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## ***The Wizard of Mecosta: Russell Kirk, Gothic Fiction, and the Moral Imagination*, by Camilo Peralta**

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### *The Wizard of Mecosta: Russell Kirk, Gothic Fiction, and the Moral Imagination,* by Camilo Peralta

#### Abstract

Camilo Peralta's *The Wizard of Mecosta* gives the first detailed look at Russell Kirk's fiction, from his ghost stories to his three gothic novels. While the work particularly emphasizes Kirk's gothic influences, Peralta also explores references to T.S. Eliot and Charles Williams in his fiction, as well as comments in his nonfiction about Lewis and Williams writing "tales of the preternatural." The discussion provides important material for seeing Kirk as an Inklings-influenced author.

#### Additional Keywords

russell kirk; t.s. eliot; ray bradbury; stephen king; j.r.r. tolkien; c.s. lewis; charles williams; lord of the hollow dark; old house of fear; creature of the twilight his memorials; evelyn waugh; gothic fiction; horror; fantasy

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**THE WIZARD OF MECOSTA: RUSSELL KIRK, GOTHIC FICTION, AND THE MORAL IMAGINATION.** Camilo Peralta. First edition. Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, May 2024. 222 p. ISBN 978-1-64889-853-2. \$78.

READERS FAMILIAR WITH Russell Kirk's groundbreaking political study *The Conservative Age* are often surprised to learn it wasn't his most successful book. His greatest seller was his novel *Old House of Fear*, in which Kirk "played a signal role in bringing the Gothic tale back into popularity" (Person 137). While Kirk published about a dozen short stories and three novels, works which won him the praise of Harlan Ellison and the friendship of Ray Bradbury, little has been written about Kirk the fiction writer. Camilo Peralta corrects that oversight in this monograph.

Over nine chapters and an introduction, we get a detailed look at Kirk's storytelling. Chapter one covers his life, from his Michigan childhood to his political scholarship career to his Lewisesque marriage to Annette Yvonne Courtemanche;<sup>1</sup> the marriage led Kirk to become a Roman Catholic after edging in that direction for years. Chapter two considers Kirk's writing style, particularly how his high use of allusions—ranging from biblical sources to modern writers such as T.S. Eliot—fits Kirk's lifelong interest in maintaining the best of past cultures. Or, as Kirk called it in various writings, carrying forward "the moral imagination."

Chapters three to nine explore specific aspects of Kirk's fiction. Since most of his fiction is gothic, chapter three considers his gothic influences (particularly Anne Radcliffe, Walter Scott, and Nathaniel Hawthorne) and how gothic literature's emphasis on the past fed Kirk's passion for preserving the past's best. Chapters four and five discuss two key Kirkian themes: What it means to have a well-ordered soul as well as a well-ordered state, and "timeless moments," his belief that our earthly lives' key moments are eternally present in the afterlife.

Chapters six through eight discuss Kirk's three novels, emphasizing the authors who most influenced the contents: Samuel Johnson's *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* informing *Old House of Fear*; Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop* and *Black Mischief* informing *A Creature of the Twilight: His Memorials*; multiple Eliot works informing *Lord of the Hollow Dark*. Chapter nine wraps things up with an extended look at Kirk's favorite literary creation: roguish adventurer and alter ego Manfred Arcane.

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<sup>1</sup> Like Lewis, Kirk married late in life to a younger woman much noted for her strong personality and for influencing his work. In both cases, this led to them becoming late-life fathers (Lewis becoming stepfather to two boys, Kirk fathering four girls).

Chapter seven, on *A Creature of the Twilight*, proves especially interesting since Peralta discusses an influence that Kirk downplayed, though Kirk's friends enjoyed Waugh and Waugh may have influenced more than one Kirk novel.<sup>2</sup> Peralta offers an answer to why Kirk disliked talking about Waugh: he criticized Waugh's relative, Sir Edmond Gosse, for being an early Eliot detractor (139). One can't help but wonder if another factor was that Waugh and Kirk were both conservative Catholics (even influenced by the same priest, Father Martin D'Arcy), but Waugh's approach to Catholicism didn't sit well with Kirk. Waugh embraced a flamboyant, gleefully misanthropic public persona; Kirk was occasionally flamboyant but avoided any public vs. private dichotomy. Friends like Father Ian Boyd were impressed that Kirk was "an integrated man who lived what he wrote" (Birzer 358). Given that Kirk and Waugh both saw themselves as out of step with their times, a larger discussion could be had on how they present two different models of countercultural Catholic conservatism.<sup>3</sup>

Readers who have seen Peralta's recent contributions to *Mythlore* ("Delight in Horror," "Timeless Moments") will not be surprised to learn that Kirk's stories show a definite Inklings influence. Most notably, Kirk loved *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* and read it aloud to his four daughters (177-178). Peralta also highlights how Kirk connects his preferred genre, "tales of the preternatural," with the Inklings and George MacDonald in the 1983 version of his essay "A Cautionary Note on the Ghostly Tale" (104). It's fairly clear from Kirk's theory of timeless moments that he read Williams's novels like *Descent into Hell*.<sup>4</sup>

Since Peralta emphasizes Kirk as a gothic writer, he only rarely explores the Inklings' influence. However, he provides excellent material for writers wanting to explore the area further. For example, if we consider Sanford Schwartz and Mervyn Nicholson's comments about gothic overtones in *That Hideous Strength*, Kirk and Lewis can both be seen as storytellers who combined the gothic with elements that readers may not have expected at the time: Kirk

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<sup>2</sup> During a conversation in which Adam Simon and James Panero discussed *Old House of Fear*, an audience member suggested that *Brideshead Revisited* and *Old House of Fear* both have gothic overtones ("Book Gallery" 00:42:00). Panero commented that Kirk's friend and colleague, William F. Buckley, loved *Brideshead Revisited* (00:45:04).

<sup>3</sup> For more on Kirk and the Inklings (especially Lewis) as countercultural conservatives, see Salter, "Russell Kirk and the Inklings."

<sup>4</sup> During the Panero-Simon conversation, another audience member reported that Kirk "read all of Williams and was conversant with him" ["Book Gallery" 00:52:27]. Birzer describes *Lord of the Hollow Dark* as "intentionally drawing on the occult story as developed by the Inkling Charles Williams" (372). For a discussion of Williamsian overtones in *Lord of the Hollow Dark*, see Salter, "Charles Williams and Russell Kirk."

combines the gothic with Buchan-style espionage fiction in his Manfred Arcane stories, Lewis combines the gothic with Arthurian myth in *That Hideous Strength*.

Peralta also tactfully highlights one area where Kirk resembled Williams: devotion to Christianity alongside an interest in esoteric traditions. In Kirk's case, coming from a family of Swedenborgians and Spiritualists—"prior to his birth, seances had been held at a regular basis" (113)—meant that he believed in the supernatural long before becoming a Christian.<sup>5</sup> While he never took Williams's route and joined secret societies, his beliefs didn't always perfectly fit orthodox Christianity: "Even as a baptized Christian, Kirk continued to believe in ghosts and was always fond of Halloween" (12). As Williams combined his esoteric and Christian influences to create his theology of substitution (see Roukema), Kirk combined his belief in ghosts with D'Arcy's advice about heaven to create his concept of timeless moments.

There's also plenty of material on Eliot, who may be called an Inklings-adjacent figure<sup>6</sup> since he knew Williams, Lewis, and Lord David Cecil. Kirk not only knew Eliot but wrote the seminal study *Eliot: The Man and His Age*. The chapter on how Eliot informs *Lord of the Hollow Dark* shows how Kirk merges Williamsian and Eliotic themes, and how close Kirk got to emulating the Inklings. Like Lewis overtly referencing his friends' ideas (Tolkien's Númenor, Williams's *Taliessin Through Logres*) in *That Hideous Strength*, Kirk overtly references his friend Eliot's ideas in this novel.

Peralta's discussion about *Lord of the Hollow Dark* also gives a sense of why it took 30 years after Kirk's death for someone to publish a book on his fiction. While it's probably Kirk's best fiction, it's also his most challenging: "Aside from the references to Eliot and Dante, Kirk alludes in this single text to almost one hundred different individuals and works spanning 2000 years of Western civilization!" (23). Without disparaging the 1970s horror market too much, it's safe to say few writers at the time were producing anything so intertextual. Kirk may have shared a literary agent with Stephen King (Birzer 292) and King may be more literary than detractors claim.<sup>7</sup> But it's hard to imagine King writing a gothic novel inflected with espionage overtones, peppered with commentary on Vatican II, drawing on Williamsian reflections about diabolism and repentance, and alluding to numerous Eliot works . . . and

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<sup>5</sup> Kirk's daughter Cecilia clarifies in a comment on Dale Nelson's article "Russell Kirk: Inklings Without the Inklings" that her father's interest in one supernatural activity, fortune-telling with tarot cards, has been exaggerated and ended after he married Courtemanche. See Works Cited for more information.

<sup>6</sup> I am borrowing this term from Jennifer Woodruff Tait, who used it to mean people within the Inklings' personal circle (such as Dorothy L. Sayers) or who explore similar ideas in their writings (such as Frederick Buechner). See "In Memory of Frederick Buechner."

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Abigail L. Montgomery on Yeatsian influences in the Gunslinger series ("Gunslinger Roland").

then another 99 authors in minor ways. Even Kirk's contemporaries when he started publishing horror fiction in the 1950s (more literary writers like Bradbury or Shirley Jackson) were rarely this labyrinthian. Much like Williams with his supernatural thrillers, Kirk brought a level of complexity that most readers didn't expect. Perhaps today, when literary horror has become a popular marketing term, Kirk will find a new audience. He certainly gives Inklings scholars and readers some fascinating material.

—G. Connor Salter

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**G. CONNOR SALTER** has a Bachelor of Science in Professional Writing from Taylor University. He has spoken on Inklings topics on several occasions, including "William Lindsay Gresham: Writer, Magician, Seeker" (November 3, 2023) and "The Lion and the Vampire: The Inklings and English Horror Films in Conversation" (October 29, 2021), both for Inkling Folk Fellowship. He has contributed to many publications, including *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C.S. Lewis Society*, *The Lamp-Post*, Fellowship & Fairy dust, *The Oddest Inkling*, and *A Pilgrim in Narnia*. His recent work includes "William Lindsay Gresham and Norse Poetry: A Surprising Discovery" (*CSL*, vol. 55, no. 1) and "Tellers of Dark Fairy Tales: Common Themes in the Works of C.S. Lewis and Terence Fisher" (*Mythlore* vol. 41, no. 1).