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Priestess and Goddess: Evolution of Human Consciousness in *The Greater Trumps*

Abstract

Extracts a definition of fantasy from Barfield's theory of consciousness, and calls Williams a "master at [...] Barfieldian fantasy." Analyzes *The Greater Trumps* as "the best exemplum" of this kind of fantasy, "that explores some aspect of human consciousness by reviving a mythic mode of thought."

Additional Keywords

Barfield, Owen—Theory of Consciousness—Relation to fantasy; Williams, Charles—Characters—Women; Williams, Charles. *The Greater Trumps*



Priestess and Goddess

Evolution of Human Consciousness in *The Greater Trumps*

Donna R. White

The novels of Charles Williams are difficult to classify, since the characteristics they share with one another are so idiosyncratic that to assign them to any particular literary genre would require an arbitrary decision. For example, in his introduction to *All Hallows' Eve*, T.S. Eliot refers to Williams' novels as "supernatural thrillers" or "stories of supernatural horror" (xiv-xv). Eliot then proceeds to define the books in terms of their differences from, rather than their likenesses to, other supernatural thrillers. Elsewhere in the introduction Eliot admits that Williams' work defies definition and that Williams invented his own forms (xiii).

The difficulty in classifying Williams' seven novels lies in their being so much themselves, a quality of self-possession that can also be seen in certain English words, according to Owen Barfield, a contemporary of Williams. These words, says Barfield, are those that relate to "that inner world of human consciousness which cannot be grasped with hands.... In that intangible inner world words are themselves, as it were, the solid materials" (*History in English Words*, p. 71). Barfield is speaking in particular of words descended from various myths -- Greek, Roman, Indian, Persian, Egyptian, Celtic, Teutonic, and Slavic. Williams, too, is interested in exploring the inner world of human consciousness and its connection to myth; as a poet, he is also sharply aware of the meanings of words. Since the two men share so many special interests, perhaps a close look at Barfield's philosophy of human consciousness can illuminate Williams' novels in a new way.

To begin with, Barfield's concept of the evolution of human consciousness makes possible a specific definition of fantasy that will easily incorporate Williams' work. Of course, fantasy by its broadest definition

already includes Williams. As defined by the editors of *Fantasists on Fantasy*, fantasy is "literature in which nonrational phenomena play a significant part" (p. 3). However, when the editors subdivide fantasy into myth, fairy tale, gothic, sword and sorcery, and historical, their examples indicate that Williams would fit into none of these categories.

In order to find a category that describes Williams' fantasy, it is more productive to start from Ann Swinfen's concept of fantasy as "both the sub-creative art, with its quality of strangeness and wonder, and the kind of novels which such art produces" (p. 5). This definition, stressing as it does an inherent quality rather than the presence of supernatural phenomena, is better suited to novels that concentrate on the inner world of human consciousness.

Swinfen's definition is taken almost verbatim from J.R.R. Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-Stories" (see his definition on pp. 66-67 in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*). According to Verlyn Flieger, Tolkien's essay borrows heavily from Barfield's *Poetic Diction* in considering writers to be sub-creators and in tying fantasy to the mythic experience of early man. Writing about Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* and "On Fairy-Stories," Flieger states:

What we might be tempted to separate into levels of meaning -- literal, metaphorical, symbolic -- is given as a vital whole, a recreation of that original participation of man with his world which Barfield postulated.

This is a mythic mode of thought, and in a world where such thinking no longer obtains we must call it fantasy. (p. 55)

A definition of fantasy derived from Barfield's

Poetic Diction would incorporate this mythic mode of thought, a mode tied to an earlier point in the evolution of consciousness, before human perception divided into the subjective and the objective and the meanings of words became diffused and abstract. An author attempting to write in this mythic mode would thus have to reanimate ancient concepts and word meanings; this would place heavy demands on both the author's and the reader's imaginations. No wonder Eliot states that what Williams has to say is "probably beyond the resources of language" (xi). Barfield might agree that what Williams has to say is beyond "language as it is grasped by logical mind," but perhaps it is not beyond "language as it is grasped by poetic mind" (*Poetic Diction*, p. 63).

Fantasy, then, seeks to reanimate the ancient and mythic unity of meaning which Barfield calls "original participation" of at least to remind us that there is another side to reality — an inside. For Williams and Barfield that inside is where human consciousness resides. Discussing the division between subjective and objective, Barfield states that consciousness "is not a tiny bit of the world stuck on the rest of it. It is the inside of the whole world" (*History, Guilt, and Habit*, p. 18).

For Barfieldian fantasy, however, reviving mythic meaning would be a job half done. A prophetic element is also necessary, because the evolution of human consciousness extends into the future as well as the past. We must go beyond self-consciousness, which is based on the duality of subjective and objective, and once more unite with the macrocosm, bringing reason and imagination together again in a "final participation." The way to do this, according to Barfield, has been provided by the incarnation of Christ, who showed us how to resolve the duality (*Romanticism Comes of Age*, p. 102).

We now have a definition of fantasy, based on Barfield's philosophy, that incorporates Williams' novels: literature that explores some aspect of human consciousness by reviving a mythic mode of thought, both past and future. This definition may exclude literary worlds that have long been classified as fantasy, such as many sword and sorcery adventures, but those may be considered the work of Fancy (in Coleridge's use of the term), whereas true fantasy springs from Imagination.

Charles Williams is a master at this newly-defined Barfieldian fantasy. All of his characters go through a change of consciousness of one kind or another; all are faced with the two alternatives Barfield sees: "ultimate death or nonentity on the one hand, and on the other the first step towards an expansion outward again to the macrocosm" (*Romanticism Comes of Age*, p. 98). Sometimes the ultimate death or nonentity results from immersing oneself too deeply in the mythic mode, as is shown by the fates of Mr. Foster, Miss Wilmot, and Mr. Tighe in *The Place of the Lion*. They allow themselves to be totally consumed by the Platonic universals that have governed their lives. The near destruction of Damaris Tighe shows that immersing oneself in the opposite mode, the rational, can have a similar effect. Reconciliation of these two modes is necessary for final participation or even for the first step toward it.

Of Williams' seven novels, *The Greater Trumps* is perhaps the best exemplum of Barfieldian fantasy. There is, in fact, a remarkable resemblance between this novel and Barfield's *History in English Words*.

There is no way of knowing whether or not the resemblance is accidental. According to Humphrey Carpenter's biography of the Inklings, Williams did review *Romanticism Comes of Age* (p. 168n). We do not know if Williams read and was influenced by *History in English Words*, but it is entirely possible, since the book was published in 1926 and Williams was writing *The Greater Trumps* in the early 1930's (Hadfield, p. 101). Barfield's book makes many connections among Egyptian myth, Greek thought, and the Christian religion, as well as discusses the influence of Celtic and Slavic elements on Western thought. All of these contribute to the mythic mode of thought in Williams' novel.

Since a discussion of all the mythic elements in *The Greater Trumps* would require several volumes, I will confine myself to exploring only those that are related in some way to the role of women. Sybil, Joanna, and Nancy, the major female characters in the novel, are themselves mythic figures; all three play the roles of high priestesses and goddesses. Nancy also exemplifies the evolution of human consciousness from original participation to final participation as she is initiated into the secret rites of several high mysteries. Barfield could almost be telling Nancy's story when he writes about the tradition of inner religious teachings:

The secrets of the Greek Mysteries were guarded so jealously and under such heavy penalties that we still know very little about them. All we can say is that the two principal ideas attaching to them in contemporary minds were, firstly, that they revealed in some way the inner meaning of external appearances, and secondly, that the "initiate" attained immortality in a sense different from that of the uninitiated. The ceremony he went through symbolized dying in order to be "born again", and when it was over, he believed that the mortal part of his soul had died, and that what had risen again was immortal and eternal. (*History in English Words*, p. 88)

Nancy is the Initiate. Henry initiates her into one set of mysteries and Sybil into a greater one, thus adding a deeper meaning to the title of the book that a first reading might overlook. Henry's mysteries involve the Tarot cards, and Nancy's initiation proceeds from assisting him in calling forth earth to trying the cards herself under his direction and helping him conjure up a vision of the world. Henry is, in one sense, the high priest of the Tarot cards. His mysteries involve power over the spiritual principles immanent in the cards and figures — power that he wishes to harness to his own use so that he may read the fortunes of the world.

Nancy is a fearful initiate into the mysteries of the Tarot; only her love for Henry sustains her in each step she takes into them. After her first experience with the cards she has a frightful vision of several of the Trumps and later imagines herself as Lady Macbeth because she cannot rid her hands of the feel of the earth. Her later experiences under Henry's direction exhaust her, and she remains fearful of these mysteries until she faces them entirely on her own.

Long before that final encounter, Nancy begins her initiation into Sybil's mysteries. When we first see Nancy she does not seem a likely candidate, having just annoyed her father to the point of exasperation.

As Sybil says, "My dear Nancy, you never do begin; you just happen along" (p. 9). Several pages later we begin to see a resemblance between Nancy and Sybil: they both have beautiful hands. This may seem to be a minor point at first, but hands are of major importance as the story progresses. Soon after this, Sybil recognizes that Nancy is at last ready to begin:

[S]he saw in her niece the opening of some other abyss in that first abyss which was love. Mr. Coningsby had spoken more truly than he thought when he accused Sybil of an irresponsibility not unlike Nancy's; their natures answered each other across the years. But between them lay the experience of responsibility, that burden which is only given in order to be relinquished.... Sybil had lifted and relinquished it; from the freedom of a love more single than Nancy's she smiled at the young initiate who from afar in her untrained innocence beheld the conclusion of all initiations. (pp. 52-53)

Nancy's love for Henry is what makes her ready for initiation into Sybil's mysteries. As Barfield points out, "love for a sensual and temporal object is capable of gradual metamorphosis into love for the invisible and eternal" (*History in English Words*, p. 92). Although this is a Platonic notion, Barfield connects it to Christian thought, as does Williams himself in his concept of romantic theology. Even though we are never told outright that Sybil's mysteries are Christian, there are more than enough allusions to lead us to that conclusion.

Nancy herself begins to sense the approach of these mysteries when her love proves greater than her fear of the cards. When she shifts from contemplation of Lady Macbeth and the weird sisters to contemplation of the glory of her passion, she experiences a new sense of power: "Her heart laboured with power still, and as that power flooded her she felt the hands that rested on the window-frame receive it; she leaned her head on the window and seemed to expect mysteries" (p. 68). It is surely no coincidence that a sense of profound intention now draws Nancy to her aunt's room, where she receives her first instruction in the greater mysteries through Sybil's challenge to give love back to itself.

This initial instruction seems to protect Nancy somewhat in her next encounter with the cards. She realizes that she has the power to refuse to go further into Henry's mysteries and that, like Sybil, she has no real desire to know the future because her present love is enough for her (p. 79). She does go on, however, because she chooses to be Henry's will. After she casts her future with the cards, she is too tired to be interested in the results and instinctively turns to her aunt for comfort. This encounter seems to mark a turning point for Nancy; from now on her interest in the cards and figures comes mainly from her love for Henry. Her own desires are turned to trying to meet her aunt's challenge to give love back to itself. This proves rather difficult, since she has yet to pass through her real initiation.

Meanwhile Nancy faces the cards with Henry again and realizes the import of this new encounter:

By her return, and her return with Henry, she was inviting a union between the mystery of her love and the mystery of the dance. As she stood, again gazing at it, she

felt suddenly a premonition of that union, or of the heart of it. It must be in herself that the union must be.... (p. 93)

This time Nancy sees, as before only Sybil has seen, a movement on the part of the Fool, who is the greatest mystery of the Tarot. Previously Nancy has only seen the Fool vibrate, which is still more motion than the other characters have seen in the Fool. This vision of movement is what Nancy takes with her from the encounter, rather than the prophetic vision of the world and its armies.

The next step in Nancy's evolution of consciousness is her true initiation into the mysteries Sybil knows so well. At church on Christmas Day Nancy hears and receives the words "Rise to adore the mystery of love" (p. 108). When Sybil tells her to try it, Nancy experiences a mystical revelation through the phrase "one altogether, not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person." This is a truly Barfieldian concept, and it gives Nancy her first glimpse of final participation as she is caught between two modes of being — action and stillness: "She flew with the one; she was suspended with the other; and, with downcast eyes and parted lips, she sought to control her youth till one should disappear or till both should come together" (p. 110).

Like many novices before her, Nancy immediately makes a mistake when she assumes that she can purify herself. Also like other novices, she faces a test of her newfound faith. She does seem to have taken her first step towards final participation, though, as we see by her new ability to sense emotions and dangers. This emphatic and prophetic gift is at work when she participates in Henry's hostile feelings towards her father and when she senses strangeness in Henry's hands, which suddenly seem inhuman. She cannot know that Henry is preparing to loose the power of the Tarot cards on her father. The same gift is at work when she dreams that her father is being thrown over a precipice.

The test of Nancy's faith comes when she stops Henry's attempt to kill her father. Since her action comes from obedience to Sybil, she is not quite destroyed by her realization of Henry's purpose. In fact, it is her false faith that is destroyed when she and Henry realize that the "Tower that each had raised — the Babel of their desired heavens — had fallen in the tumult of their conflicting wills and languages, and a terrible quiet was within their hearts" (p. 122).

Since Nancy's new adoration of the mystery of love is built on her temporal love for Henry, the wound is deep enough to be nearly fatal. When Sybil arrives she sees Nancy as "a dying creature, one in whom the power of Life was on the point of evacuation its last defences" (p. 137). Once again, Sybil provides the challenge and the choice: Nancy can choose to be life or death between Henry and her father.

When Nancy makes the right choice and goes to help Henry, she takes one more step towards final participation. Laughter and freedom spring forth within her, releasing her from her fear and enabling her to take action against the storm Henry has conjured up. As she says to Henry, "the dance is in my ears and the light's in my eyes, and this is why I was born, and three was glory in the beginning and is now and ever shall be..." (p. 147).

The scene in which Nancy and Henry enter the golden mist for the final time points out the difference in their individual development towards final participation. Because he cannot get beyond his own self-consciousness, Henry is unable to go on into the secret room. He is stuck in the duality of subjective and objective, "still aware of the irony of their movement, still aware of himself as against her, and of both of them as against the mystery of paintings and images..." (p. 164). Nancy, on the other hand, is able to transcend the duality and therefore to enter into the mysteries: "The power with her, the offspring of her transmuted love, longed in itself, beating down her own consciousness, for some discovery beyond where mightier power should answer it" (p. 164). That same power enables her to turn back the storm.

But Nancy has yet to undergo her final initiation. She has discovered what Barfield calls the "inner meaning" of the mysteries, but she must still experience the ceremonial death that will enable the immortal part of her to live. The final initiation is, of course, Joanna's attempt to sacrifice Nancy and Nancy's willingness to love Joanna. In Joanna's mind, the god is in Nancy and can literally be released through her hand; in another sense, the god is released by Joanna's efforts when Nancy manages to center herself on love. Only then is the initiation complete, when in "the place of the images the god offered himself to his seekers, through the effort of his creature" (p. 200).

The Initiate has now passed into priesthood. She joins two other priestesses -- Sybil and Joanna -- as celebrants of the greater mysteries. There is a difference, of course, between Sybil and Joanna, the two high priestesses. Although both are presented as hierophants, they each represent a different myth and a different tradition. Sybil is the high priestess of the Christian mysteries, Joanna of the Egyptian. There is a difference, too, in the state of consciousness of the two women. Joanna has immersed herself too deeply in the mythic state and allowed Babel to overwhelm her mind (p. 197). Sybil, on the other hand, has found her way to final participation: "Equanimity in her was not a compromise but a union, and the elements of that union, which existed separately in others, in her recognized themselves, and something other than themselves, which satisfied them" (p. 189).

Despite these differences, there are strong similarities between the roles of the two high priestesses. As Barfield points out, the Christian concept of mysteries descends from the Egyptian through the Greek (*History in English Words*, p. 88). More than that, there is a distinct parallel between the Egyptian myth of Isis and the Christian gospel. Isis is the virgin mother of the god Horus, who died and was reborn as Osiris. Barfield writes about the resurrection of Christ that "Egyptians and followers of Egyptian cults were persuaded that a real Horus had been born of virgin, and had risen again as an Osiris" (p. 103). When Sybil and Joanna meet, they both recognize the connection: "Sybil and she gazed at one another, their eyes recognizing mysteries of remote initiations" (p. 132).

Williams draws all three women into one mythic priestess by connecting the myth of Isis to the Virgin Mary. Early in the story Henry sees Sybil as both maiden and mystery (p. 53). Later, when he and Aaron realize Sybil's power, they see her as hierophant, maid, and matron (p. 85). According to Egyptian mythology, Isis was both a virgin and mother, and Joanna

is continually identified with Isis. As for Nancy, she is specifically referred to as "the maiden-mother of Love" (p. 195).

Such mingling of identities may have another purpose besides drawing parallels between Christian and Egyptian myth. Williams may be dipping into another mythic stream -- the Celtic. Barfield says very little about Celtic mythology; he seems more concerned with how the Celts influenced other mythologies. He does, however, quote from Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*, which mentions the freedom of women in Celtic society. Williams certainly lived near enough in time to the Celtic Revival to have known something of the mythology of the Celtic cultures. His books prove a thorough knowledge of many mythologies.

Celtic mythology contains a number of triple gods and goddesses. This fact may account for the relative ease with which the Celts accepted Christianity; the concept of a triune god was nothing new to them. A particular favorite of the Celts was a triple goddess who was both maiden, mother, and hag. In *The White Goddess* Robert Graves describes this threefold goddess, who, in various aspects, governed birth, initiation, love, wisdom, and death. As goddess of the sky she was a moon goddess and appeared in three aspects: the new moon, the full moon, and the waning moon (p. 52). According to Graves, the worship of this goddess predated all other mythologies in Britain (p. 259). If Williams wanted to reanimate original participation, he could find nothing more originally mythic than this Celtic goddess.

It is remarkably easy to apply the concept of a threefold goddess to *The Greater Trumps*. The triple moon goddess is appropriately embodied in youth, maturity, and old age. Nancy is not only the initiate -- the novice priestess of the high mysteries -- but she is also the goddess of the new moon. Young in power, she is in the ascendant. The goddess of the new moon is also the goddess of love, and Nancy is associated with love throughout the novel. It is surely no coincidence that the chapter in which Nancy turns back the storm is called "The Moon of the Tarots."

The old woman, Joanna, is the goddess of the waning moon and has little power left. She is also Isis the earth goddess and the Queen of Heaven and Annis the Blue Hag, who sucks the blood of children. Though she is in the descendant, she is still so closely identified with the elements that she can sniff news out of the air, be one with the storm, and speak for the earth itself, as she does while she calls forth fire from the Tarot cards:

She who stood there screamed and stabbed for torment of hate and loss, and from marshes and cities all desire that had not learnt its own futility rose and swelled in hers. The litany of anguish poured out as if it were the sound of the earth itself rushing through space, and comfortless for ever the spinning globe swept on, turning upon itself, crying to itself; and space was the echo of its lament, and time was the measure of its sobs. (p. 225)

Another aspect of the triple goddess is Arianrhod, who rules over birth and initiation (Graves, p. 260). This, too, is Joanna. She is the earth-mother seeking her lost child, and she is the goddess-priestess who supervises the sacrifice of the god so that the earth will blossom again.

Sybil is Cerridwen, the goddess of the full moon, at the peak of her powers. To show the full force of Sybil's godhood, Williams introduces a new character in the final chapters of the book -- the maid Amabel, who serves as a handmaiden to Sybil. In the midst of the storm and the mystic golden mist Amabel receives her summons, and the third time Sybil calls her, she responds:

Amabel dashed through the mist, terrified but exultant. It swirled round her; it carried her along; she was swept, deliriously panting, to the side of the strange lady who walked in the cloud as others did by day, and laughed at the storm as others did at spring, and closed doors that the whole power of the world dashed open.... (p. 218)

Through Amabel's eyes we observe "the strange lady" as she heals, walks among powers and principalities, tames the mad cat, and summons the figures of the Tarot. The goddess of the full moon manifests herself in the face of destruction:

... it seemed to Amabel that Miss Coningsby held out a golden hand towards the staircase down which Joanna was beginning to creep.... It lay there, very still, the centre of all things, the power and the glory, the palm glowing with a ruddy passion veiled by the aureate flesh -- the hand of all martyrs, enduring; of all lovers, welcoming; of all rulers, summoning. (p. 227)

To fully comprehend the importance of the moon goddess, we should also consider the sun god. He is present in the novel as the Egyptian Ra in the form of the cat, but as we have seen, the cat is tamed by the moon goddess. The true sun god is another triple divinity -- the Christian Trinity. He is also the mysterious Fool, who is the ultimate mystery of the Tarot. The moon, Williams reminds us, is a reflection of the sun, and the tale of the cards will be completed "when the mystery of the sun has opened in the place of the moon" (p. 195). That is exactly what happens when Sybil's hand takes control of the Tarot figures, for Sybil is not only a moon goddess, but she is also the high priestess of the sun god. Amabel sees the two approach the stairs together -- Sybil and a man in "a great white cloak and a golden helmet with a crown round it" (p. 222). Sybil stretches out a golden hand, not a silver one, and the Fool "at last fulfilled the everlasting promise and yielded its secrets to the expected hour" (p. 227). When the Tarot figures have been conquered, a great golden light breaks forth from Sybil "as of the fullness of the sun in his glory" (p. 228).

The confluence of the moon goddess and the sun god completes the tale of the evolution of human consciousness, for the moon goddess represents original participation and the sun god is final participation. Owen Barfield recognizes this truth in the conclusion of *Poetic Diction*. Writing about his concept of two principles -- the rational and the poetic -- he states:

Yet all conclusions of this nature could be no more than subjective shadows of the forces themselves, of the two living realities, which can actually be known, once our intellect has brought us to the point of looking out for them; being themselves neither subjective nor objective, but as concrete and self-sustaining in every way as the Sun and

the Moon -- which may well be their proper names. (p. 211)

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