

Readers on Writers 2 – Charles Williams – by Karen Charman

Charles Williams is, perhaps, best known today as a member of The Inklings – a circle of friends who gathered about C S Lewis, and met in his rooms at Magdalene College, Oxford. The group included C S Lewis and J R R Tolkien – both Oxford Dons - and other writers. It was originally formed so that members could read their unpublished works aloud, and ask for comments and criticisms. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *The Lord of the Rings* were both first introduced to an audience at Inklings meetings. Although he had no connection with Oxford University, other than his work for the Oxford University Press – and didn't hold a degree from **any** university – Charles Williams was invited to join The Inklings by Lewis, when the OUP relocated its offices from London to Oxford at the outbreak of the Second World War.

Charles Walter Stansby Williams was born in London in 1886. He came from a lower-middle class background. His parents were both devout members of the Church of England, and Charles attended church from an early age.

Charles' father, in particular, had a great influence on him – passing on his love of literature, religion and reason; but also a tendency towards pessimism

Though a devout Christian, Charles' father encouraged him to appreciate the force of atheist rationalism. Charles learned to be a committed Christian, prepared to listen to and respect the opinions and arguments of those with different beliefs.

In 1901, at the age of fifteen, Charles won an Intermediate Scholarship to University College, London. He left, after two years, without taking a degree, as his family could no longer afford to contribute to the costs of continuing his education.

In 1904, aged eighteen, Charles began work as a clerk in the Holborn district of London, and worked there for four years, until he obtained a post as proof-reader at the Oxford University Press.

In 1908, aged 22, Charles met Florence Conway – a helper at the Sunday School where he was teaching – and they became engaged. Charles wrote a sequence of 84 sonnets for his fiancée but – rather puzzlingly – their theme was the **renunciation** of love. Perhaps this was partly due to his naturally pessimistic outlook on life. He meditated on the notion of achieving spiritual advancement through renunciation – but he also pondered whether love for another human being could be a step towards God.

And then, he discovered Dante.

In 1910, the Oxford University Press reissued Carey's translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Williams' work involved correcting the proofs. In this way, he came to read of Beatrice - and how Dante's love for her led him through Hell and Purgatory to Paradise and the Vision of the Trinity.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* confirmed William's hope that romantic love might not just be an end in itself, but could lead to a selfless love of the divine and, perhaps, to spiritual ecstasy. With this notion of earthly love being a ladder or staircase leading towards God, Williams gave his sonnet sequence the title, *The Silver Stair*.

The Silver Stair – Williams' first published work -was published in 1912. In 1917, after a nine year engagement, Charles and Florence were married. He continued to write poetry and had a further three volumes published between 1917 and 1924.

Although Williams' love for - and relationship with – Florence inspired his early published works, it was a broken love affair with the librarian at the Oxford University Press – Phyllis Jones – that spurred him on to become a more mature and prolific writer. This love affair occurred in 1927. Soon after it ended, there began an

outpouring of books: seven novels, more than a dozen plays, three volumes of literary criticism, a handful of biographies, several books of theology, and a lengthy and complex cycle of Arthurian poetry.

During this period, Williams' writings contained an increasing element of supernaturalism.

Williams had taken a mild interest in magic as a child. By his late-twenties, he was studying the beliefs and practices of the Rosicrucian branch of Christianity. In 1917, at the age of 31, he was initiated into an organisation called The Order of the Golden Dawn. This Order had been founded in 1887 and, for thirty years, had wavered rather uncertainly between religion and magic. One of its early members allegedly practised necromancy, and another, black-magic – but the Order also included less controversial figures – the poet W B Yeats, one or two clergy with an interest in mysticism, the Anglican theologian Evelyn Underhill, and the Rosicrucian writer A E Waite, who had invited Williams to be initiated.

After a number of quarrels and a series of schisms among the members of the Golden Dawn, Waite formed his own 'temple', and it was this group which Williams joined.

Neophytes aspiring to be initiated into the Order allegedly had to declare, "My soul is wandering in the Darkness, seeking for the Light of Occult Knowledge, and I believe that in this Order the Knowledge of that Light may be obtained."

Williams' association with Waite, and his membership of the Order of the Golden Dawn, no doubt influenced much of his writing – and, perhaps, his theology.

The supernatural plays a part in most – if not all - of Williams' novels. CS Lewis once wrote of Williams:

“He is writing that sort of book in which we begin by saying, “let us suppose that this everyday world were at some one point invaded by the marvellous.”

Williams' novels reveal that the veil between this world and the next is very thin, and the heavenly, or supernatural, often breaks through into our everyday world.

This is apparent in the novel *The Place of the Lion*, where Platonic archetypes (ideal forms) begin to appear around an English country town. Thus, a butterfly appears which is the ideal butterfly, to which all other butterflies flock and are subsumed, or gathered in, by the archetypal butterfly. A lion appears which is the ideal lion, and rampages around the countryside causing chaos but also “drawing to the surface the spiritual strengths and flaws of individual characters”,ⁱ compelling characters in the novel to respond and, in many cases, to make a choice between good and evil. (I wondered, as I was reading this novel, if the lion was an inspiration behind CS Lewis's Aslan?)

The inter-connectedness between this world and the supernatural is also apparent in the novel *Descent into Hell*. This novel begins with a Victorian labourer committing suicide, and his ghost then lingers on. There is also a young woman who is terrified that she will one day meet herself – or, at least, her double; and an academic who idolises a woman to the extent that he conjures up a demon in her form. (This is the first Williams' novel I read and, I must admit, I wasn't impressed. As you can imagine, I didn't find many of the characters terribly easy to warm to, or relate to!).

In *War in Heaven* – perhaps the most accessible of Williams' novels – and, therefore, one which I quite enjoyed - Williams gives a contemporary setting to the search for the Holy Grail, and we have a clear story-line and more rounded characters: - a likeable and rather heroic Archdeacon, for example, who fights valiantly against those who wish to use the grail for evil purposes.

For an Anglican theologian, I find Williams' novels contain a surprising amount of magic. Humphrey Carpenter – in his biography of *The Inklings* – poses the question, “Did Charles Williams believe in magic?”

He continues,

“Certainly he did not dismiss black magic as tomfoolery. To him it was as valid a form of symbolism as the symbols of Christianity. Whether it was **more than** symbolism to him, whether he thought it to be true, is difficult to say ... He used [witchcraft and black magic] in his books, but he did not say, or ask his readers to say, ‘true or false’ to such things. They were simply there. So, though he soon outgrew the Golden Dawn, and left the Order ... the symbolism and the knowledge of the occult that he had acquired during his membership remained valuable to him – not least because in its extreme form black magic was the polar opposite of Christianity; and his mind was always drawn to an awareness of the opposite pole of any argument or belief.”

So, for example, in *War in Heaven*, we find scenes reminiscent of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* or Goethe's *Faust*, with the drawing of magic symbols and diagrams on the floor, and the conjuring of demons.

In Williams' novels, one critic explains,

“violent, elemental forces ... [set loose through various instruments, people, or circumstances] are brought under control and subsumed within a peaceable pattern.”ⁱⁱ

To put it more simply – in words I can understand – Williams' novels deal with the battle between good and evil, between order and chaos, between Heaven and Hell – and good invariably triumphs in the end; order is restored from chaos – God's will is done.

Another recurrent theme in Williams' work and theology is “substitution” – just as Jesus took all the sin of the world on his shoulders and paid the price for our sins, so we should bear one

another's burdens. These "burdens" are, mostly, psychological or emotional burdens, rather than physical – fear, anxiety, guilt, and other emotions which, without help, can so easily bow us down.

This type of substitution, or bearing of one another's burdens, is illustrated in *Descent into Hell*. A young woman, Pauline, lives in constant terror of meeting herself (or her exact double). A poet and playwright, Peter Stanhope, volunteers to carry Pauline's burden for her. When Pauline sets out on her walk home, Williams writes, Stanhope:

"visualized her going along a road ... he visualized another Pauline coming to meet her ... He took trouble to apprehend the vision, he summoned, through all his sensations, an approaching fear. Deliberately he opened himself to that fear, laying aside for a while every thought of what he was doing ... absorbing only the strangeness and the terror of that separate spiritual identity ... He sat on, imagining to himself the long walk with its sinister possibility ... The body of his flesh received [Pauline's] alien terror, his mind carried the burden of her world."ⁱⁱⁱ

While Stanhope thus carries Pauline's burden, she arrives home startled by the realization that, for the first time in years, she has walked the whole way without ever dreading the thought that her double might appear.

Williams produced a vast amount of literature and literary criticism. Unfortunately, I've only had time – both in my research, and in my talk tonight – to explore a small proportion.

I believe the main lessons we can learn from the works I **have** read are:

- firstly, a reminder that we are living in two kingdoms – two kingdoms that are not separate but that frequently interconnect; where the supernatural – or transcendental -

can break through into our 'ordinary' world and transform those who have eyes to see, and ears to hear

- Secondly, Williams reminds his reader that evil is present and at large in the world as we know it and beyond. There may be times when we are called to enter a cosmic battle and to fight to overcome evil forces – but, ultimately, good will triumph, and evil will be overcome
- Thirdly – and finally - Williams inspires us to consider more fully how we can love our neighbour – how we can intercede on their behalf to bear their burdens and ease their load – not offering sympathy from afar, but entering into their pain, or grief, or anxiety, and taking the load from their shoulders – following in the footsteps of Simon of Cyrene, and of our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

ⁱ wikipedia

ⁱⁱ Charles Hefling, *Words, images and (the) Incarnation*, article on Charles Williams in *C S Lewis and Friends: Faith and the Power of the Imagination*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Descent into Hell*, page 100-101