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Abstract

Sees Lilith as important influence on Lewis's *Till We Have Faces*, especially the "spiritual implications of the sense of place."

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S. *Till We Have Faces*; MacDonald, George. *Lilith*—Influence on *Till We Have Faces*; Sense of place

Neither Here Nor There:

The Spirit of Place in George MacDonald's *Lilith* and Lewis' *Till We Have Faces*

Kath Filmer

Mythopoeic Literature, especially Science Fiction and Fantasy, is often concerned with the creation of new worlds. These new worlds are not created *ex nihilo*, however; rather, they are put together out of specially selected elements of the real world as it is perceived by the authors of such books. Sometimes the new world does not really matter much; it is merely a background for a fairly traditional love story or adventure yarn, with metallic Plutonians to battle instead of Indians or bank robbers. In such instances, however, the novel is hardly mythopoeic — that is, it lacks the metaphorical quality that, in mythopoeic literature, touches the reader's imagination in a particular way — rather as the paint on the back of a mirror does. It obscures some things from our vision in order to reflect back at us in discomforting clarity a new vision of ourselves.

George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis are masters of the mythopoeic, and each has invested his real myth-making power in his final work of fantasy. Strangely enough, neither MacDonald's *Lilith* nor Lewis' *Till We Have Faces* was popular after its publication; indeed, readers have difficulty with them yet. I have chosen to discuss them today because it is obvious that *Lilith* has influenced *Till We Have Faces* a great deal, and because the legacy MacDonald left to Lewis in *Lilith* was concerned with the spiritual implications of the sense of place, implications Lewis recognized and exploited when he re-wrote the myths which intertwine in *Till We Have Faces*.

There is no doubt that Lewis believed the spirit of place to be an integral part of mythic narrative: "What's the use," he once asked, "for locating one's story on Mars unless 'Martianity' is through and through used . . . emotionally as well as logically?" (CSL, letter 1954). And what I shall argue in this paper is that the spirit of place is used, through and through, in these two novels; and that without it the imaginative and emotional appeals they make to readers would be lost. For only by seeing ourselves in these strange worlds of half-light and of mirrors can we catch a glimpse of that hidden country which is neither "here" in the mundane world, nor "there" in some other world, but which is the place of the spirit within ourselves.

Let me begin with *Lilith* — the most powerful fantasy from MacDonald's pen and the most pervasive influence on *Till We Have Faces*. There are several components of the notion of "place" in *Lilith* and the emphasis shifts in the course of the novel from the notion of "a real world" off mundanity to the emergence from phantasy and shadow of the solid reality of the world of the spirit. "Place" consists at first, then, of the mundane world, at Mr Vane's

inherited house with its large library where the spiritual first intrudes in the person of a shape-shifting man/bird, Mr Raven. But the "door" to the world of the spirit is really the ancient book which has been dissected diagonally so that it protrudes as a kind of authentic decoration for a door disguised by empty bookspines so that the library bookshelves seem to have no interruption. Already in the mundane world the notion of illusion has been raised; and throughout the book the question provokes the reader: which of the two worlds to which the Raven and Mr Vane have access is the real world, and which is the illusion?

The world into which Mr Vane follows the Raven Librarian via the mirror in the attic, is hardly an attractive one. As Mr Vane records,

I saw before me a wild country, broken and heathy. Desolate hills of no great height, but somehow of strange appearance, occupied the middle distance; along the horizon stretched the tops of a far-off mountain range; nearest me lay a tract of moorland, flat and melancholy. (11)

The immediate effect upon Mr Vane of this new country in which he finds himself is to make him ponder the issue of who he is — an issue which perplexes him:

I became at once aware that I could give.. no notion of who I was. Indeed, who was I? It would be no answer to say I was who! Then I understood that I did not know myself, did not know what I was, had no grounds on which to determine that I was one and not another. As for the name I went by in my own world, I had forgotten it, and did not care to recall it, for it meant nothing and what it might be was plainly of no consequence here. I had indeed almost forgotten that there it was a custom for everybody to have a name! (14)

This disorientation of identity and its association with the unfamiliar world into which Mr Vane has wandered continues throughout the novel. The issue at stake is Mr Vane's spiritual individuation; but his journey towards individuation is inextricably bound up with the sense of place. For as the Raven points out, Mr Vane's house is the seat of his identity — it is the house he has inherited because of his family inheritance and, ironically, because of his name; but at the same time, that same house, rather than providing safety, security and identity now provides only doorways and windows into the incalculable other-world where he has no name. Indeed, despite Mr Vane's objection (based on a well-known law of physics) that "Two objects . . . cannot exist in the same place at the same time" (23), MacDonald evokes a rather sophisticated notion of relativity — a multidimensional universe where existence and identity are not absolute but relative to the

dimension in which they are located. Thus it is August in Mr Vane's home world, not the season for the hawthorn-tree to blossom; while in the new world, the hawthorn is in full flower. The Raven simply answers Vane's protestations with the words, "The season for the hawthorn to blossom... is when the hawthorn blossoms" (24). We learn that the new world not only has its own laws, but that those laws work upon their own logic and make their own demands upon the human who ventures there.

The demand made upon Mr Vane by the Raven is that he should die, since this new place is the place of death. He is shown the couches of those who sleep in the death which Mr Raven claims is the gateway to real life, but Vane turns from the scene in fear, only to find himself back in his own library. There he notices a book has been misplaced; it is his father's diary, and through reading it, he is again drawn into a confrontation with the world of the Raven, with the notion of dimensions beyond those immediately accessible to human senses, "some of them concerned with powers which were indeed in us, but of which as yet we know absolutely nothing" (41). This time, of course, the confrontation Mr Vane experiences is vicarious: that of his father, through the diary; it is suddenly apparent to him that he has never been acquainted with the circumstances of his father's death. Perhaps, Mr Vane reasons, the Raven can throw light upon this mystery too; and with his curiosity roused and a sense of shame at his craven flight from the Raven's world also activated, Mr Vane returns to the mirror in his attic and again enters the other world.

Once in, Mr Vane's notions of identity are again challenged, this time by his learning that his father and great grandfathers for several generations are in the Raven's cemetery. His grandfather lives a kind of life-in-death existence, refusing to die — the kind of existence that Mr Vane chooses for himself. When Vane complains that he cannot understand the Raven's account of his ancestors, the Raven simply replies:

"Naturally not. Neither do I understand you; I can read neither your heart nor your face. When my wife and I do not understand our children, it is because there is not enough of [their hearts or their faces] to be understood..." (45).

Thus Mr Vane, lacking both heart and face (images of identity), is clearly an Undead soul—the soul which grasps its Self to itself, unwilling to put the Self to death in order to live "in newness of life" — that is, in the individuated and redeemed state of one who has found life in the losing of it. For that great paradox is at the heart of the Christian Gospels, and so important is it that Christ's dictum is cited five times. This notion of riddle and paradox is intrinsic to the novel, to the sense of place which wavers between the real and the unreal, and to the human condition once it is seen in relation to other dimensions of the universe which differ from those we call "normal". Thus Mr Vane, thoroughly confused by, protests:

"Enigma treading on enigma!" I exclaimed, "I did not come here to be asked riddles." "No, but you came, and found the riddles waiting for you! Indeed, you are yourself the only riddle. What you call riddles are truths, and seem riddles because you are not true." "Worse and worse!" I cried. "And you must answer the riddles!" He continued. "They will go on asking themselves until you understand yourself. The universe is a riddle trying to get out, and you are holding your door hard against it" (43).

The other world into which Mr Vane has come is to him certainly an enigmatic one, and Mr Vane's attempt to solve the riddles with which he is confronted lead him into great difficulties; the character Orual in C.S. Lewis' *Till We Have Faces* is faced by similar difficulties in coming to terms with existence in the imaginary kingdom of Glome.

Though Glome is ostensibly set in the world of mundane reality, it is nevertheless a fantastical place of the same kind as MacDonald's Other-World. The country is called Glome, a near homophone for "Gloom" which also calls to mind the twilight world of the Scots "gloaming". Glome is a barbaric and gloomy place where dark religion dominates the people and the prevailing color tones are grey. Like MacDonald's Other-world, it too is a world of the spirit and the same demands are made upon Orual as are made upon Mr Vane; Orual must also die to the Self in order to become a fully individuated, redeemed human being.

Glome is also a world of riddles and of paradoxes. Orual's younger, more beautiful sister Psyche, has become at once the sacrifice to, and the bride of, a god who is both a devouring brute, and a loving husband. Orual has tried to disprove Psyche's experiences by ridicule and emotional blackmail. In a moment of vision, Orual is left with her doubts, her anger and her bitterness. In her diary, an open letter to the Greeks, she writes:

And now, you who read, give judgement. That moment when I either saw or thought I saw the House — does it tell against the gods or against me? Would they (if they answered) make it a part of their defence? — say it was a sign, a hint, beckoning me to answer the riddle one way rather than the other? I'll not grant them that. What is the use of a sign which is itself only another riddle? (142).

The paradoxes and riddles of Glome are concerned with the tension between seemingly concrete mundanity and the world of vision and the spirit. Thus the commerce and trade of Glome is subject to the laws of the dark and bloody religion of its goddess Ungit, while the religion itself is balanced by the practical and prosaic attitude of Orual's chief soldier Bardia and by the Stoic skepticism of her Greek friend and Counsellor, the Fox. Bardia responds to Orual's questions about the gods in a typically pragmatic way:

"Lady", says he, "it's not my way to say more than I can help of gods and divine matters. I'm not impious. I wouldn't eat with my left hand, or lie with my wife when the moon's full, or slit open a pigeon to clean with an iron knife, or do anything else that's unchancy and profane,

even if the King himself were to bid me. And as for sacrifices, I've always done all that can be expected of a man on my pay. But for anything more—I think the less Bardia meddles with the gods, the less they'll meddle with Bardia" (144).

Such an attitude is a common one among human beings. It seems safer, in the long run, not to dabble too deeply in the things of the spirit. It is not, however, Orual's way. She has a grievance against the gods. She has been born ugly; and her youngest sister, upon whom she has doted, has been taken from her as an offering to the gods. Worse still, that sister, Psyche, has preferred the God of the Grey Mountain to Orual herself; and for all these things, Orual demands an answer. Her book begins boldly:

I will accuse the gods; especially the god who lives on the Grey Mountain. That is, I will tell all he has done to me from the very beginning as if I were making my complaint of him before a judge! But there is no judge between gods and men, and the god of the mountain will not answer me (11).

The whole of the novel, then, is Orual's complaint to the gods, but it is a complaint which reveals progressively Orual's obsession with herself, her need to possess and dominate all those who love her; in short, her refusal to die. Thus, once Orual becomes aware of herself as one who devours those whom she loves, she attempts suicide, only to hear the voice of a god raised in warning to her.

"Do not do it," said the god. "You cannot escape Ungit by going to the deadlands, for she is there also. Die before you die. There is no chance after" (291).

Before confronting death, however, Orual is made to reflect upon her own attempts at loving. She tries to change her ugly soul into a fair one, but learns to her dismay that she can no more mend her soul than change her face (292-93). Mr Vane learns a similar lesson when his attempts to help the Little Ones in the forest of the Otherworld do nothing to improve their lot, and his ill-placed compassion for the comatose woman he finds results in his bringing to life the Little Ones' most feared enemy, Lilith. And it is in the figures of the goddesses, Ungit of Glome and Lilith of the Otherworld, that the sense of place in these two novels is most powerful, since the goddesses are inextricably linked with the respective places and with those who inhabit them.

Lilith is Adam's first wife, a half-angel, half-vampire, who has chosen not to die and whose rule has created a wasteland of the city of Bulika where she rules on the proceeds of a commerce in gems and minerals. Bulika is a waterless and barren city; it is part of the realm of the Undead of whom Lilith is the Queen. When Mr Vane comes to the Otherworld and encounters Lilith, he is forced to recognize himself in Lilith and Lilith in himself. Only when Lilith, and the Lilith part of himself, consent to die can the Otherworld awake to a bright Resurrection morning and become a garden of great beauty and grandeur. Then the redeemed and individuated spirit of Mr Vane is taken to the city on the mountain, where the Little

Ones who accompany him are welcomed by a mighty angel. For this is Heaven; a heaven Mr Vane does not enter, for even as he begins his final ascent, he finds himself in his own house in the mundane world, back in his own library. He is left, however, with some riddles; for during his time in the Otherworld, it and its inhabitants have become more real to him than the mundanity he has left behind. Is this world, then, the dream, and the Otherworld, the world of Spirit, the one of which we should become more aware and to which we should acknowledge more responsibility? MacDonald does not presume to tell us so, but has Mr Vane ponder at the end of the novel:

...I never dream now. It may be, notwithstanding, that, when most awake, I am only dreaming the more! But when I wake at last into that life which, as a mother her child, carries this life in its bosom, I shall know that I wake, and shall doubt no more (252).

Ungit is related to MacDonald's Lilith figure in that Ungit represents the flawed female aspect of Nature, the Self which will not die and which demands worship, and yet which has in it the capacity for good. Both Lilith and Ungit represent, in Jungian terms, the dark Anima, the devouring female image which must be faced before individuation and wholeness can be achieved. Both Lewis and MacDonald use Jungian images in their fantastical worlds—mirrors, veils and visions are featured in both, so that it is clear that for both the realms of the mind have immediate access to those of the spirit.

Ungit also seems to have been modelled on the Armenian goddess Anahit, a goddess who was adopted into the pantheon of Slavic mythology. Anahit was identified by the Slavs with Aphrodite as the Greek influence in that region grew—and it seems that Glome is geographically located in a Slavic area. But further light may be shed on Ungit by examining C.S. Lewis' own reading of *Lilith*. In letters to his friend, Arthur Greeves, Lewis wrote:

"Lilith is the real ideal but somehow spoiled: she is not primarily a sexual symbol, but includes the characteristic female abuse of sex, which is love of power . . .

[Mr Vane represents] the unconverted soul [who] only succeeds at first in *waking* (at the price of its own blood) and then in becoming the tool of Lilith... He finds himself the jailer of Lilith: i.e. he is not living in the state of tension with the evil thing inside him . . . until he (or Lilith — the Lilith-part of him) at last repents . . . and consents to die (xxviii — end)" (TST).

While I think Lewis is quite wrong in one aspect of *Lilith*—she is most definitely a sexual figure as the explicit imagery associated with the Vampire-attacks she makes on Mr Vane makes clear—I agree that Lilith represents power and self-worship, as indeed so do Orual and Mr Vane. For the love of power is not a uniquely female characteristic as the misogynist Lewis would have us believe. The dark *anima* is present in both males and females, and the lust for power is surely a trait shared by both sexes. What is quite clear though is that the Lilith-image has been appropriated by Lewis for his appeal to an older mythology; he retains the vampire image but returns

it to its archetypal source in the myth of the nature of goddess and the Vagina Dentata. But both Lilith and Ungit are manifestation of the dark Anima of every personality, and both Mr Vane and Orual are made to confront the Anima-self before they can each achieve individuation.

Thus Orual, too, is taken in dreams and visions through tasks she must perform in order to lose herself in the service of others. Her previous demands of others have been that she should gorge herself on their strength; it is only after Bardia has died in her service that his wife finds courage to accuse Orual of his slow murder:

"I know, that your queenship drank up his blood year by year and ate out his life...

...
Faugh! You're full fed. Gloated with other men's lives;



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women's too, Bardia's; mine; the Fox's; your sister's; both your sisters" (274-75).

Again Orual must confront the Ungit part of herself: "I am Ungit". From this image of herself, the gods—or rather, the God of the Grey Mountain, for there is only one god in many guises—have brought Orual to the point of death, to the point where she can say to Psyche,

"Oh, Psyche, oh, goddess . . . Never again will I call you mine; but all there is of me shall be yours . . ." (317).

And the Wasteland of Orual's spiritual experience is transformed by the appearance of the god. "You also are Psyche", he tells Orual; she has become the true Psyche, the individuated and redeemed human soul. Yet, as with Mr Vane, Orual too is taken, at the moment of transcendence, back to the mundane reality of Glome.

The return to mundane reality in both novels has particular significance (quite apart from demonstrating MacDonald's influence on Lewis, a concern peripheral to this discussion). Both MacDonald and Lewis, as Christian writers, believed that the realities which demand our service and allegiance are those which are unseen but which, in the long term, are more real than mundane reality. This is "Glome" or "the world of the Undead" while we refuse to die to ourselves by first acknowledging that the devouring goddess, Lilith/Ungit, is alive in us, nurtured by our own greed and desire for self-aggrandizement and worship. But the Lilith/Ungit within us, once accepting spiritual death, becomes the goddess Psyche — the redeemed, individuated and whole human personality.

Though Lewis and MacDonald have created fantastical worlds in their novels, the real potency in the spirit of the places they have depicted lies in the fact that they are essentially places to which we all have access and that they are essentially the same place, the place of Death. And until the human spirit dies to itself, the human person will not have a face, an identity, or a Psyche, a true self. In short, the self-consumed individual who refuses to die is endlessly bound to the place of the Undead — a place which, like MacDonald's Bulika and Lewis' Glome, is neither here nor there.

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