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THE PEOPLE OF THE LIE IN THE CITY:
SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT IN *ALL HALLOWS EVE*

By Sarah Beach

*All Hallows' Eve*¹, with *Descent into Hell*, represents Charles Williams' best work in fiction. A tale of supernatural conflict, its resolution depends upon the choices the characters make, choices between evil and good. The subtlety with which Williams writes keeps the story from falling into obvious camps of black and white. Like the landscape that Lester moves through, the crucial decisions she faces are grey, and only after the choice is made do their white or black aspects become apparent. Lester herself is described as a disinterested personality, and this quality of disinterest keeps her at a slight emotional distance from the reader. The emotional distance softens the boundaries of the story's conflict and crisis, unless we can find a way of bringing into focus the issues and threats the various characters represent to each other.

To find a means of defining spiritual conditions we can turn to the work of M. Scott Peck. A noted psychiatrist and author of several books, Peck has formulated a set of definitions of levels of spiritual development. In his book *Further Along the Road Less Traveled*² Peck describes four levels. Stage One, which he calls Chaotic/Antisocial exemplifies a quality of lawlessness which is absent of spirituality. Stage Two he labels Formal/Institutional and this stage displays "a rigorous adherence to the letter of the law and attachment to the forms of religion." Skeptic/Individual is his designation for Stage Three, a condition of principled behavior that can be characterized by religious doubt or disinterest, but which is accompanied by curiosity about other areas of life. The last stage, which he considers the most mature, he calls the Mystical/Communal. This stage holds to the spirit of the law, rather than the letter.

From these brief descriptions, I'd like to elaborate a bit more. The lawlessness which Peck assigns to the Chaotic/Antisocial personality can be colored and filled by the

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- 1: *All Hallows' Eve*, Charles Williams (Pellegrini & Cudahy: New York, 1948). Hereafter noted in the text as AHE.
 - 2: *Further Along the Road Less Traveled*, M. Scott Peck (Simon & Schuster: New York, 1993). Hereafter noted in the text as FAR. The description of levels of spiritual development is on p. 238.

destructiveness and anti-life tendencies of evil. This state of being is in fact evil's surest home.

(Before moving further let us be sure to make the distinction between an evil *person* and an evil *deed*. As Peck observes in *The People of the Lie*³, "evil deeds do not an evil person make. Otherwise we should all be evil, because we all do evil things." Defining these differences is important, for as we will discover in looking at Lester's history, she had in her past agreed to some evil things, but she herself does not appear to the reader as an evil person.)

Fleshing out the description of Stage Two, the Formal/Institutional personality has an intense need for structure, and displays a fear of stepping outside the known or chosen boundaries of life. The Skeptic/Individual of Stage Three, motivated by the principled doubt and inquisitiveness, proves to be more adaptive to the unknown. However, because of the strain of individuality, this personality type can also be more susceptible to pride, that "I *know* what I'm doing" outlook. The Stage Four personality, the Mystical/Communal person, gives the appearance of being meek. The communal bond will motivate a desire to bring people together, to help, to please others. But in the heart of these people is always the vision of the spirit of the law, the law of God, which is to love one another. And this they will not sacrifice for anyone.

Peck concludes that the effects of people of different levels of spiritual development interacting will be adulation or conflict.

One of the most important reasons it is so critical to understand the stages of spiritual development is because of the sense of threat that exists between people of different stages, and their inevitable interaction There is a profound tendency for us human beings to look up to someone who is one step – perhaps a third of a stage – ahead of us as a wise person or guru. On the other hand, if someone is two steps ahead of us, we usually think that he or she is a threat, even evil. (FAR, p.241)

This potential for conflict within the structure of stages of spiritual development provides a means of analyzing the interactions of Williams' characters in *All Hallows' Eve*. It can cast light on Lester's position in the City and what possibilities wait for her.

The first order of business, then, is to sort out where the various characters fall in Peck's stages.

There can be no doubt that Simon belongs to Stage One. Simon's whole intent, to

3: *The People of the Lie*, M. Scott Peck (Simon & Schuster: New York, 1983), p. 70. Hereafter PL.

achieve rulership of the whole world without reference to the people ruled, exhibits an extreme lawlessness. He sees himself beyond law, untouchable. The collapse of his plans at the end of the story shows that he was indeed touchable. The crucial element that commits Simon to a Stage One condition is the fact that he is evil. Evil; a blunt word, but the appropriate one. Peck defines evil thus:

Evil is in opposition to life. It is that which opposes the life force. It has, in short, to do with killing. Specifically, it has to do with murder – namely, unnecessary killing, killing that is not required for biological survival. (PL, p. 42)

Yet, in his plans for Betty, who is actually the child of his body, Simon intends something even more than mere death. In order to fulfill his desire for greater knowledge of the future, he intends to exile Betty's spirit to the Limbo city to be his slave messenger in that dimension.

Up to now he had been content to send his daughter on her ghostly journeys as his messenger and in some ways his substitute. He had begotten her for this and for more than this; since she had grown out of early childhood he had trained her in this. Now the time of more had come and the mystical rain which had defeated her should mock him no longer. (AHE, p. 50)

By speaking the "backward-intoned Tetragrammaton" (AHE, p. 159) over the subdued Betty, Simon would condemn her to a deadly non-death. Peck gives a clinical description of the destruction Simon intends to visit upon his daughter.

When I say that evil has to do with killing, I do not mean to restrict myself to corporeal murder, evil is also that which kills spirit. There are various essential attributes of life – particularly human life – such as sentience, mobility, awareness, growth, autonomy, will. It is possible to kill or attempt to kill one of these attributes without actually destroying the body. (PL, p. 42-43)

Where Peck is generally referring to attempts to wipe out any *one* of these attributes in another person, it becomes clear that in Williams' tale, we are shown someone who desires to eliminate *all* those attributes in another. In the middle of the story when Simon endeavors to intone the name of God backwards, he has incapacitated Betty nearly completely: she knows nothing of what is around her, she is immobile on her bed, she is unaware, not allowed to grow (as a person), completely defenseless and without willpower. It is, however, Simon's lack of perception of things spiritual, what Peck calls being "absent of spirituality," which defeats him. Lester resides in a spiritual dimension, one in which Betty feels quite at home. The two girls can communicate, and Simon remains completely ignorant of that interaction. Simon is so totally committed to his selfish, self-

centered ends that there is no possibility of his moving upward into another stage of spiritual development.

Stage Two, that of the Formal/Institutional personality, is not so socially isolated as Stage One. For Simon, any relationship he enters into is merely a means to an end. His connection to Lady Wallingford, the mother of Betty, was for him for no other purpose but the getting of his spiritual messenger. Lady Wallingford herself means nothing to him, except as a tool. But to Lady Wallingford, Simon, and his vision of the world, has great significance. She is High Priestess in a dark religion, and she takes its forms very seriously. When she comes to view Jonathan's portrait of Simon, she is ruthless in pointing out what she perceives to be its flaws. And her perception springs from a defensiveness held for the most important thing in her life. She, in a quite literal sense, worships Simon, untainted by any romantic glow of glory. He is her god and she will protect that image. Yet although she does not like – at all – anything about Jonathan's portrait of her god, she behaves through the viewing scene with freezing formality. In a more congenial personality it might be called civility, but in Lady Wallingford, it is formality, because for her form is everything and the substance irrelevant.

Her counterpart in Stage Two is Evelyn. But Evelyn, unlike Lady Wallingford, does not have an apparent religion with which to focus her need for structure and formality. All she has is her social relationships. When she is cast, by her death, into the uncertainty of the Limbo City, she clutches at the one thing she can find of her old life – Lester. Williams presents Evelyn's vacuous need in a compact image: "this that was Evelyn, the gabbing voice, the chattering teeth, the helpless sobs, the crawling fingers" (AHE, p. 18).

Both of these women do not take kindly to the changes the story brings to them. Lady Wallingford resists the change in Betty that begins with the young woman's love for the artist Jonathan. Evelyn seeks to deny the change that death has brought, to the point of resisting even the idea of death. For Evelyn that denial seems possible because she still has the lodestone of her previous existence, Lester.

Lester, of course, is the novel's prime example of a person in Stage Three of spiritual development. The Skeptic/Individual is a person of principled behavior characterized by disinterest and curiosity. In the opening of the book, she is apparently standing on a bridge over the Thames, unmoving. Even as she comes to realize a certain oddity to her surroundings, she stands.

She remained standing there, for though she had been born a reasonably intelligent and forceful creature, she had never in fact had to display any initiative – much less such initiative as was needed here. (AHE, p. 8)

She is, then, the nearly complete picture of a disinterested personality, an individual not dependant upon others, except by choosing to be so.

But besides Richard, the only thing in which she had been interested had been the apparatus of mortal life, not people – she had not cared for people particularly, except perhaps Evelyn; she was sincerely used to Evelyn, whom she had known at school and since; but apart from Evelyn, not people – only the things they used and lived in, houses, dresses, furniture, gadgets of all kinds. That was what she had liked, and (if she wanted it now) that was what she had got. (AHE, p. 9)

As the novel progresses, Lester learns that these things are in fact *not* what she wants. But that learning leads to her changing her level of spiritual development.

However, Lester is not the sole example of the Stage Three development. Her husband Richard displays many of the same disinterested characteristics as his wife. After his wife dies, he takes some time away from work, not because *he* felt such a need but rather “to spare his office companions the slight embarrassment of the sight of him” (AHE p. 24). It is not that he does not feel grief, but rather that his encounters with those flashes of grief have no relation to a physical place. Yet, given Richard’s ability to see into the meanings of Jonathan’s paintings, it could be said that he may be closer to the edge of Stage Four than Lester is at the beginning of the book.

The Stage Four personality, the Mystical/Communal, who holds to the spirit of the law, has two representatives in *All Hallows’ Eve*, Jonathan and Betty. Jonathan displays an easy, natural connection to the people around him. When Richard visits him, “he had a general habit of leaving Richard the most comfortable chair and himself sitting on the table” (AHE, p. 25). This native graciousness even extends itself to Lady Wallingford. When she comes to inspect his work, he offers her tea. Admittedly, part of his motivation is to delay her first glimpse of a painting he fears will cause problems, but taken in tandem with his courtesy to Richard, it can also be seen as honest civility as well. The law that he consciously follows in his work is a quote for Sir Joshua Reynolds. That respected artist “once alluded to ‘common observation and a plain understanding’ as the source of all art” (AHE, p. 28). Not strict rules and unbendable forms, but rather a sense of connection to the world and life around him. Jonathan confronts this actively in his art and holds it for others to see.

But if Jonathan is the active representative of Stage Four we could say that Betty, in part, is a passive representative of it. In the City of Richard and Jonathan, Betty appears subdued to the point of being will-less. Her dutiful response to the commands of her mother is given beyond the boundaries of duty, indeed beyond the boundaries of her desire. When Lady Wallingford commands Betty to leave Jonathan’s studio, putting an end to their “pretended engagement” (as she calls it), Betty melts away from the young artist: “... he felt Betty flag in his arm and his arm was useless to her. He tightened it, but she seemed to fall through it as a hurt dove through the air by which it should be supported.” (AHE, p. 41) The lifelessness of this compelled obedience in Betty is later contrasted with a

very lively obedience when Betty's spirit ventures out into the City of Lester and Evelyn.

She went lightly and gaily; these times were always happy and fortunate; she could not compare them with others, for she knew no others. All but these joyous hours were secluded from her. Ignorant of what she obeyed, but in a perfect volition of obedience, she went along. (AHE. p. 76)

"A perfect volition of obedience": it is this purity of heart, this celebration of the spirit of the law of love which protects Betty from the evil Simon would inflict on her. It is this perfect volition of obedience and submission to God that encapsulates the most advanced segment of the Stage Four development.

These then are the players in Williams' supernatural drama. They each begin at a certain point on a spectrum of spiritual development. As the story progresses, they shall each move in one direction or the other, downward to the extreme limits of Stage One, lost into the muddy netherworld of Hell or upward to the infinite reaches of Stage Four, leading through the spectral rose to the glories of the Heavenly City. And their movement will be shown through the interactions and conflicts they have with the other characters.

To look at the nature of the conflicts between the characters, let us remind ourselves of Peck's observations.

There is a profound tendency ... to look up to someone who is one step – perhaps a third of a stage – ahead of us as a wise person or guru. On the other hand, if someone is two steps ahead of us, we usually think that he or she is a threat, even evil. (FAR, p. 241)

The first example we meet of the conflict between people of different levels is that of Evelyn's hatred toward Betty. In her gabbling stream of words when she encounters Lester in the Limbo City, Evelyn cannot help but blurt out the truth. She says to Lester: "But I only said what was quite true, even if I do hate Betty. I hate everyone except you; of course I don't hate you; I'm very fond of you. You won't go away, will you? ..." (AHE, p. 18) Later, when the two girls hear Betty's cry of "Jonathan!" in the Limbo City, Evelyn recognizes it first. While Lester is caught by the *quality* of the cry, Evelyn merely recognizes the *voice*. It is the voice of her favorite object of torment and she runs after it.

Lester also began to run. The face that had looked back had startled her; it had been excited and pleased. She remembered Betty and she remembered that Evelyn had not been very nice to Betty. ... Betty had run away and Evelyn had run after Betty, and suddenly she herself had run after Evelyn. It had not been often she took the trouble, for Betty bored her and anyhow Evelyn never did anything to Betty; even then she had been calling, "I only want to

talk to you." But something in the talk made Betty cry and for once Lester had interfered (AHE, p. 90)

To escape Evelyn's pursuit, Betty retreats back into the land of the living, and Evelyn is left with no prey. "The kind of rage that was in her was the eager stirring of the second death." (AHE, p. 92) Later, when Simon offers to make a body for Evelyn (for his own purposes), he promises her that she could possess Betty, "Always." In speaking that word, "one of the names of the City" as Williams calls it, Evelyn has a vision of her desire: "a quite small room ... where she and Betty sat, she talking and Betty trembling" (AHE, p. 179). Such a fate was not to be, of course, but the vision presents the ultimate desire of Evelyn's heart, to possess and torment the one she hates.

Lady Wallingford's antipathy for her daughter is expressed differently. When Simon sends Betty out on her spectral quest, Lady Wallingford watches the preparation process.

She could not quite bear to see the nullification of life in the intellectual center of life. She detested her daughter, and she wished to distress and pain her. But then she wished her, while she lived, to be still herself so she should be distressed and pained. (AHE, p. 74)

Lady Wallingford had built up a life of torment for her daughter. At one time, and only the once, she told the pliable and obedient Betty that she was adopted (AHE, p. 66). This was an untruth, but the girl took it seriously and was undermined by it. Lady Wallingford had also created a second life for Betty in Yorkshire, a life wherein Betty was *not* her daughter, but "purely and simply, the servant" (AHE, p. 66-67). In this place Betty was called by the belittling diminutive "Bettina" and spoken to and of condescendingly. The purpose of this was to reach the point where the girl "was no more Betty Wallingford than she was a housemaid. She was nothing and no one" (AHE, p. 67).

The destruction of Betty as a person, so that she might be an object to torment has been the consuming desire of both of these women, Evelyn and Lady Wallingford. They, in their stage of development, deeply resented Betty's Stage Four graceful obedience. Even in her torment she abided their tortures out of a dutiful courtesy. Such willingness on her part perhaps fed the desire of Evelyn and Lady Wallingford to destroy her. Or if not to destroy, to keep her locked in a relational structure where they could perpetually indulge their vindictive impulses upon her. She, being those two Steps ahead of them, was a threat to them with her free charity and love. Their response is the response of passion, to possess.

In contrast to their reaction to Betty, Simon's reaction to Lester, and to a lesser extent Richard, is passionless. This is so in part because he has dispensed with all emotion long since. But it is also a reflection of the antisocial quality of his Stage One spirituality (or lack thereof).

When Simon discovers that the dead spirit obstructing his plans for Betty is that of Richard's wife, he tempts Richard with the possibility of having Lester returned to him. Such an offer is of course one way to try and control a person who could be a threat. Obviously, it comes close to the desire of Richard's heart, and like a horse's bridle, the nearness or withdrawal of the offer can be used to move Richard to Simon's desires and purposes. But Richard, a Stage Three personality, had sufficient knowledge of his wife's true character that he was able to break away from Simon's influence. From that point on, he moves with every step further and further from Simon's reach, moving toward the Stage Four gracefulness that Betty and Jonathan exhibit. Simon attempts to manipulate Richard at a later point, and fails.

He looked particularly at Richard. But Richard was no longer the Richard of the house behind Holborn. He had tasted the new life in Jonathan's flat; he had drunk of it in his wife's eyes.... But in that second of her immortal greeting, her passion and her promise, he had been freed from any merely accidental domination by the Clerk. (AHE, p. 170)

In his position in the Foreign Office, Richard could have been instrumental in bringing about Simon's domination of the world. Indeed, he is asked by a colleague to approach Simon regarding high level important meetings. But by that time Richard has seen too clearly the underlying rottenness of what Simon offered.

He himself might have been among the worshipers [of Simon]; he owed his salvation to his wife, for it was precisely the irreconcilability of his wife with Simon which had preserved him – and he most unworthy, given up to the social virtues, needing rebirth. (AHE, p. 217)

However, though Richard could have been useful as a tool for Simon, both with his Foreign Office connections and his connection to Lester, the greater threat to Simon always came from Lester.

Lester is the focal point of the novel. It is through Lester's actions that Betty is released from her unnatural bondage, made free to exercise her charity upon the needy. It is through Lester that Simon is stopped, that his material and spiritual designs are broken apart. But these achievements are not reached easily. For Lester is far from perfect at the beginning of the novel. With each occasion where Lester faces up to her imperfections, her threat to Simon's plan grows. Yet, each point of progress is a point of choice, where the decision would lead her either toward the spectral rose of Heaven or the absorbing mud of Hell.

Her first choice is simply between action or inaction. She stands on the bridge and remains standing there for a long time (if time can be reckoned in the Limbo City). If she did nothing, her inaction would allow Simon to overwhelm Betty's love for Jonathan,

condemning Betty to the non-life of a disembodied spirit of a living person. Inaction could have been an easy choice for Lester, for Williams says “she had never in fact had to display any initiative” (AHE, p. 18). Yet, it is her love for Richard which prompts the seemingly simple action of moving. Nothing more than changing her (apparent) physical position maneuvers her onto a course where she contributes to changing everything for each of the characters. This gives Lester exactly the power which Simon has been seeking all his life. But that which Simon seeks through cold dispassionate logic, Lester achieves through a growing generous love.

Lester is a greater obstacle to Simon and his plans than he can possibly imagine. Although he and Lady Wallingford had supposed that they had successfully confined Betty’s life, to keep her uncontaminated by outside influences, they had forgotten the basic conditions of school life. Betty, a bit younger than Lester, had always looked up to the older girl, this in spite of Lester’s apparent disdain. Lester, looking back on those days admits to herself that she had found Betty boring. Yet even the disdainful schoolgirl Lester had been a model to Betty, admired and perhaps just enough of an inspiration to Betty to carry her through the uncertainties Lady Wallingford inflicted on her. That was the beginning of Lester’s threat to Simon.

Once Lester has begun moving in the City, she cannot escape her own inherent honesty. She knows she wronged Betty by her neglect in their schooldays, and when she finds herself on Betty’s threshold, she chooses to take the opportunity to make amends. Again, that threshold is a point where she could have gone in either direction. That she is not yet wholly of Heaven’s company is seen by what she says when she makes her choice.

She exclaimed, with the fervent habit of her mortality: “Hell!”

The word ran from her in all directions, as if a dozen small animals had been released and gone racing away. They fled up and down the street, beating out the echo of the word with their quick pattering feet, but the larger went for the house in front of them and disappeared into the porch. She saw them and was appalled; what new injury had she loosed? (AHE, p. 94)

Her recognition of this negative potential, and her refusal to continue giving injury propel her over the threshold. And once across that boundary, her quest is to achieve forgiveness from and reconciliation with Betty. Such spiritual acts of charity, on the part of both girls, increases their obstruction of Simon’s plans.

Lester’s reconciliation with Betty leads to her act of substitution, when Simon tries to unmake Betty’s hold on life. In a powerful scene, Williams presents the act as an echo of Christ’s substitution for all. Lester’s willingness to simply be available to Betty leads to the failure of Simon’s incantation of the anti-Tetragrammaton. For in the midst of his intoning, Betty speaks Lester’s name, speaks it from a heart of love, and the sound disrupts the effect

of the magician's spell. From that point on Simon loses whatever control over events that he thought he possessed.

Even Simon's attempt to catch and confine this thwarting spirit by placing it in the golem-body fails. He promises this to Evelyn, but when the two spirits are placed in the material form, their communion is disjoined. It was in fact only possible because Lester felt a sense of duty toward Evelyn. She consented to enter the golem on the exceedingly slim possibility that Evelyn might be raised from her low level of spiritual development. This proves impossible, for Evelyn has committed herself to the downward path. This is evident to Lester almost immediately. Lester therefore uses the opportunity to make a last parting with Richard (though it is "last" only in the sense that they will not again commune together until his spirit also enters the Heavenly City through death), and then sends the golem body back to Simon.

This returning of his magics precipitates Simon's final collapse. Arriving at Simon's doorstep in the falling rain of All Hallows' Eve itself, the passage of the magiced dwarf leaves a trail of devastation. As the golem passes by those falsely healed by Simon, their ailments return to them. In his attempts to put an end to Betty, the confusion created by his newly needy-again followers and the Evelyn-motivated golem, Simon's spells come undone. Lady Wallingford dies as a result of her accidental substitution for Betty. And Simon's two simulacrum of himself, images which had been becoming leaders in other parts of the world, return to him before the time he had designed. His preparations had gone awry, and he was not ready to receive back his copy-selves. But once the process had been begun, it could not be stopped.

The heavenly rain pours down outside and inside Simon's house. The magician dissolves into a mud that proves to be a gateway to Hell. Betty heals Simon's victim-followers. And Lester's spirit departs to the Heavenly City.

Peck indicates that all persons should progress through the four stages of spiritual development, though he admits that many get stalled in one stage or another. And although in this novel, those in the lower stages are given over to evil, I do not wish to imply that in reality that is always so. What I do want to convey is that Peck's structure of spiritual development is quite useful as a tool of literary analysis. For myself, much as I have always liked *All Hallows' Eve*, there were aspects of Lester's character that always seemed remote to me. Her choices to do what is right seemed to be too easily made. I had no clear sense of what the consequences of alternate choices *for her* might be. I admit that perhaps this may simply have been due to inattention on my part. But once I applied Peck's descriptions to the characters of this novel, I saw more clearly how easily Lester could have "gone wrong."

Lester begins the story located about in the middle of Stage Three. She has indulged, at a remove, in Evelyn's vices.

She knew she had never really liked Evelyn, but Evelyn had been a habit, almost a drug, with which she filled spare hours. Evelyn usually did what Lester wanted. She would talk gossip which Lester did not quite like to talk, but did rather like to hear talked, because she could then listen to it while despising it. She kept Lester up to date in all her less decent curiosities. She came because she was invited and stayed because she was needed. (AHE, p. 15-16)

This is hardly a winning portrait of Lester. Coupled with her admitted disinterested neglect of Betty, it shows how easily Lester could have grown more like Evelyn. In *The People of the Lie*, Peck suggests that evil be classified as a personality disorder, and he provides a description of the symptoms (as it were) of the evil personality.

In addition to the abrogation of responsibility that characterizes all personality disorders, this one would specifically be distinguished by:

- (a) consistent destructive, scapegoating behavior, which may often be quite subtle.
- (b) excessive, albeit usually covert, intolerance to criticism and other forms of narcissistic injury.
- (c) pronounced concern with a public image and self-image of respectability, contributing to a stability of life-style but also to pretentiousness and denial of hateful feelings or vengeful motives.
- (d) intellectual deviousness, with an increased likelihood of a mild schizophreniclike disturbance of thinking at times of stress. (PL, p. 129)

It is inescapable that Evelyn displays these symptoms. What was interesting to me was to find that Lester displayed a potential for them. Certainly, she was concerned about the respectable appearance. The other symptoms she faces, recognizes how hollow they are in the streets of the Limbo City, and turns herself away from them. She becomes the model, the lodestar, by which we can also turn away from becoming one of the People of the Lie.

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