creativity,” in which she discussed the “integrating principle” found in all the Oxford Christian writers. Cheryl Forbes both sang and spoke in the college chapel service. Her text was “The Baptism.” She challenged Messiah’s student body to be “creative as well as Christian in the everyday world.” During the afternoon the conference was invited to a Tummus Tea Party in Narnia, along with a group of local children. Over dinner that evening Nancy Tischler presented a fascinating paper entitled “Dorothy and Beatrice.” Bringing this very full day to a close, Jim Como spoke on “Cultism and Christianity: C. S. Lewis in the Post-Christian World.” Ably outlining Lewis’s social and personal impact, Como also succinctly outlined the major elements crucial to Lewis’s thought.

On Thursday, the final day of the conference, Cheryl Forbes demonstrated how in his Arthurian poetry Charles Williams combined both pagan and Christian elements as well as both intellect and feeling. Jim Como closed the conference with his paper “The Militant Intellect: C. S. Lewis as Rhetorician.”

In addition to this fine variety of papers and activities, conference participants were also able to view some rare manuscripts from the Wade Collection at Wheaton, as well as an art exhibit of scenes from the Narnia tales, painted by Barbara Walter, a young artist from Pearl River, New York. Although with a full schedule, the conference combined serious scholarship with a casual tone of informality and at times even merriment. A very good time was had by all!