

TWO ANTITHETICAL IMAGES OF DEATH IN THE 20TH CENTURY: ABSURDITY AND PARADISE

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to show two instances of the way the theme of death appeared in modernist and anti-modernist texts, with the help of two different authors: Ernest Hemingway and C.S. Lewis. The former developed the image of death as an absurdity in his short story “The Snows of Kilimanjaro”, while the latter chose to represent death in more optimistic tones, as a gateway to paradise, in the last book of his The Chronicles of Narnia, The Last Battle. The study of these antithetical images of the theme of death will hopefully contribute to a thorough perspective on the literature of the last century.

Keywords: death, absurdity, paradise, Hemingway, Lewis

1. INTRODUCTION

The impossibility of truly understanding the nature and meaning of death is recognized by one of the first tragedians the world has ever had, Sophocles, who in his play “Antigone” (around 442 BC), claims that man is a strange wonder with a lot of possibilities, but a crucial limitation, death: “There’s only death/ that he cannot find an escape from” (2013, p. 241) [1]. The truth of these verses have impacted readers in all times, giving birth to a large range of artistic creations. Regarding literature, death has been a pervasive topic since time immemorial, recording a large array of different approaches: from obedient acceptance to rebellion against this seemingly oppressive condition and to ways of transcending this limit.

Although the preoccupation for death has always been present in literature, with no exception regarding the period of time, in the 20th century we notice a boom of this theme in novels and short stories. We could assume that the main reason was the outbreak of the World Wars, two international atrocities that wrecked millions of people from all over the world and a lot of countries. The 20th century has been called in numerous ways, in order to reflect its deeply impactful role in shaping people’s consciousness. Eric Hobsbawm calls it “the Age of Extremes” and entitles the section dealing with the first half of the century, during which the two World Wars took place, “the Age of Catastrophe”. In his book *The Age of Extremes*, he gives a very interesting quote by Isaiah Berlin, who calls the 20th century “the most terrible century in Western history” (cited in Hobsbawm 1995, p. 1) [2]. Berlin’s statement is worth some attention, because history has always been marked by diverse types of catastrophes. Intermittent wars for territories were very frequent in the Western world and during the Middle Ages there were many plagues, deaths and periods of famine. Despite this, Berlin says that the 20th century is the peak of suffering and catastrophes.

In the cultural sphere, Modernism was the leading literary movement back then. It promoted a lot of changes in terms of form and content. Modernists chose new literary techniques such as “the stream of consciousness”, the use of flashbacks or multiple perspectives. They rejected the traditional way of doing literature and militated for novelty. In terms of content, a lot of modernists adopted existentialist perspectives on life, lamenting the loss of stability and balance caused by the turbulent historical changes the world went through. They promoted the “beauty of transitoriness” as opposed to “universal beauty”, which was represented by tradition (Calinescu 1987, p. 4) [3]. A few examples of modernist writers are: Ernest Hemingway, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf. However, not all 20th century authors were modernists, as there were some who totally rejected their ideas concerning both form and content, such as: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien or G.K. Chesterton.

On the philosophical and literary stage of the last century there was a heated discussion between two antithetical systems of thought: atheistic and theistic. Between Macbeth's cynical comment that life is "a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/Signifying nothing" (Shakespeare 2013, p. 162) [4] and Christ's teaching that this life is only a preparation for the afterlife and thus death does not exist ("I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die") there is an enormous difference (John 11:25-26) [5]. These concepts summarise the entire battle of ideas on the cultural and literary Western front. Death as existing in itself – an annihilation of everything - or death as a mere passage, almost unimportant for those who believe in an afterlife, are two antithetical ideas, which greatly influenced the literature written in the 20th century.

The focus of this article is the study of these two very different approaches to the theme of death in literature. We chose to focus on the philosophical and literary implications of this topic in the writings of two 20th century authors: Ernest Hemingway and C.S. Lewis, by selecting a representative work by each one of them. The aim of such an undertaking is to give a broad perspective on how literature reflected the main ideas about mortality circulating in the intellectual circles of the last century.

2. DEATH AS AN ABSURDITY

We will begin with the perception of death as an absurdity. It initially appeared as a philosophical concept put forward by Jean Paul Sartre in his book *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, in which he claimed that: "It is absurd that we are born; it is absurd that we die" (Sartre 2011, p. 726) [6]. The main idea here is that the human existence in itself is absurd, there is no inherent meaning in it, or purpose to discover. Such a categorical statement totally blocks any invitation at debate and it certainly inhibits the general spirit of quest which characterised the modernists. However, seen from another angle, it could be analysed as a conclusion of a terrible search for truth, which states that in the end there is nothing to be found. This existential way of perceiving the world was quite popular in the 20th century for reasons shown above. The French culture is famous for its existentialist philosophers such as Sartre or Camus, whose ideas quickly spread in the whole Western world.

Moreover, we could cite some passages from Albert Camus' writings which chime in with the idea analysed above: "Mortality is life's unique conviction" as "death is there as the only reality" (cited in Chatzipetrou 2015, p. 176, 178) [7]. What is impressive about this statement is the fact that life seems formed only by death – if death is the only reality, than life is but a shadow. Life has been thus downgraded to a mere antonym of death, while the latter seems to have taken the leading role on the literary stage. These citations given above from Sartre and Camus aim to portray the general mentality that some writers had in that time. It is crucial to emphasise, nevertheless, that some authors arrived at the same conclusions without reading Sartre or Camus; fact which shows how heavy the weight of the recent past was upon artists.

This image of death as an absurdity has been profusely widespread in modernist texts. However, we will give only an example in this article in order to show how this cultural tendency was manifested in literature. A good instance is Ernest Hemingway's famous short story "The Snows of Kilimanjaro". Before we analyse it, it is worth mentioning some biographical details about the author. Hemingway was part of what was called "the lost generation", a term used by Gertrude Stein to designate the expatriate writers from the United States of America in the 1920s living in Paris. These authors were deeply affected by the atrocities witnessed in the First World War, which is why they wrote mainly in a grim and sceptical manner. The generation was considered "lost" as firstly it was formed of willingly exiled intellectuals, who lost the connection with their homeland. Secondly, writers such as Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, E.E. Cummings or T.S. Eliot, the main representatives of this category, were literary rebels aiming to break away from tradition. This rupture with the literary movement that preceded them and in general with the values held by the generation of their parents was reflected not only in the form of their works of fiction (which was experimental *par excellence* in most

cases), but also especially in their content. The authors mentioned above are thought to belong to High Modernism as their literature was deeply influential.

“The Snows of Kilimanjaro” was published in 1936 in the magazine “Esquire”. It achieved world fame because of the deep philosophical and social issues it discusses, which are conveyed through a stark writing style, typical of modernist American literature. It tells the story of Harry, a failed writer, on holiday in the African safari with his extremely wealthy wife. He is pricked by a thorn, fact which provokes a gangrene in his leg that at its turn starts to rot. He is thus in a process of slow death, contemplating his life, his memories from the war, his past mistakes and especially his regrets at not having written any of the stories he heard. He regrets squandering his talent for a life of comfort, marrying rich women without loving them, but only to take their money, failing as an artist and ultimately dying in a miserable way. The literary piece is ultimately a meditation on death and the duty of a writer.

Called by Zheng Chang “an avant-guard of Existentialism” in an article entitled “Gift and Curse of Freedom: A Study of *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* from Sartre’s Philosophy of Existentialism” (2014, p. 194) [8], Hemingway’s short story reflected the main ideas found in this philosophy a few years before his French contemporary Albert Camus did in his philosophical work (“The Myth of Sisyphus” – 1942) and literary pieces (*The Stranger* – 1942) and Jean-Paul Sartre also in philosophy (*Being and Nothingness* – 1943). Its main idea could be summarised with the help of the beginning of Camus’ famous essay mentioned above: “The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labour” (Camus 1979, p. 107) [9]. Sisyphus is the tragic hero which sets a model for all the modernist main characters. Although his existence is absurd, he only notices this when he takes time to think of his condition. That is the moment when he becomes conscious, event which actually provides the tragic quality of the myth (Camus 1979, p. 108-109).

In the same way, Hemingway’s hero reaches a stage of consciousness when he is nearing death, fact which inevitably triggers the contemplation of his existence and his judgement over it. Interestingly enough, he did not have this moment of honesty before, when he was making all those mistakes which he now regrets. Full consciousness comes only when he realises that he is going to die and he does not have time anymore to do everything he thought he would. This is why his story is ultimately tragic.

Death appears as absurd in this text from many points of view. To begin with, on the grounds that it happens for no apparent serious reason. Harry gets his leg infected because of a scratch from a thorn - what could be more nonsensical than this? The narrator makes the readers understand that Harry is a middle-aged man, so he certainly does not expect to die so soon. Harry is loved by his wife, who suffers greatly for him. The fact that the gangrene evolves so quickly is again absurd, as Harry does not actually have enough time to meditate on his life and say his final goodbyes.

Furthermore, Harry and Helen, his wife, are expecting an emergency plane to come and fetch him. Helen is full of hope that the plane will come and save her husband, but it never comes. This unfulfilled expectation reminds us of another modernist piece in which a similar long and failed expectation is described: the play “Waiting for Godot” by Samuel Beckett. There, the characters are waiting all throughout the novel for someone who never comes. It is again quite typical of modernist writers to create a general sense of failure in their stories (no wonder they were called “the lost generation”). This sense of futility, which is also described in Camus’ essay, is pervasive in modernist literature.

A compelling difference between Sartre’s claim mentioned at the beginning of this subchapter and Hemingway’s message in this short story is that the latter believes that to live is not in vain. Harry has a gift for writing, he heard lots of stories, so he has plenty of material to use in his books. If only he had been more aware of that before he realised he was going to die, he could have lived a life of artistic fulfilment. However, despite his great talent, he has let himself be tempted into comfort and pleasure, wasting his abilities in the process: “He had destroyed his talent himself. Why should he blame this woman because she kept him well? He had destroyed his talent by not using it, by betrayals of himself and what he believed in, by drinking so much that he blunted the edge of his perceptions, by laziness,

by sloth, and by snobbery, by pride and by prejudice, by hook and by crook” (Hemingway 2004, p. 9) [10].

In addition, the death of Harry is absurd not only for himself, but also for the entire world, as he represents a resource that is forever and irreversibly wasted. People could have enjoyed his works of fiction, could have learned something from them, he may have revolutionised the history of literature if only he had had enough time. Fate seems here a ruthless master, condemning its subjects to misery and grief. Death is therefore absurd on a lot of levels, both individual and social.

Finally, absurdity also comes from the process of death which Harry experiences. The narrator notes his thoughts as the gangrene progresses and he becomes more and more conscious of his imminent final departure: “And just then it occurred to him that he was going to die. It came with a rush; not as a rush of water nor of wind; but of a sudden evil-smelling emptiness and the odd thing was that the hyena slipped lightly along the edge of it” (Hemingway 2004, p. 12). Death appears here as a tragic realisation of one’s end. It is also embodied in a symbol: the hyena, a predator and a scavenger animal, which keeps lurking around Harry, is a clear indicator that the protagonist is approaching his dissolution. The character is afraid of death, perceiving it as a fierce beast and himself as the prey trembling at the approach of its killer. Death resembles here very much the Grim Reaper of the German mythology, that skeleton with a black hooded cloak that carries a scythe.

The feeling of emptiness and desolation that death brings reflects its meaninglessness. By the end of the short story, it appears as a shadowy character that creeps onto Harry: “Just then, death had come and rested its head on the foot of the cot and he could smell its breath” (Hemingway 2004, p. 21). An interesting technique that the author uses is personification: he transforms an abstract concept into a character with his own will and actions. Death is here described as an animal, maybe as the hyena which was so often seen near Harry. The new character that comes for Harry’s life is a deeply negative one, whose approach is terrifying. The end of life is seen not only as absurd, but also as terrible, just as if the devil himself would take the protagonist to burn in hell. The absurd triggers revolt: “Tell it to go away”, says Harry when he feels death is too close (Hemingway 2004, p. 21). Of course, it does not go very far. The decay of his body engenders a series of existential thoughts that start tormenting him until he dies in remorse, regrets and terror. His end is absurd and tragic, while the reader is left to ponder on the ephemeral character of life which slips through our fingers when we least expect.

Carlos Baker in his reputed book *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* contends that “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” is a moral tragedy “tipped with irony” (Baker 1973, p. 187) [11]. Certainly, it deserves the name of tragedy because the ending at least recreates the same atmosphere of shock and absurdity which is so characteristic of the genre. However, it is not a classical tragedy, but a moral one. Harry suffers an inner death before the physical one, as his pricks of conscience slowly oppress and darken him. Not writing when he knew that this was what he should have done is the equivalent of an artist’s death, as he cannot survive without creating. The irony is that he realises his inner death when his physical one approaches and starts wishing he had more time. This shows he has been living in an anesthetized condition, in which he could not feel his own failure as an author until it was too late. Indeed, in the literature of the 20th century, there are many cases of death in life which culminate with a physical decease. The loss of one’s genuine self makes him live an inauthentic life, which could be compared to a type of demise of the soul. That of the body follows naturally afterwards.

It is worth noting that Harry’s death has been compared by Baker with a spiritual suicide of the American writer (1973, p. 187). Although it is not a suicide *per se*, as Harry does not take his own life (on the contrary, he seems to be clinging pathologically to it), in a spiritual sense he is the murderer of his own talent, so he dies spiritually. This is relevant to our discussion about the image of death as an absurdity from Harry’s point of view, as he seems to have awoken from a long sleep and feels the desire to live. His fast-approaching death while he revives spiritually seems to be the epitome of absurdity.

Another way of interpreting Hemingway’s short story is as an experiment in the inner workings of the mind of a dying man (Baker 1973, p. 191). Certainly, Harry is far from being an ordinary dying human being, so the author’s piece of fiction is not as universal as it would seem. Harry is a writer of great talent who has chosen comfort over art; he is clearly not a typical everyday man. Nevertheless, the

psychology of such a character is quite fascinating to examine as it reveals what could pass through someone's mind before approaching his earthly end. Maybe another way of expressing the absurd in this case is the fact that Harry could not come to terms with the idea of him dying, he could not accept it. His mind is scattered and desperately clinging to life, his memories are powerful but tangled and incoherent at times. The coming of death finds him totally unprepared and with a huge thirst to live on. In this sense, he could be regarded as an anti-model of a hero approaching the "final passage" (which would be accurate since the modernists promoted a cult of the anti-hero).

3. DEATH AS A GATEWAY TO PARADISE

The second approach to death which we will analyse is as a gateway to paradise. This is, of course, a Christian perspective not as widespread as the former, but still present even in those turbulent times. We will do this with the help of one of the writings of C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), a very prolific British writer with a vast and diverse work, including novels, Christian apologetic works, essays, articles, children's literature, literary criticism, meditations on certain topics etc. He brings to English and universal literature themes of remarkable philosophical depth, surprising characters set in unusual contexts, with a rich symbolic charge. His great culture and unquestionable expertise in the field of literature (he taught at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge) recommend him as an elite intellectual. His activity as a literary critic, professor and writer allows him to approach literature from a plurivalent perspective, fact which gives his writings originality.

What is extremely interesting at Lewis is that he is one of the few writers in the 20th century who envisioned what would happen after death. Normally, death has always been associated with an ending, either tragic or not, but nonetheless a barrier beyond which nobody could pass. Lewis breaks this convention, so to speak, and imagines a life after death. Or shall we say that he writes in the manner of traditional consecrated authors such as Dante or Milton? Both options could be valid. In any case, his choice of giving glimpses of Heaven in his work during a time in which dystopias were incredibly fashionable (see George Orwell's *1984* or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*) is quite bold, and could be regarded as utopianism. In fact, according to Calinescu, utopianism is a result of both Christianity and the concept that time is irreversible (1987, p. 63). However, the notable difference is that utopia has come to replace Christianity and to be a part of the modern's man attempt to get away from it, while Lewis's works are in line with this religion.

With this in mind, we could introduce one of the major images that Lewis provides in his *Chronicles*, which is death as a gateway to paradise. The British author chooses to call Heaven "Aslan's country", which is quite telling. As Aslan is the maker of the world of Narnia, Lewis practically says that when one of the Narnians die, they go to the country of their creator. It is worth highlighting that Aslan has created another world than the one he inhabits, keeping things separately from the beginning, while the Judeo-Christian God, according to Genesis, has created Adam and Eve directly in paradise, in His own world and then they were exiled on Earth after they disobeyed the commandment. Aslan comes from time to time in the world he created, showing that he has not abandoned it, but everyone knows that he has a realm of his own.

The connection with the paradise envisaged by Christianity is very obvious: historically, Christ has come in our world and has talked about the Kingdom of Heaven of His Father multiple times in parables, but has not offered a complete visual image of what it would be like to be there. This is why fiction can help to fill in the gaps and build a larger picture of what Heaven could be like, enlarge our imagination and our mind, for, as Wayne Martindale contended in the book *Beyond the Shadowlands: C.S. Lewis on Heaven and Hell*: "The unique gift of good fiction is to appeal simultaneously to our intellects, imaginations, and emotions. It can deliver such an integrated experience that our mental landscapes are permanently altered" (Martindale 2005, p. 52) [12]. This is exactly what Lewis did in his literature, particularly in *The Chronicles of Narnia*: he painted some mental landscapes of Heaven which have the power to transpose his readers into that realm and to stick to their memory. He explored this mythical land through fiction, as Colin Duriez claimed (cited in Martindale 2005, p. 52). In so doing he linked the idea of death with that of paradise, so he ultimately changed a traditional symbol of fear and anxiety

into one of joy and wonder. This trait of giving new symbols to old concepts is quite modernist, actually, but since Lewis was merely reviving what has been lost in modernity, namely the preoccupation for spiritual themes, we cannot claim that he presented any modernist trait.

We will further explore how the image of death as a gateway to paradise appears in the last book of C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia, The Last Battle*. Here we find very often the metaphor of death as a door, which makes the transition from misery to glory: on earth there is misery, in Heaven there is glory. The passage from life to death becomes much desired, because who would not want to pass from chaos to order, from wretchedness to happiness or from the copy of an idea to the Idea itself, in Platonic terms?! Because of this reason, death is seen almost with excitement.

A good case in point is the scene in which Tirian and his company talk of the stable door. Jewel, the unicorn, says something incredibly profound which foreshadows the following events in the story: "It may be for us the door to Aslan's country and we shall sup at his table tonight" (Lewis *The Chronicles* 2013, p. 555) [13]. The unicorn seems to be a very sensitive character, gifted with the power of perceiving the very essence of things. Aslan's country has already appeared in the other books of the series symbolising Heaven. The idea of the supper is clearly a Christian one: it reminds us of the Last Supper of Christ. The change of perspective regarding the door is most welcome: at the beginning it was something dreadful and terrifying, but as the novel progresses, the unicorn puts forward this marvellous idea that it could actually be something beautiful: a way of entering into the realm for which they all long.

Another example which shows how the kids passed through death into paradise and what Heaven is supposed to be is found at the end of the book under study, when Aslan comes to the kids and explains what happened to them. He at first notices that the children do not look as happy as he would like them to be. Lucy then answers that they are afraid they will be sent to their own world, like they usually are at the end of an adventure in Narnia. This brings forward a very tender image of the Father who means only the best for his children and truly desires their happiness. It seems that this outcome is achieved in the end when the narrator tells us that they "lived happily ever after". Aslan then explains to them that they would never go back to their world, for they are now dead:

"There was a real railway accident," said Aslan softly. "Your father and mother and all of you are—as you used to call it in the Shadowlands—dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning." (...) And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before. (Lewis *The Chronicles* 2013, p. 576)

The easiness and certainty with which Aslan talks of death is quite extraordinary for a time in which most people felt either fear or apathy toward this subject. Death was still considered a great mystery, one which was of course debunked (like all mysteries were in modernity). However, hardly any writers approached it with such positivity, let alone hope. For some reason, in the modernist age, the positive view of life, so to speak, was viewed as childish, while the tragic perspective won all the laurels as pertaining to the adult world. Lewis had a totally different opinion about that. Even if the novels are put in the frame of a children's story, we know that Lewis did not mean them exclusively for children, as for him they were not a separate category from other human beings. Only the form of his stories is easier to grasp, as pertaining to kids, but the essence is for the large public, as Lewis himself explains in his article, "Sometimes Fairy Stories may Say Best What's to be Said", claiming that he was writing for children solely in the sense that he did not add what he thought they would not understand, not in the sense that his books should not be read by adults. He had something to say and only found that a fairy

tale was the most suitable form to convey his message (Lewis *Of This and Other Worlds* 2000, p. 60) [14].

The ending is so rich in meanings that we would need a whole book only to attempt to decipher all of them. But since we are constrained by space, we will just highlight some main ideas that unfold here. The concept of death as an ending is suggested in the fact that Aslan tells the kids they are now dead, so they cannot go back to their world anymore. They die for a certain world, but are alive in another, parallel to the former. Their world has not come to an end, there is still life on Earth (as we find out from the fact that Susan is not with them in the train, so she must still be alive). However, Narnia has reached its end, as we realise in the moment the kids go through the stable door into the New Narnia, Heaven. Paradise looks exactly like the old Narnia they knew from the golden times when they were kings and queens, but stripped off any shadow of menace or evil. They could not get to Heaven without dying first, for their birth in the New World could only come after their death in the old one. Death is equivalent here with the beginning of a new life, the afterlife, for which the children “must all submit to death in order to be remade” (Martindale 2005, p. 119). Ironically, we could say that in this case death signifies life, but not as described in T.S. Eliot’s poem “The Waste Land”, for the characters are lively both in their earthly existence and in their afterlife. This is actually part and parcel of the Christian perspective: death does not actually exist, it has been reduced to a mere passage.

Another profound idea expressed here is that Heaven is the ultimate reality, “the real story”, more interesting and adventurous than life on earth. The kids were only experiencing Chapter One from that excellent story of victory, but all the other chapters are a splendid mystery which will be discovered for them step by step. Paradise is depicted as more real than the life the children have experienced so far. The problem of reality is quite contentious, as many philosophers have claimed that our own world is only a shadow or a dream, without necessarily implying that we shall one day know what reality is indeed. Lewis himself hints several times at the fact that this world is unreal. An example of this is found in the second book of the series, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when Lucy goes with Tumnus in his cave and sees such books as *Men, Monks, and Gamekeepers: a Study in Popular Legend*, and *Is Man a Myth*, realising with stupor that, as C.N. Manlove claimed in an article published in the book *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: C.S. Lewis*: “For the Narnians, man himself is fictive” (2006, p. 90) [15]. For humans, talking beasts are fictive and viceversa; so we could easily notice that the problem of reality is a crucial one in Lewis’s fiction.

If we follow Manlove’s point in the article cited above, we could support him in his claim that the world of Narnia definitely presents “deeper and deeper levels of reality”, while proving at the same time in the last book of the series that the earth and this world are both unrealities (2006, pp. 90-91). We constantly move between these two realms of reality and unreality all throughout the series until we get to the final book and we realise that the only true reality is found in the New Narnia, so in paradise. Reality can never be ephemeral and unstable like in our world, it could only be eternal and steady, immutable in form and essence. The only reality is that which is unseen and inaccessible to humans while they are alive, so it means that death is not only a gateway to paradise, but a door to Reality itself, our true home, like the Unicorn claimed when he arrived in Aslan’s country: “I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this” (Lewis *The Chronicles* 2013, p. 571).

Lewis stresses very much in numerous passages the fact that Narnia is indeed everything the heroes hoped for, the real world they were meant to be in, that Heaven before the Fall or after the Redemption, which has its gates open. Many characters certify that this Narnia is the best place where they could ever be: the unicorn cited above, Lord Digory who says in Platonist terms that the Narnia as they knew it was only “a shadow or a copy of the real Narnia which has always been here and always will be here”, followed by Farsight the eagle which claims that they have all been blind and only now they begin to see where they truly are and Lucy who adds that they are in a more real and more beautiful Narnia than the one on the other side of the stable door (Lewis *The Chronicles* 2013, pp. 571-575).

Finally, the passages quoted above also express the fact that paradise is a supreme form of happiness, which means that death would be the equivalent of happiness. As odd as it may seem to make such an

association, we are nonetheless confronted in Lewis's text with this possibility. The form of happiness that Aslan's country brings to their inhabitants is one without fear, as Lucy observes when she gets to the New Narnia that she could not feel any fear anymore (maybe it is her who says that because she was the smallest one and often frightened). Happiness in the new land is also endless and unbreakable. Life appears by comparison frail and bleak while Heaven, the real life or the supra-life, offers immortality and fulfilment. The finitude of the earthly existence is described as the cover of a book of stories. The important aspect to notice here is that the cover tells the main subject of the book, which could be an allusion to the fact that one's deeds on earth give the "title" of his adventure book and also provide or not the "entry ticket" to Heaven. The kids had a beautiful and noble life, if only too short, but they were always keen to reign well and help the Narnians, fact which makes them "eligible" for Heaven.

4. CONCLUSION

To put it in a nutshell, the theme of death was treated from different angles and perspectives both by modernist and anti-modernist writers. Hemingway exemplifies a popular tendency of his time to underline the tragic character of existence, as it inevitably ends in death. This fact triggers a sense of absurdity, as Sartre and Camus show in their philosophical writings. The death of Harry, a talented writer who did not have time to fulfil his whole potential is only an instance of the image of death as an absurdity, a very widespread opinion in the last century. The rejection of the idea of a life after death is what gives the story its tragic nuance, which is also present in other modernist texts.

On the other end of the spectrum, C.S. Lewis embodies the Christian idea of the possibility of entering paradise after death. In his works, the tragedy of death is cancelled, as there cannot be any sorrow if something better follows the end of this earthly existence. The heroes of Narnia enter Heaven in a very subtle way, without even consciously experiencing their own deaths. The idea of a sublime paradise provides a very positive approach to death, as only a necessary passage from this life into a better one. The two antithetical images presented here were the subject of many philosophical and literary discussions in the 20th century. Which one appealed more to the public is still an open discussion. Which one will survive the times and continue to inspire readers represents the stake of immortal literature.

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