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## *The Lion in the Waste Lane: Fearsome Redemption in the Works of C.S. Lewis, Dorothy L. Sayers, and T.S. Eliot* by Janice Brown

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## Online Winter Seminar



### Online Winter Seminar

The Inklings and Horror: Fantasy's Dark Corners

February 4-5, 2022 (Friday evening, Saturday all day)

Via Zoom and Discord

## 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>

### Additional Keywords

T. S. Eliot, Modernism, Faith

**THE LION IN THE WASTE LAND: FEARSOME REDEMPTION IN THE WORKS OF C.S. LEWIS, DOROTHY L. SAYERS, AND T.S. ELIOT.** Janice Brown. Kent, Ohio: Kent State UP, 2018. 290 pp. 9781606353387. \$40.50.

IN THE FIRST CHAPTER OF *THE LION IN THE WASTE LAND: Fearsome Redemption in the Work of C.S. Lewis, Dorothy L. Sayers, and T.S. Eliot*, Janice Brown states that the purpose of her book “is to explore the complementary nature of what Lewis, Sayers, and Eliot had to say on a number of important subjects—subjects connected with central Christian doctrine of redemption through Christ” (Brown 3). It is a purpose that is well-articulated, thoroughly examined, and delivered in a style that is enjoyable to read. A good share of Brown’s success can be attributed to the structure of the book. In brief, the first chapter explains how the three authors are connected to one another, while the second chapter narrows in on the struggle that each of the three authors faced in accepting their role as a literary prophet in mid-twentieth century modernity. With the common ground having been tilled, Chapters 3 through 8 offer what Brown refers to as “six frightening but redemptive extremities as they are illuminated in the works of Lewis, Sayers, and Eliot” (3). The ensuing six concerns, and their respective chapters, are: Chapter 3: a complete submission to Christ; Chapter 4: becoming a disciple; Chapter 5: disruption of an ordinary life; Chapter 6: learning to endure great suffering; Chapter 7: an arduous pilgrimage; and Chapter 8: facing the criticism of a hostile age.

The first chapter is grounded in what Brown identifies as “Three things that Lewis, Eliot, and Sayers had in common [...] Christian faith rooted in conservative Anglicanism, higher education in the humanities, and searing power with words” (4). Although much of what is covered in this chapter will be familiar to those who have read previous biographies of any one of the authors, Brown’s critical analysis of the lives and works of each author is well-reasoned and estimable. This is clearly seen in the first half of the chapter in which the critical strife that existed between Lewis, the traditionalist, and Eliot, the figurehead of early twentieth century modernism, is scrutinized. Pointing out that “the negativity seems to have been largely on Lewis’s side” (8), Brown demonstrates that Lewis’s concern about the demise of traditional verse was not solely aimed at Eliot’s fame. Directing our attention to consider what Lewis had to say in both his poetry and literary criticism (particularly so *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy*, co-authored with Cambridge critic E.M.W. Tillyard, and *A Preface to Paradise Lost*), Brown’s elucidation of Lewis’s frustration with modernism, and his eventual reconciliation and friendship with Eliot, is very informative, offering a more expansive view on a renowned feud. Correspondingly so, Brown’s commentary on the poetic and religious changes that Eliot experienced in the 1930s, leading to his eventual conversion and

embrace of classical and Christo-centric themes, brings forward facts and subtleties that enhance our current understanding of what Eliot was experiencing at the time. Best of all Brown avoids the somewhat fashionable pessimism that occurs in many critiques of Eliot's conversion to and defense of Christianity, just as she steers away from sentimental idolization of Lewis as champion of an old school worldview. The latter half of the chapter is given to Sayer's acquaintance with both men. Appealing to their respective letters and other biographical sources, Brown does an excellent job of demonstrating how influential Sayers was in Lewis and Eliot's professional endeavors. When it comes to Lewis and Sayers, attention is given to their passion for evangelicalism, Dante, and their roles as authors. Likewise, Brown points out that Sayers and Eliot's relationship revolved around their shared commitment to utilize drama as a "major venue in proclaiming the message of redemption" (26).

The second chapter invites the reader to consider Brown's rather bold assertion that "The term prophet can be applied equally to Sayers [...] Lewis and Eliot" (33). The success in Brown's argument is her commonsensical appeal to the historical role of the poet as a voice of the divine in the wilderness of disillusionment. This is made evident in her explanation of each author's acceptance of their calling to Christianity, their role as apologists, and their means of preaching to their audience. The treatment of each author is intriguing and constructive, with Brown focusing on how each of them accepted their role as an apologetic voice for their times. A fine example of this comparative analysis is seen in the progression of three sub-sections, appropriately entitled: *Lewis, the Self-Effacing Apologist*, *Sayers, The Reluctant Apologist*, and *Eliot on the Futility of Secularism*. While each section brings forward the personal struggles that shaped their respective career paths, Brown does a very good job of showing how all three were united in their dedication to professing the truth of religious faith and fulfilling a role that Brown refers to as "prophet-preacher" (59). From here, attention is given to Lewis, Sayers, and Eliot's more imaginative contribution as "prophet-poets" (59). On this account Brown claims that "The literary power of Eliot, Lewis, and Sayers found its fullest expression in their creative works," and not those works of non-fiction "that relied on exposition" (59). Support for this contention is offered in the ensuing chapters, becoming one of the hallmarks of the book's over-arching theses.

The third chapter opens with a candid assessment of modernity, and the unavoidable effect it had on the three authors. Brown's view on this widely-debated matter is made very clear when she tells us that "The modernism that Lewis, Sayers, and Eliot confronted was characterized by a general disillusionment arising from the absence of any basis for certainty about anything. The rejection of traditional religious modes of thought left a huge vacuum, intellectually and emotionally" (64). Brown's viewpoint is backed up

by her observation that for centuries Christ was at the center of artistic expression, and that all three authors were moved by, and often appealed to, a medieval aesthetic. Starting with Sayers depiction of Christ in *The Man Born to Be King*, Brown offers an informative history of the twelve play production and reception, further explaining that the “plays grew out of Sayer’s disgust at the failure of the contemporary Church to show the truly terrifying nature of the Lion of Judah” (67). The commentary on Sayers is followed by a four page perusal of Lewis’s depiction of Christ, as seen in the characterization of Aslan the Lion in five of the seven Narnia books. Although the critique of the Narnia books is on point (even predictable), the absence of any comment on *The Magician’s Nephew* and *The Last Battle*, and the rushed tempo of this particular section, leaves the reader feeling a tad bit short-changed.

The latter half of Chapter 3 is given to the imagery of Christ in Eliot’s poetry, and is the best part of the chapter. Occurring over the course of ten pages, Brown’s inquiry begins with a few words on Eliot’s 1915 poem “Preludes,” which offers brief allusions to a divine “transcendent and infinite” (76), before moving on to a more robust critique of Eliot’s 1920 poem “Gerontion.” Pointing out that the Christian symbolism within this poem (composed well before Eliot’s conversion) is not only self-evident, but is also central to the poem’s search for meaning, Brown leads the reader to consider the dramatic last two lines of the second stanza, wherein we meet “Swaddled with darkness. In the juvencence of the year / Came Christ the tiger” (qtd. from Brown 76). Christ as a fearsome and terrifying presence in a conflicted world supports Brown’s argument that such “devouring imagery, anticipates the many allusions to Christ in Eliot’s better-known works, his major works of the ensuing years” (80). With Eliot’s early depiction of Christ having been established, Brown approaches *The Waste Land* by taking a close look at mysterious and haunting figures that appear throughout the poem (the Hanged Man, the hooded figure, and the mysterious third figure). In doing such, Brown is inviting the reader to engage in what she refers to as “the numinous quality of a presence that is ultimately benevolent” and Christ-like in its pursuit of our soul (82). Two post conversion poems, “Ash-Wednesday” and *Four Quartets*, round out Brown’s argument that Eliot’s Christ is “the Tiger that can devour us or redeem us” (84). Working with a decidedly Christian lens, Brown’s observations on the imaginative processes of Lewis, Eliot, and Sayers yields what she refers to as accomplishing “what the medieval poets had done [...]. In portraying Christ as they did, they were providing something that was virtually absent from organized Christianity in their day: a renewed vision of Christ and renewed vitality for the message of redemption” (86-87).

Chapter 4 examines Lewis, Sayers, and Eliot’s respective calls to Christ, and the various means by which each of them used their work as an evangelical

tool. After a few pages on the nature of Christian conversion, and the individual experience that each author had (or in Sayer's case didn't have) with conversion, the reader is given a series of examples that demonstrate a consistent pattern of repentance and relinquishment as core themes in each of the author's respective corpus. The movement from one author's work to the next, several times over, as well as the choice of twenty-plus works, examined in the aforementioned light, makes for a thought-provoking read. Highlights include Brown's insights on Lewis's autobiography *Surprised by Joy* and his most widely known apologetic work, *Mere Christianity*; Eliot's 1930 poem, "Ash-Wednesday," and Sayer's 1937 play, *The Zeal of Thy House*. In this particular instance Sayer's lesser known play steals the show, and Brown's summary of the play's twelfth century storyline leaves one desirous to read the primary work. More importantly, buried beneath the more transparent theme of repentance and relinquishment as moral conditions for a sincere conversion, there resides the question of the adherent's pride. With this in mind, Brown does a superb job of showing that hubris is not only a going concern in *The Zeal of Thy House*, it is a feared fault that is embedded in each author's portrayal of conversion.

At first blush, the sub-title given to Chapter 5, *Angelic Interference*, is the type of referential that is apt to raise a cynical eyebrow. Fortunately, the more sentimental side of angel-lore and adoration is quickly dismissed, leaving Brown to remind us that "In the works of Lewis, Eliot, and Sayers, angels are indispensable to the operation of the divine will," and, in addition to this, that "Their depiction of angels is both scriptural and imaginatively original" (116). To support this claim Brown appeals to a wide variety of examples, including Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*; Sayer's *The Zeal of Thy House* and *The Man Born to Be King*; and Eliot's *The Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party*. The most captivating part of Brown's analysis is her exegetical explanations of the appearances of angels in the fictive examples offered. Overall, this particular chapter is one of the more successful in demonstrating Brown's broader point that the three authors had more in common than has been typically assumed or claimed in the past.

In Chapter 6, *Fiery Trials: World War II and Redemptive Suffering*, Brown adopts the position that "War takes a heavy toll, but in the midst of its greatest horrors, God's grace and mercy can operate" (162), and goes on to show how profoundly the war affected all three authors by appealing to their wartime publications. Starting with Lewis's most popular wartime publication, *The Screwtape Letters*, and the BBC radio addresses that would become *Mere Christianity*, Brown delves into lesser known but historically relevant works, such as Lewis's essay "Why I Am Not a Pacifist," and his sermon "Learning in War-Time." In like fashion, Eliot's renowned *Four Quartets* is juxtaposed with his lesser known poems "A Note on War Poetry" and "Defense of the Islands,"

and his essay "Poetry in Wartime." For Sayers, Brown discusses her BBC broadcast message, "The Religions Behind the Nation," and her passionate and stirring poems "Aerial Reconnaissance" and "Target Area."

In addition to her critical assessment of the aforementioned works, Brown makes two very provocative claims that bring additional charm to Chapter 6. The first claim occurs early on in the chapter wherein Brown states, "As a defense of the faith, the apologetic work *Mere Christianity* is the best of its kind. Similarly Eliot's "Little Gidding" [the last of the *Four Quartets*] is the greatest Christian poem of the [literary] modern age, and Sayers *The Man Born to be King* is the most comprehensive and impressive biblically based work of drama in English literature" (168). Even though this claim might be agreeable to many critics and readers alike, there are obvious rebuttals. While *Mere Christianity* might be the most popular apologetic work of the twentieth century, is it truly greater than one of the more esteemed works by G.K. Chesterton or Francis Schaeffer? Similarly so, we can agree that "Little Gidding" is a great Christian poem, but so too were several works by W.H. Auden, Robert Lowell, and other Christian poets of the same generation. Two pages on, Brown makes her second claim when she writes, "Though Lewis, Eliot, and Sayers made no claim to speak for the church in any official capacity, their words rang with authority" (170). Once again, this contention appears to make sense. However, it raises a compelling question: Just how popular and authoritative were these three authors then, as opposed to now? Going even a step further, is the critical mindset of Inklings Studies guilty of being a tad bit too whiggish? As the chapter comes to an end Brown reminds us that war "was costly in every sense" (199). Eliot and Sayers were torn away from their comfort zones, and, as Brown correctly points out, "Lewis's wartime writings also meant the loss of the approval of his Oxford colleagues," which would eventually mean "he was never given the promotion to full professorship" (200). Likewise, even though Eliot and Sayers were outliers to the university community, their Christian positions and productivity were often criticized, particularly so Eliot who was seen by many of his contemporaries as having betrayed modernism. And it is here, on this point, that Brown nudges us forward to wonder just how hospitable is the academic world to those who openly profess their faith, then as well as now?

Chapter 7 invites us to consider how each of the three authors viewed and depicted this life as a journey that ends with a reunion with God. Brown begins by pointing out that when it comes to heavenly matters one common denominator for all three authors is their debt to, and borrowings from, Dante and the Grail Quest. From here, Brown's focus is primarily given to Lewis and Eliot, with brief comments on Sayer's essay, "Strong Meat." The comparison between Lewis and Eliot's respective views on what she refers to in the chapter

heading as “The Journey to Joy” begins with Lewis’s allegorical novel *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, his autobiographical *Surprised by Joy*, and an enticing selection of his poems, including “The Ecstasy” and “As One Oldster to Another.” For Eliot’s eschatological views, Brown primarily appeals to a strong mix of verse, with due attention given to *The Waste Land*, *Four Quartets* (including a very nice analysis of *Burnt Norton*), “The Journey of the Magi,” and “The Cultivation of Christmas Trees.” Brown’s comparison of joy, beauty, and “the longing for heaven” (206) in Lewis and Eliot’s poetry is commendable, and her argument that much of what both writers had to share has much more in common than has been recognized in the past is both engaging and convincing (206). Oddly enough, though, when Brown speaks about Lewis’s experience with a heightened sense of joy there is no direct mention of *sehnsucht* in her analysis, even though there is a reference to Eliot’s use of the term *erhebung* to indicate special moments of grace (207-208). Missed opportunities aside, one of the highlights of this chapter is the significance that Brown extends to *The Pilgrim’s Regress* (a work that is often passed over) in shaping Lewis’s more mature views on God’s promise of salvation.

The eighth and final chapter is given to Lewis, Sayers, and Eliot’s shared affirmation for “the validity of old views and values,” as such are clearly expressed in the strong appeal “they made for a return to Christian orthodoxy and for acceptance of the redemption offered by the gospel” (231). To demonstrate the concern that each of the three authors held about the spiritual cost of embracing the secularism of modernity, Brown appeals to both their poetry and their apologetic works. Stand-outs include her commentary on Lewis’s poem “The Country of the Blind,” and *The Abolition of Man*; Sayer’s views on education, as are made evident in her two essays “The Contempt of Learning in Twentieth Century” and “The Lost Tools of Learning”; and Eliot’s essay “The Idea of a Christian Society,” and his poem “Little Gidding,” from *Four Quartets*. As her choices indicate, Brown uses the last chapter to speak to our present state of affairs. Without being preachy or overly sentimental Brown reminds us that all three authors saw a great loss occurring in the twentieth century as both the academy and society dismissed the grace and beauty of religious faith as being archaic, and gravitated toward a relativistic realm of secular self-gratification. At the close of the chapter Brown tells us that “This book is based on Eliot’s conviction that literary texts are most valuable when they are set in relation to one another: I believe that the key ideas of Lewis, Sayers, and Eliot are most powerful when considered simultaneously” (260). *The Lion in the Waste Land* proves Eliot’s point, and Brown succeeds in enriching our knowledge of both familiar and lesser known works by three of the greatest literary figures of the twentieth century.

—Jim Stockton