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Abstract

Brief discussion of relationships between Garner’s *The Owl Service* and its source myth in the *Mabinogion*. Considers how successful Garner has been in his use of the myth.

Additional Keywords

Garner, Alan. *The Owl Service*—Sources; *The Mabinogion* —Relation to Alan Garner

WHO'S LLEU?

by Ruth Berman

When I first read Alan Garner's *The Owl Service*, I found it fascinating, but incomprehensibly confusing. Later, I read the *Mabinogion*, and now I find it -- comprehensibly confusing.

The problem is partly that it is necessary to have read the myth to know what is going on. The book gives enough information to piece it out, but the information is scattered too widely to be combined by a reader who does not already know the pattern.

Let me pause to recall that pattern. Llew Llaw Gyfes is the son of Arianrhod and, probably, her brother Gwydion. Gwydion raises him, for he is rejected by his mother. Moreover, she lays a curse on him, that he shall marry no mortal woman. To circumvent the curse, Gwydion magically creates a woman out of flowers to marry Llew. But after marrying Llew, Blodeuwedd falls in love with another man, Gronw, and helps him murder Llew. Llew's spirit takes the shape of a wounded eagle, which hides in a tree, where he is found and brought back to life by Gwydion. Llew then kills Gronw, and Blodeuwedd is turned into an owl. In *The Owl Service*, there are three main characters: Alison and Roger -- her widowed mother having married his divorced father, creating one family -- and Gwyn, the son of Nancy, the housekeeper of their summer home in Wales. All three are likable individually, but they have trouble getting along with each other and with their parents. When Alison discovers a dinner service of plates with a pattern of owls on them and starts tracing paper owls off the plates, she finds herself in touch with a mysterious power which seems to bring her paper owls to life (and a threatening life -- owls in this book are primarily birds of prey, not funny symbols of wisdom going "Hoo Hoo") and which increases all the tensions felt by the youngsters. Alison, trying to ease the tensions, betrays to each of the boys a secret about the other.

When I first read the book, I couldn't tell which of the boys was meant to be which of the figures in the myth. Blodeuwedd is created to be married to Llew, but the magic that gives her life cannot ensure that she will love her assigned husband; her choice, when she comes to love, is Gronw. In these terms, Roger is Llew -- Alison is forced to live with him when her mother marries his father, and when she chooses a confidant it is Gwyn.

Yet it turns out that Gwyn is Llew. Alison betrays his social-climbing ambitions to Roger, as Blodeuwedd betrays Llew to Gronw; Gwyn runs away and takes shelter by climbing into a tree where he is found by Huw as Llew in eagle-shape was found in a tree by Gwydion; Gwyn returns to retaliate by taunting Roger with his mother's rejection of him, as Llew returned to slay Gronw. Here the comparison breaks down -- mocking a boy with his secret fears or hopes is made equivalent to killing, but Alison has to be made to betray each boy to the other, whereas Blodeuwedd is faithful to Gronw. Besides, Blodeuwedd knowingly betrays Llew, whereas Alison, in revealing each boy's secret to the other, is acting innocently, trying to get each one to understand the other better.

Alison's problem is really the opposite of Blodeuwedd's. Blodeuwedd rebels at being forced to love (understandably). Alison does not rebel against loving people; her problem is that she is afraid to rebel against her mother's order that she is not to love Gwyn. Blodeuwedd is without a

past, but Alison is like the boys, and like Llew, in struggling towards some kind of happiness despite the burden of an unloving mother who rejects her.

Another source of confusion is the equation of friendship and sexual love. Garner sets up a pattern for his version of the myth: generation after generation, Gwydion and his sister/wife give birth to Llew, who is rejected by his mother and betrayed by his wife, and who, after killing Gronw, lives to see himself become a new Gwydion and his son/nephew a new Llew rejected by mother and betrayed by wife. But the relationships producing Lleus are for the most part not incestuous; the confusion of fatherhood is caused by illegitimate births, instead.) Nancy leaves Huw for Bertram, Huw kills Bertram, and Gwyn, son of Nancy and Huw, grows up to be hated by his mother and to exchange insults with Roger/Gronw. The "Birmingham Belle" leaves Clive and Roger (but Clive does not kill her lover), and their son Roger grows up to exchange insults with Gwyn.

Roger is a Llew-figure, but he does not embody the complete pattern; it is Gwyn who hides in the tree and finds there all the weapons used by generations of Lleus to kill generations of Gronws, weapons going back even further than the spear of Llew to primitive throwing-stones.

Thematically, it's appropriate enough to equate the friendship Alison innocently betrays with the sexual love Blodeuwedd betrays: it is the fact of the betrayal and the tensions of unhappy parents producing unhappy children which matter. But Alison's innocence, compared to Blodeuwedd's guilt, is a confusing distortion of the myth; and although friendship may be compared symbolically with sexual love, it is confusing to have several generations' worth of betrayed love and murder suddenly, in this generation, producing mere betrayed secrets and name-calling.

At the end, Huw implies that the round of betrayals can only be halted if Gwyn will give up his anger at Alison's betrayal of him: "Always it is owls, always we are destroyed. Why must she see owls and not flowers? Always it is the same . . . She is coming, and will use what she finds, and you have only hate in you." ("She" is Blodeuwedd, the woman made out of sweet flowers who was turned into a sharp-clawed owl.) But Huw is wrong -- or so it seems. Alison's tortured trance is broken, and flowers fall around them, when not Gwyn but Roger finds it in him to forgive.

"You poor devils," says Roger to Gwyn and Huw, and from that moment to the end of the book a page later, there is not a single mention of Gwyn. Alison's owl pattern is shown to be reversible into a flower pattern, falling feathers are replaced by falling blossoms, Alison wakes to Roger's calling her by nickname, and the last sentence flows peacefully, as if to promise that the ancient tragedy is ended at last: "And the room was full of petals from skylight and rafters, and all about them a fragrance, and petals, flowers falling, broom, meadowsweet, falling, flowers of the oak."

It's a beautiful close -- not a "happy ever after," but a promise of a chance at happiness, a chance to keep flowers fragrant in their lives and not have them turned into fierce owls. But as convincing as it is in the very sound of it, how can it be? How can it be that Roger (who calls his step-sister "Ali"), the English outsider, the Gronw, has the power to wake her and turn feathers

to flowers, when Gwyn (who wins Alison's affection partly because he gives her her full name), the lord of the Welsh valley, the Llew, is silent? Even assuming Roger has the power to break the spell that entranced Alison, does he have the power to keep it broken without a similar renunciation of anger from Gwyn? What is Gwyn doing while Alison wakes and flowers bloom? The last we hear of him, just before Roger's "You poor devils," is the narrative statement that Gwyn "stood alone." Surely, unless Gwyn takes part in the reconciliation, he will grow up to start the cycle all over again?

But perhaps Garner does mean that Roger alone can end the cycle. He has deliberately scrambled the mythic identifications so that Roger, too, is a Llew/Gwydion figure as well as a Gronw. Roger is rejected by his mother and overprotected by his father as Llew was; his relationship with his stepsister Alison echoes that of Blodeuwedd and Llew, as already noted, and it also echoes the quarrelsome fondness of Gwydion and his wife/sister. (And as Garner's version of the myth has Llew grow up to be Gwydions, this likeness to Gwydion makes Roger more like Llew.) If Llew and Gronw are ultimately the same, both with a fair claim to Blodeuwedd's loyalty, then perhaps the feud can actually be stopped by the decision of any one of the participants.

But if that's Garner's meaning, then it seems to me he made a poor choice of myth. Llew and Gronw are separate persons in the original, and Llew is wholly innocent (although Llew's father Gwydion is not). The inheritance of unhappiness from parent to child in the myth works directly in the story, but the problem of trying to force love, the immediate cause of the tragedy in the myth, is largely irrelevant in Garner's version.

And yet, despite my feeling that the match of myth and modern analog is imperfect, and that it is confusing to have Gwyn definitely Llew and Roger definitely Gronw and yet Roger a Llew as well -- yet the story is powerful, and part of its power comes from the awareness that we all play more than one role in what we do. We are all Lleus, Gronws, Blodeuwedds, innocent, guilty, trying to find justice as best we may.

Editorial Note

The grouping together of Dorothy L. Sayers and the Inklings is, on certain levels, natural and seems to be a current trend. The problem is, what shall we use as a descriptive term for Sayers and the Inklings together? I suggest that "Oxford Christians" may not be the best term, on two grounds. First, as Joe R. Christopher has pointed out in *Mythlore* 13 in his article "Dorothy L. Sayers and the Inklings," not all of the "Oxford Christians" made the city of Oxford their primary residence. Both Lewis and Tolkien lived there all of their adult lives, but Williams was a loyal resident of London until 1939, when the War forced him to move to Oxford. As Christopher has pointed out, Sayers was as fully at home in London as in Oxford, and spent the majority of her post-graduate life in London. Owen Barfield, as a solisitor, spent much of his time in London. My second reason for not using the term "Oxford Christians" is the second word of the term. Surely Sayers and the Inklings were not the sole keepers of faith in the history of that ancient city in the heart of Britain. The blood and ashes of the martyrs of that place would cry out against that. The fact that all the prominent Inklings and Sayers were sincere Christians is beyond

dispute. But the current secular intellectual pre-disposition in Western civilization to isolate religion from other aspects of life, will in most persons distort the preception of the word "Christian" in this instance. Persons not yet familiar with the actual content of these authors' works, may be led to prejudge these writers as being solely "religious" or "theological." The rich diversity of theme in these authors and the depths of their works does not deserve to have future readers of these works diverted by cultural prejudice, occasioned by the use of a term, which is factually correct but culturally misleading by a perceived over-emphasis.

What then? Shall we search for another term? The term "Oxford Movement" has been mistakenly used in the past to describe these writers. I believe these people were an informal movement attempting, each in their own way, to re-mythologize and romanticize 20th Century literature. But the "Oxford Movement" should not be used both because of the reason of residency, and that the term has already been taken by another movement -- that of the Tractarians and Newman in the 19th Century. Until recently, I was advocating the term "Oxford Circle," but have given that up because of the residency problem. Unless a better term be found, I suggest the term "Inklings Circle." I admit there are some problems with this: Sayers never having attended an Inklings' meeting or gathering. But then there is Sayers' friendship with Lewis, and an even closer one with Williams, and her sharing of the same world-view and basic literary commonality with all the Inklings. I suppose those who are primarily Sayers admirers will have additional objections, nevertheless I suggest we adopt "Inklings Circle."

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF LOVE I

After a thousand days of grainy pallor
Hanging smoke-dry in the tired
Air of mellow half-waiting
A moment broke volcanic
Fireflashblazoned
In which your glance was
Rich with grace as those foaming fathoms
Of translucent light which streaming bathed
Our Lady of the Moon in that night
Of whirring wings and whispered power.

Then He descended who dwells
In the interstices of Exchange, self-
Emptied,
The lesser in the greater, the greater in the lesser
And in my heart I keep
The silent sublunar conception of
God the Son.

— Robert S. Ellwood Jr.

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF LOVE II

Like a crucifixion your smile
Seizes and bolts to a rough-scraped board
A flash of light that ripped
From far ruling Uranus
Into my grey cobweb-intricate days.

And then, like a sunset crumbling
Into a sift of colored chalkdust
Or a descent from the cross
On stained-glass streaked with warm salt rain,
The uranial glory returns beyond
The long low murmuring rumble of heavy sky
And in the night I seize the hard bare wood,
On its good rugged face
Pendant sweet globelets of April.

— Robert S. Ellwood Jr.