

A Cultural Semiotic Interpretation of Heaven Writing in Lewis' *The Great Divorce*

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Abstract—Heaven writing is an important theme of literature. CS Lewis, a contemporary British writer, uses rich symbols to construct heaven in his work *The Great Divorce*. This study analyzed those symbols through the lens of cultural semiotics. Guided by Yuri Lotman (Юрий Лотман)'s symbolism, this study separates them into traditional symbols and innovative symbols according to their functions as preserving and creating cultural memory. Traditional symbols are coded based on the conventions of cultural memory and derived from the past texts and they are used to set the surroundings and background; innovative symbols, embedded with the theme of the word, come from the reconstruction of the conventionalized expressions or contents in the new context, in order to produce new cultural memory.

Index Terms—Symbols, *The Great Divorce*, cultural semiotics, Yuri Lotman.

I. INTRODUCTION

Influenced by his friend JRR Tolkien, the famous British writer CS Lewis has converted to Christianity since 1931 and has written many literary works with religious elements, most of which are popular in research, such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Space Trilogy* and *The Screwtape Letter*. However, there is little research on *The Great Divorce* (TGD) [1], which was published at the same time as the famous *Space Trilogy*. This paper interprets the symbols in the fiction in order to illustrate how Lewis constructs the image of heaven and conveys his religious ideas. To achieve that, the research adopts Yuri Lotman's (Юрий Лотман) theory of symbolism. From the perspective of cultural semiotics, the paper aims to explain the relationship between those symbols and related cultural memory. It contributes to the practical research of heaven writing, Lewis's fictions, and feasibility of Lotman's symbolism for analyzing literal texts.

II. AN OVERVIEW OF LEWIS'S HEAVEN WRITING IN THE GREAT DIVORCE

Heaven is a significant theme of literature. The writing of heaven is inspired by the *Bible*. Between the heaven and earth, the holy city Jerusalem falls from the sky, with the twelve angels guarding the twelve gates, God sitting high on the throne, the river of life flowing out from under his seat, and the tree of life growing by the river. There is no darkness, death, disease, or pain there (Revelation 21:1, 21:2, 21:12, 22:1, 22:2, 22:3, 22:5).

However, Lewis constructed an intriguing heaven similar to but different from that of *Bible* in TGD. This book describes the journey of a group of ghosts from hell to heaven. Visitors from hell arrive in heaven by bus. The place is as beautiful and harmonious as the garden of Eden. However, because of their fragile body, the ghosts cannot move any leaf or grass, and they may get hurt at any time. The angels try to persuade them to stay in heaven, which requires them to move towards the mountains in the forever sunrise as their feet get stronger during the pain, but none except one could bear such pain and retrieve their beliefs in God. Led by one of the angel George MacDonald*, the protagonist witnesses the conversations between the angels and the ghosts and at the end finds out the truth of heaven and hell.

As the story told, readers' understanding of heaven is constantly overthrown. To interpret the image of heaven in this book, three steps must be taken. First, the heaven appears to be "a level, grassy country through which there ran a wide river (P10)". There are mountains, steep forests, distant valleys, and even a mountain city on an inaccessible peak. Everything seems harmonious and beautiful. However, as the ghosts feel, the heaven is full of dangers. Because of their unsolid body, ghosts are difficult to move a leaf or a petal. Moreover, any waterdrop or fallen leaf may pose a fatal threat to them. At the end, the natives of heaven call heaven "reality", while hell is described as a false existence. Compared with the vast heaven, hell is even smaller than an atom of heaven.

If the ghosts want to stay in heaven, they need to overcome the pains and advance to the mountains in the distance. To do so, they should conquer their lusts and regain the solid beliefs in God. Almost all ghosts choose to return to hell, where they can live comfortably with all their desires realized.

On the one hand, the heaven in TGD draws on the garden image of Eden in the *Bible*, on the other hand, it also contains Lewis's unique imagination. According to Yuri Lotman's symbolism, this paper separates these images into traditional symbols and innovative symbols, and interprets the image of heaven from the above two aspects. Lotman is a cultural semiotologist of the Tartu school in Moscow, Russia. He points out that the expression (form) and the content (meaning) of a symbol are independent cultural texts and the basic unit of culture. [2] Symbols are featured as a high degree of condensation ability, independent migration ability, and outstanding creativity, with the functions of information transmission (transmit information to the receiver),

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*G. MacDonald, 1824-1905, a Scotland writer whom Lewis considered as his mentor.

information generation (generate new meaning) and information memorization (preserve meaning and past context), which play the role of preserving, transferring and creating cultural memory. [3].

III. TRADITIONAL SYMBOLS TO SET THE SURROUNDINGS

Lewis uses many traditional symbols in his literary works that echoes the *Bible* or other famous works. The expression and the content of these symbols are consistent with the traditional image and meaning in cultural memory, which makes them highly understandable.

A. Mountain

A range of mountains is located where the unchanging sunrise lay. Every angel lives only to journey further and further into the mountains. They interrupt that journey and retrace immeasurable distances to come down that day on the mere chance of saving some Ghosts. To be saved, the ghosts have also to head the mountains. "It will be joy going to the mountains, but there will be plenty of work. (P15)" "It will hurt at first, until your feet are hardened. Reality is harsh to the feet of shadows. (P19)" Heaven is the reality while Hell the opposite. The ghosts are shadows of lives. "It's only the little germ of a desire for God that we need to start the process. (P44)"

In TGD, the symbol of the mountains in Heaven embodies the belief in God. As the residents need nothing but the belief in God and they are always on the journey to the mountains, the symbolic meaning of the mountain to them is naturally an ordeal.

The mountain here is a traditional symbol that echoes the record in *Bible*. On the mountain named Golgotha (Matthew 27:33), where the crucifixion took place, Jesus suffered for the sinners and saved them after the resurrection. The mountain is the end of sins and the beginning of salvation. The symbolic meaning of the mountain in TGD is similar to Golgotha in *the New Testament* —the process of climbing makes them suffer but it can also strengthen their faiths.

Informed by Lotman's symbolism, the expression and the content of a symbol are individual cultural texts which can be freely combined or separated. Therefore, the expression and the content of a traditional symbol have already been conventionalized in cultural memory because of the rather frequent and fixed combination.

The symbol of mountain remains similar expression and content in *The Divine Comedy*. Sinners with different original sins would climb from the different layers of the Mount Purgatory. From bottom to top are respectively the proud, the envious, the angry, the slothful, the avaricious and prodigal, the gluttonous, and the sensual. To expiate the sins, they have to bear extreme pain just as the ghosts have to do in TGD.

However, not only the ghosts but the angels are required to climb the mountain. Therefore, transformation from ghosts to angels can be considered as the first stage of salvation, which is not the end. All the angels are also heading to the mountain almost all days, which can be regarded as the second stage of salvation. Hence, the mountain in heaven symbolizes an ordeal while the way to the mountaintop is the process of salvation.

B. Apple

As the tree of knowledge in Eden, there was also an apple tree grew near a lake in TGD. "Wet with the spray, half-veiled in foam-bows, flashing with the bright, innumerable birds that flew among its branches, it rose in many shapes of billowy foliage, huge as a fen-land cloud. From every point apples of gold gleamed through the leaves. (P23)" One of the ghosts tries to take an apple back to Hell. A gust comes and half a dozen apples falls around and on him, making him unable to rise for a few minutes. He lifts the smallest one and staggers away when an angel berates him, "Fool, put it down. You cannot take it back. There is not room for it in Hell. Stay here and learn to eat such apples. The very leaves and the blades of grass in the wood will delight to teach you. (P24)"

It is widely accepted by the public that the forbidden fruit recorded in the Bible is apple, for it is the most widely cultivated tree fruits. The apple in TGD is also resembles the forbidden fruit. The ghosts are forbidden to take it back to Hell or eat it in the form of a phantom. Readers can find out the reason at the end of the story: Hell is no larger than an atom of Heaven. Obviously, an apple is too huge for Hell to bear it. As a result, if the ghost eats it, it may pierce him apart. A ghost should do nothing to the fruit but stay in Heaven and learn to eat it. Therefore, the content of the symbol is slightly different from that in the Bible. The creatures in Heaven are allowed to eat it. They even try to use it as a temptation to persuade the ghosts to stay. The apple is the fruit of wisdom. Eating the apple the ghosts can overcome their lusts; eating the fruit of knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve gained great wisdom for human beings.

Besides, the ghost's stealing the apple resembles Eve's eating the forbidden fruit. It is also regarded as an evil conduct, a typical Hell-style conduct. As Giovanni Costabile [4] concludes, there are three reasons regarding the theft of the unripe apples as a crime far worse than it seems. There are also three reasons for the conduct of the ghost to be judged as a worse crime. First, it is wrong to steal. Second, the ghost is not committed out of hunger and need for the fruit to any purpose, but just to take it as a souvenir. Third, taking the apple away is equal to deprive his own right to be redeemed. In a word, the apple is also a symbol of the evidence of the ghost's crime.

The narrator describes the distance between the ghost with the apple and the bus coming from Hell as "via dolorosa (P23)". It is the path along which Jesus carried the cross to Golgotha. It is a street of suffering and also a street of redemption. The process of learning to eat the apple in Heaven and climbing the mountain can be also considered as walking along "via dolorosa" as far as I concerned. It is hurt and uncomfortable at the beginning but in the end the glory of God will descend on him.

C. Unicorn

Unicorn is a mysterious creature, like a horse, with long horns on the forehead. One of the earliest descriptions of Unicorn appeared in the collection of ancient Greek animal fables called *the Physiologus* [5]. Unicorn is a strong and fierce animal, and only virgins can attract and capture it. Therefore, the traditional symbolic meaning of unicorn is power and purity.

The unicorns in TGD in heaven show the content of power.

A herd of unicorns came when the fourth conversation, overheard by the narrator, took place, between the ghost of a well-dressed woman and one of the angels. “Twenty-seven hands high the smallest of them and white as swans but for the red gleam in eyes and nostrils and the flashing indigo of their horns. (P30)” He could still remember the shaking earth, the squelching noise of the soft wet turf under their hoofs, the snorting and the whinnying.

Dating back to the Greek translation of the Bible and the King James Version of the Bible, the original “re’em” was wrongly translated into “unicorn” until the new international version changed it back to “wild ox”.

Numbers 23:22

“God brought them out of Egypt; they have the strength of a wild ox. (NIV)”

“God brought them out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of a unicorn. (KJV)”

Deuteronomy 33:17

“In majesty he is like a firstborn bull; his horns are the horns of a wild ox. (NIV)”

“His glory is like the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are like the horns of unicorns. (KJV)”

This translation error indicates the widely accepted symbolic meaning of the unicorn--power, which is also adopted in TGD.

IV. INNOVATIVE SYMBOLS TO CONVEY RELIGIOUS IDEAS

When Lewis built heaven, he not only encodes many traditional symbols to adapt to the readers’ understanding, but also designs some innovative symbols. These innovative symbols have new expression or content and require readers to interpret within the contexts. The unique ideas embodied in those symbols then create new cultural memory.

A. Angel

In TGD, the residents of heaven are angels transformed human beings after they die, and they have a devout belief in God:

“Some were naked, some robed. But the naked ones did not seem less adorned, and the robes did not disguise in those who wore them the massive grandeur of muscle and the radiant smoothness of flesh. Some were bearded but no one in that company struck me as being of any particular age...The earth shook under their tread as their strong feet sank into the wet turf. (P12)”

The author’s description of angels, such as “the bright people” and “the white spirit”, meets the readers’ imagination. He uses bright and white to describe angels. These simple symbols of lightness and color leave readers with the direct impression of holiness and purity. And just like their appearance, their faith in God is also pure. “You can begin as if nothing had ever gone wrong. White as snow. (P18)” what they have done before is not important. As long as they pay their pious faith, they can stay in heaven. That’s why in the book one of the angels used to be a murderer before he dies. Therefore, the first content of the angel symbol in this book is devout believers.

They are not only believers, but also assistants of God’s salvation, which is another content of angel symbol.

Changing from ghost to angel is not the end of salvation. Angels still have to move towards the mountains. This is the second stage of salvation. However, when visitors from hell arrive in heaven, angels are willing to “interrupt that journey and retraced immeasurable distances to come down on the mere chance of saving some Ghost. (P36)” This is not the first time that the devout assistants try to convert some ghosts. To do so, they make great efforts in convincing and even offer help selflessly—“You can lean on me all the way. I cannot absolutely carry you, but you need have almost no weight on your own feet: and it will hurt less at every step. (P31)” The way angels treat ghosts resembles how mothers care for toddlers, holy, pure and selfless.

The angels in TGD from heaven are not exactly the same as those in the Bible. Although they are also devout believers and assistants of God, the latter has white wings on his back and a halo on his head. They were assigned many tasks: reporting the birth of John and Jesus, worshipping God, being a bridge between God and man, conveying human requirements for divinity, and revealing religious laws to Moses on behalf of God. [6]

The prototype of angel is the believer and assistant of God in the *Bible*, such as reporting good news to the Virgin Mary. Generally speaking, the content of angel symbol is stable—devout believers and God’s assistants, but there are new expressions in different literary works. For example, in TGD angels are no longer a kind of species created by God, but transformed human beings with devout faith. They have no wings or aura, and they are still on the way of strengthening their faiths.

B. Lizard

Most ghosts cannot wait to go back hell. Only one ghost and his pet lizard have been converted and transformed to the residents in heaven. Why a lizard can be saved? What does it have to do with ghosts? And why has the ghost been converted?

Lizard is considered an unclean creature in the *Bible*. God said to Moses, “Of the animals that move about on the ground, these are unclean for you: the weasel, the rat, any kind of great lizard, the gecko, the monitor lizard, the wall lizard, the skink and the chameleon. (Leviticus 11: 29, 11: 30)” Perhaps because lizards are cold-blooded reptiles, people often endow it the symbolic meaning of dirty and evil. For example, the Western dragon is an evil monster created based on the lizard and is the enemy of mankind.

However, different from the above symbolic meaning, Lewis sets up a lizard to be redeemed and designs unique contents for this symbol. There is a red lizard sitting on the shoulder of a human ghost. The ghost is annoyed by its whisper and allowed the angel to kill it after a long conversation. “The Burning One (an angel) closed his crimson grip on the reptile: twisted it, while it bit and writhed, and then flung it, vroken-backed, on the turf. (P52)” But it does not die. “So far from dying, the creature was still struggling and even growing bigger as it struggled. And as it grew it changed. Its hinder parts grew rounder. The tail, still flickering, became a tail of hair that flickered between huge and glossy buttocks. (P52)” The lizard is transformed into a great stallion, and it is “silver white but with mane and tail of gold. It was smooth and shining, rippled with swells of flesh

and muscle, whinneying and stamping with its hoofs. At each stamp the land shook and the trees dindled. (P53)”

The lizard is killed first, then gets the solid entity of a horse, as the resident of heaven. This plot gives the lizard complex symbolic meaning.

First of all, the process of the death and transformation of the lizard is very similar to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus—they are both killed to redeem sins and are both endowed with new life. Second, the change of the lizard proves that even unclean lower creatures are worthy of God’s salvation. Then, the transformation of the lizard satirizes other human ghosts who refuse to be redeemed and indulge in their lusts. Human beings have too many lusts and feelings that blind their eyes and make them abandon their faith. That’s why they can hardly be redeemed. The lizard has much simpler lusts than a human being does, so it is easier to establish the faith in God and transform. Finally, because the angel kills the lizard on the ghost’s shoulder after obtaining the owner’s consent, it indicates that human beings have complete control over animals. God created human beings and gave them the power to “rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground. (Genesis 1:28)”

However, the relationship between the human ghost and the lizard is not simply controlment. George, the protagonist’s mentor, explains, “what is a lizard compared with a stallion? Lust is a poor, weak, whimpering, whispering thing compared with that richness and energy of desire which will arise when lust has been killed. (P54)” It can be seen that the lizard represents lusts of the ghost the horse after transformation symbolizes desires. When the angel proposes to kill the lizard, that is, to eliminate the ghost’s lusts, the lizard cries for help in the ghost’s ear, “Then you’ll be without me for ever and ever. It’s not natural. How could you live? You’d be only a sort of ghost, not a real man as you are now, only dreams.(P51)” When the lust is killed, the shackles that imprison ghosts in hell no longer exist. Therefore, as the dead lizard turns into a horse, this “dark” and “oily” ghost turns into an immense man with strong limbs. The newborn giant is as pure as snow, with strong faith. He jumps on horseback and heads toward the mountain with the great energy generated as the weak lusts turns into the strong desires.

At first, as the lizard continuously whispers in the ghost’s ear the ghost cannot bear the disturbance and plans to go back hell in submit to his lusts. When the angel asks him for the first time, “would you like me to make it quiet? (P51)” The ghost does not hesitate to say yes, suggesting that he has the intention to resist the lusts, but his own strength is not strong enough. When the angel proposed approaches to the lizard, the ghost starts to be afraid of getting hurt himself. He shrinks back. Till the angel repeats asking for permission for the eighth time, the lusts of the ghost finally collapses, and he shouts, “get it over. Do what you like. (P52)” Then he pleads, “God help me, God help me. (P52)”

The ghost can only be saved if he overcomes his lusts in the first place. During this period, the persuasion of the angel helps him strengthen his inner strength and faith. As mentioned above, the angel can give the ghost support, but cannot do it for the ghost completely. This means that the subjective willingness of conversion is a necessary condition for salvation.

In a word, the “lizard” in TGD is a very important innovative symbol and contains rich contents. The lizard, as a saved creature itself, echoes with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, which proves that lower creations can also be saved, expresses the author’s ridicule of human ghosts who indulge in lusts, and reflects human’s domination over animals. When the author reveals that the lizard is actually the ghost’s lusts, he also uncovers the truth of “salvation”—the angel tries to strengthen the belief of the ghost through persuasion until the latter overcomes his desire and reconstructs his belief himself.

V. CONCLUSION

Lotman emphasizes that the expression and content of symbols are a whole. Although they can form a new whole with another text at any time, any combination is loose and temporary. Therefore, the author can freely design and combine the expression and content of the symbol. When the author selects the more profound expression and content in the cultural memory familiar to the readers, this symbol is called the traditional symbol, which is convenient for coding and decoding; when the author encodes the symbolic expression and content according to his own ideas, the reader needs to decode it in combination with the context.

Most of the symbols used by Lewis to construct heaven in TGD are traditional symbols echoing the *Bible*, such as rivers, mountains, various animals and plants, unicorns and so on. The author constructs symbols based on the generally accepted direct and indirect experience in cultural memory, so that readers can easily understand them. They often render the surroundings and shape the story background.

In addition, in order to reflect the theme of the work, Lewis uses a small number of but exquisite innovative symbols in the design of important plots to encode his thoughts of redemption. Although the innovative symbols are not as easy to understand as the traditional symbols, readers can think carefully about the theme of the work and gain impressive understandings in their memory when trying to figure out the author’s intention within the context.

Lewis designs innovative symbols in two ways. For one thing, he adjusted the expression of traditional symbols. For example, angels are transformed by human souls rather than directly created by God, but the content of the symbol remains the same—angels are still believers and assistants of God. For another, he encodes the content of symbols, such as the lizard, which contain rich and complex symbolic meanings and reflect unique creative thinking. It can be found that each of the two important innovative symbols interacts with the inherent cultural memory, so readers can quickly mobilize the relevant cultural memory when reading. When they find that the symbolic expression or content in the work is inconsistent with their memory, they will rethink the author’s intention. When readers accept these innovative symbols, the writer’s ideas and intentions are understood and new cultural memories are generated.

Cultural memory to some degree affects writers’ choice of symbols. In turn, the symbols selected by writers can inherit or innovate cultural memory. It is precisely because of symbols that culture can be preserved and developed. Traditional symbols carry the inherent cultural memory and

represent the wisdom of the past; innovative symbol contains new elements, which makes the culture full of vitality and constantly enrich. With these symbols as carriers, cultural memory can be preserved and updated.

From the perspective of cultural semiotics, this study uses Lotman's symbolism to analyze the symbols used in Lewis' TGD. It enriches the study of heaven writing, Lewis' work, and proves the possibility of Lotman's symbolism in literary text analysis.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Tongtong Shi conducted the research, made the analysis and wrote the paper.

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