

Resurrection in the arts

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The resurrection of Gandalf was one of the great moments in my reading childhood, and perhaps one of the most relieving scenes in modern fiction, and now cinema. The hobbits are not alone; the Balrog did not triumph; the great hope and security of Middle Earth is not lost, but is stronger than before. And more powerful, and more impressive, and more comforting than ever. Gandalf the Grey became Gandalf the White.

Such scenes of resurrection are common in the arts—but *not* common in realist fiction. Realist fiction is the telling of stories as if they were history, with the recognisable features of human existence, families, cities, nature, the material world, and it has very few resurrections to offer us.

It seems that resurrection requires a relaxation of the naturalistic or realistic mode. Resurrection is something on the imaginative edge of human experience, just beyond what we see, hear and touch. Resurrection requires more than the senses, more than history, more than our usual understanding of human behaviour and character.

But once the realist features are relaxed, the arts is filled with instances of resurrection.

In *Lord of the Rings*, it is the fantasy genre which makes Gandalf's resurrection plausible. We know that a wizard as powerful as Gandalf could find a way back from the certain demise that he met falling from the bridge at Khazad-dum.

In mythological writing, resurrections are common but complicated. Take the Egyptian story of Isis and Osiris, the Queen and King of Egypt. In a jealous rage, Osiris' brother Set chops Osiris' body up into little pieces and scatters them around the world. Isis wanders the world, gathering the pieces of her brother. When all of the pieces have been collected, Osiris is brought back to life, and Horus, the Sun god, is born through the union of Isis and Osiris. It isn't history, but the mythological story has a ready-made place for a kind of resurrection.

In children's literature, few resurrections can better that of Aslan, the lion in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, who dies on behalf of a traitor thereby breaking the Deep Magic that gives death its victory, and rising again, mane-shaking and roaring his way across Narnia with enthralled children riding on his back.

If a novel is realist or historical, resurrection may take the form of a concept rather than an event. For instance, in Tolstoy's novel, *Resurrection*, he has a character making amends for an immoral act in his past, and by summoning his own reserves of inner strength turning his life around. This he calls resurrection, when a Christian might argue that what he describes is almost entirely the opposite of what Christ achieved on the cross.

Or consider D. H. Lawrence, who in various novels and stories transforms the idea of resurrection to new life into a symbol for the beginning of a new age in which the earth no longer needs a saviour and a pagan religion of pleasure and nature, fertile and powerful, reigns. Lawrence wrote a story called 'The Escaped Cock', later changed to 'The Man Who Died', in which Jesus rose from death but refused to return to heaven because his new life on earth—a kind of 'good life' involving family, nature's beauty and simple worldly pleasures—was so satisfying. During the story, a rooster who has been tied up breaks free from its leash to roam the farmyard once more, and this image is for Lawrence the essence of resurrection: freedom from restraint.

But it is a view of the world that doesn't match with experience for me; the good life is always eventually disappointing. Human behaviour makes sure of that. But there is something in the idea of resurrection after which Lawrence is striving here.

It's hard to resurrect a character in a novel, unless the story is a fantasy or magical in some way, or the resurrection is symbolic rather than bodily. This observation makes the claim that Jesus rose from the dead in *history* even more startling. Because the accounts of Jesus are narratives, even realist narratives, historical narratives—and yet they do not shirk from recording the actual, bodily resurrection of the main character. This, as I have suggested, is almost unique in literature.

It may be hard to do historical narratives of resurrection, but other art forms draw enormous inspiration from both resurrection as a concept, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ in particular. The histories of Western painting, of music of many kinds (choral,

orchestral, and of course hymns and gospel), of poetry, of drama—all are replete with the resurrection.

The resurrection puts the imagination to the test. What would it be like to be resurrected? What words could describe such a never-experienced, never-observed happening?

We can but consider one example in more detail.

The 19th century poet Gerard Manley Hopkins found his own extraordinary style in order to grasp after some kind of poetic evocation of the resurrection. His poem, ‘That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and the Comfort of the Resurrection’, is too complex a poem to explore fully, but let’s read part of it together. It was written late in life, with death fast approaching, and written in sorrow and illness. But at the end of this poem, after fretting over the black blot that death is on the marvels of the world, the poet recalls that the resurrection awaits:

Enough! the Resurrection,

A héart's-clarion! Awáy grief's gásping, I joyless days,
dejection.

Across my foundering deck shone

A beacon, an eternal beam. I Flesh fade, and mortal trash

Fáll to the resíduary worm; I world's wildfire, leave but ash:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,

I am all at once what Christ is I, since he was what I am, and

This Jack, jóke, poor pótsherd, I patch, matchwood, immortal
diamond,

Is immortal diamond.

There is this stunning moment, when ‘in a flash, at a trumpet crash’, the dead is alive again, like Christ. And he is transformed from worm food, from trash and ash, into what Christ is: an immortal diamond. That last description in the list comes as a shock, does it not? “Jack, joke, poor potsherd (a piece of broken pottery—a shard of pot), patch, flimsy

matchwood...and then, all of a sudden, all of surprise, all of God's grace...immortal diamond.”

Not only back from the dead, but transformed into an everlasting gem.

Resurrection—it is the deep desire of art. Human desire seems to be most adequately fulfilled in the notion of resurrection. It's what we want.

This is not to pretend that all art and creative endeavour is always about the resurrection. No, but it is to say that in the realm of creativity, one of the highest desires, the highest goals of expression, is related to the life of the human being beyond the grave.

The psychologist Jung called resurrection one of the great archetypes of human consciousness, and I think he was on to something.

Deep within us, within the parts of us that think, feel and believe all at once, there is some urge for resurrection. Woody Allen said, “I don't want to achieve immortality through my work...I want to achieve it through not dying”.

Woody and all of us here know that *not dying* isn't an option. But we deeply desire that returning from death might be on offer instead.

Of the world's six and a half billion human residents, around four and a half billion of them believe that death is not the end of the human person. Roughly 70% of people hold to a world view that teaches some sort of post-bodily death existence.

I'm not asking you here to accept that the belief is true, just to acknowledge that that is what we desire. And that desire is expressed in the arts everywhere we look.