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Abstract

Examines Williams’s conceptions of coinherence, exchange, and substitution as they are portrayed in *All Hallows’ Eve*—particularly in the actions of Lester Furnival.

Additional Keywords

Coinherence in *All Hallows’ Eve*; Substitution and exchange in *All Hallows’ Eve*; Williams, Charles—Characters—Lester Furnival; Williams, Charles. *All Hallows’ Eve*; Gerri Holmes; Annette Harper

"COINHERENCE" AND "THE TERRIBLE GOOD"

A SOUL'S JOURNEY TO AWARENESS AND RESPONSIBILITY

DEBORAH CARTER-DAY

Alice Mary Hadfield in her essay entitled, "Coinherence, Substitution and Exchange in Charles Williams' Poetry and Poetry-Making," says that Charles Williams considered the most important concept of his writing . . . (to be) that which he called coinherence, or, in full, coinherence, substitution and exchange.¹ She mentions his pamphlet, "The Way of Exchange," reprinted in *The Image of the City* (London, 1958) where he says "...there is a union of existences, and everywhere an interdependence in social life for mutual benefit or survival."² This idea of coinherence and interdependence for mutual benefit or survival is brought to fruition in *All Hallows Eve*, Charles Williams' last novel. Here, the spirit of a young girl, Lester, who has recently died, progresses through several states of awareness until she learns the importance of coinherence, substitution and exchange in achieving a "terrible good": her soul's entrance into the City of God.

At first, there is much confusion in Lester's mind. The suddenness of her death has left her unprepared and perplexed. Consciousness of the implications of death comes to her slowly and she struggles even then to comprehend what it all means. Her dilemma becomes the reader's as well, and it is not until near the end of the first chapter that the state of her being is finally clarified. After realizing that it is she and not Richard (her husband) who is dead, she thinks to herself:

This however was a quite new life. Her good fortune had preserved her from any experience of that state which is--almost adequately--called "death-in-life"; it had consequently little prepared her for this life-in-death. Her heart had not fallen--ever, ever--through an unfathomed emptiness, supported only on the fluttering wings of everyday life; and not even realizing it was so supported. She was a quite ordinary, and rather lucky, girl and she was dead.³

Wandering aimlessly through the silent city of her death, she continues to contemplate her "new life." She is at a loss as to what she should do. Being unprepared for death, she can not discover what meaning there is in this ". . . City (that) lay silently around her. . ."⁴ She ponders the question:

If the City were as empty as it seemed, if there were no companion anywhere, why the lights? She gazed at them, and the wonder flickered and went away, and after a while returned. . .and so on for a long time. . . though she had been a reasonably intelligent and forceful creature, she had never in fact had to display any initiative--much less such initiative as was needed here. She had never much thought of death; . . . never prepared for it; she had never related anything to it. She had nothing whatever to do with it, or (therefore) in it. As it seemed to have



G. Holmes
1980

"IF THE CITY WERE AS EMPTY AS IT SEEMED, IF THERE WERE NO COMPANION ANYWHERE, WHY THE LIGHTS?"

nothing to offer her except this wide prospect of London, she remained helpless.⁵

Her contemplation begins to reveal certain facts about her. We learn that "besides Richard, the only thing in which

she had been interested had been the apparatus of mortal life; not people--she had not cared for people, except perhaps Evelyn;. . ."⁶ And that she has much pride, "a good deal of pride, especially sexual--(it) had kept her from commitments except with Richard."⁷ Her personality begins to take shape: she had never displayed much initiative, she cared little for people, and she was proud.

Beginning to walk again, she moves toward Leicester Square Tube Station and sees, on the opposite side of the road, someone standing there. Her emotions are strangely unengaged. "She was still not conscious of any shock of surprise or of fear or even of relief. Her emotions were not in action."⁸ The figure she sees is Evelyn, an acquaintance she once spent much time with, though she really did not like her. Meeting at the bridge, by chance, they had both been killed when a fighter plane had crashed into them. They are both somewhat relieved when they see each other, though neither speaks of death. Again a new fact about Lester is revealed: 'Lester had no lack of courage. She had always been willing, as it is called, "to face facts";. . .'⁹ Ironically, much later, Lester will be required to face the facts of her own indifference and neglect in regards to another acquaintance.

Surprised somewhat that she has a new companion, Lester allows Evelyn to lead her away to the park, their own growing fears necessitating the reassurance that stems from the other's existence in the silent world they now inhabit. But Lester soon realizes that her companion in death is a foolish, prattling, malicious girl. She rudely tells Evelyn to be quiet.

The voice stopped . . . The stillness of the City was immediately present again and for a moment she almost regretted her words. But of the two she knew she preferred the immense, the inimical silence to that insensate babble. Death as death was preferable to death mimicking a foolish life.¹⁰

As her awareness of her new situation increases, Lester begins to realize several important facts. She once would have been impatient or sympathetic to Evelyn who is crying because Lester asked her to be quiet. Now she feels nothing. As her friend's crying and chattering continue, Lester thinks how she might feel if it were Richard sitting beside her there in distress. She thinks she probably would not have offered him help or concern, but instead, "she would have expected him to help her."¹¹ Her selfishness continues to intrude into her thoughts. Then something happens to change the direction her thoughts have taken.

In her first conscious recollection of her past, she remembers an instance of courtesy, an act of "pure courtesy" and it is this recollection that prevents her from selfishly abandoning her friend. Her heart acknowledges a debt because she had spent more time with Evelyn in life than she had anyone else except Richard. In growing moral awareness, Lester remains with her companion. 'She said in a voice touched by pity if not by compassion, "It's no good talking, especially like that. Don't you understand?"¹²

When her friend shrieks out, "Why are we here like this? I haven't done anything. I haven't; I tell you I haven't. I haven't done anything."¹³ . . . Lester realizes that those words have taken on a new and significant meaning, like an accusation they hover in the air. At this point Lester understands that in this world every casual utterance of hers or Evelyn's rings with new clarity and meaning. Appalled by the dilemma of being forced to be with Evelyn instead of Richard, she is horrified:

She saw Evelyn, Evelyn instead of Richard. She stared down at the other girl and she exclaimed aloud, "Oh my God!" It was the kind of casual exclamation she and Richard had been in the habit of throwing about all over the place. It meant nothing. . . But in this air every word meant something, meant itself; . . . and the oath had echoed into an invocation.¹⁴

As she begins to acknowledge the meaning inherent in

the words she and Evelyn have uttered, Lester realizes a great truth. It is embodied in her husband's image. She exclaims, despairingly, "Richard!" and

As she spoke, she almost saw his face, himself saying something, and she thought she would have understood that meaning, for his face was part of the meaning, as it always had been, and she had lived with that meaning--loved, desired, denounced it. Something intelligible and great loomed and was gone. . .¹⁵

Now she is aware that she must do something and gently speaks of this to Evelyn. But her friend reiterates that she has done nothing, not realizing as Lester does the true meaning of her words. Lester tells her:

"No," she said, "I know. Nor have I--much." She had for six months kept house for Richard and herself and meant it. She had meant it; quarrels and bickering could not alter that; even the throwing away could not alter it. . . it was as certain as any of the stars now above her in the sky. For the second time she felt-- apart from Evelyn--her past present with her. . . this was stronger and more fixed. She lived more easily for that moment.¹⁶

This is an important discovery that Lester makes. Her resolve to do something now starts her on the road to her own soul's salvation. The fact that she had loved Richard and had meant her passion for him will allow her to redeem her spirit. She knows of love, but has not been generous with it. She still has a chance, offered by the universe, to learn about coinherence, substitution and exchange. Later, once she has accepted the responsibilities inherent in these actions and then acted upon them, she will have a greater chance of becoming a citizen in the City of God and of knowing and accepting the "terrible good" that exists in the universe.

Alice Mary Hadfield reminds us of what Charles Williams meant and what Lester will have to learn in her description of the process of coinherence, substitution and exchange:

. . . We live from others, aware of it or not--and we can do so with far more intense energy than is common. It is not a matter only of married people loving each other, however deeply, or of dedicated communal communities. A greater life lies about us all. Awareness of this life can affect our emotions and our wills, and in time our actions. A new life can spring in us, which is known in the coinherence of the greater life and ourselves. Lovers know a little what it is to live the other's life, to live her family troubles, his fear of failure at work--not sharing but living from these conditions as if they were one's own, a true substitution, coinherence and exchange. What we can do and know as lovers, love teaches we can spend our lives becoming able to do and know in a few more instances and circumstances.¹⁷

Thus, Lester's awareness of the loving exchange between herself and Richard can be extended to others now. Through the ritual of coinherence, substitution and exchange she can help someone else, if she can only find someone in need. Once she extends her love, her chances for redemption can not be far away in either time or space.

Almost a month later, after Evelyn and Lester have reconciled themselves to their life-in-death and their desolation in that silent city that seems intended as a kind of Purgatory, several more people, those who inhabit the real world the two dead girls have left behind, are introduced: Richard Furnival, Lester's husband; Jonathan Drayton, a renowned painter and friend of Richard's; Betty Wallingford, Jonathan's fiancée; Lady Wallingford, Betty's mother; and Father Simon, a religious leader whose mysterious workings have been the main topic for newspapers everywhere for the last few months. These men and women will be active participants in Lester's attempt to help someone. For it is Betty Wallingford who is to be the recipient of Lester's gift.

As the story unfolds, Betty's pathetic plight seems to take precedence over all the other fragments of the story. Victimized by her mother and Father Simon, she is to be used in a ghastly magical experiment that will ultimately cause her death. Father Simon (who is in reality her natural father), as a necromancer and a cabalist, seeks to extend his power beyond his actual existence on this earth. Using his daughter, who has been conceived just for this diabolical purpose, he wants to send her as his servant to that other world where Evelyn and Lester now reside to learn the future. This will insure omnipotence in his present sphere. Already he is capable of separating Betty's soul from her body by magic and has sent her on several errands into that spiritual world. Ultimately, he desires that she reside there permanently and has set down a ritual that will cause her death.

It is on one of these pilgrimages into the other, spirit world, that Lester first sees Betty, who she once knew at school but did not behave very charitably towards. When Betty, frightened by Evelyn's malicious laugh, runs back to her mother's house, Lester follows her friends to discover what is going on. Though she confronts Evelyn with her wickedness, Evelyn flatly denies Lester's accusation. Evelyn, always cruel, always petty, seeks to hurt and frighten Betty just as she once did when she was alive. But Lester, caught up in Betty's spiritual need, resolves to help her and pulls away from Evelyn and her bitter and selfish utterance, "Oh come away!"¹⁸

At the words Lester, for the first time in her life, saw a temptation precisely as it is when it has ceased to tempt--repugnant, implausible, mean. She said nothing. She went forward and up the steps. She went on into Lady Wallingford's house.¹⁹

Once inside the hall, Lester is confronted with many shadows and images that result from a magic sign which Father Simon has made over her. Unaware of the significance of her presence, but suspecting that it is something from that other world, he means to reduce the intruder to his own will. After making a magical sign over the spirit (i.e., Lester), Father Simon asks "Why?" and every memory of those times when Lester did not help Betty appears.

It was upon those vague and unexplored memories that the magical sign had power. The hall became to her suddenly full of shadows. Betty was on all sides of her and so was she. . . . She saw herself ignoring Betty, snubbing Betty, despising Betty--in the gardens, in the dormitory, in the street, even in this hall. They were so vivid to her that she forgot the god on the stair; she was secluded from him in all this ghostly vehemence of her past.²⁰

Agonizingly Lester is confronted with her past indifference to Betty's needs. And she suffers for her past neglect.

Where she once had refused to help, she was now left to need help. But that refusal had been laziness and indifference rather than deliberate malice--original rather than actual sin. It was permitted to her to recognize it with tears. The spiritual ecstasy ravaged her; . . . ²¹

And so Lester is brought, almost forcibly by that universal omnipotence, to a realization of her callousness. Still, she is not being abandoned. Her plea will be strengthened by her remembrance of the 'sympathy she had once felt for Betty, the occasional interference she had bestowed, (and it) allowed her now a word of appeal. She cried out, pleading as she never supposed she could or would plead: "Betty! please! Betty!"²²

Those words break the spell and Lester moves on up the stairs, towards the help she needs (and towards the help she hopes to bestow). Simon, the Clerk, does not realize that she has conquered his magic sign. He thinks to himself:

It could not, . . . this poor vagrant from the other world, this less than human or

angelic monstrosity, bear the question he had put to it, and it had fallen in to nothingness below. He was right enough in what, after his own manner, he had seen--the supernatural shaking of Lester's center; but the processes of redemption were hidden from him. At the moment she drew nearer to the true life of that City, he thought her to be dissolved.²³

Miraculously Lester is getting nearer to the "true life of that City," and through the exchange she hopes to have with Betty, she will get nearer even still. After asking Betty's forgiveness for her (Lester's) neglect, they share in a brief moment of joy that is increased by their goodness and understanding. Though Lester is not aware of the plot on Betty's life, she tells her new friend warmly that she will stay at her side. Consequently, when Simon begins his incantations over Betty, Lester is there to interpose herself between Betty and the evil Father Simon. In an exchange of love, Lester substitutes herself (in a symbolical way as Christ the savior once did) for Betty and defeats the death light that Simon issues against his weakened daughter. Aided by other heavenly spirits that support her in a kind of cross, Lester magnificently realizes and takes upon herself the burdens and responsibilities inherent in the universe. Initiated into a state of grace which comes from substitution, coinherence and exchange, Lester, through a magical sacrifice, struggles against Simon and defeats him.

Lester, lying with closed eyes, felt the change. She felt herself resting more quietly and more securely on her support; it might be said she trusted it more. . . . She did not see the tongue-thrusting Death lie still; or even here and there recoil, . . . She thought, in a drowsy happiness, "well, that's saved her getting up," but she remembered no action of her own, only how once or twice, when she had been thirsty in the night, Richard had brought her a glass of water and saved her getting up; and in her drowsiness a kind of vista of innumerable someones doing such things for innumerable someones stretched out before her, but it was not as if they were being kind, for it was not water they were bringing but their own joy . . .²⁴

Lester is dreaming of the ritual of substitution, coinherence, and exchange. Sharing joy with innumerable someones is a re-enactment of the ritual. She has participated in an amazing sacrifice but sees it as a natural progression, a sharing of joy.

As an initiate to the eternal City, Lester will continue to grow in awareness and understanding. Her vision is clarified: "To her now all states of being were beginning to be of their own proper kind, each in itself and in its relationships, and not hampering the vision of others."²⁵ Now, poignantly, she is allowed to comprehend the "terrible good" and its implications for her and Richard.

. . . As she looked at them (she is looking up the river Thames at the Houses and the Abbey along its Embankment) the premonition of a pang took her; a sense of division, . . . she was suddenly afraid. . . . They had not guessed what truly existed . . . this which was different from and refused all earthly meetings, and all meetings colored or overlooked by earth. Oh vain, all the meetings vain! . . . Her spiritual consciousness knew and shuddered . . . however long she waited, she only waited to be separated, to lose, in the end . . . This was it . . . the small cold piercing pain of immortal separation.²⁶

The intensity of this realization rocks her to the very foundation of her spiritual being and before this final pain of immortal separation occurs, she has to see Richard and give him the love she has for him. In the figure of the dwarf which Simon has created with the hope of entrapping Lester in mortal flesh, Lester calls Richard and arranges for a meeting, telling him to expect the gruesome, deformed woman which she now inhabits with Evelyn. Their telephone conver-

sation echoes her own awareness of the "terrible good" which she and Richard must face.

"That's all right," the voice added, "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. And ask Jonathan to let me in; I'll speak to you inside. Goodbye. I do love you, Richard."²⁷

After this meeting, Lester (and Evelyn) decide to return to Simon to restore to him his creation, the dwarf-figure. Though Lester and Betty try to save Evelyn from her own damnation, she exhibits "the mad determination of the lost spirit,"²⁸ and refuses salvation. Lester is separated from all earthly bonds and experiences her final initiation into the City of God and the "terrible good" that her immortal soul is capable of.

Only she felt again the awful sense of separation. It was like a sharp pain in a great joy. She gave herself to it; she could no other; she had consented long before--when she married Richard perhaps--or was consenting now--when she was leaving him. Her heart sank; without him, what was immortality or glory worth? and yet only without him could she even be that which she now was. All, all was ending; this, after so many preludes, was certainly death. This was the most exquisite and pure joy of death, in a bearing of bitterness too great to be borne. . .²⁹

Lester's ritual of substitution, coinherence and exchange which initiates her into the eternal City is an inspiration for those who must remain to carry out an earthly task. Though her husband loves her dearly and cannot comprehend her going, and is even touched by despair at their separation, when Jonathan tries to prevent Betty from sacrificing herself in Evelyn's behalf, Richard replies:

Richard said--and if there was an impunity in his answer, it was hardly avoidable; a deadly touch was in his heart and more than Jonathan he knew that certain departures must be; if he spoke with the least possible impatience, it was but mortal--Richard said, "I shouldn't worry. You won't have her if you keep her; where she wants to go she ought to go."³⁰

And though reluctantly, Richard nevertheless realizes the responsibility that those who are called to serve must fulfill.

Once all is resolved, Simon destroyed by his own evil, Lester and Betty, almost kindred souls look at one another for the last time. Betty asks Lester about the suffering followers Simon has left behind, those whose illnesses had been cured by his false magic suffer their maladies again the moment his power was destroyed. Lester tells her, "They are for you, my dear. You can do it; you've done harder things. It'll take something out of you, of course, but you can. Goodbye."³¹ And then, after a last glance at Richard and reassurances to him of her love, Lester blesses him, thanks him and departs.

She stood, quiet and very real, before them; then the brightness quivered in the air, a gleam of brighter light than day, and in a flash traversed all the hall; the approach of all hallows possessed her, and she too, into the separations and unions which are indeed its approach, and into the end to which it is itself an approach was wholly gone. The tremor of brightness received her.³²

By saving Betty from death, Lester was taught the lessons of substitution, coinherence and exchange. When she is gone, these gifts remain to her friends and loved ones. Betty knows already these lessons and Richard and Jonathan are well on their way to learning them. Lester's death is not a loss but a "terrible good" for she has redeemed not only herself, but her friend Betty as well. And Betty carries on the legacy that Lester has left--she gives of herself by healing the sick who have been restored to their former illnesses at Simon's destruction. All who knew Lester will remember her love and how it was manifested on this earth. Her goodness will live through Betty, Jonathan and Richard and a potential good, a "terrible good" will remain, waiting for others to learn how it can be achieved.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Imagination and The Spirit, Essays in Literature and the Christian Faith, edited by Charles A. Huttar (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971) p. 229.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ All Hallows Eve by Charles Williams with an introduction by T. S. Eliot (The Noonday Press, 1977) pp. 7-8.
- ⁴ Ibid., p. 8 ⁵ Ibid. ⁶ Ibid., p. 9 ⁷ Ibid., pp. 9-10
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 10 ⁹ Ibid., p. 12 ¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 14-15
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 17 ¹² Ibid., p. 18 ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 18-19 ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 20 ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 21
- ¹⁷ Imagination and the Spirit, p. 230.
- ¹⁸ All Hallows Eve, p. 94. ¹⁹ All Hallows Eve, p. 94.
- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 123 ²¹ Ibid. ²² Ibid. ²³ Ibid., p. 124
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 163 ²⁵ Ibid., p. 223 ²⁶ Ibid., pp. 223-224
- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 228 ²⁸ Ibid., p. 254 ²⁹ Ibid., p. 256
- ³⁰ Ibid., p. 260 ³¹ Ibid., p. 269 ³² Ibid., p. 269



SAM

The art of Annette Harper has graced MYTHLORE many times. Here is the submission she sent to TOLKIEN JOURNAL about 15 years ago, resurrected and printed for the first time. May her success inspire other aspiring artists. - G.G.