

Vol. 8, Issue-VIII (July 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

# The Criterion

*An International Journal in English*

Bi-monthly, Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Jr. No. 768]

*Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite*

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ISSN 2278-9529

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

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## Depiction of Spirit World in Charles-De-Lint's *The Onion Girl*

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**Article History:** Submitted-31/05/2017, Revised-11/07/2017, Accepted-20/07/2017, Published-31/07/2017.

### **Abstract:**

The present paper attempts to explore the spirit world depicted in Charles De Lint's urban fantasy novel *The Onion Girl*. De Lint is one of the prominent novelists in Canadian literary realm, who have popularized the genre of fantasy. In fact, De Lint pioneered the genre of urban fantasy through the projection of his fairy, magical world with realistic and urban setting. Though he has melded the world of fairy with the modern life of metropolitan, his tales are no less magical where readers find crow people, shape shifters, tricksters and grafters as well as real human beings, who are bestowed with supernatural gifts in the urban environment. His novels are the tales of real people, who have the capacity of transforming anything that changes everything in course of the action of the novel. Almost all his works are set in the fictional world of 'Newford,' where he exploits folklores, fairy tales and myths to explore and represent contemporary sensibility of the modern man.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section deals with the fantasy world of Charles De Lint; second section explores the spiritworld depicted in the novel *The Onion Girl*; and third section concludes the paper with an overarching statement. Thus, the present paper will be a modest attempt in exploring the fantasy world depicted in De Lint's *The Onion Girl*.

**Keywords:** Charles-De-Lint, Spirit World, *The Onion Girl*, Canadian, genre of fantasy.

### **Section I**

Charles De Lint began to write fantasy and short stories as a pastime but later on, he took it as vocation, an earning source. Over the next six or seven years, De Lint wrote stories for small magazines, then in 1979, he made successful debut as writer by publishing, *The Fame of the Grey Rose* in a Zebra Collection. Later on, he expanded the fantasy world into the novel, *The Harp of the Grey Rose*. However, with the publication of *Moonheart*, he moved away from his typical imaginary landscape of fantasy to an urban environment. His *Mulengro* is a hybrid of the horror and fantasy genres which is set among Canada's modern day gypsy communities. Including this one, he has written more orthodox fantasies based on traditional British folklore like *Jack the Giant Killer*, *Drink Down the Moon*, *The Little People* and *The Wild Wood*.

De Lint combines Native American mythology with Celtic story in his 1990's novel *The Dreaming Place*. Another novel *The Little Country* is the most complex novel, set in modern Cornwall that exposes Lint's own affection for folk music. The city Newford serves as a background place for more than a dozen of De Lint's books. The first collection of Newford tales *Dreams Underfoot* introduces the ensemble cast of characters that flow in and out of the Newford stories. The Newford saga includes *The Ivory and the Horn* and *Moonlight and Vines*, a collection of stories that demonstrates De Lint as the most literate and ingenious purveyor of urban fantasy. He has also used his fictional city, Newford as the setting for his several novels like *Memory and Dream Trader*, *Some Place to Be Flying* and *Forest of the Heart*. One of the most popular Newford novels is *Some Place to Flying* in which De Lint has focused on crows and ravens. His *Forests of the Heart* weaves a complex story of intrigue and suspense, while exploring the power of spirituality and friendship. Artist Jilly Coppercorn, a recurring character in De Lint's Newford tales is the protagonist of the 2001's novel, *The Onion Girl* and its sequel *Widdershins*, published in 2006. In the *Spirits of the Wires*, De Lint creates a magical Otherworld, where spirits of fairy and folklore occupy modern technology.

Thus, De Lint receives a worldwide acclaim for the fantastic tales that depict the fairy world of modern inner city. He blends together a potent brew of contemporary realism and thought-provoking messages through the characters that live and breathe right off the page in the fast moving plots. As a result, his novels capture a wide and loyal readership as well as critical raves from all over the world. In his review of *The Little Country*, Gary Westfahl rightly comments that "in a genre choking to death on regurgitated Tolkien, De Lint does research and imbues his story with an unusual, authentic atmosphere" (11). His novels are appealing to the common readers because of their in detail descriptions of smaller events from the ordinary life. Perhaps this quality of his writing sets him apart from all other writers of the genre. Tanya Huff aptly points out this quality of his writing, when she writes: "Unlike most fantasy writers who deal with battles between ultimate good and evil, De Lint concentrates on smaller, very personal conflicts" (26). Almost all his novels depict an everyday sort of magic that leads the reader to experience real places and people. In fact, De Lint's novels are his "fascination for the humbler creatures of folktale and legend, and for the darker side of magic . . . and this mitigates against the more sentimental aspects" (Speller 97).

## Section II

Published in 2001, *The Onion Girl* is a contemporary urban fantasy novel centred on life of Jilly Coppercorn, a recurring character in the Newford series. De Lint has used fairy tales to create a magical Otherworld, which has a potential to simulate the objective reality of the world and confer the magical powers to the characters, which are otherwise impossible in the real space. His magical world is structured "with its fascinating blend of urban faerie and dreamworld adventures," where the characters get an opportunity to enter the spiritworld physically as well as psychologically (publishers

weekly. web). He has portrayed real human beings with a powerful ability that enables them to experience the thrill in that magical world. They have the capacity to wander in the spiritworld while they are awake or in their dreams without taking their physical body. The protagonist of the novel *Jilly Copercorn* is a real human being, who has a great fascination for the Otherworld. She believes that there is another world that exists far away from this real world. She says: “I’ve always been aware of the Otherworld, of spirits that exists in that twilight place that lies in the corner of our eyes of fairy and stranger . . . and wonderful world where the implausible becomes not only possible, but probable” (*The Onion Girl*, 18).

Her desire to wander in the dreamland soon comes to be fulfilled, when she becomes paralyzed because of the car accident. After the accident, she was admitted into the hospital in an unconscious state, which allows her to experience the dreamland. From hereafter she gets the access of the magical world in her dreams. Charles De Lint has effectively decorated the magical world, where Jilly finds herself in and around the forest every time when she enters. The forest is not like as usual but is covered with bigger, taller and stranger trees, where light pours down from the dense canopy above in golden shafts that creates gloomy and fearful atmosphere.

The spiritworld is created by Great Spirit, where no one can find anything specific as there are no maps. It is a land covered by spirits of the animals, who leave the World as it is. In one way the spiritworld is similar to the World as it is as one can find there animal, vegetable, mineral, waterway, landscape, building. But when one goes deeper in the land, it becomes “wilder and more unpredictable . . . Go far enough and it’s like you’re on some other planet where the natural laws all run counter to everything you know” (87). The spiritworld is made up of various small places like Mabon, where Sophie goes in her dreams and Greatwood, the land, where Jilly finds herself in her dreams. These small landscapes are linked like:

[A] spiderweb of paths that stick to the same timeline that the two worlds can share. Work at it and you can also find other, secret roads where the hours stand still, or fold back in on themselves so that no time passes from when you step on the trail to when you get off again. (87)

Most of the small places are quicklands, where time runs faster than it does in the World as it is. But there are also slowtime places, where time runs too slow. The spirits like Joe avoids slowtime places as they know once they get trapped in the slowtime places, they will lose much of time of their lives.

As Jilly enters in that spiritworld, she begins to experience the wonderful land there, which has no past, no future but only a Zen time which is different than in the real world. In fact, the “time’s like water here, sometimes moving faster, sometime slower than it does in the [real] world” (57). In addition to this, the light never seems to change there, so it is hard to tell the passage of time. Not only time but the days and

years in the spiritworld are different from those of in the real world. The activities of the characters depend on the days. For instance, Workdays is a bike riding day along the hedgeroads for Toby Childers, the Boyces; Soowieday is book borrowing day in Mabon; and on Wiggly, he sleeps late because there is so much to do at night.

Jilly finds there Joe in the spiritworld, the only person known for his Otherworld origin in the day today world. De Lint has deliberately created this Otherworldly creature in the novel, which makes the spiritworld more magical. Joe is called as a Crazy Dog because he has a wolf head. Jilly describes him as: "The wolf head shimmers . . . morphing into the face . . . with its dark, coppery cast and broad features. Square chin, eyes set wide, nose flat. His long black hair's tied back in a single braid festooned with feathers and beads" (26). Joe has the powerful ability through which he can enter into the magical land while awake and he also knows how to navigate the spiritworld.

Now the life of Jilly switches between the two worlds; one is day to day ordinary world and another is a spiritworld, where her physical body is now not a hindrance in wandering. She insists to remain more in the spiritworld rather than in the real world. Next time, when she meets Joe, he tells her that now she has two broken things and until she deals with her earlier wounds, it is impossible to heal the recent one. But Jilly does not care about the healing of her physical body; instead she wants to go deeper and deeper into the spiritworld.

As Jilly visits the dreamworld again, she decides to go sketching and involves herself in the amazing light of that wonderland drawing something until a recognized shape appears on the sketchbook, when she realises that something is standing behind her for a while. When she turns back, she finds an amazing little man watching her who fits in her mental image of Robin Good fellow or Puck, an image she had drawn from the English folklore. He is little shorter than Jilly, trim and muscular with broad face which looks big and strange for the small and thin body; dark brown eyes set wide and prominent, nose stubby and mouth generous. His overall appearance looks funny and strange like his name which he tells Jilly as Toby Childers, the Boyces. Almost each Otherworldly character is strange in appearance and the names given to them are also strange and funny. These strange characters have got strange and funny names according to their appearance and magical powers. In fact, the names of these characters are the titles they got through their appearance. Joe is called as a Crazy Dog because he has wolf or dog's head and human body; Jeck is called as a Crow Boy because he has a crow head over human body. Their names work as a power in the spiritworld.

Jilly begins to wonder about these creatures and the experiences she gets there. She remembers her encounters with them in the magical land. She has seen fairy girls, who live in the abandoned car in Tombs and call themselves as gemmin. She has seen an underground kingdom of goblin-like creatures called skookin that exists below the city. She has also seen crow girls, who have the ability of changing or shifting from one shape to another. All of these Otherworldly creatures have the magical powers, which

they use accordingly. They appear suddenly without any hint and also perform a magical act of disappearing by taking a step behind an invisible curtain.

It is said that Greatwood is the First Forest that Raven has made, when he has created the world. Jilly feels as if she is transported back to the beginning of time, when she is there under the enormous canopy of Greatwood. Since Jilly's entry into the magical place of Greatwood, the strange, funny and inhumanly creatures become regular visitors to her. She repeatedly meets with most of them, especially to those who are related to Joe in some way. Among them Nanabozho is a regular visitor to Jilly. He is a twin brother of Joe with that same canid head on his human shoulders, except his colour is more to wolf greys than Joe's fur and his mismatched eyes: the right eye is a brown and the left is steel-blue grey. He always insists that Jilly should draw him in her sketchbook. The crow girls are also regular visitors to her.

Toby, who suddenly disappeared when he had seen Jolene, appears in front of her next time and tells that he simply disappeared because the presence of Jolene like animal people makes his existence less real. He says that he is not a real person like Jilly or Joe or Jolene. He exists in the world because somebody like a writer or an artist has created him and his existence in the spiritworld depends upon the belief of the people. If people do not believe in him, he may vanish from the world. His existence is threatened more with the presence of animal people than the ordinary animal or person. So, he exits when he sees Jolene there. He says to Jilly that he belongs to the group of Eadar, the creatures of the Meadhon that exists between the magical places at the middle of two worlds i.e. spiritworld and real world. One has to pass this middle world to enter into the spiritworld. It provides the way to the people or animal people to enter into the spiritworld but it has no limited boundaries.

The conversation with Toby leads Jilly to realize that the Greatwood forest trees have a magic sticks. He asks her if she wanted to climb the tree to get the sticks. He says: "The twigs at the very top are fat with magic. We could gather up a handful each and become wizards" (193). There first time she comes to know that the magic sticks enhance the power of a person and make him sorcerer. She refuses to climb the tree as she finds the very fat trunks of the trees. But when she starts climbing she finds that it's not as bad as she had thought it would be. She finds the easy bumps and crevices of the rough bark to climb on the tree, which eradicates her fear. However, when she reaches at the top of the first branches, she finds another world up there. She begins to wonder about this amazing magical place. She knows that she has wonderful experiences of dreamworlds as she encountered animal people, crow girls and deer women but now she feels that it might be an amazing part she has found in the dreamworld. She finds the branches too broad that can make two-lane highway and slightly flat on the top, where both she and Toby can walk side by side. They reach at the "next levels of branches by way of tangled nests of vines that hang here and there like clusters of ropes" (194). When they reach from one branch to its higher branch, they find the patches of grass growing there, which they see in the yellow light that come in the twilight. They also

see the swaths of wildflowers, little pools of clear water, which they can drink and other pools of thick water, where the frogs look invisible in the green surface except their eyes and the triangular tops of their head. There are plenty of songbirds like finches, sparrow, wrens, bluebirds, cardinals, which are flying among the small branches of the tree. There are all sorts of little lizards, butterflies and bugs. Jilly has also seen bigger moths with creamy wings that look like a soft velvet, noisy red and black squirrels arguing with one another and scolding anyone, who passes by, fat rabbits, which were chewing on clover, small set of antlers etc. There Jilly feels as if she were watching other world, which is more vivid and lively than she had seen in the forest below.

De Lint has created a deeper and wilder fairy world in this novel, where it is almost impossible to find any person once he or she stepped in. There is also no postal or courier service through, which a message can be sent. However, he has also created some fairy spirits through, which it is possible to send a message. It is here De Lint's fantasy world is related to and similar with modern urban world. Besides this, almost all his dreamers and some other characters are born and brought up in the urban environment, which is far different than the spiritworld. The message sent to Joe from Cassie is brought to him by Nory, a little Manitou that looks like from the urban environment but "completely at home for all that she's been transplanted to this place" (345). Cassie sent the message that they had found the signs of Jilly's sister in the Newford and she also might have been visiting spiritworld in her dreams. Joe decides to leave Bo in the spiritworld as he has lost his sense of identifying human and take Jack with him to search the whereabouts of Jilly's sister.

Raylene and Pinky have kidnapped the body of Jilly and take to the spiritworld. At that time, Jilly's dreaming self was on the magic tree, where she feels that something is pulling her down. As soon as she arrived there, Raylene began arguing for leaving her alone in the clutches of Del. Meanwhile, Pinky shoots Jilly, but Raylene throws her in between Jilly and the bullet. Soon Joe arrives there with pitbull which killed Pinky. Toby comes there along with the magical wreath through which Jilly can cure her broken body, but she decided to wake her sister and put it on the dead body of Raylene. The light comes out of the wreath and goes inside the body of Raylene making her once again alive.

### Section III

Charles De Lint has created a marvellous spiritworld in *The Onion Girl*, where the fantasy creatures like crow-girls, shape-shifting animal people are projected in a fantastic manner. He has structured his spiritworld totally different, far away from the real world, but he has used all the conventions of real world to delineate the fantastic. He has given an extraordinary power to his Otherworldly characters, who make believe the readers in the implausible situations. The principal shape-shifter Joe, who can take the form of wolf or dog and his Otherworldly companions like Jack and Nanabozho have an ability of changing themselves into wolf from man. Apart from them, other

fantasy creatures like the crow-girls, who can cross the gate of two worlds very quickly and who have the magical power of recovering the broken body. They are assigned to heal the broken body of Jilly but remain helpless as Jilly's previous wounds obstruct them to work out on her broken self. The creatures like Toby, are born out of the imagination, whose existence is depended upon the belief of the people. If people stop in believing in him, he may vanish from the world. Besides these creatures, De Lint has also introduced the supernatural gifts in the form of the magical twigs and the wreath, which is made of various rare flowers and magical twigs. These supernatural gifts work out mysteriously to cure any fatal wounds or diseases as well as bringing dead ones to the life. Thus, De Lint has excellently depicted his spiritworld in the novel.

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