

Parable and Allegory in Robin Hardy's Fiction

As John Bunyan's example in *Pilgrim's Progress* makes clear, allegory is a good way to communicate philosophical and religious truths. Angus Fletcher says allegorical works serve "major social and spiritual needs" while contributing to education and providing entertainment. (23). He concludes, "I suspect they are the monuments to our ideals. They do not mimetically show us the human beings who need these ideals, but they examine the philosophic, theological, or moral premises on which we act, and then they confront us with the perfection of certain ideals, the depravity of others" (360-61.); but as Carolynn Van Dyke observes, they function through "a shift of perspective to include both concrete agents and the intelligible realities" that are abstract ideas (39). Though Gay Clifford aims "at persuading readers of the particular power of allegory, its imaginative and intellectual—and moral—pleasures," she argues, "We read on to find out what happens, rather than to find out what this means, or how the meaning might be applied to our own existence" (3). Robin Hardy has published seventeen novels, all of which have enlightening things to say about living the Christian life as they use names, dialogues, and situations that direct the reader to ponder religious truths. Hardy calls her mode in *Streiker's Bride* analogy, saying, "It is a story in which spiritual forces or ideas are said to BE LIKE something else, something concrete. All of Jesus' stories are analogies: 'The kingdom of heaven IS LIKE a mustard seed'" (*Streiker's Bride Q & A* 1).

Neither *Pilgrim's Progress* nor Hardy's novels are written solely to teach religious truths. First and foremost they tell stories. If a reader wants to know how to live the Christian life, he can read a book on Christian living. If he wants to be entertained, he can read a novel. If that novel has a metaphysical level beneath the plot level, it functions like a puzzle to the alert reader, who notices correspondences and sees meanings on two or more levels running parallel to one another. In a "pure" allegory, everything contributes to the lesson being taught, but not even Bunyan wrote such a book. The reader becomes interested in Christian as a person and grieves when Faithful is burned at the stake. The reader is not grieving over a general abstraction but a

person of flesh and blood who meets a dreadful and unjust end. The reader of Hardy's *Streiker's Bride* does not see merely Christ figures, the Church, and Christians but an intriguing romance with the same appeal as *Jane Eyre*: poor, young, innocent girl pursued by dark, mysterious, wealthy stranger.

Hardy calls her first trilogy a parable. *The Annals of Lystra—Chataine's Guardian, Stone of Help*, and *Liberation of Lystra* (also published as *High Lord of Lystra*; Hardy's kingdom is imaginary, but St Paul did visit Lystra in Asia Minor)—depict a rebellious heroine named Deidre, who in the first of the novels through waywardness and disobedience brings her guardian (and later husband) to be whipped and condemned to hanging (he escapes by substitution as in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*). As in the Celtic legend that provides her name, Deidre elopes with the man she loves to avoid marrying her father's choice. Her husband Roman is a Christ figure throughout the trilogy. As in Jesus' case, Roman's father was not married to his mother though his father did eventually claim him. Roman also is descended on his mother's side from a dark skinned race, which makes him suspect in Lystra. In the second novel Deidre's father willingly submits to hanging that she might be freed from the slavery her willfulness has brought her to.

Liberation of Lystra, the final novel in the trilogy, is far more allegorical than the first two. In this Roman claims the battle is his and faces torture alone, confronting and defeating the forces of hell. He is branded on the chest with a cross and then tied to a pole on the roof and left for twenty-four hours. In one sequence he breaks an evil mirror and is drawn into hell, imitating Christ's harrowing of hell as seen in medieval theology. Deidre represents the typical Christian, always demanding more and wanting her own way, often needing rescue. Deidre realizes Roman's strength is in total obedience to his High Lord (as Christ was totally obedient to his Father). In this novel Roman disappears and is thought dead, but he is resurrected after his funeral barge is lit. At the end of the novel he leads Deidre and a few of their loyal friends through a mysterious deadly mountainous region called the Poison Greens. This area full of snakes surely represents the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Finally, the heroic band watches

from a mountaintop in the final scene as two thieving, disloyal armies meet on the plain below to annihilate each other. Their loyal friends have been held back to keep them from participating in the fray. The episode is reminiscent of the Tribulation Period and the Battle of Armageddon.

The second trilogy—*Streiker's Bride*, *Streiker the Killdeer*, and *Streiker's Morning Sun* (as Hardy says on her website, they concern earth, heaven, and hell, respectively)—is more obviously allegory—of Christ and his bride the Church. Adair Weiss, the vessel of consciousness in the story, accepts *a dare* to marry billionaire Fletcher Streiker sight unseen after perusing a folder filled with clippings and letters about things he has done, talking with others about him, and conversing with him on the phone, reminiscent of conversations with God in prayer. The folder, obviously a stand-in for the Bible, helps Adair understand Fletcher's character. She learns from the things he has done that “he likes children . . . he's not afraid to get personally involved in a painful situation . . . he can handle danger . . . he's not afraid to take personal risks . . . he believes in entrepreneurship and wants to help others succeed” (23). She even dreams that she dances for an audience of one and feels exhilarated and grateful that she has pleased him as a person can feel joy that God is pleased even though He is the only one who knows the accomplishment. The surname *Weiss* could refer to “though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” from Isaiah 1:18 because Christians have their sins washed away. The name Fletcher Striker also has pertinent connotations. A *fletcher* is an arrow maker, one who attaches feathers to arrows. Psalm 91:4 refers to God's protecting his people: “He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust.” The word *strike* is used tellingly in the Exodus story of the Passover—with the Passover lamb a type of the Messiah: “And they shall take of the blood, and strike it on the two side posts and on the upper door post of the houses, wherein they shall eat it” (Ex. 12:7). In response to Adair's question about why Fletcher chose her, he writes to her, “[S]omething about you told me you might respond” (31) even as Christians believe that God chose them because He knew their hearts. Hardy says that Fletcher chose Adair “Because he knew she would choose him!” (“Streiker's Bride Q&A”). After she agrees to marry Fletcher, Adair waits several days without word, but all the time he is making arrangements. As Adair is

whisked from doctor's office to lawyer's office with no explanation, she begins to fear, "But then she remembered the person behind these errands, and she relaxed. . . . Fletcher had arranged it, she entered confidently ignorant" (93-94). In the allegory we are taught that God is behind the unexplained things, and we can trust Him. The lawyer explains to Adair that he has been given broad authority because he always does exactly what Fletcher has asked him to do, just as God asks that His followers obey Him.

Fletcher and his relationship with Adair suggest God's nature and the relationship between Christ and the Church. On their wedding night, Fletcher promises Adair that their penthouse apartment is only temporary quarters and that he is going to build a home for her as in John 14 2: "In my Father's house are many mansions. . . . I go to prepare a place for you." One day after their marriage he leaves her on urgent business, which turns out to be the necessity of allowing her space to grow up and make decisions. Adair loves ballet, and Fletcher willingly pays for her lessons, but she discovers that she doesn't have time to pursue ballet and be available to take care of the things Fletcher asks her to do. She comes to understand "There was no competition. It was useless to choose the gift over the giver. Without the giver, she would have nothing at all" (200). After Fletcher is gone, his maid, Sugar, tells Adair, "He always has such good reasons for what he asks—the only problem is, he doesn't usually explain them!" (177). As Adair waits for Fletcher's return, telling Sugar he said it might be a while, Sugar replies, "He always talks like that—'I just don't know when I'll be back'—then poof! One day he walks in the door, right out of the blue" (208), reminding the reader of Christ's promised return in the Second Coming. Eventually, "Adair realized how unreliable her feelings were. . . . Her love for Fletcher had nothing to do with her feelings. He was coming back at some point regardless of how she felt about it. All she had to do was be ready to greet him. . . ." (233). Finally Adair comes to see that when she married Fletcher she gave "up life on her terms—[gave] up old relationships, familiar problems, whimsical decisions. By coming into Adair's life, Fletcher had knocked out every support and small consolation she'd had, until she had nothing left but . . . him" (247).

Much of the second novel of the Streiker trilogy takes place in Hawaii, Fletcher's birthplace, site of his large lovely home, the home of his family, and heaven in the cosmos of this trilogy. In *Streiker's Bride*, as Adair looks over the material in the original folder she was given at the initiation of Fletcher's wooing, she sees pictures:

They were obviously pictures of Hawaii—sunlit beaches and swelling waves, waterfalls coursing over black cliffs, wild orchids and palm trees in the rain Suddenly Adair understood these as well. These were pictures he had taken of his home. This was the place special to his heart, where he was certain to bring her when he came back to get her. This was a picture of her future, and it was Paradise” (232).

That Hawaii is heaven seems an understated backdrop for the story that develops in the novel, of Fletcher's assumed four-year-old son, whose mother has supposedly been killed in a car accident. Sandra assigned paternity to Fletcher at the child's birth to gain Fletcher's money, but Fletcher tells Adair, "I saw him and loved him. I chose him to be mine" (241)—as God chose Abraham and his descendants, both biological and by adoption—instead of denying the boy though Fletcher was not the biological father. When Fletcher pursued the relationship, Sandra taught her son to fear and hate his legal "father." Afraid that his enemies will attempt to get at him by harming the child, Fletcher assumes the role of the killdeer, drawing attention to himself in front of his enemies and away from the child. He explains to Adair, "It's a little brown bird that builds its nest right on the ground. That would seem to be a stupid thing to do; but when predators get too close to her nest, the mama killdeer will lure them away by pretending to be wounded. It's actually a very effective defense" (83). Given care of the child with Fletcher absent, Adair rescues Daniel from a fire and kidnappers and teaches him to love her and his father. Adair sees her role: "[T]hat's what he chose me for—to help Daniel see that his father is not the monster he's been led to believe. That's my job, and that's what I'm going to do" (165). On one level Daniel represents the Jews as God's chosen people, but on another he represents all the lost, for Christians, symbolized by Adair, are God's representatives to show the love of Christ to a dark

world. Trying to teach Daniel that Fletcher loves him, Adair sings all the verses of “Jesus Loves Me” to him.

The third novel in the Streiker trilogy, *Streiker’s Morning Sun*, plays with dream and nightmare as Fletcher, Adair, and Daniel visit frigid Beaconville. Fletcher tells Adair he aims to blow apart the Warfield group—Satan and his legions—which he does by bringing many of the townspeople out of their domain. Fletcher has responded to an invitation from Lilith Crandall to come help the town, but she neglects to meet him and his family, so they try a motel. Because the night manager will not open the door and find room for them in the inn, they take refuge in the church. Fletcher offers to buy out businesses and persuades people to leave town on the train when they hear the whistle, for this is hell. Adair feels currents of evil trying to suck her in, but she protects Daniel and trusts Fletcher to get them out. Everyone wants Fletcher’s money, but as Adair knows, “Fletcher’s gifts did not come cheaply. He required a cooperation, an alliance, and Adair was not sure they understood that. What might they do when they discovered there were strings attached?” (48). As hell seems to be engulfing the town, Adair, Daniel, and four others take refuge in the church, where Fletcher has stocked food for them, surrounded by stained glass windows picturing Jesus—knocking at the door, as a good shepherd, on the cross, and on a white horse. These few are safe in the church until the train comes. Adair tells one of the others in the church, “When you’re in the middle of a nightmare, it’s as real as anything to you. But when the sun rises, and you wake up, you realize you were trapped in nothing more than shadows. But . . . you have to be willing to wake up and face the light” (218).

The other novels are not allegorical but make entertaining reading. Apparent in all of them is a recurring theme, as stated by Hardy on her amazon.com blog: “What I have learned (and keep learning) is that the most powerful story in the world is that of redemptive love. So I keep working at it, trying to get the story right, and to adequately express something that is really beyond me.” In *Padre* the reader tunes in to the title character’s nickname and the heroine’s final home, the Grayson Homestead near San Angelo. The five Sammy books tell of a versatile, clever policeman—*Sammy: Dallas Detective*; *Sammy: Women Troubles*; *Sammy: Working for a*

Living; Sammy on Vacation; and Sammy: Little Misunderstandings. Finally, three recent novels in the Latter Annals of Lystra: *Nicole of Prie Mer, Ares of Westford, and Prisoners of Hope* focus on Ares, the great, great grandson of Roman, from the earlier Lystran trilogy; it is hard to see allegory in the later novels though they do clearly illustrate redemptive love.

The literary artist gives concrete expression to the abstractions that make life meaningful. Clifford argues, “Though allegory is the most abstract and intellectual of all forms of fiction, its authors need a strong sense of the concrete and a lively visual imagination. The writer is concerned with recurrent patterns of human experience and the immaterial or metaphysical patterns of which these are supposedly a reflection, but he necessarily relies on particulars to express these abstractions and generalities” (8). Allegory is out of fashion today, perhaps because it spells out its message in giant letters, and modern critics prefer subtlety; however, as Flannery O’Connor says, “For the hard-of-hearing you shout, for the nearly blind you draw large startling pictures.” Hardy’s novels are all good reading, and they delight with their insights into what it means to live a Christian life. Hardy says,

Christian authors . . . want to portray life as it is in the real world to demonstrate that the power of God can cleanse and heal real suffering caused by real evil. Even in the fantasy genre a book’s power lies in how realistically it depicts the human struggle. . . . God saves us from our worst fears, beyond our wildest expectations. I don’t know of anyone so secure in his understanding of God that he doesn’t need even a simple reminder . . . in whatever form. (“Online” 9)

She also says that she is writing “to equip adults emotionally for resisting Satan’s attacks by believing in God’s love for them” (“Online” 14). Her work needs to be better known.

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