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"All Shall Love Me and Despair": The Figure of Lilith in Tolkien, Lewis, Williams and Sayers

**Abstract**
Examines Lilith-figures in Tolkien, Lewis, Williams, and Sayers, discussing how each demonstrates certain attributes of the archetypal temptress character.

**Additional Keywords**
Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Jadis; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Lady of the Green Kirtle; Lilith (archetype) in literature; Sayers, Dorothy L.—Characters—Helen (“The Devil to Pay”); Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Galadriel; Williams, Charles—Characters—Lily Sammile; Williams, Charles—Characters—Succubus (Descent Into Hell); Nancy-Lou Patterson
"All Shall Love Me and Despair"

The Figure of Lilith in Tolkien, Lewis, Williams, & Sayers

Meredith Price

Who is Lilith? According to Hebrew tradition, she was the first wife of Adam, cast out of Eden for insubordination and doomed to roam the world a malevolent spirit. Mother of the Jinn, her name means "the Nocturnal One," and she is the spirit of whirlwinds and destruction. Able to assume the shape of a beautiful woman, she is the smotherer and devourer of children, seducer and strangler of men. Long an archetype in Christian and Hebrew literature, she sometimes appears as the wife of Satan and occasionally emerges as "Dame Hell," synonymous with the Devil himself. (Should we say "her-"?)

Three important Christian authors of the famous Oxford writers' group, the Inklings, made use of the Lilith image. Charles Williams did so quite explicitly in his Descent into Hell, where aspects of Lilith are readily apparent both in the person of Lily Sammile (whose character also incorporates the Semitic storm-demon Samuil) and in the false Adela or succubus. By contrast, J.R.R. Tolkien's use of the motif in The Fellowship of the Ring is the least explicit, to be found in the figure of Galadriel—not as she is, but as she would become under the influence of the One Ring. C.S. Lewis falls somewhere in the middle with his portraits of Jadis, the White Witch of Narnia, an enchantress descended from Lilith (LWW, 77) and sharing many of her attributes, and in the Emerald Witch (The Silver Chair) who is "one of the same crew" (SC, 22). In addition to the three Inklings, another Christian author, Dorothy L. Sayers (who had contact with the group through Lewis) also employed the Lilith motif in her Faustian drama, The Devil to Pay. Here Lilith emerges as synonymous with the pagan Helen, whose beauty destroyed the Trojans and ravaged the Greeks. These six figures are all recognizable descendants from a common prototype in that they all partake in large measure of a common set of attributes: 1) association with the garden motif, 2) great beauty (or at least, allure), 3) immortality, 4) association with the cold or with darkness, 5) dominion over (or at least truck with) a host of hideous creatures.

To begin with, each author at some point associates each of the Lilith figures with some manner of garden, recalling to the reader's mind The Garden in which God created Lilith and from which He later barred her. For example, the Mirror of Galadriel, beside which Frodo witnesses the Lady's potential for evil, stands within "an enclosed garden" (FR, 468). Similarly, Lewis portrays Jadis, unable to pass the gates of Aslan's garden, scaling the walls to steal the apples from the Tree of Life (MN, 159-60) while the Green Witch first appears beside a fountain near a wood where the court went maying (SC, 51). Later, both attempt to seize control of the garden paradise of Narnia (LWW, SC). Likewise, Sayers, who uses the Lilith figure more openly, has Helen (Lilith) remind Faustus (Adam) of their love "in the old, innocent garden" before the coming of Eve (DP, 66). Williams also employs the garden motif: the chapter entitled "Return to Eden" (DH) sees the succubus lead Wentworth down into the false, internal paradise of his own body; afterwards, he must carry her across the threshold into his own garden—she cannot pass the gate herself (DH, 129).

Meanwhile, Mrs. Sammile stands "at the gate—of Pauline's) garden or world or soul" (DH, 111), entrusting Pauline to let her enter and lead the way to Gomorrah.

In addition to each author's linking the Lilith figure with the garden motif, an attribute shared by all, all six also partake in some respect of beauty, usually a superhuman loveliness in association with
stature. Tolkien’s Galadriel, for example, an elf-maiden already fair and tall (FR, 459) would become under the influence of the Ring “beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow” (FR, 473). Lewis’s Jadis is also tall and breathtakingly beautiful (MN, 48), but is stern and cold as well (LWW, 27). Likewise the fair Emerald Witch who, though merrier-seeming (SC, 75), is “green as poison” (SC, 51). The legendary beauty of Sayers’ Helen is, of course, “Beyond all splendour of stars” (DP, 40), and in Williams’ tale, Wentworth finds the succubus both beautiful and infinitely seductive (DH). Only Lily Sammile seems at first to be odd woman out, but she, too, has something to do with beauty. Though Pauline as first perceives her to be short and unattractive, with "cheeks...a little macabre" and eyes having a "hint of hollow about them, she realizes "Mrs. Sammile's face...had once been beautiful." Moments later, as Pauline begins to fall under the demon’s influence, Lilith becomes more attractive as Pauline reconsiders: "she had been unjust to Mrs. Sammile’s eyes. They were not restless... They were soothing; they appealed and comforted at once" (DH, 59). Later, the mere touch of Lilith’s hand is enough to tempt Pauline within an inch of damnation. Doubtless the four authors stress the beauty and allure of Lilith to symbolize the unspeakable magnetism of things forbidden and desired.

But if Lilith is beautiful, she is also immortal: Galadriel is already so, without becoming Lilith, for the Lady of Lorien has lived “though ages” for “years uncounted” (FR, 462), and though she “will diminish, and go into the West” (FR, 474), she cannot die. Jadis, too, slept among her ancestors in the hall of images for “hundreds of thousands of years” and more (MN, 62) and after eating the apple of youth, becomes immortal (MN, 161). The semi-divine, eternally young Helen in Sayers’ drama is, of course, transported across from the pre-classic times to the sixteenth century A.D. Greek legend makes her, like her brothers the Dioscuri, undying. Finally, Wentworth’s youthful succubus is ‘millions of years older than’ Pauline’s dying grandmother (DH, 134), and Lily Sammile, though “an old woman pretending youth,” is an “ancient witch” (DH, 206), existing from time out of mind. Lilith is, then, for these authors, an eternal spirit, tireless, recurring, a demon which the individual may reject but not destroy.

Finally, Lilith’s beauty and immortality make her the mistress of darkness, in association with the hideous, inhuman creatures of the night: Prodo’s vision of Lilith-in-Galadriel occurs at night, and the armies of Sauron (who is a masculine version of what Galadriel would become were she to take the Ring) include the orcs and trolls, Balrogs and Nazgûl, creatures which shun the light of day. Likewise, Jadis’ army consists of horrors, cruels, and incubuses; ghouls and werewolves; ogres and minotaurs (LWW, 132, 148), while her sacrifice of the Lion takes place at night. So too, the Emerald Witch, with her sunless Underworld of ugly gnomes.12 Glen Goodnight discusses this “stealer of the light” motif as well as that of the demon hoard and Sauron’s similarity to the Lilith figure in his “Lilith in Narnia,” too, appearing in the Narnia Conference Proceedings, 1969. Similar to these characters of Lewis and Tolkien, Wentworth’s nocturnal, false Adela is one of Satan’s succubi (DH, 126), while Lilith patterns through the night on Battle Hill and crouches in her sunless graveyard shad (the endless floor of which slants down to Hell), surrounded by the wreaths of the damned (DH, 206). So, too, Sayers’ Helen, attended by devils, Mephistopheles’ creature, who woos Faustus to his damnation, symbolized by a darkened mirror and an eclipse of the Sun (DP, 25, 71, 115).

The garden, beauty, immortality, darkness and demons: these, then, are a few of the key attributes shared to a great degree by the Lilith figures of Lewis, Tolkien, Williams, and Sayers. But when one examines other attributes, particularly the nature of Lilith’s power over mortals, one discovers two distinct poles toward one or both of which all six figures gravitate: the celestial pole versus the chthonian one. The celestial Lilith (I choose the term because of the star imagery Tolkien and Sayers use in connection with her) is a spirit of outwardly directed power: a queen, indeed, almost a goddess, capable of overwhelming her resisters by main force. She is a cosmic vision, "The spirit of power" (DP, 98), inspiring war. Galadriel, for example, were she to take the Ring, would doubtless overthrow "the Dark Lord (and)...set up a Queen" (FR, 473) by means of some great warhost not unlike those of Sauron and Saruman. Jadis, too, fought a great war against her sister for dominion of her own dying world (MN, 60-61) and later massembles troops to put down the Narnian rebels (LWW). The Emerald Witch likewise plots the conquest of Narnia, sending Rilian with "A thousand Eärendils at (his) back...(to) fall suddenly on (her) enemies, slay their chief men, cast down their strong places" (SC, 137-38). Similarly, Helen inspired the bloody Trojan War, and later Faustus turns from altruistic acts of charity to mass martial slaughter after she seduces him.

But alongside this awesome vision of an all-powerful, irresistible ravisher runs another conception of Lilith’s might. Besides the celestial stands the chthonian Lilith: Lilith the serpent,15 the cunning persuader, Lilith the seducer. This is not one to conquer another against his will. Hers is a far more personal damnation—she beguiles only “joicing eyes and
William's Lily Sammile can only invite, entreat, offer: Worth's succubus is the best example: it is "quite sub-become Lilith, or reject it "and remain Galadriel" (ER, chthonian Lilith can be resisted. Sayers' Helen, too, is plainly the seducer with siren's call, "O love, hast thou forgotten (me)"? (DP, 65). Lewis' characters as well have elements of the temptress. The Emerald Witch, for example, wooes Rilian with visions, inviting him to come to her (SC, 50-51), and Jadis beguiles Edmund with enchantment, pretended kindness, and promises (LWW, 30-36). Even Galadriel, who would, like Wentworth, be her own seducer, must wrestle with the decision whether to accept the Ring from Frodo and become Lilith, or reject it "and remain Galadriel" (FR, 473-74).

The polarizations, then, are far from complete, and it is at this second pole—the "clithonian" pole of temptation and seduction—that Lilith becomes most keenly Lilith. The temptations she offers are many and varied. She is, in fact, "all things to all men" (DP, 97). She proffers "Crowns for the victor, crowns,/ Riches and wisdom, honour and glory and blessing" (DP, 208) in Sayers' drama. For Williams, she holds out "health, ... money, ... life, ... good looks and good luck, ... peace and contentment" (DH, 208). Indeed, she offers "Everything, anything; anything, everything" (IH, 112). In short, she would give to each person his heart's desire (which seems inevitably to fall into one or more of three categories: beauty, power, knowledge) and she often uses a dual approach, appealing to her victim's altruism and narcissism simultaneously.

On the altruistic side lies power, the power to do good for others. At one point, Pauline is almost induced "to indulge... in the spiritual necromancy of Comorrh" (DH, 209) out of pity for the pathetic Lily Sammile. So, too, Digory wants the apple of youth to heal his mother (MN, 162), while Edmund envisions improving the road system of Narnia (LWW, 87). In the same vein, Faustus demands power to end world poverty (DP, 42); Rilian only desires to please his lady in conquering Narnia (SC, 132, 134), and Galadriel would preserve Lothlorien (FR, 473). However, another side often exists to the power Lilith offers, a narcissistic side. Jadis first offers Digory the apple for himself (MN, 161). Edmund desires to be crown prince "to pay Peter out for calling him a beast" (LWW, 85). Likewise, after pledging his soul to Helen (DP, 70), Faustus turns his power to evil, and Galadriel knows her power would eventually corrupt. Power alone is enough for some, all good intentions absent: Sayers' Emperor longs for the power of Helen solely that he might "Crush the Pope... and... be sovereign of the world" (IP, 89), and Wentworth wants his own interior world where he alone is God (DH, 86-87).

If Lilith appeals both to the individual's self-love and to his love of others through her gift of power, she appeals wholly to human vanity with her gift of beauty. For men, this beauty resides in the form of a beautiful woman, carnal possession of whom the masculine ego demands. The Emperor and Faustus both desire Helen. The Emerald Witch offers the be-guiled Rilian her hand in marriage. Wentworth attains an idealized "personilized" copy of Adela. But for women, the gift is beauty itself, as when the Lilith in Galadriel offers the Lady such beauty that "'All shall love me and despair!'" (FR, 473).

In addition to beauty, Lilith also offers knowledge beyond that of most mortals. Galadriel reveals visions to Frodo and Sam which they cannot understand. Similarly, along with Helen, the devil offers Faustus "master(y) of the words of power" (DP, 41), and Jadis tempts Digory with "knowledge that would have made you happy all your life" (MN, 160). Lily Sammile offers Pauline forbidden experience, "sights and sounds, touches and thrills" (DH, 110) and bids her, "'Think what you might be missing!'" (DH, 109) while Wentworth seems to see things clearer in the mist (DH, 84). In the latter three cases, in which the Lilith is genuine, the knowledge offered is not only beyond the realm of proper human experience, but beyond the realm of permissible experience as well. It is taboo, forbidden fruit, no less that "Turkish" (i.e., un-Christian) delight.

But whether it be knowledge, beauty, or power, what Lilith really offers is immutability: first a change for the better (only the dissatisfied turn to Lilith) and then that desired state fixed eternally—perpetual and unchanging. Galadriel wishes that Lorian would not fade. Lily Sammile offers Pauline eternal permanence (IH, 209). Wentworth retreats into his quiet inner world, flees from the changing world outside. Likewise Lewis' Jadis seeks to keep Narnia "Always winter and never Christmas" (LWW, 16), and turns her enemies to stone, while Faustus desires perpetual youth and the immortal unchanging Helen (DP, 70). Such immutability, however, the four authors make clear, goes against the laws of God. Sayers' Judge proclaims, "'All things God can do, but this thing He will not: / Unbind the chain"
Lilith's gifts, then, are a cheat. The four authors agree whole-heartedly on this point. Not only does the recipient wither and fade, but the gifts themselves do as well, for they are nothing: illusions, images, air. With sweet-smelling smoke and a subtle music, the Queen of the Underworld seeks to convince Rilian, the children, and the Marshwiggle that the Sunlit Lands are but "foolish dreams" copied "from the real world, this world of mine" (SC, 157). But the words of Lilith are nonsense, Unreason, the "meaningless galle" of "the guardian of all the circles of hell" (DH, 207). Jadis' food is sweet, but it cannot satisfy; Lilith "desired infinitely to seem to give suck" (DH, 207), but her breasts are dry. Helen is "Melted away! Clean from our hands—only her garments left! O sorcery!" (DP, 100). So, too, Wentworth's succubus—imperceptible to all but one: dammed Adela, already halfway into Hell—which is but "a phantom", evoked from and clouded and thickened with the dust of the earth or the sweat of the body or the shed seed of man or the water of ocean, so as to bewildere and deceive" its willing consort (DH, 126). This "image without incarnation" (DH, 127) fades from existence the moment Wentworth shuts the door (DH, 136).

And Sauron's kingdom, built upon the Power of the Ring, exists largely in the surreal half-world of the Ring-wraiths. Its counterpart, Lothlorien, though as solid and intensely real as the Lady is fair, is also based upon the One Ring's power. Its time flows outside that of the rest of Middle Earth (FR, 503), and it, too, will perish with the destruction of the Ring (FR, 472).

Lilith, then, our authors agree, is not the marvelous enchantress beautiful and desirable, giver of gifts and teller of tales all true. So she would have her blinded victims to think, but she is a liar. She offers not the heart's desire, but bitterness, not joy but self-deception. Cut off from communion with humanity, denying themselves outward sustenance, her victims collapse in upon themselves like burned-out stars, recede inward toward damnation and death. Worse yet, the degeneration takes place without the victim's knowledge (Lilith is, as Sayers calls her, "a worm in the brain," DH, 98): Lewis's Rilian did not know he was enchanted, nor Williams' Wentworth, nor Sayers' Faustus. Were Tolkien's Galadriel to take the Ring, she would, like Bilbo, fall beneath its influence insidiously. Lilith is, for these four authors, truly "She of the Night," demon patroness of the time when shadows shift, forms fade into indistinction, and dreams drift in to cloud one's reason. Ultimately, all four writers portray her as a sham, a shell, the sound-seeming rind of the rotted pumpkin: not goodness and love and beauty, but only the semblance of them. For the Inklings and Sayers, she symbolizes vanity and glamour, all that seems and is not. To love her, they warn—go with her, to enjoy her favors—is to find not happiness, but wormwood and despair.

Notes

1. Sayers plays upon this theme when she reminds us that Helen (Lilith) is "hell-born. hell-named / Hell in the cities, hell in the ships, and hell / In the heart of man" (DP, 40-41), an English paraphrase of the wordplay in lines 687-690 of Aeschylus' Agamemnon:

"...." (Helen, fittingly in that regard crusher of ships, slayer of men, destroyer of cities).

2. To be abbreviated DH. All page numbers refer to


4 To be abbreviated FR. All page references from Ballantine Books paperback edition.

5 SC. Collier Paperbacks.  

6 The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe; Prince Caspian; The Magician's Nephew. Abbreviated LLW, PC, and MN, respectively. Collier Paperbacks edition. This character, also called the Lady of the Green Kirtle, embodies aspects of Morgan Le Fay. Her relationship with Riilan (enchantress to her captive knight) is distinctly Arthurian, reminding one of the green-girdled lady under Morgan's direction in the medieval poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and of similar enchanted knight episodes in Malory's Morte Darthur.

7 DP. In Two Plays about God and Man, the Vineyard Books paperback edition.

8 Galadriel, who is not yet (nor ever will be truly) Lilith, is free to enter the garden. Also, in a sense, Lothlorien is her garden, a paradise set off from the rest of Middle Earth and into which the evil Eye of Sauron cannot penetrate.

9 Compare the behavior of vampires and Lamas (female vampires) who cannot cross any threshold unless invited by their intended victims.

10 At least, she is beautiful to men (Digory, the magician, and Edmund). Polly, however, couldn't see anything specially beautiful about her (MN, 48). Aunt Letty, too, is far from dazzled (MN, 79-80).

11 Not even Aslan can kill the witch, as becomes apparent in the sequel to LLW, Prince Caspian. See page 165: the bag says, "his dear little Majesty needn't mind about the White Lady—that's what we call her—being dead. ...(W)ho ever heard of a witch that really died? You can always get them back."

12 The gnomes, of course, though still ugly, are not such a bad lot once freed from the witch's spell.

13 In his 1969 article, "Lilith in Narnia," Good-Knight also perceives "a two-sided picture of the figure of Lilith" in literature: the "witch-bag" as opposed to the "beautiful, dream-like seductress." However, unlike my dichotomy, which stresses the differences in Lilith's method of operation (brute force versus temptation), Good-Knight divides the Liliths by their victims: children stolen by the bag and young men seduced by the dream lady.

14 Tolkien: Galadriel's Mirror reflects the stars as she stands beneath 'earendil, the Evening Star .... So bright ... that the figure of the Elven-lady cast a dim shadow' while 'Its rays glanced upon a ring about her finger ... and a white stone in it twinkled as if the Even-star had come down to rest upon her hand." (FR, 472). This is Ninya, one of the three elven rings of power, upon which Lorien is founded. As for Sayers, following the classic myth that Helen did not die but was made a star by Zeus, Mephistopheles invokes Helen with these words: "Rise up, thou star of evening, called by night: Hesperus, but in the morning, Lucifer. / And sometimes Venus, lady of love" (DP, 97). One notes with interest the association between Lilith and Lucifer, the Light-bearer, best and brightest of the angels, a star now fallen. Galadriel's name, also, means "Lady of Light" — but she remains unfinished.

15 Here my terminology comes from the conception of Lilith as the serpent in the Garden of Eden, tempting Eve to facilitate the fall of man. Lewis actually portrays his Emerald Witch as a serpent (SC). Most of the Classical cthonian figures of Greek mythology had snakes as their attribute: Hecate, the Gorgon (said by Euripides to have been earthborn), Erichthonion, Echion.

16 Interestingly, these are the three categories represented by the goddesses Aphrodite, Hera, and Athena who each offered Paris a bribe that he might judge her the fairest. Aphrodite offered Paris Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, as his love. Hera offered him dominion over all Europe and Asia. Athena offered him unparalleled wisdom and knowledge. Sayers incorporates the Judgement of Paris into her Devil to Pay, conceiving of the Golden Apple as synonymous with Eve's fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Lewis, too, uses the motif of Lilith and apples, portraying her not, as Sayers does, tempting man to cast back the fruit and give up the knowledge of good and evil. Rather, Jadis tempts Digory to accept the apple of the Tree of Life and live forever.

17 But she is not Lilith, only potential Lilith, and through her guidance, the hobbits do not misinterpret the visions, thereby endangering themselves and all Middle Earth by abandoning their quest.

18 Compare this to the motif of "fairy gold" found in other folklores, the crock of gold granted by leprechauns in numerous Irish folktales, for example. The recipient must spend the treasure before morning, for it will transform to bones and ashes at the first ray of dawn. Recall also the gifts of Cinderella's fairy godmother, which last only until midnight. At the stroke of twelve, the gown goes back to rags, the horses to mice, the coach to the hollowed pumpkin shell.

19 Compare Aunt Letty's reaction to the magical incantation uttered by Jadis: "I thought as much. The woman is drunk. Drunk! She can't even speak clearly." (MN, 71)

20 Compare Tolkien's Nazgul, who exist mostly in the spirit world but wear real cloaks and ride mortal steeds in order to be perceptible on Middle Earth.

Bibliography

The Texts

authors have created. While I value Mythlore's articles for their insights and intellectual stimulation, it is the pictures that I look at and say, "Yes, this person sees something of the same vision I do," or, better yet, "This person has given me a new vision of the world I love." Poetry has something of the same effect; it too appeals to the heart rather than the head. Both of these things help to make Mythlore the very special journal it is.

Jerry L. Daniel 419 Springfield Ave. Westfield, NJ 07092

C.S. Lewis had a brief letter published on the dust cover of Arthur C. Clarke's Childhood's End (London; Sidgwick & Jackson, 1954). (G34 in Walter Hooper's second bibliography). This letter was not reprinted on any subsequent edition, and the few copies of the 1954 edition I've located have lacked the dust cover. I have exhausted all avenues of search of this letter! I've checked hundred of libraries, including those reported to have a large collection of science fiction. I've checked with the publisher, with Walter Hooper, and even with Arthur C. Clarke himself. No luck. Surely some reader of Mythlore owns the Sidgwick & Jackson edition. It would mean a great deal to me to get a photocopy of the Lewis letter.

(Please try to write letters of comment within a month of receiving an issue, so that timely letters can be included in the next issue. — Editor)

LOOKING AHEAD

Editorial Notes - Glen GoodKnight

As a response to readers' interest, the next issue will be a special one focusing on The Silmarillion, Unfinished Tales, and The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien. As part of that issue, we would like to publish readers' comments on how these books have affected and changed their previous view of Tolkien. A sheet is enclosed for your comments for possible publication.

In the following issue, we will mark the 15th anniversary of The Mythopoeic Society. We would like to include comments from readers on what the Society has and does mean to them. The same enclosed sheet can be used for this.

I hope you will take part in both of these to share your thoughts and feelings.

The changes that were begun in the last issue have brought very favorable comments from many quarters. Your support is vital for Mythlore's ongoing improvement. Please make its welfare your personal concern by: encouraging your friends to subscribe; giving gift subscriptions; becoming a patron; posting the flyer that was enclosed in the last issue in libraries, English departments, etc. (more copies are available on request); requesting or asking a faculty member to request that your library subscribe; and resubscribing yourself before we need to send you a renewal letter.

You, the individually involved and concerned reader, are the most important reason for Mythlore's success. Only through us working together with a sense of common purpose can Mythlore continue to improve.

The change-over to the new format with larger print, and the addition of the Subject Index, have meant less room for Reviews and Letters for this issue. If we can increase our subscribers by about 15 to 20% we can add at least six additional pages for each issue and other improvements.

1983 Mythopoeic Conference

At this point there has been no definite interest shown in the organization of the 1983 Conference. Those interested should write this this year's Chairman of the Council of Stewards, Christine Lowentrout, 115 5th St. #2, Seal Beach, CA 90740 for guidelines.

Reference Works


