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Mistress of Creation

Abstract

Discusses examples of women as creators (in the artistic and/or intellectual sense) and as inspiration for creative activity in others, in the works of Lewis, Williams, Sayers, and Murdoch.

Additional Keywords

Creativity—Women; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Women; Murdoch, Iris—Characters—Women; Sayers, Dorothy L.—Characters—Harriet Vane; Williams, Charles—Characters—Women; Women as creators

Mistress of Creation

Alice P. Kenney

Creation is the myth by which the human imagination makes visible to the conscious mind the experience of the origin of life, ideas and the universe itself. Mythological Creation stories derived from primitive folklore, Platonic philosophy and Judeo-Christian theology often represent matter by feminine bodies which masculine minds or souls impregnate with form. They do not envision the possibility that the minds of women might be quite as capable of creative insights as the minds of men. But as female scholars assert their equal rights in the world of thought and imagination, they are claiming woman's equal place as mistress of creation.

Readers can find numerous images of the woman scholar as creator in works by Charles Williams, Dorothy L. Sayers, C.S. Lewis and Iris Murdoch. Williams and Lewis have retold traditional myths, depicting feminine characters as active participants in, rather than passive recipients of, creative power. Dorothy L. Sayers and Iris Murdoch have explored the philosophy of artistic creation, showing it to be an intellectual and imaginative activity as characteristic of women as of men. All four have emphasized the importance of knowledge, intellectual discipline and imaginative insight in the development of creative communication and human understanding.

In *Place of the Lion*, Williams has reinterpreted a traditional Judeo-Christian Creation myth, showing supernatural primeval beasts suddenly erupting into a contemporary English country town. Anthony Durrant discovers his kinship with the mythic Adam as, in a tour de force of intellectual will, he disciplines the forces within himself that the beasts represent. His fiancée Damaris Tighe, a Ph.D. candidate who has allowed her intellectual passion to overmaster her, learns from him to restore the balance of intellect and emotion. Then, like Eve, she watches while Anthony controls the beasts by naming them and, enlightened by this vision, prepares to continue creative scholarship as his wife.

Williams reverses the roles of the sexes in *The Greater Trumps*, in which a pair of lovers enter the Great Dance in which all things are made. Here Henry Lee, who seeks to use occult knowledge to dominate the forces of Creation for selfish ends, overreaches himself and is swept off his feet by them. His fiancée Nancy Coningsby, whom he has taught to share his knowledge, then uses it independently to restrain the unleashed powers and restore the balance of nature. But, though he perceives her leading where in his pride he expected her to follow him, she envisions herself responding in love to his need of her.

The creative process attracted Williams' attention in the experience of Dante, whose occasional youthful meetings with Beatrice, remembered throughout his life, inspired his greatest poetry. Williams believed that these moments of emotional intensity, inspiring feelings of universal charity, were akin to those commonly experienced by many less articulate ordinary lovers. But Dante's powerful intellect made the memory of these moments of insight the focal point for organizing his lifetime accumulation of theological learning and secular knowledge. By thus revealing the lover's quest for his mistress as one manifestation of

the soul's search for God, Dante discovered a new dimension of imaginative understanding.

Beatrice, in Williams' estimation, always remained the Florentine girl whom the young Dante loved, transformed by the poet into a mythic figure whose intellect equalled his own. He delighted in her mind, as lovely as her body, appreciating intuitively truths he had learned by laborious study, so that Reason and Love reinforced each other. Her will, as fierce, hard and valiant as a man's, challenged him with hard questions and rewarded him for meeting the test with the ecstasy of her approbation. This interpretation of Dante's Beatrice, perhaps owing something to Shakespeare's, who met Benedick on equal terms, suggests promising opportunities for imaginative and creative women scholars.

Dorothy L. Sayers depicts the creative process in the mind of a woman in *Gaudy Night*, in which Harriet Vane encounters a block in writing a mystery novel. She cannot complete construction of a coherent piece of detection until Lord Peter Wimsey points out some basic inconsistencies in her characters' motivation. He is able to do this, not because his viewpoint is masculine, but because he has the objectivity of an outsider and a trained historian. Harriet's satisfaction in work well done restores her intellectual and emotional integrity, and Lord Peter's respect for her work enables them to meet on equal terms.

Dorothy L. Sayers discussed the theory behind the process of creating consistent characters in an essay explaining how she put together those in this novel. In her estimation, Harriet's method of inventing a series of actions and then trying to deduce appropriate motivations for them was essentially superficial. Her own preference was to select a mood she observed in herself and then ask what behavior would result if it became dominant. Thus, Harriet represents the creative and Peter the interpretive artist, but these traits could have been embodied quite as well in characters of either sex.

These theories were developed more fully in *The Mind of the Maker*, in which Dorothy L. Sayers compared the work of the artist to Divine creation. She divided the artist's task into Idea, Energy and Power, which she viewed as analogous to the operations of the three Persons of the Christian Trinity. Thus, the Father inspires the original concept of a work, the Son strengthens its working out in a particular medium, and the Holy Spirit helps it communicate with its audience. Though she drew her model from the methods of the professional artist, she believed that all human beings share with their Maker the capacity for creation.

Examples of how this theory functions in practice were taken from the works of authors whose ideas, skills and communication were well balanced - "equilateral trinities". Others whose ideas were too grandiose for their skills, or too meager to provide adequate material for their technical virtuosity, were described as "scalene trinities". She perceived a sacramental quality in work worth doing and well done, and urged the worker to respect the work and enjoy the task. Translating traditional ideas into contemporary

images, she observed that the artist finds the difficulties of life not a problem to be solved but a medium for creation.

Following Charles Williams, Dorothy L. Sayers finds notable example of human creativity in the work of Dante, whom she admires as a supreme storyteller. Her translation of the *Divine Comedy* matches Dante's technical skill, forwarding the narrative in fast-moving words, sounds and rhymes, reflecting the rhythms of popular speech. In her introductions and many interpretive essays, she points out the magnitude of his achievement in making his scholarly subject fascinating to the common reader. Thus she reminds Dante critics that their author wrote not only for them but for everyone, by drawing on her experience as a popular novelist.

Also like Williams, she sees Beatrice as a character in her own right, and interprets her words and actions from the viewpoint of another woman. She points out how Beatrice reveals an intense love for Dante by responding honestly to every facet of his character, including his faults and foibles. Her Florentine girl recalls the most familiar popular Italian feminine tradition, the prima donna, with compelling energy, a fierce temper, and glorious command of the coloratura register. But perhaps her most original contribution was to demonstrate in her own person that a woman's mind is capable of the creative power that Dante ascribed to Beatrice.

In *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, C.S. Lewis put a formal scholarly foundation under an approach to Milton's myth of Creation that Charles Williams had developed intuitively. Lewis points out that the poem is an epic in the tradition of Homer and Virgil, recounting an episode in the cosmic war between good and evil. In this context the fall of man, created in God's image, is an unfortunate incident whose proper conclusion is the Redemption, related in *Paradise Regained*. Human disobedience is seen as an excess of good qualities, reaching forward to seize anticipated knowledge before God intended, rather than as evidence of feminine frailty or innate depravity.

In this context, the character of Eve gains a stature as primeval mistress and mother of Creation, which Lewis believes Milton intended for her. Her subordination to Adam and his yielding to her temptation Lewis explains as rituals of sex play, which one of their failings is to take too seriously. Lewis points out that Eve's intelligence must not be underestimated, and that though she receives instruction from Adam, we might find her infinitely our superior in wisdom and grace. Thus he attempts to separate Milton's creative insight from the limitation of his period and personal experience, and to show his characters' significance for an age of equality.

About the same time, Lewis embodies these ideas in *Perelandra*, a retelling of the Miltonic Creation myth from the viewpoint of a Christian humanist philologist, Elwin Ransom. Ransom's experiences recapitulate the development of the human creature from birth to death and resurrection--his arrival on Perelandra imagines the moment of conception as seen from inside the ovum. His toilsome climb through the caverns inside the mountain likewise reflects the ascent of the soul through the various organic regions inside the human body. His quest achieved, the power of evil in one human being defeated by the will to good in another, he participates himself in the Great Dance.

The Eve in this Eden, the Green Lady, is a figure of wise innocence, understanding justly things within her experience and eager for new knowledge. This curiosity threatens to be her undoing when the evil Weston invades her world, since she has no basis for distinguishing the falsehood from the truth in his arguments. Ransom's debates with Weston give her an opportunity to observe the conflict of ideas, and his forcible removal of the danger shows her that good can act decisively. Thus she uses her intelligence to learn from her mistakes, and acquires the discrimination necessary to choose the good by her own will rather than blind obedience.

In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis describes his own efforts to seek emotional satisfaction by imaginative creation, and his eventual success through spiritual insight. Combining the temperament of a poet with the academic training of a philosopher and literary critic, he focused his life around intense experiences he called "Joy." Like Wordsworth, he regarded these experiences not only as desirable in themselves, but as valuable material for later deliberate work of the imagination. His own criticism consisted largely of description, and analysis of the language, images and structure by which authors evoked such imaginative responses from their audience.

In *Till We Have Faces*, Lewis uses the autobiographical mode to explore the consequences of a woman's doubt of the reality of such an experience. Orual, reenacting the myth of Cupid and Psyche, challenges her sister to prove the divinity of her mysterious lover, which plunges both girls into misery. Though Orual then develops great intellectual, military and political ability and achieves success as a philosopher-queen, these creative accomplishments fail to bring her satisfaction. Only as death approaches does she recognize the possessiveness of her love for her sister, and joyfully accept the beautiful, terrible reality of the god.

Iris Murdoch, though of the next generation and not a close personal acquaintance of these authors, considers similar questions in her fiction and philosophical writings. *A Severed Head*, for example, derives its title from a Celtic mythic symbol of power, and narrator Martin Lynch-Gibbon sees Honor Klein as a mysterious power figure. A military historian, he explores classics in her specialty of anthropology, and articulates his growing love for her as a metaphoric adoration of a mythological mother-warrior goddess. Then, aroused by her challenge, he thinks beyond his preoccupation with her power over his emotions, to perceive her objectively as a woman of ruthless intelligence, tenderness and humor.

In her essays on literature and philosophy, especially a recent study of Plato, Iris Murdoch develops a theory of art indebted to, but differing from, Plato's ideas. Like Plato, she perceives the artist's task as drawing form out of chaotic matter, driven by creative eros to strive toward unattainable transcendent reality. But, passing beyond Plato's dismissal of art as popular enchantment, she envisions it as a medium for communication of truth, more widely accessible at present than philosophy or religion. To accomplish this, the author must respect and love characters' independent existence as other people, demonstrated by attentive, accurate depiction of details of their everyday lives.

All these authors reinterpret traditional myths in the context of twentieth-century scientific knowledge, philosophical presupposition, and social conventions of equality between the sexes. Williams and Lewis retell stories of Adam and Eve, showing how, since the Redemption, women-and-men can train their God-given intellect to distinguish between good and evil. Lewis also depicts a woman, who, after making a wrong choice, learns by bitter experience how to discriminate among and place in proportion greater and lesser goods. Iris Murdoch shows this choice in ordinary human beings in a muddled world, who, often distracted by self-centered theories or feelings, must appreciate other people's separate existence.

Also significant in these authors are figures of women who, like mythic goddesses, possess and use the power to inspire creative activity in men. Williams shows Dante making Beatrice unforgettable in medieval Christian mythology, and Dorothy L. Sayers adds to her character many insights from the experience of a woman scholar. While Beatrice is beautiful, Orual is ugly, and attracts no devoted worshippers, but she wins the respect of loyal male counselors and the love of her people. Honor Klein, also ugly, appears a power symbol to Martin, and sometimes accepts this metaphor to communicate with him, but probably regards herself much less solemnly.

Sex appears in these modern myths as an important element of intellectual and emotional balance, good in its place, but only one of many creative processes. Both Damaris Tighe and Harriet Vane find that when they recognize their own and their lover's sexual needs, they also resolve difficulties in their intellectual work. Ransom discovers that in Perelandra gender is far more significant than sex, and Orual, choosing not to marry, directs her intense energy into creative statesmanship. Suprasexual images of creativity appear in Dorothy L. Sayers' analogy between the artist and the Trinity and in Iris Murdoch's references to Plato's primal Demiurge.

In the Romantic tradition, these authors describe the creative process as moments of intense insight developed by later conscious, deliberate effort - "emotion recollected in tranquility". Williams emphasizes the once-in-a-lifetime "Beatrician experience" described by Dante but possible "to anyone, while Lewis finds moments of "Joy" frequent and unanticipated. Dorothy L. Sayers sees the moment of conception, envisioning the final reality of the work, as only the beginning of thoughtful, ingenious craftsmanship which brings its own satisfaction. In Iris Murdoch's view, the ultimately impossible task of the artist is to elucidate the tension between the formless reality of life and the form imposed by the reality of abstract ideas.

The philosophic foundation of all of these theories of the creative process is English Idealism, in which reality lies in abstract ideas rather than in concrete material objects. For Williams and Dorothy L. Sayers, this point of view was part of the general intellectual climate taken for granted by educated people in early twentieth-century England. For Lewis, it was the subject of his undergraduate study and early teaching, and provided the structural framework for his literary, religious and imaginative thinking. In an era dominated by existentialism and empiricism, Iris Murdoch discovered that Plato's approach offered insights into moral questions of little interest to most professionals in philosophy.

By and large, these authors consider differences of sex insignificant in the functioning of the human mind and in the creative process. Lewis avers that abstract differences of gender are far more real than material ones of sex, and Dorothy L. Sayers, that anyone may possess creative ideas, energy and power. One reason why Lewis and Iris Murdoch succeed in creating believable first-person narrators of the opposite sex is that they focus on these characters' intellectual dilemmas. Dorothy L. Sayers observes that so far the principal myth makers have been men, while women have usually written of practical, everyday human relations, but does not regard this as inevitable.

When women as well as men develop their creative capacities, they may discover that collaboration improves their intellectual work and brings forth intense human relationships. For several women characters, resolution of their emotional conflicts with lovers removes obstacles to creative thinking, while some men receive from intelligent women challenge and inspiration. Iris Murdoch, who considers her principal subject to be love--the common name of the creative ~~eros~~--observes that authors know their characters because they love them. All these authors agree with her in defining love as intelligent recognition of, respect for, and rejoicing in the independent existence--the otherness--of other people.

This insight is particularly significant in an era when philosophy, religion, psychology and popular culture all emphasize specialized, self-centered concepts of personality. These authors not only demonstrate the inadequacy of such theories, as psychoanalysis in *A Severed Head*, but present a broader, deeper idea of human nature. Their characters, men and women, discover that unaided individual intellect and imagination carry them only so far, and successful creativity demands communication with kindred minds. Such communication can be created in many dimensions when participants complement each other in sex, as well as in intellectual imaginative and spiritual insights.

Though these authors demonstrate that women can have creative insights and participate in the creative process, they do not address some broader social implications. In a society where women traditionally do not initiate communication with men, a woman who has a "Beatrician experience" may find others unprepared to appreciate it. In practice women artists, including those among these authors, are learning to overcome this barrier and work with men to develop creative professional and personal relationships. These examples should encourage them to use such experiences in works of art, to offer other women examples to improve their capacity for creative communication.

These authors therefore demonstrate that traditional Creation myths can be reinterpreted to show how women participate actively in the origin of life, ideas and material things. They are quite as capable as men of experiencing creative insights, acquiring the skills of craftsmanship, and embodying their conceptions in significant works of art. As they work together with men of similar gifts, they may discover new dimensions of communication, and that creation itself is fundamentally an act of love. Womenscholars who direct their disciplined intellect and imagination to expression of such insights can lead other women to take their rightful place as mistresses of Creation.

continued on page 45

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ROCHESTER THE RENEWER continued from page 16
early literature, and lists only six "comparatively recent" authors who "made their mark on him." (p. 157) Bronte is not among them.
4. "On Fairy-stories," in *The Tolkien Reader*, p. 89
5. He suggests that "Tree and Leaf" may interest readers of LOTR because they were written in the same period; yet it seems clear that such interest comes not merely from the connection in time, but also from a concern with the same subject.
6. It is perhaps appropriate to say something at this point about Tennyson. If we agree to stretch the concept of the Byronic hero wide enough to include King Arthur, it may seem that that character accomplishes the union under discussion here; but, while Arthur, like any king, shares many messianic qualities with Christ, the deep structure of his myth (as Charles Williams saw) is that Arthur chooses not to be Christ-like, letting Galahad seek the Grail instead of going for it himself. At the allegorical level, of course, Tennyson's ideal knight is identified with the human soul at war with sense, not Christ at war with evil.

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* I omit references to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Holy Bible*.

MISTRESS OF CREATION continued from page 20 WORKSCITED

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MYTHOPOESIS continued from page 28

his subtlety, his creative genius, come precisely from his acceptance of and cooperation with the dark side of his own soul. That's why Andersen the fabulist is one of the great realists of literature.
(LN, p. 51)

Radical, basic, unqualified honesty and the willingness to see and accept the consequences of acts, of characters: these are the keys for unlocking the problems of evil characters, creatures born of shadow. These creatures may be part of the Sub-Creator, but they are not all of him, nor is he ruled by them.

It is the Sub-Creator's mind which gives life to the characters with which he peoples his world. The depth and range of personality which they exhibit is limited only by the will and honesty of their maker.