



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 16
Number 1

Article 7

Fall 10-15-1989

Perpetual Winter in C.S. Lewis and Patricia McKillip

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Carter, Margaret (1989) "Perpetual Winter in C.S. Lewis and Patricia McKillip," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 16 : No. 1 , Article 7.

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Abstract

Sees a number of plot similarities and intriguing differences between Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and McKillip's *The Harrowing of the Dragon of Hoarsbreath*. The most significant difference is the ambiguous world-view of the latter as regards good and evil and the motivations of the heroes.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*; McKillip, Patricia. *The Harrowing of the Dragon of Hoarsbreath*

Perpetual Winter in C.S. Lewis and Patricia McKillip

MARGARET CARTER

The direct influence of C.S. Lewis' Narnian tales appears in many children's fantasies published thereafter, for instance in the Christian background of Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* and its sequels. Even at least one adult novel, *The Talisman*, by Stephen King and Peter Straub, clearly descends from the Narnia series; the boy hero saves an alternate world from a magical blight (like the four children in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*), while simultaneously winning a magical cure for his dying mother (like Digory in *The Magician's Nephew*). In both these examples, the narrative clearly distinguishes between good and evil, and good triumphs, as in Lewis' prototype. Patricia McKillip, however, in her children's novelette, *The Harrowing of the Dragon of Hoarsbreath* (1982), uses plot motifs similar to those in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (LWW) to depict a world of ambiguity in which what triumphs may or may not be goodness.

McKillip's *Harrowing* takes place on "an island named Hoarsbreath, made out of gold and snow... covered with winter twelve months out of thirteen" (McKillip, 115). The miners who dwell there sometimes curse the cold but have come to terms with their "rich, isolated, precarious lives" (McKillip, 116). A miner's son who has been abroad for many years, learning to be a dragon-harrower, returns home and reveals that Hoarsbreath's climate is not natural, but the results of a dragon that lairs on the island, wrapped around it. "You live in dragon's breath," the youth Ryd tells his former neighbors, "in the icy mist of its bowels, hoar-frost cold, that grips your land in winter the way another dragon's breath might burn it to flinders" (McKillip, 127). With the help of a girl, Peka, who has also studied abroad, Ryd finds the dragon's nest. He attempts to harrow it, that is, to drive it away, and would have succeeded completely except for Peka's intervention. She pours a bottle of strong liquor, wormspoor, into the dragon's mouth. Although Ryd does manage to drive the creature away, its increased strength, caused by the liquor, results in its ripping the island apart as its flees.

The similarities of the plot of *LWW* are obvious. In both stories the perpetual winter springs from an unnatural source, a source traditionally identified as evil — a witch or a dragon. The inhabitants of Narnia and Hoarsbreath are equally powerless to deliver themselves from winter's grip. Since the people of Hoarsbreath live so completely isolated from the warm mainland, Ryd arrives as a deliverer, in a sense, from another world, like the English children in *LWW*. The dragon, like Lewis' White Witch, possesses the power to allure; Peka sees beauty in the

dragon and its icy world, inspiring her to aid the dragon as Edmund aids the White Witch, though for different motives. Finally, the dragon, like the witch, suffers defeat, and the land thaws.

More intriguing, however, are the differences in detail between the two books, illustrating how McKillip uses Lewis' basic plot in the service of a quite different world-view. Lewis defines his attraction to the fairy tale in terms of "its brevity, its severe restraints on descriptions, its flexible traditionalism, its inflexible hostility to all analysis, digression, reflections" (Lewis, *On Stories*, 46). Does McKillip's tale conform to this set of qualities? For brevity and lack of digression, *Harrowing* certainly qualifies; it focuses on a single action, the quest for and harrowing of the dragon. As in classic fairy tales and Lewis' own work, and "analysis" and "reflection" present are mediated through the actions and dialogue of the characters, not offered as direct comment by the narrator. The brevity of McKillip's story enforces "restraints on description," though her prose is more self-consciously lyrical than Lewis', full of images like "great jewels of ice, blue, green, gold, massed about them like a giant's treasure hoard" (McKillip, 139). The phrase that best describes her treatment of the fairy tale form, however, is "flexible traditionalism." Whereas the classic fairy tale focuses on the conflict between a good, or at least sympathetic, character and an evil entity, clearly identified as such, which can be defeated once and for all, *Harrowing* transforms the traditional categories of good and evil. To begin with, McKillip's treatment of her antagonist, the dragon, differs from Lewis' treatment of the witch in *LWW* in two immediately obvious ways: First, unlike the White Witch, the dragon cannot be killed, but only driven away. Second, there exists not only one dragon, but many, and there will always be more dragons in the world, who "breed winter and cannot be killed" (McKillip, 127). Thus McKillip's world allows no permanent solution to the problem of the winter-breeding "evil."

Moreover, she calls into question the very identification of the dragon with evil. Lewis, as in the classic fairy tale, identifies the White Witch with evil, and no one questions that judgement except Edmund, when under the spell of her Turkish Delight. Firmly guided by the omniscient narrator, we as readers know that Edmund is deluded and never doubt the witch's malevolence. McKillip's omniscient narrator, on the other hand, does not evaluate the opposing arguments of the two characters, Ryd and Peka, who hold conflicting views about the dragon's nature. Ryd, when he first tells Peka about the

dragon, associates it with evil, with "terror and deaths" (McKillip, 123). He presents himself as a hero battling a monster: "If you on Hoarsbreath rouse it, you are dead. If I rouse it, I will end your endless winter" (McKillip, 123). Yet Peka accuses him of fascination with dragons, and he openly speaks of them as beautiful as well as deadly. As for Peka, she stubbornly refuses to accept Ryd's evaluation of the dragon. She likes winter and does not want to see her native land changed. After seeing the dragon, terrifying though the gigantic creature is, she says, "Let it sleep. It belongs here on Hoarsbreath.... It's a thing made of gold, snow darkness —" (McKillip, 142). Speaking of the traditional dangers in fairy tales, Lewis says, "A good giant is legitimate: but he would be twenty tons of living, earth-shaking oxymoron" (Lewis, *On Stories*, 8). In *Harrowing* McKillip creates an oxymoron, an earth-shaking monster who is nevertheless beautiful.

The ambiguity in the character of the dragon has its counterpart in the characterizations of the normal hero. Ryd comes over the sea like Aslan, from a sort of other world like all of Lewis' youthful heroes. Unlike Lewis' deliverers, however, Ryd meets an ambivalent reception. The girl Peka, as already mentioned, opposes Ryd's crusade against the dragon, though she does agree to be Ryd's guide. While Ryd returns to Hoarsbreath full of an outsider's condescending pity for the ignorant natives, eager to straighten out his former homeland, Peka's studies on the mainland have made her appreciate her home all the more. "She loved every part of Hoarsbreath, even its chill, damp shafts at midwinter and the bone-jarring work of hewing through darkness and stone to unbury its gold" (McKillip, 117). To her "a dragon is simply one more danger to live with" (McKillip, 131). She questions the professed purity of Ryd's motives, with the accusation, "And you don't care about Hoarsbreath. All you want is that dragon. Your voice is full of it" (McKillip, 137). Moreover, his speech and behavior reveal a self-centered pride and thirst for glory seen in none of Lewis' young heroes except Edmund at his most deluded. When Peka tries to warn Ryd that the awakened dragon may destroy the island, he retorts, "No. This will be my greatest harrowing" (McKillip, 147). Thus Ryd is not only ambivalent about his task but flawed by a streak of hubris that foreshadows tragedy.

How does Hoarsbreath, as a winter-bound country awaiting a deliverer, differ from Narnia? The treatment accorded the hero and heroine of *Harrowing* reveals immediate differences between the two societies. Peka receives high respect from her neighbors: "The miners called her their good luck. She could make wormspoor, too, one of the few useful things she had learned on the mainland" (McKillip, 118). However, she receives no particular respect because of her sojourn on the alien mainland. Upon Ryd's return after seventeen years absence, the miners listen to his tales with polite attention and kindly skepticism. Indeed, Red's reception is more like Aragorn's in *The Fellowship of the Ring* than that given to any character in *LWW*. Unlike the inhabitants of Narnia, the miners of

Hoarsbreath have no prophecy teaching them to expect a hero; Ryd has to proclaim his own greatness. In fact, they do not even realize themselves to be in need of deliverance. As Ryd says to them of the dragon, "You don't know it's there, wrapped around your world. It doesn't know you're there, stealing its gold. What if you sail your boats full of gold downriver and find the great white bulk of it sprawled like a wall across your passage?" (McKillip, 130). The ice-dragon embodies a great moral force rather than the intelligent malice of the White Witch. The people of Hoarsbreath remain unintimidated by Ryd's exotic experience and the prophecy he himself proclaims. Peka's mother, a down-to-earth housewife like Lewis' Mrs. Beaver, finally says "tolerantly" rather than with awe, "Oh, go with him lass.... There may be no dragon, but we can't have him swallowed up in the ice like his father. Besides, it may be a chance for spring" (McKillip, 133).

In *LWW* spring clearly represents the triumph of good over evil, life over the deathlike grip of "always winter and never Christmas" (Lewis, *LWW*, 16). Though, as everyone knows, Lewis steadfastly denies any allegorical intent behind the Narnian tales, the Christian world-view informing them makes them easy to allegorize. For instance, the witch's Turkish Delight can be taken as a representation of sin and the witch herself as an avatar of Satan. When Edmund, the only character in *LWW* who may be said to suffer from a serious inner conflict, meets her, his conflict is objectified in the form of the tempting confection. No such concrete device objectifies Ryd's ambivalence toward dragons in *Harrowing*. And unlike Lewis, McKillip ends her story without providing any objective judgement as to whether "good" lies on Ryd's side or the dragon's — or neither. Though a kind of spring comes to Hoarsbreath, it proves to be disastrous, not blessed. We cannot even call the dragon evil for destroying the island, since the destruction would not have occurred without Ryd's reckless challenge to the creature and Peka's misguided attempt to help it with a dose of wormspoor. Together "two miners' children came back from the great world and destroyed the island. They had no intention of doing that" (McKillip, 117). In this world good intentions are not enough; no Aslan comes from over the sea to reward faithful striving.

The ambiguity of *Harrowing* echoes the ambiguity of an even stranger tale by McKillip, *The Throme of the Erril of Sherill* (1973), shedding further light upon this author's world-view. This story, too, begins with a traditional fairy tale motif, the knight on a quest to prove himself worthy of a lady's hand in marriage. He must bring back the elusive Throme, a poem reputed to hold unearthly strangeness and beauty, for the lady's father. After many ordeals the knight discovers that the Throme does not exist. He therefore writes one himself. In other words, rather than finding the object of his quest, he manufactures it. No outside force comes to his aid. The tale portrays a world in which few things or values are what they seem. Similarly, the world of *Harrowing* has no room for absolute values,

(Continued on page 57)

Janice K. Coulter **Milwaukee, WI**

In his forward to *The C.S. Lewis Hoax*, Joe R. Christopher urges that Kathryn Lindskoog's arguments be repeated until Walter Hooper responds to them. He asks, "What else can honest scholars do?"

They can do what honest scholars have always done. Dig for the facts. It is the only way to discover the truth.

Hooper cannot be compelled to respond and his silence cannot reasonably be construed as an admission of wrongdoing regardless of how often Lindskoog's theories are repeated. The veracity of any statement he may choose to make would probably be questioned by those now impugning his integrity.

Honest scholars who mistrust Hooper won't simply parrot arguments, engage in personal attacks, or publish unsubstantiated suspicions. They will investigate and report the facts.

Paul Nolan Hyde **Simi Valley, CA**

In response to the query about the function and dubious value of the "Reverse Spelling Dictionaries," may I say in all seriousness that I am not the inventor of such a thing. Such dictionaries exist for many languages including English. The purpose is to group all words in a body of material with the same or similar suffixes in one place. For example, if you wished to find all of the words in the language that ended with the suffix "-able", the reverse dictionary would have them all listed under "elba-". In English this is not a particularly informative exercise, but in inflected languages such as Old English, German, or Finnish, this sort of printed arrangement can be quite useful. My purpose in creating "Reverse Dictionaries" for the Middle-earth languages was to provide a way whereby the conjugations and inflections of nouns, verbs, and other parts of speech might be easily analyzed. Needless to say, it was not done to invoke consternation or mental anguish in the hearts and minds of the readership; I have more effective methods for doing that.

Tales Newly Told (Continued from page 53)
her magical talent. She is also divided between her native earth-magic, which is invasive, hard to control, and sometimes frighteningly impersonal, and her attraction to smithcraft — also a kind of magic, but a conscious, controlled, "light" one.

The setting of *The Sarsen Witch* is essentially the same as that of Henry Treece's *The Golden Warriors*, and Kernaghan's meticulous depiction of seasonal rituals recalls Diana Paxson's tales of proto-historic Britain (as her evocation of exiled Atlanteans may owe something to Tolkien's idea of Númenor), but nevertheless this vision of the Bronze Age seems fresh and individual. Kernaghan definitely belongs to the first school of historical fantasists mentioned above: in a quiet, unassuming but powerfully effective style, she paints a realistic and colorful picture of the chalk downs of southern England as they must have

appeared in their pristine splendor, changing slowly through the seasons. We are made constantly aware of the characters' experience of the natural world around them, and of its relation to the magical influences in their lives.

(One very minor but amusing anachronism: at one point Naeri and her companions are shown hunting pheasant. But pheasants were only introduced to Britain during the Roman era!)

The Bronze Age of Europe hold a great fascination for the modern imagination, because, although we have so little concrete knowledge of the period, so much of the myth and magic in our own culture seems to have its dim, half-perceived origin there. Eileen Kernaghan's mythopoeic glance at that era is most enriching. One hopes that she will journey there again, to uncover new aspects of it for us.

Perpetual Winter (Continued from page 36)

adherence to which ensures that the protagonist will remain on the right path. Nor does this world offer a hope of deliverance from a higher sphere. Lewis' characters inhabit a multi-level universe, in which the natural world has connections to a higher realm. Aslan's country, the real world of which the known worlds of mortality and mutability are only shadows, can be visited and eventually inhabited by the heroes. McKillip's is a self-contained universe, where the young hero and heroine, attempting to escape the devastation of the thawing ice, are cast "back to the bewildering shores of the world" — a world that is "only another tiny island, ringed with a great dragon of stars and night" (McKillip, 165).

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