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The Hero's Education in Sacrificial Love: Thomas Covenant, Christ Figure

Abstract

Traces Thomas Covenant's development through six books, into a character capable of sacrificial love. Notes that despite frequent Christ-imagery associated with Covenant, the latter's sacrifice is of a different type.

Additional Keywords

Christ-figure; Christian imagery in *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*; Donaldson, Stephen R.—Characters—Thomas Covenant—as Christ-figure; Donaldson, Stephen R. *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*; Sacrificial love in *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*

The Hero's Education in Sacrificial Love

Thomas Covenant, Christ-figure

Matthew A. Fike

Although Stephen R. Donaldson has begun to receive critical attention, much remains to be said about the major themes of *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever*. Gordon E. Slethaug, for example, rightly identifies Covenant's need "to go beyond himself so that he can perceive beauty and experience love in the most hideous humans and devastated landscapes," but his treatment of the title character as victim and victimizer does not pursue the theme of love or the complementary relation of love and beauty (26). By exploring these issues in the six *Chronicles*, this essay charts Thomas Covenant's growth, and thus makes possible an extended view of the scope and quality of human love in Donaldson's universe.

In the first trilogy, an old man -- the Creator Himself -- gives Thomas Covenant a tract urging belief in the Land, and fortifies his body against a fatal allergic reaction to antivenin. And when Linden Avery comes to Haven Farm to meet Thomas Covenant in the second trilogy, she first encounters the same fetid-mouthed old man, who collapses by the road. After she revives him with CPR, he enigmatically counsels, "Ah, my daughter, do not fear.... You will not fail, however he may assail you. There is also love in the world.... Be true" (IV, 15).¹ Such intervention in human affairs, however eldritch or enigmatic, reveals not only that the Creator is concerned for His worlds but also that He is, like the Christian God, a God of love.

While He counsels Covenant and Linden on Earth, He cannot intervene after they are transported to the Land lest he break the Arch of Time, freeing Lord Foul to ravage the universe. The Creator cannot even incarnate Himself as he does at Haven Farm to counsel the Lords. He depends, as much as Foul, on fallible beings who retain free choice. Unlike our world, then, the Land seems void of actual grace -- God's sudden intervention for a specific purpose.² But the love of which the Creator speaks is a cardinal value in the Land, and Thomas Covenant, in his journey through the six *Chronicles*, matures toward self-sacrificial love whose paradigm is Christ's death on the cross.

Thomas Covenant's name, of course, directly implies the paradoxical nature of his presence in the Land. He is at once the doubting Thomas of the Gospel of John -- the original "unbeliever" -- and an embodiment of the term "covenant," first mentioned by a faith healer who quotes Revelation 21:6-8:

"To the thirsty I will give water without price from the fountain of the water of life. He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be his God and he shall be my son. But as for the cowardly,

the unbelievers, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

"Marvelous, marvelous Words of God. Here in one short passage we hear the two great messages of the Bible, the Law and the Gospel, the Old Covenant and the New." (III, 17)

A moment later he remarks, "Never mind murder, fornication, sorcery, idolatry, lies. We're all good people here." Ironically, Covenant himself is an unbeliever, polluted by leprosy, who has murdered, raped and lied. The hypocritical preacher has him thrown out -- the salvation he offers is selective, not for the likes of Covenant -- in contradiction of the words of Isaiah 55:1: "Ho, every one who thirsts, / come to the waters;" the words of Christ Himself in John 7:37: "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink" (italics mine);³ and the preacher's own claim that Christ "hung on the cross erected in the midst of misery and shame to pay the price of our sin for us" (III, 19). The preacher's words affirm the new covenant open to anyone, but his actions embody the spirit of the old.

Although Thomas Covenant rejects, and is in a sense rejected by, religious doctrine, he nevertheless journeys, in a Land touched by God's hand since the creation, toward the meaning of his name. The word covenant incorporates three Greek concepts: *mesites*, mediator, intermediary, guarantor; *engyos*, guarantor; and *diatheke*, irrevocable decision (*The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 365-73). Though reluctantly at first, Thomas Covenant clearly mediates between the Creator and the Land, between the Creator and Foul, between Foul and the Land, and finally between Foul and the Arch of Time, as Christ Himself mediates between God and man. And the Lords of Revelstone clearly view him as the possible guarantor of their deliverance from Foul, as Christ guarantees salvation. The word *engyos*, in suggesting legal obligation carried out even at the hazard of one's life (*New International Dictionary*, 372), approaches the following spirit of *diatheke*:

A prerequisite of its effectiveness before the law is the death of the disposer. Hence *diatheke* must be clearly distinguished from *syntheke*, an agreement. In the latter two partners engaged in common activity accept reciprocal obligations. *Diatheke* is found only once with this meaning.... Elsewhere it always means a one-sided action. (*New International Dictionary*, 365)

A covenant, then, involves self-sacrifice, which is the essence of the divinely enabled agapic love Christ embodies on the cross. Christ's sacrifice seals the new covenant (*A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, 318). To such sacrificial love Thomas Covenant matures, though his death does not participate in the divine.

Covenant's journey, however, begins with *eros*, not as the Platonic desire for transcendent beauty, but as the love of the earthly beautiful for the perceiver's own sake, particularly the desire for sexual union with a woman. In the *Chronicles* Covenant's *eros* manifests itself in two main areas: passion and beauty.

As *Lord Foul's Bane* opens, Thomas Covenant finds himself alone and impotent, longing for the passionate communion he lost when his wife Joan divorced him. A leper, he struggles to deny the past and the body, and "to crush out his imagination... a faculty which could envision Joan, joy, health" (I, 20). To overcome his genuine need for human love he steels himself against all reminders of his erstwhile erotic relationship in a denial of passion itself. But despite concretizing his denial of *eros* in actions like burning his best seller, "an inane piece of self-congratulation" (V, 327), which arises from and reflects the rapture of his early marriage, the revitalization of his leprous nerves in the Land takes him quite by surprise. Healed by hurtloam and awash with sensation, he rapes Lena -- the ultimate crime of passion and self-possession. In addition, he visits The Door in *The Illearth War*, a night club described "as if he were entering the first circle of (Dante's) hell," where lust abides (II, 17). Singer Susie Thurston churns out in terrible verse the same shallow denial of love that he received from Joan:

Let go my heart --
Your love makes me look small to
myself.
Now, I don't want to give you any
hurt,
But what I feel is part of myself:
What you want turns what I've got to
dirt --
So let go of my heart.
(II, 22)

The song burns him, and he makes for the door, determined to deny the hurt and loss that the song evokes in him.

Covenant's appreciation of beauty is a second mark of *eros*. Lena sings:

Something there is in beauty
which grows in the soul of the
beholder
like a flower:
fragile --
for many are the blights
which may waste
the beauty
or the beholder --
and imperishable --
for the beauty may die,
or the beholder may die,

or the world may die,
but the soul in which the flower
grows
survives.
(I, 57)

In other words, the soul which appreciates beauty -- Covenant's soul -- survives the heart-break of beauty's passing. At this point in the narrative he would deny that he has such a soul, but later the Land's beauty and health are palpable to him: "All the colors -- the trees, the heather, and bracken, the *alanthas*, the flowers, and the infinite azure sky -- were vibrant with the eagerness of spring, lush and exuberant rebirth of the world (I, 117). Covenant is equally struck by the beauty of Andelain, described as "the heart-healing richness of the Land" (I, 149), "the bright Earth jewel of Andelain" (II, 54), and "priceless Andelain, the beauty of life" (I, 399). There, unable to act, he watches the ur-viles destroy the Wraiths which "had been so beautiful" (I, 169). Earlier, when he asks why the Hirebrand of Soaring Woodhelve trusts him, the Hirebrand replies, as if to confirm the implication of Lena's song, "You are a man who knows the value of beauty" (I, 147). In the second trilogy, with a more developed view of the Land and himself, he explains to Linden why he cared so much for the Land during his earlier visits: "The Land was incredibly beautiful. And the way the people loved it, served it -- that was beautiful, too. Lepers," he concluded mordantly, 'are susceptible to beauty'" (IV, 83-84).

Passion and appreciation of beauty enable and define Covenant's first victory over Foul. Passion not only corresponds with lust but also enables power. In *The Power That Preserves*, Covenant and High Lord Mhoram, independently of each other, discover the link between passion and power. For ages the Oath of Peace, designed to restrain violent emotion that could conduce to despair and Desecration, handicapped the Lords' ability to understand Kevin's Lore, simply because it denied the very key to the Seven Wards: passion itself. Armed with his new understanding, Mhoram awakens Loric's krill and slays the Giant raver whose army assaults Revelstone. Meanwhile, Covenant defeats Foul, a victory motivated by the Land's beauty and enabled by passion. When Foul asks why Covenant refuses the offer of health, mastery and friendship, he replies, "Because I love the Land" (III, 454). When Foul torments him with a vision in which his friends appear "mortally ill, rife and hideous with leprosy," he erupts. "Fury at their travail spouted up in him like lava. Volcanic anger, so long buried under the weight of his complex ordeal, sent livid, fiery passion geysering into the void... Foul exalted Covenant" (III, 459). When he touches the Illearth Stone, wild magic, rising from his passion, burst from his ring:

The wild magic was passionate and unfathomable, as high as Time and as deep as Earth -- raw power limited only by the limits of his will. And his will was growing, raising its head, blossoming on the rich sap of rage. Moment by moment, he was becoming equal to the Despiser's attack.
(III, 462)

The passion that defines and limits Covenant's love enables his initial victory. True to the nature of *eros*, it is a selfish act, motivated by the beautiful. Says Covenant, "I'm going to do it for myself. So that I can at least believe in me before I lose my mind altogether" (III, 135). Thus, in the first trilogy, Covenant journeys from passionate abuse of the beautiful in the rape of Lena to passionate desire for beauty's preservation.

Though still far from the pinnacle of sacrificial love, Covenant learns *philia*, a love which does not exclude but enlarges and enriches *eros*. *Philia* is essentially selfless "social love, affection of friends," and sometimes suggests warmth and endearment (*Theological Word Book*, 133-34). The term also embraces qualities such as courtesy, goodwill, forbearance, honesty and greatheartedness, which nurture friendship.

When Lord Foul's *Bane* opens, Covenant's leprosy separates him from the townspeople; his denial of joy and his conviction that he is outcast and unclean create a "moral solitude" as well (I, 22). He finds that his bills are paid for him and that groceries are delivered without his request. Donaldson speculates, "if he did not resist this trend, he would soon have no reason at all to go among his fellow human beings" (I, 4). In a dream the townspeople torment him with his isolation:

"You are dead. Without the community, you can't live. Life is in the community, and you have no community. You can't live if no one cares.

"... Take him to the hospital. Heal him. There is only one good answer to death. Heal him and throw him out." (I, 191)

Covenant's "need for people became unendurable," driving him to attend the faith healing service (III, 13). And so with his visit to The Door: while the bar radiates all the lust of the first circle of Dante's hell, it also provides companionship, sordid but genuine. In the same manner, Covenant's first victory over Foul is not only the apotheosis of his passion for the Land's beauty but also the product of Foamfollower's greatheartedness and a sign of the companionable love they share. Instead of trying to kill Foul, an action he realizes would make him a despoiler of Foul's image, he asks the Giant to laugh. Soon the wraiths of the old Lords laugh along with him, and their laughter reduces Foul's form to nothingness. Unknowingly Covenant thus acts on Lord Osondrea's earlier words to the Giant: "When many matters press you, consider friendship first!" (I, 265).

In the first trilogy part of what makes Covenant an isolator -- his acerbic personality -- is partly cast off in favor of forbearance, which is particularly noteworthy in several episodes. "He had lived without tact or humor for such a long time. But he had promised to be forbearing" (I, 382). Consequently, he speaks gently to Manethrall Lithe in Book I, and he is later kind to the insane Lena in Book III. Even more to the point, he refuses Elena's offer of marriage. Although she is beautiful and he desires her, he appreciates her

qualities without succumbing to lust. Instead he loves her for what she is: his daughter and his companion. But though his actions suggest *philia*, his motivation bears the selfishness of *eros*. He manipulates her, as he finally admits just before Amok leads them to the Power of Command: "I watched you and helped you so that when you got here you would look exactly like that -- so you would challenge Foul yourself without stopping to think about what you're doing -- so that whatever happens to the Land would be your fault instead of mine. So that I could escape!" (II, 494).

For Donaldson, *eros* and *philia* are not mutually exclusive, and nowhere are they more complementary than in Covenant's relationship with Linden Avery. "He was a hungry man who had at last tasted the aliment for which his soul craved" (V, 381); namely, "a living love. For as long as I can get it" (VI, 275). He deceives her, however, by not telling her that experiences in the Land do not affect one's physical condition in our own world. In the second trilogy, he lies with a knife in his chest in the woods near Haven Farm, and he cannot return to his body without rending the Arch of Time. In effect, he allows her to love a dead man, selfishly savoring her love while he still can, because he does not want to return to "the hungry and unassuaged life he had lived before he had found Linden's love" (VI, 15). But as he finally explains himself to Elena, so he also explains the true nature of his condition to Linden, and his honesty not only marks, in each case, the *philia* he achieves throughout the six *Chronicles* but also ultimately heightens the value of his lovemaking with Linden -- they love that well which they must leave ere long.

Covenant's death, in fact, fulfills his walk through the Land, for in it he achieves a self-sacrificial love akin to *agape*. Paul says of *agape*, "Love does not insist on its own way" (I Cor. 13:5); and "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Thus it is selfless love of the unlovable, involving "total self-surrender," made possible by the participation of our love in Christ's (*Catholic Encyclopedia* VIII, 1044). *Agape*, then, is not only the love which compels Christ to the cross (*A Handbook of Christian Theology*, 97) and which He embodies in his death, but also the selfless sacrificial love in which one may participate through His sacrifice.

Thomas Covenant's two deaths -- the first in the woods near Haven Farm when he dies in Joan's place; the second in Kiril Threndor when Foul impales him with wild magic -- capture the spirit but not the essence of *agape*. Each death is self-sacrificial, but neither is enabled by divine love. The Lords are ambivalent even about the Creator's existence. Mhoram, for example, remarks that "we do not know a Creator lives. Our only lore of such a being comes from the most shadowy reaches of our oldest legends. We know the Despoiler. But the Creator we do not know" (I, 292). Tamarantha offers a Blakian objection, "Of course the Creator lives... there can be no Despoite without Creation" (I, 293). Whether or not the Creator exists, the people of the Land do not have a personal rela-

tionship with him: "Worship?" Prothall seemed puzzled. "The word is obscure to me" (I, 345). Covenant himself makes the definitive denial of divine grace: "Creators are the most helpless people alive. They have to work through unsufferable -- they have to work through tools as blunt and misbegotten and useless as myself" (III, 130). Ultimately, Covenant's death in the Land serves the Creator's purpose, but the Creator does not empower or participate in Covenant's sacrifice.

Although Covenant is appalled by their self-sacrifice, people throughout the *Chronicles* willingly lay down their lives for him and bear his burdens. Lens stays silent about the rape until Atiaran and Covenant have begun their journey. Foamfollower exhausts himself to draw power from the boat on Covenant's first journey to Revelstone. A Ranyhyn allows itself to be pierced by a spear intended for Covenant. *Kelenbrabanai*, the legendary Father of Horses, naively sacrifices himself to Foul in hopes of stopping a war. A healer takes Covenant's pain, wounds and madness upon herself. Melma places herself between the company and the na-Mhoram's *Grim*. Seadreamer places himself between Covenant and the One Tree. And the Bloodguard continually serve the Lords, sometimes for centuries, until death consummates their service.

Three sacrifices stand out from the rest. First, of course, Foamfollower allows himself to be immolated in Covenant's conflagration, a sacrifice that assures the Land's continued health. Hamako, the Stonedowner who has dedicated his life to the Waynhim, defeats an *arghule* which bears a *croyel* on his back. Linden rails at the needless loss of Hamako's life, but Covenant replies, "You let him achieve the meaning of his own life" (VI, 152). And Caer-Caveral (the former Hile Troy) allows Sunder to strike him with the *krill*, a sacrifice which breaks the Law of Life, allowing not only Hollian's rejuvenation but also Covenant's final victory over Foul. In each case, true to the meaning of the word *covenant* which involves the death of the disposer, a character finds in death the meaning of his life.

Though Covenant does not realize it, he is himself moving toward a sacrificial death. As Christ dies to overcome sin, Covenant will die to overcome Foul. Throughout the *Chronicles*, in fact, Donaldson describes Covenant by allusion to Christ's life and crucifixion. Christ's return is prophesied in Revelation, and the return of Berek Halfhand, whom Covenant resembles, is a favorite legend in the Land. People wanted Christ to be a martial savior, and the Land expects Covenant to wield his power for its benefit: "These people [Mithil Stonedowners] wanted him to be a hero" (I, 83). Christ is associated with the cross; Covenant, with Loric's *krill*, which "stood in the dirt like a small cross" (VI, 381), but ultimately he achieves, willing sacrifice, "deliberate acquiescence to death" (VI, 401).

Donaldson frequently describes Covenant's physical condition with imagery of the crucifixion. At the end of *Lord Foul's Bane* his doctor draws a connection between the crucifixion and leprosy:

"It must be hell to be a leper," he said rapidly. "I'm trying to understand. It's like -- I studied in Heidelberg, years ago, and while I was there I saw a lot of medieval art. Especially religious art. Being a leper reminds me of statues of the Crucifixion made during the Middle Ages. There is Christ on the Cross, and his features -- his body, even his face -- are portrayed so blandly that the figure is unrecognizable. It could be anyone, man or woman. But the wounds -- the nails in the hands and feet, the spear in the side, the crown of thorns -- are carved and even painted in incredibly vivid detail. You would think the artist crucified his model to get that kind of realism."

"Being a leper must be like that." (I, 473-74)

When Covenant awakens on Easter morning at the end of *The Power That Preserves*, "His right wrist was also tied, so that he lay in the bed as if he had been crucified" (III, 478). When he saves the little girl who has been bitten by a timber rattler, "Despite the nails of pain which crucified him, he lurched onward" (III, 56). His condition in the Land is described in similar terms. When he frowns "he wore the healing of his forehead like a crown of thorns" (II, 79). Later "the pain in his ankle held him down as if his foot had been nailed to the ground" (III, 223). Covenant remembers how Marid bit him: "Marid had nailed venom between the bones of Covenant's forearms, crucifying him to the fate Lord Foul had prepared for him" (VI, 184). In Seareach, the sight of the Giant Raver's slaying "pierced Covenant's eyes, impaled his vision and his mind like the nails of crucifixion" (IV, 483). When the *Elohim* touches him to unlock the location of the One Tree, "Covenant knelt with the power blazing from his forehead as if he were being crucified by nails of brainfire" (V, 144). In the Cavern of the One Tree, "Covenant stood with his arms spread like a crucifixion" (V, 454). With his power alight, he sends Linden back to the woods by Haven Farm where "He lay as if he had been crucified on the stone" (V, 460).

These descriptions of Covenant's physical condition suggest that his two deaths in some way capture the spirit of Christ's. Dr. Berenford tells Linden at the end of Book VI what the fanatics mistakenly thought when Covenant offered himself in Joan's place: "When he was forced to offer himself for sacrifice, the whole world would be purged of sin" (VI, 474). While the Land is still not purged of Foul at the end of *White Gold Wielder*, Covenant's sacrifice greatly reduces him. To Linden's horror, Covenant hands Foul his white gold wedding ring and then manipulates Foul into killing him. Foul builds up a blast to rive the Arch of Time and sends it upward through Mount Thunder, but somewhere inside the mountain the power is shattered by Thomas Covenant, "A man who had placed himself between Lord Foul and the Arch of Time" (VI, 449). When his wrath becomes visible in the cavern, instead of fighting as he had in his earlier victory, Covenant says, "I wouldn't dream of fighting you" (VI, 450). He allows Foul to fire

wild magic at him: "Blast after blast, he absorbed the power of Despair and fire and became stronger. Surrendering to their savagery, he transcended them" (VI, 451). In other words, as Christ takes upon his head the sins of all men, Covenant absorbs hatred and fury so that Foul goes out like a light --defeated but not destroyed.

Yet Covenant is not Christ. He "could not bear to be treated as if he were some kind of savior; he could not love with such an image of himself" (IV, 75). Although his sacrifice fulfills the meaning of his name and expresses his *agape*-like love for a once beautiful Land where even Andelain has not escaped the blight of the Sunbane, his ultimate act is not motivated by participation in divine love, and it is not totally selfless. Rather, in his two deaths he seeks to expiate his guilt: for being a leper, his crime against Joan; and for all the deaths he has caused in the Land. Whereas Christ pays Mankind's debt of sin, Covenant pays his own. But in showing that on his own one can achieve self-sacrifice, a quality of love thought possible only through divine grace, Thomas Covenant's death fulfills the covenant best expressed by Atiaran: it is the responsibility of the living to justify the sacrifices of the dead (III, 42).

Notes

- ¹ All quotations are from Stephen R. Donaldson, *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever*, Books I-VI (new York: Ballantine Books):



FRODO ON THE GREAT RIVER

Paulo
Di Sante 1988

Lord Foul's Bane, The Illearth War, The Power that Preserves (1977); *The Wounded Land* (1980), *The One Tree* (1982), *White Gold Wielder* (1983).

- ² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia2ae Q III Art. 2.
- ³ Biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.
- ⁴ Slethaug writes, "When he is offered compassion by Lena, he has grown so used to feelings of victimization and violence that he beats and rapes her..." (25). But as Covenant himself explains, the rape is an uncontrollable response not to victimization but to beauty and sensation: "After my leprosy was diagnosed, and Joan divorced me, I was impotent for a year. Then I came here. Something I couldn't understand was happening. The Land was healing parts of me that had been dead so long I'd forgotten I had them. And Lena --' The pang of her stung him like an acid. 'She was so beautiful. I still have nightmares about it. The first night -- It was too much for me. Lepers aren't supposed to be potent'" (IV, 91)

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