

6-2016

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Recommended Citation

Tandy, Gary L., "Reflecting the Eternal: Dante's Divine Comedy in the Novels of C. S. Lewis (Book Review)" (2016). *Faculty Publications - Department of English*. 57.

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Reflecting the Eternal: Dante's Divine Comedy in the Novels of C. S. Lewis

By Marsha Daigle-Williamson, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2015. ISBN 978-1-61970-665-1. Pp. 330. \$16.95.

That C. S. Lewis was a great admirer of Dante's poetry, specifically his *Divine Comedy*, will come as no surprise to readers of Lewis's fiction, literary criticism, and letters. At his first reading of the poem as a 20-year-old, Lewis stated that the *Paradiso* reaches "heights of poetry you get nowhere else" (Letter to Arthur Greeves, October 13, 1918), and 10 years later he thought "Dante's poetry, on the whole, the greatest of all the poetry" he had read (*Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, 76). That Lewis not only admired the poem but imitated it and used its themes and imagery creatively in his own works we have Lewis's own testimony. To use one example among many, Lewis stated in a 1946 letter to Dorothy Sayers that his novel *The Great Divorce* owed more to the *Purgatorio* than to the *Inferno*.

Marsha Daigle-Williamson's *Reflecting the Eternal: Dante's Divine Comedy in the Novels of C.S. Lewis* meticulously documents these kinds of references, but if that were all her book did, it would have done no more than validate a truth that careful readers of Lewis already knew. What I did not recognize before reading Daigle-Williamson's well-researched and thoroughly documented study is the depth of Lewis's debt to Dante, specifically the manifold ways he appropriated, adapted, and transformed Dante's material in his fiction. So comprehensive and exhaustive is Daigle-Williamson's scholarship that by the book's conclusion the reader is ready to assent to the author's bold claim that "Dante is a major presence, if not the major presence, in Lewis's work" (201). Herein lies the chief value of the book and the reason it fills a significant gap in the scholarship on Lewis as a literary artist.

Daigle-Williamson provides a clear and logical structure for her exploration of Dante's poetry and Lewis's fiction. Her first chapter shows how Lewis's literary theory allowed for both imitation and originality and then presents evidence showing the pervasiveness of direct references to Dante by Lewis. These include the three essays Lewis wrote about Dante and the detailed editorial help he provided to

Dorothy Sayers as she translated Dante's poem. Daigle-Williamson then notes the varied ways "Lewis's fiction is tied intimately to Dante's *Divine Comedy*" (15), including paraphrasing and quoting Dante's words; using similar phrasing and vocabulary; adapting Dante's settings, characters, events, and dialogues; creating protagonists who resemble Dante's pilgrim and whose journeys mirror patterns in Dante's poem; and constructing imaginary worlds using Dante's techniques to "translate spiritual and theological concepts into concrete images" (15:). Finally, she concludes the opening chapter with a helpful summary of *The Divine Comedy*.

Chapters 2-9 each deal with one of Lewis's fictional works, and the treatment is arranged chronologically by publication date of the novels. Chapter 8 deals with the whole of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, focusing primarily on *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* and *The Silver Chair*. Chapter 10 concludes the study with summary observations. Following are 106 pages of notes and bibliography, evidence of the author's responsible scholarship. While the endnotes are appropriate and helpful, the decision not to include numeric references to them in the text is somewhat inconvenient. The notes are identified by page numbers and an identifying phrase, but since most pages contain multiple notes, it was not always easy to locate a specific reference, I suspect this method was used to make the main text less cluttered for the general reader, but, as a result, the book seems a bit less accessible to scholars.

Each of the main chapters of Daigle-Williamson's study follows a uniform structure this organization both makes the book easier to follow and reinforces the author's argument that Lewis makes consistent use of Dante's poem in his fiction. After an introduction summarizing and describing the nature of the work, the author describes the fictional world and its inhabitants. Here Daigle-Williamson documents the phrases, vocabulary, scenes, and characters in Lewis's novel that echo Dante's poem. Next, the author discusses how characters and plot events in the novel relate to the pilgrim's journey in Dante's poem. The final main section of each chapter discusses an example or sometimes multiple examples of what Lewis himself called "Beatrician experiences" in his own literary criticism of Charles Williams's novels. Here Daigle-Williamson identifies characters who parallel Beatrice's role in Dante's poem and specific settings from Lewis's novel that echo the meeting between Beatrice and Dante's pilgrim. Each chapter then ends with a conclusion summarizing the ways and the extent to which Lewis makes use of Dante's poem in this particular work of fiction. While the author acknowledges and builds on the work of previous scholars like Joe Christopher, David Downing, Thomas Howard, and Doris Myers, she focuses on the primary texts for her analysis. No doubt the analysis of these texts is enhanced by her knowledge of Italian as Daigle-Williamson uses her own translations of Dante's text to get at what she calls a more literal meaning than is available in existing translations.

Chapter 7, which discusses Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, is a good example of the author's approach and the insights it yields. As Daigle-Williamson acknowledges, many scholars have noted the fundamental similarities between this novel and Dante's poem. Each story is set in the afterlife and deals with the state of souls

after death. Critics have compared the novel to different parts of *The Divine Comedy* and have noticed the obvious similarities of the guide MacDonald to Virgil, to Beatrice, or to both. The value of Daigle-Williamson's treatment, however, is in the way it goes beyond surface-level correspondences to show the complexity of Lewis's use and the way Dante's themes and imagery permeate Lewis's novel. In fact, the author suggests *The Great Divorce* can be seen as a highly condensed version of *The Divine Comedy*.

Following are a few of the many helpful insights Daigle-Williamson provides in her analysis of *The Great Divorce*. (1) Lewis connects his Plain to Dante's purgatory through several clear parallels, including the arrival of the ghosts on a bus full of light ('in Dante, it is a boat full of light) their arrival early in the morning at a grassy region and the sense of unfamiliarity experienced by the passengers when they arrive. (2) Not only MacDonald but the Bright People who come down from the Mountains resemble Virgil and Beatrice. Further, MacDonald not only resembles Virgil and Beatrice but three other characters from *The Divine Comedy*: Cato, the angel guarding the gate of Mount Purgatory, and Cacciaguida. (3) Many of the key encounters in Lewis's novel revolve around natural loves that have gone wrong in various ways, examples of either perverted or disordered loves. The general division of Dante's Mount in *Purgatorio* is based on the distinction between perverted loves and disordered loves needing to be set in the right order. For example, the lady ghost exhibits the perverted love of vanity while Robert's wife demonstrates a disordered excessive, smothering love. (4) The episode involving the young man with a red lizard on his shoulder has numerous parallels with the scene of Dante's pilgrim on the ledge of the lustful in *Purgatorio*. Daigle-Williamson points out five specific parallels including the imagery of fire and heat in the descriptions of both angels. Also, Virgil informs Dante's pilgrim that his passing through the wall of fire may cause pain but not death, while Lewis's burning angel informs the young man that the death of the lizard will hurt him, but not kill him.

This last example is representative of the frequent instances in this study where Daigle-Williamson's analysis illuminates Lewis's artistry in insightful and sometimes surprising ways. For example, in her discussion of *The Screwtape Letters*, she notes that Lewis chose an approach similar to Dante's in naming his devils. Dante has his "Wild Swine" and "Dog Scratcher" while Lewis has his "Slubgose" and "Toadpipe." Similarly, she identifies Dante's poem as a possible source for Lewis's idea that devils consume sinners and other devils. In Dante's poem, Satan himself is pictured as eternally gnawing on three souls in the very pit of hell. In a similar vein, the author notes that "For both Dante and Lewis the whole activity of hell since it cannot create, is to spoil, to take something good and attempt to pervert it" (68).

At times the parallels and correspondences this study identifies seem merely interesting, as when the author points out the connection between the Perelandrian Eve and Dante's emerald lady in the Garden of Eden scene. My responses to these kinds of revelations were often "aha moments," answering questions about why Lewis chose a particular image or setting. In other cases,

the correspondences Daigle-Williamson points out seem more significant because they have a bearing on our interpretation of Lewis's themes and meanings. A good example comes in the discussion of Lewis's views of salvation, particularly the fate of virtuous pagans or those who follow Christ without knowing him. Readers interested in the question of Lewis's theological orthodoxy have often focused on his fictional depiction of the salvation of Emeth, the good follower of Tash, in *The Last Battle*. What Daigle-Williamson adds to this discussion is the awareness that one source of Lewis's view on this subject may have been Dante, who raises the question through at least two examples in *Paradiso*: Trajan, who lived in Christian times but died a pagan and Rhipheus, a hero in pre-Christian times during the Trojan War. The author also points out that Psyche and Orual, two major characters from *Till We Have Faces*, can be viewed as examples of pagans who ultimately reflect Christian values, noting that Lewis describes Orual as one who is, "after many sins, saved" (198:). Daigle-Williamson makes a convincing argument here that both Dante and Lewis warned their readers "not to judge hastily about who is not redeemed and who is, because no one firmly knows or understands the mysterious working of grace and providence" (200:).

Marsha Daigle-Williamson provides overwhelming evidence that Dante's *Divine Comedy* served as both source and influence for Lewis's fiction. To her credit, she does so without relying on tenuous examples or forced parallels to support her thesis. This measured approach and her careful scholarship result in a convincing and valuable contribution to Lewis studies. Finally, she has created a book that will satisfy not only literary critics but also general readers looking for a deeper appreciation of Lewis's artistry, theology, and imaginative vision.

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