

Circular Designs in Morris's *The Story of the Glittering Plain*

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In *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, Morris creates an apparent earthly paradise. The island of the Glittering Plain is a place free from death, hardships, old age, war, conflict, and adverse weather. This land of eternal youth, generous hospitality, and great beauty is also a place where every desire is satisfied. The island's King declares that 'in this land no man hath a lack which he may not satisfy.'¹ Such a place appears to be the very embodiment of our deepest wishes.

Morris has frequently been dismissed as an escapist writer, creating such places of enchantment. He has been accused of drawing 'the mind completely away, not only from the troubled and ugly world of the nineteenth century, but from life itself.'² Added to this charge is a belief that the craftsmanship of his work is hasty and careless.³ Although critical attention is being directed towards the literary craftsmanship of the prose romances,⁴ there is still somewhat of a general perception that Morris is an interesting but minor writer. Even his multi-faceted talents have caused concern. According to Clive Wainwright, Morris 'could not actually compete with the professionals because his many interests and occupations automatically qualify him as an amateur'.⁵ By examining the circular designs in *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, I hope to redress these concerns and draw attention to the careful attention to detail and structure that characterizes Morris's literary work. I will also point out how he inverts and redefines conventional expectations about happiness.

The movement of the main character - from Cleveland by the Sea to the Isle of Ransom to the Glittering Plain and back to the Isle of Ransom and Cleveland by the Sea - forms the overall circular pattern of the work. The narrator makes a point of emphasizing this circularity. Not only does Hallblithe return to the Isle of Ransom, but, as the narrator points out, 'to the very haven-mouth whence he had set sail with the Sea-Eagle a twelvemonth ago...' (p. 298). Within the Glittering Plain itself Hallblithe undergoes an analogous journey from the heart of the island to its outskirts and back again into its centre. The perimeter of the plain is marked by a building significantly called 'Uttermost House.' The Warden of this house states, "my charge is to further those who would go inward to the King, and to stay those who would go outward from the King" (p. 277).

Hallblithe visits two islands in the course of his journey and they seem to be diametrical opposites of one another. The beauty of the paradisaical Glittering Plain stands in sharp contrast to the barren wilderness of the Isle of Ransom. But the structural arrangement of events suggests something very different. *The Story of the Glittering Plain* is a work organized around the journey motif. The journey is not just from Cleveland by the Sea to the Glittering Plain and back again, but from Cleveland to the Isle of Ransom to the Glittering Plain and back to Ransom and then to Cleveland again. Such a formal structure highlights the parallels within it and calls attention to the circular format of the journey. Morris makes use of the journey cycle

and its parallels to close and enclose the narrative. Within the overall journey motif are detailed descriptions of two parts of this journey that echo one another. If all roads lead inward to the centre of the Glittering Plain, this pivotal point is surrounded, on either side, by parts of the journey that are carefully paralleled.

Hallblithe travels through wasteland and rugged wilderness both before and after the comfortable life he enjoys in the midst of the Glittering Plain. On the first part of his journey, upon seeing the Isle of Ransom, he notices 'the high cliffs and crags and mountains of a new land which seemed to be an isle' (p. 221), and these mountains appear 'deep blue under the sun' (p. 221). He is told that the mountains are not in fact this 'wondrous blue' colour, but only appear so because of the distance (p. 221). Hallblithe's later journey out of the Glittering Plain begins with his observation of a corresponding landscape: 'Then he looked up at the mountains ... and lo! as he looked, it was to him as if the crags rose up in the sky to meet him ... and therewith he fell aback and lost all sense, so that he knew not what was become of the earth and the heavens and the passing of the minutes of his life' (p. 279). The only other time that Hallblithe notices these mountains, he comments upon their 'blue' colour (p. 247). In fact both sets of mountains are associated with fantasy and illusions. At the beginning of both these journeys, Hallblithe falls into an enchanted sleep (pp. 266-7, 279) and awakens only to discover that he has been beguiled - the first time by the Puny Fox, the second by the Warden of Uttermost House (pp. 227, 279). Hallblithe's initial reaction to both these discoveries is to fear that he will die (pp. 228, 280).

The Puny Fox identifies the 'gate' to the Isle of Ransom as that of an underground 'cave' (p. 223). A corresponding cave also provides the 'gate of the Glittering Plain' for Hallblithe and his three fellow travellers (p. 285). The narrator identifies this cavern as a possible 'gate of death' (p. 285), and within both these caves, the darkness of the interior suggests an opening to a kind of haunted underworld. The journeys themselves are through strikingly similar territories. Descriptions of the second journey through a 'stony waste', a 'desert' and a 'stony tangle of the wilderness' (pp. 280, 282, 283) seem like deliberate echoes of the first journey through a 'world of stone', a 'waste and desolate land', and 'a wilderness of black sand and stones and ice-borne rocks' (pp. 223, 227, 228).

The people encountered on each part of the journey resemble each other. The Warden of Uttermost House is described as a big man, 'surly of aspect', devoid of weapons, and dressed in red scarlet (p. 276) while the people near the Hall of the Ravagers are portrayed as 'giant-like of stature', 'fierce of face', devoid of weapons, and 'red-haired' (p. 229). Hallblithe is curiously ignored and unheeded by the people when he arrives at both the Hall of the Ravagers and Uttermost House (pp. 236, 281). And in both places such treatment is reserved only for Hallblithe.

The guides along these journeys make similar comments upon the direction of their travels. The Warden of Uttermost House, who tells Hallblithe he can only help those 'who would go inward to the King', and must 'stay those who would go outward from the King' (p. 277) sounds remarkably similar to Long Hoary as he tells Hallblithe, "And now I will tell thee that it is good that thou hast chosen to go to the Glittering Plain. For if thou wert otherwise minded, I wot not how thou wouldest get thee a keel to carry thee" (p. 233).

Although the similarities between the Isle of Ransom and the Glittering Plain are made most apparent in these parallel journeys, they are also underscored by deliberate

parallels between the two islands themselves. Hallblithe alerts the reader to their similarities when, upon first arrival in the land of the Glittering Plain, he describes the rocks as black 'like the rocks of the Isle of Ransom' (p. 248). In both places sheep and shepherds appear (pp. 270, 299), and in both, Hallblithe meets with the same strange reaction when he calls the land of the Glittering Plain by its other name - the Acre (or House) of the Undying (pp. 235, 253). Moreover the King of the Isle of Ransom is also the King of the Glittering Plain, and his picture (as well as pictures of the Glittering Plain itself) adorns the walls of the House of the Ravagers.

While it is obvious that Morris has created a multitude of similarities between these two islands, it is also equally clear that he has contrasted them throughout. The paradisaical overtones of the one island stand in diametrical opposition to the internal associations of the other one. What Morris achieves through these multiple correspondences is a radical revision of the reader's conception of happiness. If there are differences between the two places, these differences are only surface deep. The significance of the Glittering Plain is made clear through its counterpart - the Isle of Ransom. The latter is the mirror image of the Glittering Plain stripped of all its glitter.

The reader only gradually realizes that there are problems with the Glittering Plain. All first impressions are of the beauty and idyllic nature of the island. The interconnections between the two islands alert the reader to the fact that the illusions and lies so prominent in the Isle of Ransom are more hidden, but just as real, in the Glittering Plain. In fact the King of the island is later identified as the 'King of lies' (p. 269). The Glittering Plain has to be recognized by the reader and the protagonist alike as a place filled with false conceptions of happiness.

The parallels between the two journeys creates an enclosing effect in the narrative. Individual aspects of these two journeys also suggest enclosure. Both of them are framed as types of waking visions; in each case Hallblithe falls asleep at the beginning of the journey. Both journeys are also enclosed spatially. Mountain ranges and cliffs as well as the surrounding water define the boundaries in both places. The journey itself as a dynamic spatial enclosure further highlights boundaries and the areas within them. The journey motif functions mimetically to highlight the theme of enclosure and entrapment.

The two journeys are part of the overall circular journey in the work. Within this macro design is a corresponding micro one associated with the Glittering Plain. If this island is the midpoint of Hallblithe's journey at large, the grove of the King's daughter is the midpoint of the journey within the island. This grove is the site where Hallblithe believes his wishes are to be granted. And this centre is buried deep within many different levels and types of enclosure: the King's daughter is introduced to Hallblithe through the frame of a tale read from a scroll, and she is hidden within a grove. This grove is itself encompassed by an island, which is further surrounded by the sea, and is approached via another island. Such levels of enclosure suggest concealment within multiple barriers. These levels are well suited to a place which has a hidden alternate name.

The two chapters in the middle of *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, as the structural and thematic focus of the work, are both devoted to the fulfilment of desires - the first, Sea-Eagle's wish for unending youth, the second, Hallblithe's wish for his beloved. The structural placement of these two chapters - enclosed and surrounded by all the others - suggests one of Morris's crucial thematic points in the work: that

the fulfilment of such desires leads to entrapment and unhappiness. Hallblithe admits, “I wander round and round in a tangle that I may not escape from. I am not far from deeming that this is a land of dreams made for my beguiling” (p. 265). He recognizes that he is caught ‘by the meshes of ill-hap’ (p. 282), and after he is disappointed in his quest, he says, “Behold me, then, that my quest beginneth again amidst the tangle of lies whereinto I have been entrapped” (p. 266). He believes not only that he is a ‘captive’ in a land of lies, but also that Sea-Eagle is a ‘thrall’ in this land (pp. 267, 256).

The circular structure of the work reflects the circumscribed and narrow way of life in the Glittering Plain. Such a life is limited by the absence of difficulties and problems. Hallblithe’s difficulties in searching for the Hostage are juxtaposed to the complete lack of hardship in the lives of the Glittering Plain’s inhabitants: ‘... he wearied and longed for death, but would not die until there was no corner of the land unsearched... Whiles it irked him to see the soft and merry folk of the land, who had no skill to help him, and he longed for the house of his fathers and the men of the spear and the plough’ (p. 271). Morris undercuts the easy life on the Glittering Plain by emphasizing how useless and ineffectual the people become without problems to solve or hardships to bear.

Life on the Glittering Plain is based upon a very limited conception of love. Hallblithe’s beliefs about love are continually juxtaposed with those of the Glittering Plain’s inhabitants. Sea-Eagle, anticipating what he will find in the land, says to Hallblithe:

“At least, it is like that there shall be no lack of fair women there: or else the promise of youth renewed is nought and vain. Shall this not be enough for thee?”

“Nay,” said Hallblithe.

“What,” said the elder, “must it be one woman only?”

“One only,” said Hallblithe.

The old man laughed his thin mocking laugh, and said, “I will not assure thee but that the land of the Glittering Plain shall change all that for thee....” (p. 249)

Hallblithe, in remaining true to his original heart’s desire, presents a vision of love that is much different than that of the narrow Glittering Plain where love is equated solely with the fulfilment of sensual desires. Fittingly situated on an island, this paradise is in reality an isolating and narrow place.

There are other limitations on life here. The Glittering Plain has no war. Initially, this absence - like the previous limitations - appears most desirable to us. The King asks Hallblithe, “Where else than in this land wilt thou find rest? Without is battle and famine, longing unsatisfied, and heart-burning and fear; within it is plenty and peace and good will and pleasure without cease” (p. 272). Hallblithe is continually called ‘Spearsman’ by these people and is described as ‘a goodly image of battle with the sun flashing back from his bright helm, his spear in his hand, his white shield at his back, and thereon the image of the Raven’ (p. 250). This image of the Raven - called the ‘fowl of battle’ by the Puny Fox - further identifies Hallblithe with war (pp. 221, 215). But the absence of war does not constitute the creation of peace. The Warden of Uttermost House carries no weapons but is a menacing and sinister figure.

Another man without weapons is the King, yet he is an even more threatening figure than the Warden. After the King tells Hallblithe ““Thou art free to seek thy love wheresoever thou wilt in this my realm. Depart in peace!”” the narrator says, ‘Hallblithe saw that the King was angry, though he smiled upon him; yet so coldly, that the face of him froze the very marrow of Hallblithe’s bones...’ (p. 269). Just as the absence of war is not as attractive as it first seems, so too is the possibility of battle more positive than it initially appears. If Hallblithe had not continued in his opposition to the Puny Fox, the King, the King’s daughter, and in fact, all of the characters that he meets, he would have remained trapped in lies and unable to accomplish his quest.

The Glittering Plain is also devoid of other hardships. It has no winter; the sun continually shines there in a perennial summertime. But again the island is portrayed as a place that is limited and incomplete without the full range of the seasonal cycle. In fact the restrictive and confining nature of the Glittering Plain is gradually revealed through the number of elements missing from it. The inhabitants have no recall of the past. Hallblithe sadly reflects that when he leaves Sea-Eagle and the maiden, they will only remember him for a very short time (p. 274). One of the damsels also tells Hallblithe ““we have not but hearsay of other lands. If we ever knew them we have forgotten them”” (p. 253). Such temporal and spatial limitations are also accompanied by a restricted appreciation of the natural world. These people, we are told, ‘loved the sea but little’ (p. 295); their love is confined to the land only.

The final element missing from the Glittering Plain is death. In what Tolkien identifies as man’s oldest and deepest desire, ‘the Escape from Death’,⁶ lies the Glittering Plain’s greatest appeal. But as the alternative name for the Glittering Plain suggests, life without death is merely ‘undying’. The legend of the ling-worm is a fitting description of what life without death would really mean. As the King’s daughter says, ‘life shall grow huger and more hideous’ as ‘the moveless unending ring of the years that change not’ (p. 266). Circularity here underscores the idea of entrapment. *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, like all of Morris’s prose romances, is a work that tries to widen the vision of the reader. He moves us away from enclosing types of tunnel vision by highlighting the limitations and narrowness of the Glittering Plain itself.

The circle motif is not always associated with the theme of imprisonment. The vision of happiness that is juxtaposed to that of the Glittering Plain’s inhabitants is of course that held by the alien in the land - Hallblithe. As the wider, more all-encompassing vision, it is the one that Morris is presenting as an alternative to its narrower counterpart. Such a vision is tied with the annual, diurnal, and seasonal cycles of time. Hallblithe reflects on the passing of time during his stay in the Glittering Plain: for him ‘the time was again drawing nigh to the twelfth moon’ (p. 292). Age is spoken of in terms of the seasonal cycles; we hear of ‘three lads of fifteen winters or thereabouts’ (p. 216). The date set for the wedding of Hallblithe and the Hostage is one associated with a seasonal yardstick - that of ‘Midsummer Night’ (p. 211). And early in the story, the narrator identifies the time of day as ‘two hours after high-noon’ when the three travellers depart (p. 212). The eldest of the three travellers says, ‘the days of the springtide are waxing, the hours of our lives are waning’ (p. 211). By continually drawing attention to a way of life that measures time in terms of the cycles of the natural world, Morris highlights a view of existence that accepts the

entirety of life - winter as well as summer, night as well as day. Such a world view does not ignore or try to escape from the harsher side of life. Instead it accepts adversity as a natural part of the overall cycle of life. The Puny Fox, in explaining to Hallblithe why he will miss the Isle of Ransom, is a case in point: “Nay, I love the land. Belike thou seemest it but dreary with its black rocks and black sand, and treeless wind-swept dales; but I know it in summer and winter, and sun and shade, in storm and calm” (p. 319). Working together with the emphasis on the cycles of time is a highlighting of the generational cycles of mankind. Hallblithe hopes that when she marries him, Hostage ‘might bear to the House the best of men and the fairest of women’ (pp. 256, 323). It is within this cyclical context that death can be embraced as part of the natural and inevitable movement of life. Hallblithe tells the three travellers, “Here men die when their hour comes” (p. 212). Unlike the Glittering Plain’s inhabitants who ‘stood huddled together like sheep’ at the mere mention of the word ‘death’ (p. 295), the people of the Raven and the Rose view death as a natural part of life. In fact the real paradise of the work is not the island, but rather Cleveland by the Sea. Hallblithe tells the travellers: “Wayfarers, look under the sun down the plain which lieth betwixt the mountains and the sea, and ye shall behold the meadows all gleaming with the spring lilies; yet do we not call this the Glittering Plain, but Cleveland by the Sea” (p. 212). The people of Cleveland embody a philosophy of wholeness and completeness that is missing from the Glittering Plain.

NOTES

- ¹ May Morris (ed.), *The Collected Works of William Morris*, (New York: Russell and Russell 1966), XIV, p. 261. All subsequent page references appear in brackets in the text.
- ² Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange, ‘Introduction’ to William Morris in *Victorian Poetry and Poetics*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1968), p. 612.
- ³ For example Philip Henderson speaks of Morris’s ‘too rapid method of composition’ resulting in a ‘lax and careless’ verse. See *William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends*, (New York: McGraw Hill 1967), p. 87.
- ⁴ See, for example, Amanda Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987); Carole Silver, *The Romance of William Morris*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press 1982); Carole Silver, ‘Socialism Internalized: The Last Romances of William Morris’, in Florence Boos and Carole Silver (eds.), *Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris*, (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press 1990), pp. 117-126; Norman Talbot (ed.), ‘Introduction’ to *The Story of the Glittering Plain and Child Christopher*, (Bristol: Thoemmes Press 1996), pp. vi-xxxvii. David Latham also has a convincing article about Morris’s literary craftsmanship in general in “A Matter of Craftsmanship”: William Morris’s Manuscripts’, *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, VI, 3 (Summer 1985), pp. 2-11.
- ⁵ Clive Wainwright, ‘Morris in Context’ in *William Morris*, ed. Linda Parry, (London: Abrams 1996), p. 354.
- ⁶ J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1964), p. 59.