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Where Words Fall Short: Limitations of Language in All Hallows' Eve

Edward Croft

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Abstract
Notes the difficulty of conveying "the essence of Evil" in fiction due to the limitations of language. Examines how Williams dealt with the problem in *All Hallows' Eve*.

Additional Keywords
Evil in All Hallows' Eve; Williams, Charles. All Hallows' Eve—Evil; Williams, Charles. All Hallows’ Eve—Language
In his introduction to Charles Williams' All Hallows' Eve, T.S. Eliot remarks that no form (or writing) could have been satisfactory for what Williams wanted to say. What Williams wanted to say was "something imaginative," concerned, at least in large part, "not with the Evil of conventional morality and the ordinary manifestations by which we recognize it, but with the essence of Evil..." and, equally, with the essence of Good. In this book, the writer's apprehension of what he attempts to render is rooted in a realm of experience inaccessible to conventional perception. Language which can convey ideas and impressions posited in the world of conventional experience is, however, limited in its ability to render directly perceptions which either transcend or anteceude this realm of experience.

The subject of Evil is a common enough theme in literature, and is relatively easy to suggest in conventional ways, but rendering what is believed to be the essence of Evil is another matter. In 20th century literature, authors have struggled with approaches which attempt to suggest through concrete illustration the nature of this subject. For example, Graham Greene's Pinky, in Brighton Rock, is portrayed as an embodiment of a disposition towards evil -- yet his evil is only suggested by the nature of his acts. We are not given a view of the core of his evil -- the writer has not found a way. Conrad, in Heart of Darkness, uses an elaborate structure of metaphors to grapple with the problem, and although the depth of his characterization of Kurtz is startling, and the motifs which relate to him are effective at many levels, we are never privileged to see directly with Kurtz's eyes when he utters his final words: "The horror." Williams attempts to bypass the suggestion of evil through concrete metaphor and the limitations implied by this approach -- he sees Evil as a force not confined to the world of concrete, finite experience. The writer, in this case, struggles to convey directly his experience of what Evil is -- and so, he does not confine himself to the tangible effects of Evil. But he is burdened with a means of discourse ill-equipped for the task. Perversely, he is confined to language which, in fiction, is most effective in its descriptive powers when it conveys concrete phenomena. Yet, in order to deal directly with his subject, Williams is forced either to use more abstract description and have faith in the reader to hear a responsive chord struck deep in the well of his own experience, or to use concrete illustration in an unconventional way: through the use of contraries, or through surrealistic arrangement of objects.

Insofar as concrete illustration is used, representation of objects is secondary, for the author's purposes, to the suggestion of mood or experience which transcends the structure of the conventional, physical world. Hence, in the opening scene, where the writer attempts to convey Lester's consciousness after death (and her experiencing of this consciousness), we read of street lamps and city lights (concrete phenomena), but the environment is unconventional, surrealistic, because all the shutters and blinds to the windows in the buildings are missing. While it is possible in the tangible realm of experience for curtains and shutters to be removed from all the windows of buildings, it is not, realistically, probable. This unlikely arrangement of concrete phenomena -- a surrealistic arrangement -- is as it stands a signifier, but not a representation, of an environment which is paranormal. Struggling to convey more of the nature of Lester's experience immediately after death, Williams moves to more abstract language. Hence, we read:

Those lights were the peace, It was true that formal peace was not yet in being; all that had happened was that fighting had ceased. The enemy, as enemy, no longer existed and one more crisis of agony was done....

... Something was ended.... (p. 1 [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux])

Adverbs struggle, too, to convey the sensations of the dead woman: "She began to cry -- unusually, helplessly, stupidly." But the emotional impact of Lester's realizing her own death is suggested not through concrete manifestations of emotions, say, in the form of dialogue or movement, but through the rendering of situation:

He had gone; all was silent. She choked on his name; it did not recall him. He had vanished....

He must be dead; how else could he be gone? ... Dead; separate; forever separate. It did not, in that separation, much matter who was dead. If it had been she --

She. On the instant she knew it. (p. 6)

Again and again, however, the paranormal nature of the experience-to-be-conveyed forces the writer toward the abstract. Frequently, he names the emotions experienced by the characters (e.g., "It was a pure and perfect enjoyment" [p. 167]) instead of suggesting the emotions through depiction of the character's behavior, or through some other device which "shows" instead of "tells." Generally, writers are encouraged to prefer showing over telling in narrative writing, yet, for Williams, the subject of his work often precludes this.

Ironically, for the novel, words have an almost tangible quality, and a concrete power in the world of the paranormal:

She exclaimed, with the fervent habit of her mortality: "Hell!"

The word ran from her in all directions, as if a dozen small animals had been released and gone racing away.... (p. 94).

Conversely, in this purgatorial other-world, wasted words -- babbling -- become a torment. Note that Lester moves away from Evelyn, in part at least, because of the irritation created by Evelyn's prattling.

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It is Office-room, viewed from the inside through a glass door, as it was seen by Dickens on a dark London day; and it was used by Chesterton to denote the queerness of things that have become trite, when they are seen suddenly from a new angle. [11]

In other words, when the mundane world is clothed with myth or fantasy, we are permitted a new, fresh vision of that world and are able to see in ordinary things the qualities of the marvellous and the wonderful. When Tolkien gives us a picture of the wayfarer Christian set in the fantastical world of Middle-earth, we see that it is an image of ourselves and our own world that he is holding up to us. He shows us our fallen selves and the effects of evil in the world about us, and sheds on us strength, comfort and finally freedom might be found.

Thus Sauron, the evil one, must be the focus of Tolkien’s title: though he does not appear in the text as an integrated persona, he appears throughout in the atmosphere of doubt and dissolution and in every act of self-aggrandisement the characters perform. There is very clearly a sense in which all are Sauron until the Ring’s power is finally broken; that for each of us there is the possibility that our star might fall, as did that of the legendary elven king Gilgalad, “into Mordor where the shadows are” (I: p. 183). There is no guarantee that the succour of the church or other divine agencies will keep us from Mt. Doom. Ultimately the victory must be an individual one, the conquering of the evil “self” within.

Tolkien’s protests notwithstanding, then, I believe that The Lord of the Rings is a work of Christian apologetic, which if read allegorically can lead us to recognition of the Frodo and the Gollum within ourselves, and a glimpse of a forbidden Ring clutched in our hands. It leads us beyond that too, to the victory of self-surrender that takes us to the High Sea and on into the West, though for the moment we may stand on Mt. Doom.

Notes
[2] Ibid., p. 193


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The character in which Evil is centered — Simon — makes use of language to exercise the power of the evil he possesses, and which in turn possesses him: “He knew sounds and the roots of sounds, almost the beginnings of sounds; the vibrations that overthrew and the vibrations that built up.” Through his mastery of sound in language, Simon makes the “Relaxations” a lethal means of controlling others. The singularly most deadly tool he has at his disposal is the utterance of a “Name,” the “anti-Tetragrammaton,” the “tongue-thrusting Death.” But alas, the reader never hears this name itself — just as he never sees what Conrad’s Kurtz sees in the end — nor hears the manner in which Simon changes the language he utters. Williams can only suggest the effect in general terms.

Williams is perhaps most effective in applying seemingly contradictory imagery to Simon in order to reveal something essential about the essence of evil. Richard’s early impression of Simon is that of a god (p. 104), yet Simon is a man. Later, Richard remarks: “...Simon control [ˈkəntərl] (v.) Simon's a real devil” (pp. 149-150). Lester, too, on first perceiving Simon, believes him to be superhuman. But she soon realizes his limitations. In Jonathan’s painting, Simon is alternately genius and imbecile, evangelical leader and beetle.

He professes love; he practices hate. He heals; he murders. He is alternately Clerk and Father. He provides shelter for the needy; he exploits them. He is ascetic, yet he lusts for power. He is either material or insubstantial. His power is seemingly awesome for some, but for others, he is utterly powerless. Indeed, he is master of the central force within him, yet he is slave to that force.

Ultimately, the image which Simon conveys depends on the perceiver’s choice of perspective. The nature, presence, image, and power of Evil depend, according to Williams, on the mortal individual herself. Evelyn and Lester, who as mortals were not drastically distant in character, represent uncompromising polarities in the paranormal world. Their views of Simon, and their respective susceptibility, or invulnerability, to his power depend on their own choices. Simon’s image has substantial impact on those in the waking, living, corporeal world, as well. Richard and Jonathan, who at first are unable to determine the nature of Simon’s power, eventually see Simon the way Lester sees him — as powerless, base, and corrupt. For Williams, there seems to be no middle ground in our struggle with Evil. For each consciousness, Evil will at a given moment be either overpowering or powerless — powerless, if the perspective is undistorted. At the moment in which the object of temptation is seen for what it is; at the moment in which the temptation vanes; the object becomes repulsive.

At least, this part of what Williams had to say is clear. If by the limitations of language he must fail in trying directly to illuminate his experience of the paranormal world and the autonomous appearance of Evil, he is able to say something about Evil’s relation to the individual in very definite terms. For Williams, in countless situations in which we grapple with Evil’s temptation, we will, for each encounter, either vanquish it, or be vanquished by it. There can be no compromise.