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## What I Did For Love

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### What I Did For Love

#### Abstract

Guest of Honor speech Mythcon 21. Follows the conference theme, "Aspects of Love in Fantasy," and discusses various kinds of love and their appearance in fantasy. Concludes those "which appear most strongly in modern mythopoeic fantasy" are comradeship/ *caritas*, love of place, and "the attraction towards the numinous, or Divine."

#### Additional Keywords

Love in fantasy

# What I Did for Love

21st Mythopoeic Conference Guest of Honor Address

Diana Paxson

For a number of years now I have been listening to Guests of Honor arise from among the coffee cups at the end of the banquet to deliver their orations and been astonished by their eloquence and erudition. This was especially unnerving last year, when I realized that next time the person who was endeavoring to provide a dessert course of intellectual nourishment at once scholarly, amusing, and inspirational, would be me.

The prospect is particularly daunting when one considers the magnitude of the conference theme — Aspects of Love in Fantasy. Glen GooKnight got us off to an excellent start yesterday morning by reading from C.S. Lewis' *The Four Loves*. Lewis is an even harder act to follow than the other Mythopoeic Conference Guests of Honor, but although the book lays down an essential groundwork for our consideration of love, there are aspects of love which are particularly important to us as readers of fantasy which he was not able to treat in as much depth as they deserve. For instance, the speech given last year by Guy Gavriel Kay could well have been given the title I've chosen for mine. His work on the Tolkien papers was done for love, and which one of us, given freedom and the opportunity, wouldn't have dropped everything to do the same? Kay was motivated by one of the kinds of love which is responsible for all of us beings here tonight — the love of literature.

And so, thank goodness, there is still something left for me to say.

Not only is good fantasy literature worthy to be loved, but all aspects of love are represented within it. However, in fantasies written in the mid to late twentieth century in general, and the work of the Inklings in particular, it seems to me that the kind of human love featured most often and effectively is the love of comrades, and it is just that kind of Love which fuels the Mythopoeic Society.

Given that assumption, it is possible to make a connection between the original theme suggested for this conference, which was "coming of age" and the one eventually chosen. Love has certainly contributed to my maturation as a writer. If I have a unique value as an Author Guest of Honor for this Conference, it is because I "grew up" as a writer while participating fully as a fan of fantasy. I know the passion with which one grabs the newest work of a favorite author, and I know what drives people through the trauma of creating a Mythopoeic Conference — again and again! Writing and reading books or working on the Conference are both things that one does "for love" . . .

But what is love?

In order to make sense of the subject, we need a few definitions. First, it is essential to distinguish between sex and love, which have been so consistently confused in contemporary culture. I once heard of a Romance Writers convention to which everyone was instructed to wear pink and which only at the last moment gave up the idea of releasing a cage full of white doves at the banquet. I didn't notice any doves in the audience, although there is indeed a heart on the Conference T-shirts. Whatever it is we are doing here, I don't think romance is our primary purpose, except for the inherent romanticism involved in hankering after other times and ways.

This is not to say that these Conferences and romance are by any means mutually exclusive. I know of several couples, including the conference chair Jo Alida Wilcox and Bill Welden, and Leigh Ann Hussey and David Oster, who met or fell in love at one of these Conferences. There are others, no longer together, who through the Society have continued to be friends. But my guess is that if Eros were all that they have in common, they would not still be together, which leads up to the point I am aiming for.

Tonight I'd like to talk about what love in this larger sense means, and how these meanings have been explored in mythopoeic fantasy. Madeleine L'Engle has stated that Fantasy is about the power of Love versus the love of Power. But what kind of love?

C.S. Lewis' analysis of the four loves provides a useful beginning. His Typology consists of: Affection, Friendship, Eros and Caritas. To this list one might add love of country or place, love of family, love of one's work — as in Campbell's "follow your bliss, and love of the Divine. Clearly, the word "love" must refer to something other than genital arousal, although sexual attraction, being one of the most universal and powerful drives, provides some of the most powerful metaphors of love's expression.

All kinds of love are capable of becoming transcendent, and all of them can be perverted — thus providing the writer of fantasy with an inexhaustible source of conflict and character. Sam once pointed out to Frodo that an adventure is someone else having an uncomfortable time of it. In emotional terms, it is someone else's trauma that makes the best story. Affection uncultivated slips into complacency; Parental love all too easily becomes possessiveness; Eros can descend into Lust; Friendship contort into co-dependency or the mentality of the mob. Unexamined Patriotism may become the chauvinism that fuels war; love of one's work may lead to blindness to human needs, or a heart attack; and the love of God, which should be the noblest of all, becomes the worst when it

degenerates into the fanatic compulsion to tell others how to believe. Any virtue, even love, becomes an evil when it is unbalanced, wrongly applied, or carried to an extreme.

One sees all kinds in fantasy.

Let us look for a moment at how our favorite literature got that way. Fantasy's most direct literary ancestor is the Fairy Tale. Although fairy tales and medieval romance both come out of the same cauldron, romance has become the ancestor of mainstream fiction, while fairy tales were consigned to what Dr. Elizabeth Pope in *her* Guest of Honor speech called the "Attic of Faerie," and considered fit only for children. However a happy by-product of this juvenile focus is the fact that Young Adult writers have been forced to deal with relationships other than the erotic affairs that dominate "adult" fiction, (or perhaps they have been freed from the convention that adult heterosexual attraction is the only valid or desirable human relationship). The contemporary focus on love=romance=sex in popular music and culture is tragically limiting. As a literature, fantasy is better than most in transcending the requirement for "love interest." Fantasy in general and mythopoeic fantasy in particular offer a wide variety of relationships.

Of the three writers who are the focus of the Society, Charles Williams probably came closest to writing actual love stories, but for none of them was erotic love ever the major plot motivation. However all three offer notable examples of love in action, as do more recent writers, including those who have been guests at Mythopoeic Conferences.

Let us "count the ways" in which people, and characters in mythopoeic fantasy, love.

*Affection*, the first of Lewis' "four loves," is probably the most common in life and the least important as a motivation in literature. Displays of Affection, such as Sam's goodbye to his pony outside the gates of Moria, are useful primarily as a means of characterization. *Parental love* can certainly go beyond simple Affection, but except in *The Secret of NIMH*, it has been relatively unimportant in fantasy. Parents tend to get upset when their children disappear on adventures, and they themselves should be too responsible to go off and seek adventures if they have babies at home. Children who have living parents feel guilty at leaving them to worry. Denethor's feeling for Boromir is an excellent example of the misplacement of parental feelings. Theoden, though he is only an uncle, is not much a model either. No wonder there are so many orphans in Fantasy!

Erotic love, the most common plot motif in mainstream literature, is less significant in mythopoeic fantasy, but it is sufficiently important in the larger culture that I think its use in the works of the "Big Three" needs to be treated in some detail.

Tolkien's account of Beren and Lúthien in *The Silmarillion* is a major love story, however the focus is not upon the complexities of their personal relationship, but on the larger tapestry of history in which their struggle to

be united entangles them. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the love between Aragorn and Arwen is part of the background, and that between Éowyn and Faramir, mere icing, and no one ever misses the romance. The fact that Tolkien's characters are most bachelors saves them, and the reader, a lot of distractions.

Since the protagonists in C. S. Lewis' Narnia books are juveniles, erotic love is irrelevant and the author is free to concentrate on the adventures of the children and their companions. In the space trilogy, Jane Studdock's problem is not passion but responsibility. Perelandra is only one of the Powers who descends upon St. Anne's, although when she appears she does have very nearly the last word.

Charles Williams is the only one of the major Inklings who focuses on romantic love, both as a metaphor and as a means to spiritual union. Despite his *Theology of Romantic Love*, in his fiction, erotic attraction is used to direct attention to something for which the feeling for the Beloved is only a roadsign. In none of the novels does "getting the girl" provide the major plot impetus, and in none of them would the hero's love have meaning if there were no greater context. The romantic connections between the characters, however genuine, are less an end than a foundation which supports other kinds of loving, such as Lester's growing love for Betty in *All Hallows' Eve*. And the real consummation is the character's union with the Divine.

As Lewis points out in *The Four Loves*, the essence of Eros is not the act of love but the fact that the lovers focus is upon one another. For this reason, if no other, Eros tends to play a secondary role in modern fantasy, which focuses on solving a problem of such magnitude that human relationships, even at their most profound, must be secondary.

Next on the list comes the love of friends, or *comradeship*. In fantasy, as in life, it may appear as a close, but not necessarily erotic relationship between two characters, or even as a rivalry which binds them (as in Zimmer's *Dark Border*), or as the bond between members of a fellowship or a company.

Such relationships can be all the most powerful when they are neither supported nor bound by conventional expectations. When I was a teenager my favorite reading included the Sherlock Holmes stories and all seventeen volumes about Dumas' Three Musketeers. One of the reasons was the often suppressed and always unstated love between the main characters. I used to re-read the story in which Watson is wounded and for a moment Holmes' mask drops to show that he really cares. I wanted to be D'Artagnan, not his mistress, and ride off with Athos in search of adventure. To step outside our primary territory for a moment, let me suggest that *Star Trek* provides a well-known example of this kind of relationship. We are sure that Spock "really" loves Kirk, although he can rarely admit it. The inability to express emotion overtly (whether physically or verbally) only increases its intensity. This has nothing to do with whether they, or Holmes and Watson, or D'Artagnan and Athos, are "really" gay. The point is



not what arouses one physically, but what creates an emotional bond.

When Sun Wolf and Starhawk become lovers in Barbara Hambley's *The Ladies of Mandrigyn*, their union deepens their relationship, but does not essentially change it. The Inklings, being males in a cultural context which frowned upon sexual relationships among grown men, were not required to deal with the effects of erotic love on friendship (although I think that *A Grief Observed* demonstrates that after Lewis married Joy, he began to learn how). These days, when female characters are routinely given an active role in the story, the possibility of sexual attraction can no longer be ignored.

But erotic love can endanger rather than enhance friendship when conventional expectations about a physical relationship make the couple lose sight of the things that brought them together. Our culture tries to brainwash us into the ideas that love must be expressed physically to be "real," as a corollary the notion that any relationship which is expressed physically must by definition be animal lust or erotic love. Along with this goes the idea that only one kind of bond (heterosexual monogamy) is acceptable. Even excessive religious devotion tends to make people uncomfortable.

However in modern fantasy, the relationships between individuals are only part of the story. In *Star Trek*, Spock and Kirk may be the most important characters, but they are not a "couple." What comes through clearly is the love that unites *all* of the main characters. Not only is comradeship the aspect of love most commonly seen, it is the comradeship that binds a group of characters together that is most prevalent in modern fantasy. The ensemble — the crew of the *Enterprise*, the Four Musketeers, the Company of Saint Anne's or the Fellowship of the Ring — form the basis of the story's appeal. To make at least a bow in the direction of *A Chorus Line*, whence came the title for this peroration, it is the wonderful synchronized line of dancers at the end of the play that gives context and significance to all we have learned about them as individuals.

In Lewis' space trilogy the story of one man — Ransom — becomes that of the Company of Saint Anne's, whose selfless companionship is explicitly contrasted with the illusory solidarity of the clique at Belbury. Modern fantasy may feature individual heroes and love interest, but this focus on the group is its distinguishing characteristic. The basic plotline, from Tolkien through Donaldson and Kay, is the story of how a collection of unlikely allies (sometimes extremely unlikely, as in DeCles' *Particolored Unicorn*) become bonded comrades in order to save the world.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, the major emotional tension is between the members of the Fellowship, which include every kind of diversity except sexual. I suppose that if an Ulster Protestant could become the best friends of a Roman Catholic, getting an elf and a dwarf to tolerate each other presented little difficulty. Women were apparently perceived as being more alien. In *The Lord of the Rings*, relationships such as that between Frodo and Sam or Gimli and

Legolas give meaning to the story, and the fate of the Fellowship itself helps to unify it. The main action of the trilogy begins with the formation of the Fellowship in Rivendell, and even after it is broken physically at the end of Volume One, its existence provides moral support and a continuing point of reference for the characters. Their reunion is one of the high points of the conclusion, and the final sundering at the Grey Havens is the end of an age. The Fellowship fulfills Lewis' definition of friends in the sense that they are standing shoulder to shoulder, facing a common foe or seeking a common goal. But they also look at each other, and their love for each other may conflict with or contribute to their efforts to achieve the greater goal.

In fantasy, comradeship often extends beyond love for other human beings to beings of other species. Faerie is full of creatures which are at once natural and spiritual. Giving such beings personalities makes it easier to disappear, and the range of possible objects of love increases accordingly. Indeed, the bond between the members of a group can transcend simple comradeship to embrace elements of all the loves.

The type of love to which Lewis gives the highest place is *Caritas*, or Charity. His discussion implies that it is the same as love for God, though what he says about it seems rather designed to show that it is the kind of love that is most like that which God gives us. Certainly it does not seem to be necessary to be personally devoted to the Christian (or any other) god to exercise it. *Caritas* is that love which takes caring to the point where the well-being of others is as important or more important than one's own. *Caritas* may begin with affection, shared goals, or personal bonding, but it can lead to point where a character will lay down his or her life for another, or perform the harder task of forgiving enemies, or expressing love for those who may seem neither lovable, grateful or even deserving. Some of Frodo's treatment of Gollum certainly falls into this category, as does Aragorn's forgiveness of Boromir, and Ransom's relationship with the Un-man. Most of the relationships in the Thomas Covenant books seem to require *Caritas*.

People can also be powerfully motivated by love that is not directed towards other human beings, such as the love for one's work, or of one's land, or even love for the Divine.

*Love of one's work*, or "following one's bliss" is actually rather a common theme in contemporary fantasy, appearing in the form of the protagonist's struggle to identify, develop, and find an outlet for his or her personal potential. In fantasy this usually involves the discovery of one's magical abilities, or one's inherent capability to be a hero. Frodo discovers that he is considerably more than the common stereotype of a hobbit; Ransom turns into the Pendragon of Britain; an long list of characters from *Ged of Earthsea* on discover that they are wizards. In such stories, the quest for magical power seems to be a metaphor for the drive to self-realization. Often the story

is built around the conflict between the need to use these powers to help others and the temptation to use them for personal gain.

But the essential power of the drive is often independent of its apparent goal. Writing books is certainly an example. Writers may say their purpose is to make money, or to entertain, or to instruct or inspire, but basically, people write because it is too painful not to. An artist who is not working is an incomplete and unhappy as a sailor deprived of the sea. But although the work of artists is often honored, especially at conventions and conferences like this one, creating art is only one kind of bliss. Some are only happy when they are growing things, or making their bodies perform at peak efficiency, teaching others, making music, making a computer do new tricks, or bringing up a child. Humans are unhappy if they are prevented from achieving their potential in whatever area it may lie. Once an individual becomes aware of that potential, to deny it is a kind of castration.

In fantasy, heroism or magical powers often develop in response to an external crisis, particularly one which threatens the characters' world. *Love for the Land* goes beyond simple Affection for Place in fantasy. It can range from the rueful recognition of the values of the Shire to everyone's eventual willingness to sacrifice themselves to keep Middle-earth free. Narnia as an entity commands a kind of devotion beyond affection for any of its elements. In the Covenant books, saving the Land is the highest good of all.

This is hardly surprising, since mythopoeic fantasy depends on the creation of alternate worlds. Such worlds have an attraction that transcends the appeal of the stories that take place within them. In the 60s, travel posters were sold with the legend, "Visit Middle-Earth." I recently saw a car whose license plate read, "2 Narnia." Why are these worlds so attractive? They are not really so different from the Fields we Know. As Tolkien pointed out in his essay on fantasy, no one could imagine a green sun without having a concept of "green" and "sun" to start with. But in the secondary world, all these things are presented to us refurbished and made new. The magical places revealed in the world of the story stimulate us to look for magic in our own. The danger to the world forces the characters, and the reader as well, to stop taking it for granted, as Frodo learned to value the Shire, writing about Westria has enabled me to see California with new eyes.

This, I think, leads us to the way in which Love of the Divine is displayed most powerfully in fantasy. Beyond all the other things which may be said of mythopoeic fantasy is the fact that it conveys the experience of the Numinous with satisfying regularity.

One form which this takes is the glimpse of the Otherworld. The country of the heart exerts a powerful pull. St. Brendan hankers always for the Blessed Isles. With Legolas, we hear the sea-birds crying and we long for home. Tolkien's heroes pass at length to "... a far green country under a swift sunrise." (*LotR*, III:310) whose exist-

ence has been hinted at consistently throughout the tale. But sometimes the Otherworld shines through the world of the story itself. In the Narnia books it is not only the Sea of Lilies and Aslan's Country that proclaim a transcendent reality, but the glory that shines from every leaf and stone. The Otherworld is everywhere.

The glory shines also through the characters, human or other. Aslan is not a tame lion. Galadriel is far more than a simple elf-woman, and who can forget Gandalf the Grey unveiled? Even Frodo becomes like a clear glass for light to shine through. The Company of St. Anne's see each other as the gods and goddesses that they can potentially can be.

This last love includes all the others, It is essentially paradoxical because it is beyond the boundaries of manifestation. This love glimmers through all high fantasy, though it is not always addressed directly. It is spiritual, but it is not necessarily involved with the social linkages of religion. Organized religion is virtually absent from Middle-earth, but an awareness of the reality of spirit pervades it. Overtly at least, the religious elements in Narnia are more pagan than anything else. Numerous contemporary writers of fantasy have invented mythologies and divinities for the same reason Lewis did — to deal with spiritual realities without tripping over the cultural baggage that has obscured the truth in conventional religion. Others have invoked the old god in order to expand the definitions of spiritual reality.

Magic can be a metaphor for talking about the spiritual world. The true magic of the Elves that Sam senses without understanding is that of the spirit. The magical/spiritual experiences portrayed in fantasy feed a hunger which may or may not also be satisfied by conventional religion. It affirms that there is something beyond the mundane and that it is possible to interact with it. Paradoxically, when we have seen the spiritual world made visible in fantasy, it may become easier to see the magic in the physical world around us as well.

The experience of the Divine may be that of the Rejection of Images — impersonal and beyond description, or that of the Affirmation of Images, a totally personal or even erotically physical experience of union. It may be perceived as love for an Otherness that is more alien even than the world of Nature, or love for a Person who is the ground of one's own being. The compulsion to seek the Divine is more fundamental than the drives to fulfill one's creative or sexual potential because it includes them. If the Divine is manifest in all aspects of Creation, the larger the circle of things that one is able to love, the more completely one will be able to appreciate the source of them all.

Love is not a "feeling" despite all the songs. It is an active verb, something to do. Especially in fantasy, it manifests in the actions taken by the characters out of the truth of their own nature. Love is not "virtuous" in the common and hackneyed sense of something one does to make points with other people or with God. It is "virtus" or perhaps "feminitas," the essence of being human.



Love not only makes the world go round, it is the hub of the literature that we love the best. And as I have tried to show, the kinds of love which appear most strongly in modern mythopoeic fantasy, are Comradeship extending into Caritas, the love of Place, and the attraction towards the Numinous, or Divine. One might well wonder why this is so.

Our world is as imperilled as any mythopoeic land, and as the churches become more secular, we range farther afield to feed our hunger for contact with spiritual reality. But what about comradeship?

Writing is generally considered a lonely business, and the writer is portrayed battling for survival in a hostile world. Not only does this stereotype describe many artists (although the battle may be against the demands of husband or children instead of the world), but until the Inklings came along, it also described the fantasy hero.

I cannot help wondering whether it was the kind of companionship that the Inklings found at the "Baby and the Bird" that rooted the idea of a Fellowship in the imaginations of Tolkien and Lewis. Surely those meetings enabled them to give each other a kind of emotional support which for men engaged in producing what their academic colleagues dismissed as "fairy tales" must have been essential.

I can appreciate the value of such support, having become a writer in a household which some consider a fantasy, but which in truth is merely fantastic. Our dinner-table conversations may sometimes involve disputes over who is responsible for leaving the lights on, but they also include appreciation, criticism, and the sharing of our craft. Without the Greyhaven environment, it would probably never have occurred to me to revive dreams of writing which had been almost terminally squelched by a social realist writing instructor when I was in school.

In 1971 I began what eventually became the Westria series. This June I revised *The Jewel of Fire*, which contains some of the final material from the version I wrote almost twenty years ago. During that time I have learned a great deal about a great many kinds of love. This seems an appropriate moment to acknowledge my debt to my husband, Jon DeCles, and to Paul Edwin Zimmer, my companion on the road; to Marion Zimmer Bradley, who showed me the way; and to my son Ian for teaching me the difference between procreation and sub-creation and loving me even when I let the dinner burn. And there are others, who have become part of Greyhaven for a time or forever. They know who they are.

And you know who you are.

The moment when you discover that you are not the only one who reads "that stuff" is like falling in love. Reading Tolkien is not quite the passport to a secret society it was in the early 60s when I first discovered *The Lord of the Rings*, but far too many of us still come from families where nobody else reads, much less reads fantasy. We still want to go with Sam to see Elves and Magic. And I suspect that there's something in all of us that would happily

march off to save the world from Mordor — in the right company.

But what we have is the Mythopoeic Society, and these crazy meetings once a year where we can reaffirm that although the road may go ever on and on, we are not travelling it alone. And sometimes, like lightning linking earth and heaven, a flame of love darts among the banquet tables and lets us see each other with new eyes.

So despite its ups and down, the Society is still here, and every years someone volunteers to run the Conference, and the rest of us come to it.

That's what we do for love. ♥

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