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Friendship in *The Place of the Lion*

by Dan Hamilton

Dan Hamilton, an engineer and writer, has edited a dozen George MacDonald novels. His books include *Forgiveness*, *The Forgotten God trilogy*, *Should I Home School?* and *Look Both Ways*. He co-authored Dr. Ed Brown's *In Pursuit of C. S. Lewis*. Dan participated in the purchase and preservation of The Kilns, and he co-founded the C. S. Lewis and Friends Society at Taylor University and the Central Indiana C. S. Lewis Society in Indianapolis.

I must warn you that you are in the hands of an engineer, one of those people who like to take things apart and see how they work. That's what I did last year for our Lewis Society in Indianapolis. I took apart *The Place of the Lion* to see what's happening in it and how and why.

I picked *The Lion* because it's one of the Inklings books on which I have fielded the most questions over the years—usually some variation on “I liked that book—but I didn't understand it. What's it about, anyway?” In this essay, I have three goals: I want to celebrate *Place of the Lion* in the context of friendship; I want to inspire reading or re-reading the book; and I want to give the reader some tools for enjoying it more thoroughly.

This book is *about* friends, but it also *started* a notable friendship when two strangers, C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams, wrote to each other a day apart. This mutual outburst of praise led to the immediate and deep friendship between the two that lasted until Williams' death in 1945, and profoundly affected Lewis, both personally and as a writer.¹

The best fiction starts with one simple premise: *What if?* In this case, it involves exploring the results IF something like Plato's archetypes or medieval angelic realities suddenly “broke through” from another plane of reality into our world. What would they do? What would they do to us? Would they be dangerous? What would we do in reaction to them?

In the novel, Smetham, a little town in England (just north of London) is suddenly confronted with the true Lion, the true Butterfly,

1 These letters are reprinted on pages 183-187 of *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis* (Volume II).

the true Serpent, the true Eagle, and other true archetypes. These archetypes are a dire threat to our world not because they are evil, but because by their very nature they attract and absorb everything that is like them, everything that is one of their pale shadows—as the light of a candle is swallowed up by the blaze of the noonday sun. Earth will be a barren, empty, lifeless place roamed by the archetypes unless someone can intervene.

Williams is deliberately vague about details. It is certainly convenient for him that the medieval book from which the ancient information is drawn—the fictional *De Angelis* by Marcellus Victorinus of Bologna—is maddeningly incomplete. Williams hints at several ways to organize the nine archetypes, but does not fill in the charts we would like to have. In one sense, the archetypes are merely the mechanism of crisis by which the humans are exposed for what they are or what they choose to become. In another sense, they are deeply connected to the nature of the humans themselves.

One other barrier to following the narrative is the timeline of events. Many of the later chapters are not sequential, but loop back and actually happen simultaneously. But beyond the timeline, beyond the supernatural dazzle of the events, this book is a story of ordinary people—three friends, against a background of other people with varying motives, levels of perception, and fates. There are three main characters: Anthony Durrant, Quentin Sabot, and Damaris Tighe.

ANTHONY DURRANT

Anthony is a clear-headed man who sees the truth (and the danger) and asks what he must do to see the situation put right. He is a magazine publisher, and he occasionally prints a piece by his cousin Damaris Tighe, whom he loves with a peculiar kind of affection, clarity, perception, and good will. He is patient and adaptable, drawn to truth, whenever, however, and wherever it is revealed to him. He is loyal to his friends; he is patient with Quentin's fears, and is unafraid to serve Damaris while being completely truthful with her and completely undeceived about her flaws. In one passage, he remarks that having an argument with her is like being mauled by a lioness. Only Anthony, by surrendering to the truth and wisdom of the Eagle, is able to control the other archetypes. He can ride the Horse, while the Unicorn will not carry Damaris but will only knock her aside in the road and let her follow. And in the end the Lion and the Lamb come to Anthony and obey his directions as he takes up the archetypal

mantle of Adam in controlling an unruly/disordered Creation.

QUENTIN SABOT

Quentin is a solid friend of Anthony's, and his intellectual equal, but is in some key ways his opposite. The underlying emotion in Quentin's life is fear, the fruit of which is cowardice. He sees dangerous things clearly, but wants to run from any chance of contact with them. He doesn't really mature or learn anything in the course of the whole story. He is saved only because Damaris ultimately agrees that she should find him, because the Unicorn leads her to him, and because she clings to him and keeps them both in the inviolable shelter of the peaceable Lamb that appears in the field.

DAMARIS TIGHE

Damaris is focused on one thing: Damaris, especially her anticipated success as a learned, published, and therefore respected academic with a doctoral degree. She wants only to be left alone to finish "her work," which ironically is all about the very kind of dangerous beings that are about to invade England. The problem is that she thinks these are all *ideas* held by imaginative but lesser-informed people of the distant and ignorant past, and cannot possibly be current *realities*. She is self-centered, though not incurably selfish. If she encounters something that doesn't interest her, she dismisses it as irrelevant and without value; she tolerates her father's quest for butterflies and beauty as a mere "hobby" at best and an unfortunate obsession at worst. Anthony infuriates her, because he is always right; he loves her with an open-eyed love and challenges her on her blind spots. He chooses to serve her, but he refuses to put her on a pedestal.

Damaris is very proud of her learning and her career. She values knowledge especially, but doesn't seem to recognize or care for wisdom. C.S. Lewis noted how the figure of Damaris resonated with him. He recognized himself, and probably more than a few of his colleagues, in her. As a side note, when Lewis wrote *That Hideous Strength* a decade later, he brought forward as a main character Jane Studdock, a young self-absorbed academic who has to be brought rather forcibly to face reality. Both women, at least in the beginning, are intelligent, scholarly, foolish, largely willfully ignorant about reality, and rather silly and shallow in their human and cosmic relationships.

Damaris's goal is getting her doctorate. Everything else that

does not contribute to that result is definitely secondary—including her job, her relationships with family and friends, and her neighbors. Even her correspondence with a literary journal is weighed in terms of what influential people it might impress or offend. She uses everyone around her—for her own ends. She is rude and condescending to her father, who presumably is supporting her during her advanced studies. She mainly keeps Anthony around because he occasionally publishes her work and might do so again in the future. She uses Mr. Berringer's little society meeting as (she hopes) a platform to meeting and impressing someone useful to her publishing career. She rejects with disgust Quentin's initial appeal for help; she hardly knows Quentin, barely recognizing him as one of Anthony's friends. The novel suggests that if she truly cared about Anthony as a person, she would be more likely to know and care about his closest friends. She even apparently takes servants for granted; the only time we see an interaction there is when Damaris astonishes the maid by getting herself a sandwich without domestic help.

Of the three main characters, Damaris, knows *all* the relevant information and has the best chance to realize what is happening, but she is blind to it because she sees these archetypes as dead ideas and not actual realities. Her love for mere facts has insulated her from the truth.² She is rudely pulled into reality by the intrusion of the Eagle into her awareness. I believe she meets the Eagle as the Pterodactyl, because she is unprepared for Truth (as opposed to facts), unwilling to acknowledge it, and untrained to serve it.

Those who do not love the truth will find truth to be their enemy, and so it has worked out with Damaris. Immediately after Anthony

2 There is also irony in her isolation from everything but her thesis. If she had taken some interest in the people and doings in Smetham she might well have encountered Berringer, who was deeply interested in the same topic, though his approach was different—entirely practical and much closer to the truth. Richardson could also have helped her greatly in her studies. In this sense Williams is showing us friendship lost in the midst of a friendship perfected. Williams has also given us a glimpse of the antithesis of friendship. Foster and Miss Wilmot are a duo who form their alliance for purely selfish reasons. They both seek power (of different kinds, and for different reasons), and find the other somewhat useful to those ends. In the end they are separated, alone and lost, devoured and crushed by the archetypes they sought to control. Neither are saved, and perhaps (as Williams shows in his depiction of their beastly final moments) there is not much human left to save at the very end.

rescues her from the Pterodactyl / Eagle, he lectures her about the realities she has willfully ignored. So it could be said that Anthony does not directly save her from the Eagle, but only intervenes and then drives her to acknowledge the truth that sets her free and in proper relation to the Eagle again. It is only because she surrenders to Anthony's protection and leadership (and finally *listens* to his authoritative instruction and wisdom) that she finds herself humbled and ready and willing and enabled to search out and save Quentin (who is in no position to save himself). She had refused to help him at their first encounter, but now she goes meekly to make up for it, though she has no idea how it will turn out. Her "conversion" has been sudden and painful, but complete and lasting. And it is the only one we see in the book. All the other characters become, literally for good or for evil, just what they already were "but even more so."

This idea is also in harmony with another aspect of Williams' Law of Co-Inherence, which holds that we cannot save ourselves, but can only (and must) save others. On the good side, Damaris is intelligent, and learned, and she displays integrity in her scholarship. She may be proud and arrogant and rude and self-centered, but she is exacting in her research and honest about where it leads her (as far as *facts* are concerned, anyway).

So how does this imperfect three-way friendship ripen, and blossom, and save the world? We have to start with Anthony, the center figure of the trio. He is properly the human hero of the story, but not quite in the usual way. Instead of conquering by his own might and strengths, he conquers by submitting and choosing to serve that which is higher. He is nearly lost in the pit that opens at Berringers, when he first sees and is confronted by the archetypes revealed together. He cannot save himself, but he is rescued by the Eagle. Later, he realizes that the Eagle is the highest of the archetypes that have appeared at that point, and, as Truth, (somehow) controls the others; Anthony then determines to serve the Eagle as the archetype of Truth and take his proper place in the celestial—and now terrestrial—hierarchy. By submitting, he is empowered to do what he wanted to do and must do. He assumes the role of another Adam to restore order to a chaotic universe. The Eagle puts the other archetypes at his service; the Horse comes to him and bears him on its back when he most needs speed to save Damaris. He has been saved, but not for that end alone: now he must turn and save others.

Damaris herself has refused Anthony's initial offer of protection, by stubbornly staying put in Smetham instead of taking refuge in

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London. Now she is confronted by the Pterodactyl; on the verge of being destroyed, she turns helplessly to find someone to rescue her. Her father merely looks at her, and says mildly and distractedly, "Well, I was afraid you might get hurt."

Then she encounters the specter of Abelard, a major subject of her studies. But he is dead, and powerless to give her any aid, not even a meaningful word. It is only when she finally calls out to Anthony that she is rescued. At Anthony's feet, with the Eagle on his shoulder, she finally acknowledges the reality that has been surrounding her, and she understands the Eagle in his true guise.

She submits to her place in the hierarchy and realizes that she must now turn and rescue another who is more helpless than she. She chooses to seek for Quentin, not because she has been Quentin's friend in the past, but because he is Anthony's friend and now therefore hers as well.

The archetypes do not serve Damaris as they do Anthony, but they do come to her aid. She has no Horse to ride, but the Unicorn knocks her down to get her attention and then leads the way to Quentin, who is desperately fleeing the brutish Foster with the last shreds of strength in his broken body. She does not directly deliver Quentin herself, but drags him into the safety beside the quietly grazing Lamb while the Lion roars about in the field. And when the danger has passed, she brings Quentin back to her own house and sees to his needs, her former aloofness swallowed by the mercy she has received and must now extend. She is then allowed to watch Anthony from a distance as he approaches the burning fire of the Phoenix and merges, though not forever, with the ninth and final archetype of Man. In his dual being he claims Adam's power over the archetypes and sends them all back where they belong—the Lamb and the Lion appearing at his side for one last moment, a glimpse of Eden as it was and one day shall be again.

There the story in the novel ends, but we can only imagine how deeply enriched will be the friendship among the three. In friendship, the friends have saved one another, and their mutual love and obedience have saved the world. Co-inherence has overcome the incoherent.

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Useful weblinks:

<http://www.charleswilliamssociety.org.uk/>

<https://theoddestinkling.wordpress.com>.

*A fuller version of this paper was originally presented to the C. S. Lewis Society of Central Indiana on March 20th, 2015.