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## To Live From a New Root': The Uneasy Consolation of *All Hallows' Eve*

Marlene Marie McKinley

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### To Live From a New Root': The Uneasy Consolation of *All Hallows' Eve*

#### Abstract

Analyzes Williams's view of love in *All Hallows' Eve*, noting the challenging and disquieting notion of giving up earthly attachments and definitions of the phrase to "live from a new root."

#### Additional Keywords

Death in *All Hallows' Eve*; Life after death in *All Hallows' Eve*; Love and death in *All Hallows' Eve*; Williams, Charles. *All Hallows' Eve*

# 'To Live from a New Root'

## The Uncasy Consolation of All Hallows' Eve

Marlene Marie McKinley

A part from artistic values and other merits, the majority of literary works whose subject is death are efficaciously salutary and even salubrious: by affirming life after death and offering consolations of various sorts, they help us to cope with and accept the death of a loved one as well as to overcome fears of mortality and the unknown whereby we are able to confront and accept our own death. However, some of these works which are decidedly consolations of hope, faith, and love can also worry us when they extend definitions and meanings of justice, love, the self, and so forth, which counter our own experiences, ideas, and beliefs. In other words, unsettling us is the discrepancy between our notions of what is and should be (which the works show to be illusory or short-sighted) and what, in fact, is. Therefore, consolatory as they are, such works make demands on us – demands our thinking, understanding, and experience – which can be not only quite disquieting and disarming, but frightening. And so it is with Charles Williams' *All Hallows' Eve*. Though *All Hallows' Eve* most beautifully dramatizes the way of purgation and purification toward perfection of knowing Love and Union whereby we are consoled, some aspects of that way and its end expand beyond the known into the alien, wrenching us from our safe, comfortable mode of thought and life. In short, *All Hallows' Eve* "pitches us out of ourselves,"<sup>2</sup> especially as it amplifies Williams' definition of Love: "To love is to die and live again; to live from a new root" (HCD 120).

Dramatizing "to live from a new root" is Lester, a physically dead woman" to whom Williams bonds us by making her one of us. Therefore, not the tale of a saintly soul, such as Margaret (DH), *All Hallows' Eve* is "essentially the tale of one soul, and that of anyone" (Hadfield 228), a soul possessing faults and virtues. Although Lester's character is exposed in a number of situations in which she finds herself and in her relationship with Evelyn and Betty, it is her relationship with her husband which clearly defines her character, her idea of love, and then her progress.<sup>3</sup> For example, at the beginning of the novel her initial concept of love is provided in the statement that Lester's "... willingness to commit herself with Richard... made her believe she (as she called it) loved Richard..." (9-10), Williams' parenthetical comment voicing the truth. Indeed, since she does not love others – she cares about and is interested in "gadgets" and other material things, not people – her relationship with Richard is flawed. In short, she is not yet "adult in love," made critically clear in Chapter 4 when hearing Betty's voice gloriously calling out Jonathan's name, Lester, filled with love for Richard, calls out his name. But instead of a strong voice, Lester

fears the worst: the weakening, decline, and finally death of all her senses. Important in the progression of her thought and heightening fear of "dying further," selfish love overcomes Lester. Given another opportunity to meet Richard, she will not push him away as she had on Westminster Bridge; instead, she will "embrace" him, pulling him down into the bowels of the earth with her. If she is going to be a prisoner, then Richard will be a prisoner too: "... a prisoner with her, and to her!" (89) These thoughts are damning enough, but then Lester takes the ultimate step: "If only he too would die and come!" (89)<sup>4</sup> In the midst of her selfish love, her damnable sin, and consequently in the midst of envisioning the horror of the Pit of Hell and herself, "both, being one" (89),<sup>5</sup> Betty's strong, clear voice once again calling out "Jonathan!" cuts through Lester's selfishness; choice is offered and is hers to make: damnation or salvation. And in the ensuing inner dialogue ("Something in or out of her mind, said to her, 'Would it be unfair?'"[90]), Lester demonstrates the "courage and good sense native to her" in her answer, which she gives "with a new and holy shyness 'It would be perhaps extreme.'" "It would be your own extreme," the voice if it were a voice, continued. She said, "Yes" (90). As the voice succinctly corrects Lester's words, placing the onus of "extreme" on Lester, Lester's "Yes" not only conveys her acknowledgement of the truth of the voice's correction but also signals her choice in the decidedly affirmative "Yes."<sup>6</sup>

Truly, Lester's faults and her virtues<sup>8</sup>, defined in her relationship with her husband, make her one of us. But the husband-wife relationship does more; it pointedly and vividly conveys the utter sorrow and despair one suffers by the death of and separation from a loved one, especially one's beloved, which Williams develops not only through physically alive Richard (the customary point of view in such works), but importantly through physically dead Lester, an unusual point of view, allowing Williams to explore facets of eschatology<sup>9</sup> and to penetrate psychological and spiritual states of the dead whereby in exposing her intense grief Williams unites us, sympathetically and empathetically, with Lester. Examples of her suffering are plentiful even in the first chapter: her great pain when she realizes that she is separated from Richard forever; her painful acknowledgement that she is alone is responsible for Richard's disappearance; and then the sharp pang of separation and of death that seizes her – a pang which recurs throughout the novel. Moreover, though Lester's initial concept of love is surely deficient, her grief and suffering quicken the redemptive process, altering her knowledge of Love. Thus, in our identification with Lester,

we too undergo the process of discovering the meaning of love – a process which begins with comforting reassurances.

Of the more striking scenes confirming our ideas about death and the death of the beloved is one which occurs during Lester's intermediary stages of learning Love when Lester's penitence for her former behavior toward Betty, culminating in her substitution of Betty, earns Lester another meeting with Richard. No longer the impatient, angry Lester who pushed Richard away on Westminster Bridge at the beginning of the novel; no longer the selfish Lester who wished him dead; Lester now meets her husband with joy.

Her [Richard] added, across the room to Lester, without surprise, but with a rush of apology, and only he knew to whom he spoke, "Darling, have I kept you waiting? I'm so sorry."

Lester saw him. She felt, as he came, all of her old self lifting in her; bodiless, she seemed to recall her body in the joy they exchanged. He saw her smile, and in the smile heaven was frank and she was shy. ...she said, "I'll wait for you a million years." She felt a stir within her, as if life quickened....(169)

Certainly, Williams delicately captures the poignancy of their meeting in these few brief lines. Every sentence stirs us, reflecting our own feelings, thoughts, and words if we were permitted such a reunion with a loved one. Not lapsing into sentimentality of regrets or wishing for something that cannot be, they accept the reality that one is dead and the other is not; moreover, separation is now unimportant, for they have found another reality which transcends physical death: "If Richard or she went now, it would not matter much; their fulfillment was irrevocably promised them, in what manner so-ever they knew or were to know it" (169).

Williams, then, first provides the context of familiar thoughts, feelings, and situations, linking us with Lester as well as affirming our ideas and notions about relationships and the nature of love after physical death. Throughout the major portion of the novel as Richard glimpses Lester and she, him, and then in their meetings and talks, we are comforted, confirming our ideas and/or hope that death does not separate people who really love each other; that the physically dead person, who may or may not need our help in some way, still cares about us and loves us and watches over us in some fashion; and finally that when we die, we will be reunited with our loved ones. Especially evocative of our thoughts and feelings in Lester's meeting with Richard when she tells him she will wait for him "a million years" – a promise which is quite touching, but naive as she soon discovers. For "a million years" echoes painfully and hauntingly throughout her subsequent learning experiences of "to live from a new root," which is strongly foreshadowed about half-way through *All Hallows' Eve* in Lester's own thoughts. As yet Lester sees but "dimly,"<sup>10</sup> but she is aware that Love is "something different," that it is "a kind of way of knowledge... perfect in its satisfaction" (181), though at this point we are not certain how or in what way(s) Love

is "different." But through Lester's vision of the City, her vision of the Thames River, and then through the Act's purging, we grow progressively apprehensive about the meaning of "to live from a new root."

First, Lester's vision of the City is strangely beautiful: simultaneity is presented with the "glowing and glimmering City, of which the life was visible as a roseal wonder within" (187). And here Williams hints at what Lester's future involvement in Love will bring, suggesting, for example, that out happiest moments on earth are but a norm there.<sup>11</sup> Though the City may jar our chronological sense of time and our geographical sense of place, the City and citizenship of that City beckon us to know Love, reinforcing our sense of justice and reward in the Other World. Further, though we realize that Lester's citizenship means advancing from the transitional dimension she presently inhabits and separating her from her husband (that is, ending her present occasional glimpses of and meeting with him), her citizenship does not threaten us too much, for we assume they will have a future reunion – an assumption based on our ignorance of Love, an assumption all too quickly shattered in Lester's next vision, that of the Thames River. Though the Thames River scene begins with Lester's joy and delight in seeing the waters of the river, her memory of finding the river's source with Richard ("So that even here she felt a high, new, strange and almost bitter longing mingle still with the definite purposes of her past" (223)) acts as a transition, transforming Lester's former delight into a "premonition of a pang" of separation, of division, manifest in the deep strong current of the river which is "cold and frightening, worse than death" (224). What frightens and chills Lester, and us, is her premonition of her advance in Love. Now, she realizes the naivete of her promise to wait for Richard: "Oh vain, all the meetings vain! 'A million years?' not one moment; it had been the cry of a child....however long she waited, she only waited to be separated, to lose, in the end" (224). Though Williams has previously suggested as well as stated that Love is "something different," not until the Thames River scene does he overtly begin to prod us away from the familiar into the unfamiliar, the "different," where he can begin to disclose the full meaning of Love:

The under-river sang as it flowed; all the streets of London were full of that sweet inflexible note – the single note [Love] she had heard in Betty's room, the bed [wooden cross] on which she had safely lain. This was it – bed and note and river, the small cold piercing pain of immortal separation. (224)

Needless to say, this discovery<sup>12</sup> of love does not comfort us at all.

Therefore, through Lester's vision of the City, of the Thames and the "cruel clarity" of its undercurrent, and then through the Act's purging Lester further and her assent to their will (whereby she accepts loss), with dread we realize that "living from a new root" is utter separation from our loved one(s), the "cold piercing pain of immortal separation" (224). And if we are still unwilling to acknowledge that truth of Love, Lester's meeting with Richard in

Jonathan's apartment and her final scene with him force us to accept the terrible separation and the loss. For example, prior to her meeting with Richard in Jonathan's apartment, she telephones her husband and tells him:

"Once more. Before I go, before I give you up. Oh my sweet!"

The voice was so full of serene grief that Richard went cold. He said "Nothing shall make me give you up. I've only just begun to find you."

"But you will, even if nothing makes you," the voice said. "It'll have to be like that. But I'll come first. Don't be too distressed about anything.... I do love you, Richard." (228)

Because Lester's "serene grief" and words of endearment keep us bound to Lester, we accept her resignation that she must go, though we do so with grave misgivings. What troubles us is not only the idea of immortal separation from the beloved but Lester's acceptance of that separation.<sup>13</sup> That the process of discovering Love includes the necessary surrendering of the will to The Will may be easy for us to agree with intellectually, yet is very difficult to practice in our ordinary daily affairs and especially so in a crisis, such as confronting death. Our reflex is to work our own will and to rail against what seems to us to be inequity. We therefore have trouble understanding Lester's bending her will which brings her so much pain; and yet that pain is necessary, which is all too vividly realized in the potent closing scene of the novel. Here, Lester experiences fully the pain of separation which is necessary for her further advancement – the paradoxical efficacy of panthei mathema – the "sharp pain in a great joy" (256), finding herself in the rain,

... herself no longer bodily understood, but a point... of the light floating in the air... she was not very conscious of herself as herself.... Even Richard's figure there had lost its immediate urgency; something once necessary and still infinitely precious, which had belonged to it, now lay deep, beyond all fathoming deep, in the current below, and could be found again only within the current or within the flashing rain. Of any future union, if any were to be, she could not begin even to think; had she, the sense of separation would have been incomplete, and the deadly keenness of the rain unenjoyed. (256-257)

We want to escape from the alien reality of death and separation, desperately wishing to alienate ourselves from Lester and to return to our own comforting and reassuring thoughts about death and love; but until our very last glimpse of Lester as she ascends beyond our vision in a flash of light, Williams keeps injecting the familiar into the unfamiliar to prevent us from severing our connection with her. Even in the midst of this rich, yet strange, vision-experience of rain, river, and light, Lester's thought is surely our own: "her heart sank; without him [Richard] what was immortality of glory worth?..." (256). Our contact with her established on our own level, completing the paradoxical sentence Lester's next thought, though not at all to our liking, we grudgingly admit to be true: "...only without him could she even be that which she now was" (256).<sup>14</sup>

And in keeping with her involvement which is possible only without Richard, Lester's last words to her husband are, "'Dearest, I did love you. Forgive me. And thank you – Oh Richard, thank you! Goodbye, my blessing!'" (269), the past tense "I did love you" a shockingly abrupt shift from the present tense "I do love you" (228) she had just hours before she said and meant, now severing herself from him and now severing us from our last security of hopeful thoughts about love and death. At least prior to Lester's last words to Richard we could take some comfort in their continuing love, affirming love to be eternal in spite of possible eternal separation. Now, even that small consolation is annihilated!

Williams' post mortem investigation and its consolation in *All Hallows' Eve* are neither easy for us to understand nor easy for us to accept. Lester's loss of her purse at the very beginning of the novel foreshadows critical losses and separations in relationships, love and the self. First, the consolation is uneasy because on the level of personal relationships, there is no longer Lester's promise to wait for Richard; she accepts "immortal separation." Second, unsettling us more is Williams' presentation of Love which seems to us to be completely dispassionate and impersonal, Love which negates love "I did love you." Third, on the level of the self, even Lester's "human form" is transformed in the rain into a point of light, into the alien,<sup>15</sup> which is bewildering, disquieting, even terrifying. Much more to our liking and thinking is the scene in Betty's room where eternal love is declared and the promise is made to wait a million years (or however long it takes to be reunited with the beloved). It is this scene which we understand and accept; it is this scene which comforts us, which gives us consolation, which gives us hope. However, though we try to refute the validity of the alien and the impersonal which counter our experiences, thoughts, hopes, and expectations, so powerful in William's vision of Love that it compels us to question and evaluate ourselves. Is it possible, for example, that our love or concept of love is selfish and limited? If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit after reading this novel that our love is deficient, not only our love of the beloved and of our neighbor, but our love of God: "The word 'love' has suffered.... The famous saying 'God is love,' it is generally

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assumed, means that God is like our immediate emotional indulgence, and not that our meaning of love ought to have something of the 'otherness' and terror of God" (HCD 11). Therefore, even though Williams always includes the possibility of a future finding and having, it is necessary that Lester and we forsake that possible hope and accept loss, separation, and suffering. It is necessary to strip ourselves of our preconceived ideas and notions of what we think should be, of what we think to be reality. It is necessary to die, to die to ourselves. More precisely, it is necessary that the "old self" die or be denied.<sup>16</sup>

No doubt, the old self on the new way is a necessary period, in most cases of change. But the Apostles, to judge by the epistles, were not willing that the faithful should remain consistently faithful to themselves. They demanded, as Messias had demanded, that the old self should deny itself. It was to be removed and renovated, to be a branch of the vine, a point of the pattern. It was to become an article of love. And what then is love?

It is possible here to follow only one of the many definitions the New Testament holds; the definition of death. To love is to die and live again; to live from a new root. (HCD 119-120)

Through Lester,<sup>17</sup> Williams affirms life after the death of the physical self and then communicates that new life of living from a new root after the death or denial of the old self. Lester thereby becomes a paradigm of the step-by-step process by which we too can know Love, "knowledge perfect in its satisfaction" (181). And because we do identify with Lester throughout the novel, keeping in touch with her even during her transformation at the end, we cannot help but be "caught up" in the magnificence and radiance of the rain, the roseal light, and Lester herself becoming a point of light. Thus, in spite of our reluctance, fear, and even dread, *All Hallows' Eve* does indeed "pitch us out of ourselves," extending the parameters of our narrowed, limited ideas of the Other World, of the Spirit, and of Love, expanding our consciousness, and widening our vision even though we may as yet see "dimly" (181). Williams offers us a beautifully rendered consolation, yet it is a bittersweet consolation, an uneasy consolation, maybe because we do not quite fully understand, maybe because we are as yet not quite willing to "lose" — to lose the beloved, to lose our concept of love, to lose ourselves and surrender ourselves to the ALL. Yet lose we must to find Love and grace.

The thing we call "grace" is here and there and gone and back, like the lightning of the living creatures, and a greater: "so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be." It is a kind of life, and in that life we are for a moment no more ourselves. It is a life admirably described in the Apocalypse as drinking freely of the waters of life in the City, so simple, so natural, so one with all. (HCD 143-144, italics mine)

### Notes

1. Such literature spans across cultures and time, from various sections in the Bible, the Upanishads, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, through Plato's "Myth of Er" at the end of his *Republic*, Cicero's "The Dream of Scipio," Dante's *Divine Comedy*, *The Pearl*, Milton's "Lycidas,"

Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilych," Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," and so on and so on. On the other hand, of course, some investigations make us wary of death, such as some of Emily Dickinson's poems. In fact, even some of her "positive" investigations have that effect, such as "Because I Could Not Stop for Death." Though Death is personified as a gentleman caller and though immortality is the third character in the carriage—all reassuring us so far—ambiguity arises at the end of the poem: is the speaker of the poem still in the carriage with her companions? or has Death dropped her off at the chilling grave to remain there alone for eternity? Needless to say, the latter possibility chills us away from any reassurance about death.

2. A slight rewording of Joseph Campbell's words, speaking about the function of ritual and one of the functions of Myth in the PBS interview series with Bill Moyers entitled *The Power of Myth*, later published under that title. Among Campbell's several mentions of "pitching one out" is the following: "They've [the Roman Catholic Church which has forsaken the Latin Mass in favor of a language that has a lot of domestic associations] forgotten that the function of ritual is to pitch you out, not to wrap you back in where you have been all the time.....the rituals that one conveyed an inner reality are now merely form" (84). My use of Campbell's words about myth in my discussion of Williams is not really the same intent as, say, Plato when he wrote "The Myth of Er"; in other words, both writers create a myth in order to talk about and impart reality; both works are fictions positing Truths.
3. Though Williams dramatizes living from a new root (or various stages of living from a new root) through at least one character in the first six novels, not until the last one does he investigate its meaning and implication through a character who is physically dead (though the Suicide in the penultimate novel, *Descent Into Hell*, is certainly a precursor).
4. I do not mean to suggest that Lester's relationships and interactions with Evelyn and Betty are of minor importance; to the contrary, they are vital. But in the process of narrowing my material, Richard best suited my purposes.
5. Echoes of Milton's *Paradise Lost* are all too clear in Lester's wish that the one she loves "fall" with her!
6. Certainly, these words again recall *Paradise Lost* and Satan's words "Myself am hell."
7. In his prose works, Williams frequently writes about accepting or denying choice and action.
8. In brief, Lester's weaknesses include impatient, anger, and pride. Her strengths include the "courage and good sense of native to her" (90).
9. Williams's eschatological exploration is a paper topic in itself. Therefore, among the many interesting aspects Williams advances are that death does not automatically confer spiritual awareness; that death does not automatically reveal knowledge or awareness of one's faults or one's former transgressions; that multiple dimensions are contained within the Other World; that judgement and one's final destination are not immediate, at least in certain cases such as the sudden death of two young women who have not had the time to experience, learn, and make important choices (and his idea is also found in Williams's penultimate novel, *Descent Into Hell*, in the case of the poor Suicide); and that one chooses one's own end or destination.
10. Lester's "dim" awareness about love here and her growing process recalls St. Paul's words in *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*: "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity."
11. Lester sees only "a small part of the whole" (180), for some things are not yet permitted: "It was not for her yet to know the greater mystery. That waited her growth in grace and the enlargement of her proper faculties in due time" (188). Williams can provide only hints of what awaits Lester's involvement since our experiences and thought and language are so limited.
12. That discovery involves pain of some sort is validated not only in Lester's experiences and in our own responses but in Hadfield's words about Williams:

Faber's published it [*All Hallows' Eve*] and Charles assured Eliot that it went on from the point at which *Descent into Hell* left off. This was his aim for every work, to move forward from each point of awareness – exchange, patience, delight – because there was always more to discover. *Discovery is a kind of pain*, in the fact that our joys and loves do not and cannot survive without some life other than their own desire. Themselves they cannot save. (Hadfield, 228 [italics mine])

13. Knowing she must go, Lester is not resentful nor does she try to work her own will; quite the contrary, her words further reveal her bending her will to The Will; and for this reason The Acts "quickened their purging" (230-231), and Lester thinks of "herself in humility and serious repentance all the way" (232). The effect of the Acts' purging is quite evident in Lester's meeting with Richard in Jonathan's apartment. It is Lester who now apologizes to Richard for keeping him waiting. It is Lester who says she is "sorry" – a word conveying multiple meanings; here, "all friendliness" (233). It is Lester who admits her faults in her relationship with Richard. And it is Lester who urges Richard to admit the truth. Indeed, the past is redeemed in the present – redemption found in Lester's laughter which is "the speech of pure joy" (234).
14. The words "separation," "ending," and "death," found in the Thames River scene, echo back to their repetitions found in Chapter One, but here there are no hammering repetitions as found earlier; instead, these returning thoughts are transformed (in keeping with Lester's transformation into a point of light) into being part of the water. The importance of water is omnipresent here, as it is throughout the novel with even a chapter's title "The Wise Water." Water keeps accruing in intensifying meanings: tears of grief, sorrow and shame, as well as tears of joy, Betty's lake, baptism, protection; Lester's memory of Richard getting up at night to get her a glass of water, an act of exchange, bringing her a glass of joy ("joy of spring water, joy" [164]); the rain falling on this All Hallows' Eve. In short, water permeates the novel, and when saturated with light as it is here, the water and light working together, coining, are explosively potent in vividly conveying purgation, baptism, purification, redemption, rebirth, and grace.
15. Williams even uses the term "alien" earlier in the novel which foreshadows several scenes, especially Lester's final scene in the book:  
... [Lester's] voice... was audible enough to any of the myriad freemen of the City, to the alien but allied powers of heaven which traverse the City, to the past, present and future of the City, to its eternity and to That which everywhere holds and transfixes its eternity; audible to all these, clear among, the innumerable mightier sounds of the creation.... (155 [italics mine]).

Needless to say, Love includes the known and unknown.

16. Williams repeatedly speaks about the denial of the self:  
... Messiah said: 'Deny the self, take up the cross, follow me'; it being admitted and asserted that the crucifixion itself is his. (HCD 124)  
The first and final maxims in the present earth is DENY THE SELF, but – there, or here – when the need for denial has passed, it may be possible to be astonished at the self as at everything else, when that which is God is known as the circle whose centre is everywhere and the circumference is nowhere. 'He saved others; himself he cannot save.' The glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one; I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one.' (HCD 132-133)
17. The "new self" being "an article of love" is thus amply dramatized not only in Lester's actions and words, her separation from Richard the necessary denying herself, but in becoming a point of light she experiences herself as "no longer bodily understood" (256), illustrating "the new self does not know itself" (HCD 119).

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