

## Praise for *Your Life Is a Story*

“Chesterton famously telegraphed his wife, ‘Am in Market Harborough. Where ought I to be?’ She replied, ‘Home.’ Their exchange neatly encapsulates the paradox of human freedom and human destiny, of subjective lives lived within an objective reality. Brady Stiller unpacks this paradox with clarity and insight. In true Chestertonian fashion, he makes a case that is at once simple and profound.”

—**Michael Ward**, University of Oxford, author of *After Humanity: A Guide to C.S. Lewis’s “The Abolition of Man”*

“If one wants help with the paradox of freedom, one will do well to turn to the master of paradox himself, G.K. Chesterton. This is what Stiller has made possible for us. We see Chesterton’s genius through Stiller’s thoughtful, insightful, and penetrating treatment.”

—**David W. Fagerberg**, Professor Emeritus,  
University of Notre Dame

“As Brady Stiller rightly points out in this wonderful book, ‘any worldview that does not ultimately align to reality is bound to crack.’ And so, guided by the joyful wisdom of Gilbert Chesterton, he shows us a worldview that will not fail us; one big enough and humble enough to bring us into contact with reality and into communion with the deeper things of God.”

—**Duncan Reyburn**, author of *Seeing Things As They Are: G.K. Chesterton and the Drama of Meaning*



YOUR LIFE IS A STORY



# YOUR LIFE IS A STORY

G.K. CHESTERTON AND THE  
PARADOX OF FREEDOM

**BRADY STILLER**

FOREWORD BY DALE AHLQUIST

WORD  on FIRE.

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To *Notre Dame*, Our Lady





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# Foreword

*Dale Ablquist*

President, The Society of Gilbert Keith Chesterton

For the past many years, I've been waiting for someone like Brady Stiller to come along. And then, well, Brady Stiller came along. He turned out to be much better than whoever it was I thought I was waiting for. His résumé far exceeds what I could have dreamed up: Notre Dame valedictorian; double major in biology and theology; senior thesis highlighting G.K. Chesterton; and valedictory address invoking Chesterton. Then he goes to England to immerse himself more deeply into the prophet who is without honor in his own country. And now, he writes a book on Chesterton. One great mind meets another, and one young man makes the old things new again.

I had the privilege of meeting Brady when he was still a student at Notre Dame. He was part of an enthusiastic collection of students and faculty who would gather regularly for scintillating discussion about all things Chesterton. I wondered: How could this be? It had seemed that this prominent Catholic university had all but forgotten Chesterton, who back in 1930 had been invited as guest lecturer for six weeks and was awarded an honorary doctorate. The English writer, who had never seen a football game in his life, happened to be present at the opening of Notre Dame's famous stadium, where he was given a huge ovation. Those cheers had long gone silent.

But it was at Notre Dame where Brady Stiller met G.K. Chesterton over eighty years after the man himself had visited the campus. It was theology professor David Fagerberg who made the introduction, and Chesterton quickly became Brady's favorite author. It was the saneness and the playfulness of Chesterton's writing that captured him. But it was also the case of one integrated thinker encountering another. Chesterton put everything together. By studying both biology and theology, Brady was also putting everything together. Biology is the study of life. It's slippery. Theology is the logic of God. It's dry. But you can't afford to get either of them wrong. To get life wrong could mean death. To get God wrong could mean damnation. But for the past century or so, especially in the academic world, science and religion have kept to their own departments and haven't really been on speaking terms. But along comes Brady Stiller and gets a major in both disciplines. At Notre Dame. And using a writer who is considered neither a theologian nor a scientist, but a journalist, a poet, and a storyteller.

A good story is memorable because the listener can locate himself in the tale. And Brady realized that his own life, his own story, is part of a larger story, written by the Author of life.

The sciences tend to study things objectively, while the humanities tend toward the subjective. The modern philosophers, such as Nietzsche, Sartre, and Foucault, have fed the culture with doubt, not just of God but of any objective truth. The sciences, on the other hand, leave no room for subjectivity. The result is that objectivity and subjectivity are mutually exclusive. The Christian worldview, however, does not see this conflict. It has, says Brady, "a more capacious answer." And G.K. Chesterton conveys it more perfectly and poetically than anyone. He sees that life is a story, and therefore there is a storyteller. But he also sees that life consists of the familiar and the unfamiliar—in other words, the objective and the subjective.

## FOREWORD

As one who many years ago stumbled through writing a thesis on Chesterton and the concept of paradox, it is rather a thrill to discover decades later that a new student has accomplished the task in stunning style and with greater gravitas—not only because of his credentials but because of his credibility. I've been waiting for Brady Stiller to come along.



# Introduction

*“I wish to set forth my faith as particularly answering this double spiritual need, the need for that mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar which Christendom has rightly named romance.”<sup>1</sup>*

Whether or not we realize it, we all hold particular principles about the meaning of life. Our principles will place us at a certain point on a spectrum of meaning, which ranges from the extreme of pure objectivity to the extreme of pure subjectivity. At one end are the ideas that all meaning is fully determined, our lives are fated to end a certain way, our actions are occurring out of necessity, and free will is illusory. At the other end of the spectrum, no meaning is determined, our lives can have any one of an infinitude of endings where one is no better than another, our actions are a product of chance, and we are free to create our own identity apart from external influences vying to define us. Certain principles along the spectrum can be classified under official terms, such as karma, predestination, fate, chance, flux, determinism, essentialism, existentialism, and relativism. Although we may not describe our personal beliefs under one of these labels, our principles fall somewhere on this spectrum, either at the extremes or at some point in between.

1. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Classics, 2017), 2.

This book will present the worldview of G.K. Chesterton (1874–1936)—viewing life as a story—as not simply a metaphor for life but a definitive philosophical position that occupies a peculiar place on this spectrum of meaning. Making a particularly Chestertonian move, this worldview is best understood as a *paradox*, which for Chesterton is a coexisting of two extremes at their full strength at the same time. As a paradox, this worldview occupies *both* extremes of the spectrum of meaning, cultivating the determinedness and un-determinedness of life that best explains this reality. To claim that life is wholly predetermined would be too simplistic of an explanation for this existence, just as would be the claim that all is flux, chance, or subjective experience. Nor is life’s meaning a compromise or a meeting-in-the-middle of the two extremes that would dilute their potency. Rather, life’s meaning consists of both extremes at the top of their strength, as Chesterton’s notion of paradox evinces. Seen through this lens, this paradoxical position reveals ontological and cosmological truths about meaning, our relatedness to one another, our role in the universe, and the connectedness of all the details comprising the story of existence.

“Meaning” and “freedom” are intrinsically related, and to the extent that they will be key focuses of this book, it is essential to provide up front an operative understanding of these terms and their relationship. Bishop Robert Barron defines freedom, in its highest and most authentic form, as “the disciplining of desire so as to make the achievement of the good first possible, then effortless.”<sup>2</sup> As will be seen, Chesterton, too, understands freedom to be inherently conditioned and limited as well as ordered toward achieving the good. Moreover, Bishop Barron defines a meaningful life as “one that is lived in a purposive relationship to values,” offering such examples of values as the

2. Robert Barron, “The Glory of God Is a Human Being ‘Fully Alive,’” Word on Fire, January 22, 2006, <https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/barron/the-glory-of-god-is-a-human-being-fully-alive/>.



three transcendental properties of being—goodness, truth, and beauty.<sup>3</sup> Chesterton’s equivalent is his emphasis on seeing the world aright; one’s worldview is indicative of that person’s purposive (or lack thereof) relationship to values. For Chesterton, having a healthy worldview (using Bishop Barron’s terminology, to be in purposive relationship to values) produces joy, the result of being rightly ordered and a mark of ontological fulfillment, which can be experienced only in part during this life. Based on these definitions, freedom and meaning are related in this way, as will be further explored: freedom is the capacity to subjectively order the materials of this life to objective values, that is, to order life in a meaningful way. Of course, the major philosophical worldviews that Chesterton argued against and the culture of our day do not operate within these same understandings of freedom and meaning, which makes it all the more important to consider Chesterton’s worldview in light of postmodern philosophical principles.

Chesterton’s worldview can be largely represented by two words, romance and story, both of which characterize Chesterton’s paradoxical defense of the objective and the subjective. For Chesterton, romance is adventure, fighting and loving, chivalry, and thrift. Each of these romantic expressions acknowledges both the determinedness and un-determinedness of life. For instance, thrift acknowledges the inherent limits of life, which in turn equips us to use our freedom more effectively and properly within these limits. Moreover, story conveys intentional design, proportion, and various possibilities for a story’s ending. Just as with romance, story conveys both determinedness and un-determinedness in life; while our story *may* end in any way, it *should not* end in any way, and we possess the freedom to direct our lives toward an objectively noble ending.

3. “S4: E60—The 4 Horsemen of Meaning | Bishop Barron, John Vervaeke, and Jonathan Pageau,” *Jordan B. Peterson Podcast*, September 10, 2021, <https://www.jordanbpeterson.com/podcast/s4e60/>.

Insofar as this book engages Chesterton's worldview, it would seem most appropriate to engage the whole corpus of Chesterton's writings. Like many things about Chesterton, the man is too large to contain and to categorize. While it is true that he was a journalist, this label would be too limiting. He was an author, poet, playwright, novelist, artist, defender of common sense, apologist, philosopher, commentator, and patriotic Englishman. Not only is Chesterton many things, but his corpus is expansive in its volume and extensive in its genres, and its genres cross over into one another's realms, where his philosophical exposition may appear in the middle of a literary critique. Additionally, the reader tends to get the full Chesterton in any of his writings, where even in a biography of Thomas Aquinas or a literary critique of Charles Dickens you may feel you are learning more about Chesterton than the figure he is writing about. As a result, Chesterton's worldview is on full display in any and every genre, from his apologetical books like *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man* to a daily newspaper column on the Boer War.

Even if one had the time to scour every page of Chesterton's writings, it would not be necessary to arrive at the essence of Chesterton's worldview, which is more extensive and explicit in some works than others. For that reason, those key works of Chesterton's will comprise the scope of this book. *Orthodoxy* will be a central text for several reasons. Chesterton sets out his purpose in *Orthodoxy* as summarizing his worldview in direct response to Mr. G.S. Street, who challenged Chesterton to give an account of his view of the world. Moreover, as Chesterton names in the first chapter as a core purpose of that text, he seeks to convey his worldview as ultimately satisfying the "double spiritual need" of life, what he calls the need for the "familiar and the unfamiliar."<sup>4</sup> An accounting of the familiar and the unfamiliar—the objective and the subjective, the determined

4. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 2.

and the undetermined—is the core purpose of this present book, just as it was of Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy*. Additionally, Chesterton summarizes his view of life as a story most explicitly within *Orthodoxy*, claiming, “I had always felt life first as a story: and if there is a story there is a story-teller.”<sup>5</sup>

In addition to Chesterton’s great work *Orthodoxy*, *The Everlasting Man*, which many argue is Chesterton’s best book, will be important for understanding Chesterton’s worldview. In *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton offers a perceptive account of two stories that have lost their significance in contemporary society because of dull scientific and reductionist accountings—the story of human history and the story of Christ. As it relates to *Orthodoxy* and Chesterton’s view of life as a story, *The Everlasting Man* makes sense of the shape and dramatic trajectory of these stories, revealing further how each of our lives is a story and that our stories fit into a much larger story spanning space and time.

Other prominent writings of Chesterton will be considered as they build upon the core principles of Chesterton’s worldview that are on clear display in *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man*. *Heretics*, *The Thing: Why I am a Catholic*, *The Well and the Shallows*, *What’s Wrong with the World*, and Chesterton’s autobiography offer illustrative selections consistent with the aforementioned writings. In terms of Chesterton’s fictional titles, two will be considered due to their symbolic representation of Chesterton’s view of the determined and undetermined—the play *The Surprise* and the novel *The Man Who Was Thursday*. These nonfictional and fictional works, among a few others, paint a clear and comprehensive picture of Chesterton’s view of life as a story and the philosophical principles it upholds.

This book contains two parts. Part 1 establishes that Chesterton views life as a story and that this worldview is a definitive philosophical position on meaning and human freedom, while

5. Chesterton, 57.

part 2 then considers Chesterton's worldview up against other prominent philosophical positions that differ in their principles on the objectivity and subjectivity of life—namely, determinism, existentialism, skepticism, and nihilism. These four were intentionally chosen, as they were worldviews that Chesterton directly combated in his writings. Chesterton explicitly names determinism, skepticism, and nihilism throughout his writings and identifies their misalignment with reality, particularly reality's meaningfulness and the relationship between meaning and human freedom. While existentialism is a term that did not arise until the mid-twentieth century, the philosophical position no doubt existed during Chesterton's time, and Chesterton wrote vehemently and extensively against such subjectivist strains in the culture of his day. Against these worldviews, which each provide a limited and unsatisfactory accounting for the objectivity and subjectivity of life, Chesterton's worldview proposes a more capacious position that says yes to both extremes: "Could life's meaning in fact be very objective and very subjective at the same time, and would that not be most true to reality?"

PART I

Your Life Is a Story

THE CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW AND  
THE PARADOX OF FREEDOM



## CHAPTER I

# Your Life Is a Story

*The Worldview of G.K. Chesterton*

*“I had always felt life first as a story: and if there is a story there is a story-teller.”<sup>1</sup>*

### WORLDVIEWS

It would not take an empirical study canvassing the entire human population to soundly conclude that there are as many ways of seeing the world as there are people alive. One will observe very early on in life that his worldview is shaped by every subjective human experience—being born to a certain set of parents in a certain time in history and particular geographical location, developing thoughts and opinions through every sensory and cognitive experience, and growing up and experiencing this existence from the viewpoint of an unrepeatable identity. In other words, the evidence is endless to defend a subjective experience of the world. From his epistemological journey of coming to know things the way he does, to his unique ontological identity that no other human can embody, to his cosmological perceptions of how everything in the world fits together, a person’s experience of reality is remarkably one of a kind.

At the same time, and not in contradiction to subjective experience, worldviews tend to fall into groupings of major philosophical positions along epistemological, ontological, and

1. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Classics, 2017), 57.

cosmological lines. For instance, one person may believe that many events occur by fate while another scientifically minded person believes that events are predetermined by subatomic forces and the laws of nature that govern them, but what unites these two different positions is the common thread of determinism. The same holds for the opposite side of the spectrum, with one person holding a relativistic view of morality and the other perceiving events as happening by chance—these are united in their subjectivism.

Now, there is a tendency in our postmodern culture to treat each person's opinions, positions, and worldview as inviolable and deeply personal. Worldviews are a deeply personal matter, but they are not inviolable insofar as they fall into a major philosophical grouping, with one philosophical position vying to be more right and true to reality than other worldviews on offer. These major philosophical positions—whether determinism, subjectivism, skepticism, or nihilism—are all contending to be the most valid way of viewing the world, and the thinkers who defend them are not in the business of respecting other major philosophical positions. Even the avid subjectivist, at the risk of contradicting his own commitment to subjectivism, would fight to the death asserting that subjectivism is the worldview every person should hold, an ironically objective claim nonetheless. From the perspective of these larger camps, these philosophical worldviews are mutually exclusive; their tenets exclude belonging to multiple camps. One cannot be a committed determinist and an enduring existentialist and a steadfast skeptic at the same time, because each philosophical position has tenets that directly contradict those of the others.

If everyone's view of the world is unique, yet everyone's worldview on freedom and meaning tends to fall into a larger philosophical camp that makes a fierce claim about being the most correct view of reality, then a critical question is raised: Is there a most correct worldview as it relates to what is objective and what



is subjective in life, and if so, what could it be? To answer this question is the chief interest and purpose of this book.

To make an attempt to answer this central question, it seems most fitting that we would turn to a particular figure for whom worldviews were of supreme interest, particularly because one's worldview not only impacts every choice throughout one's life but also most directly determines one's happiness. As this figure himself claims, "But there are some people, nevertheless—and I am one of them—who think that the most practical and important thing about a man is still his view of the universe."<sup>2</sup> For G.K. Chesterton (1874–1936), one's worldview was all it took to figure out everything about a man. He had an uncanny ability to diagnose the worldviews of those around him, not only tracing people's positions back to the root causes to explain why they believed what they did but also possessing the foresight to predict what choices people's worldviews would lead them to make, as well as identifying the ultimate prognosis of their worldviews. While Chesterton did treat the worldviews of fellow writers and public figures—such as Joseph McCabe or Bernard Shaw, whose worldviews he wrote about at length—as their own deeply held beliefs, that did not prevent him from categorizing their worldviews based on their alignment to major philosophical positions. For Chesterton, people's worldviews really do follow patterns, to the point that so-called "new" philosophical movements during his time were really just new emphases on ancient principles already explored and tested over the ages. We could imagine Chesterton agreeing with Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), who famously claimed that the European philosophical tradition "consists of a series of footnotes to Plato."<sup>3</sup>

This leads us to make the same demand of Chesterton as Mr. G.S. Street made of him. If Chesterton has the right to

2. G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, in *The Collected Works*, 1:41.

3. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 39.

diagnose and critique the worldviews of prominent figures as flawed, then Chesterton should give us an account of his own worldview and why he believes it is more sound than theirs. Chesterton eagerly took the provocation from Mr. Street, producing the grand apologetical masterpiece *Orthodoxy* (1908) to expound his worldview, which could be summarized thus: far pre-dating his formal adoption of the Catholic Christian faith, Chesterton had always viewed life as a “story,” a worldview that he would later discover had already been the Christian worldview for nearly two millennia. Up to that point of publicly expounding his worldview, Chesterton’s early life could be characterized as a search for a right worldview that best explains this reality. It never was a question of whether worldviews were a matter of personal taste. Instead, Chesterton had always treated worldviews in relation to an objectively right worldview that—even if he would never come to find it—he was convinced others had already found. And it was in this very way of viewing life as a story that he would find himself unknowingly already within the bounds of Christianity.

In this discussion of philosophical positions contending for the title of “most correct worldview,” we might next wonder if Chesterton considered his worldview on the same level as other dominant philosophies making objective claims about reality and asserting their framework as one that all people should be operating within. The short answer is “yes,” and to provide the long answer is the purpose of the remainder of this book—to show why Chesterton believed that the view of life as a story (which was not only his own worldview but also that of Christianity) is one that best explains this existence and, therefore, one that all people should hold if they are to discover the key that unlocks the secrets of the world.

Far more than a metaphor or a personal liking, to view life as a story is an audacious and expansive philosophical framework that seeks to explain all things, all peoples, all times, and all

places. This position makes fierce epistemological claims about what we can know to be true. It takes a strong ontological position that life has meaning to be discovered, that life has a meaningful trajectory, that the story of life should end a certain way but could nevertheless end in any way as a result of free will, that the story of life has an author embellishing it with choice details, and that the purpose of human beings as protagonists of the story is to overcome the central conflict in pursuit of a noble resolution. Likewise, it proposes cosmological views on the existence of the universe and how human beings fit into this existence, offering a hermeneutical lens through which to make sense of every detail of life. Ultimately, to view life as a story is the position of the Christian tradition, and like any serious philosophical worldview, it seeks to explain everything and to traverse the universe leaving no stone unturned.

Now, if someone who had never read Chesterton's writings had been given one of his books to read—let us say his more well-known books *Orthodoxy* or *The Everlasting Man*—and had to identify three key words that captured the essence of his worldview, those three words would most likely be “story,” “romance,” and “paradox.” These three terms are distinct from each other and have multiple meanings that are core to Chesterton's worldview, but they are also interconnected in their principles. Chesterton perceives life as a story, a story that takes the ideal form and genre of a romance story, and a story that has multiple paradoxes at its core.

To first begin with Chesterton's idea of story, “story” meant many things to Chesterton, all of which he viewed as consistent with Christianity and as best revealing the deepest truths about reality. For Chesterton, a story must have a storyteller to intentionally determine every detail, down to the smallest of details; a story is a work of art with proportion and personal expression; and a story has an ideal ending that it should (with moral and ontological imperative) achieve but is not predetermined to

achieve. These principles may seem self-evident, but for Chesterton and for Christians, the application of these principles to reality is of utmost significance, as they comprise the Christian “philosophy,” in the sense of a system that seeks to make sense of existence. To offer an initial example, to claim that our lives are stories with a storyteller opens up a whole line of questioning: “Who is the storyteller? Why did the storyteller choose these exact details? What is the ideal ending that the storyteller had in mind?” Someone who believes in a well-meaning storyteller will approach life’s meaning very differently from someone else who believes that life is better accounted for as an accidental unfolding of chance events.

As for Chesterton’s idea of romance, “romance” is best understood as the ideal “genre” of the story of life. This is opposed to viewing life as a horror story, which would be more in line with how the nihilistic philosophy views the story of life, if nihilism could even be said to call life a story. Love and adventure are at the core of Chesterton’s understanding of romance, but lest the concepts of “love” and “adventure” be dismissed as too obvious or even overly sentimental, these concepts carry strong philosophical presuppositions in Chesterton’s understanding. For Chesterton, love was less of a delightful emotion and more of a fierce claim about the primitiveness of goodness and that goodness should be defended against the onslaught of opposing forces. This is essentially the Christian understanding of love as “willing the good” of another person, a much stronger treatment of love than reducing love to an emotion. On a similar note, Chesterton’s understanding of “adventure” was less about life being fun—though Chesterton did view life as fun. More accurately, claiming that life is an adventure is to make two key inferences about reality: first, that conflict is an inherent part of the human experience and that a sense of adventure arises from the fight to overcome it, and second, that the future is undetermined and offers the exciting opportunity to redirect the story

in the right direction. Thus, the principles undergirding Chesterton's idea of story and romance are deeply philosophical in their approach, Christian in their essence, and universal in their applicability.

#### STORY: STORYTELLER

Having set the context for Chesterton's understanding of worldviews and the defining principles of his own worldview, we now consider each of the principles of Chesterton's understanding of "story" and "romance," as well as how they begin to form a system of understanding the world. It makes sense to start from the beginning with Chesterton's earliest intuition about life's meaning, namely, that life is a story with a storyteller, which he put thus: "And this pointed to a profound emotion always present and sub-conscious; . . . I had always felt life first as a story: and if there is a story there is a story-teller."<sup>4</sup> This succinct statement of Chesterton's earliest intuition about life's meaning, one that he would carry with him the rest of his life, is powerful enough to capture nearly all of Chesterton's worldview, and much of the Christian philosophy can be deduced from this single statement.

To begin with the idea of story, understood in the most general sense, a story is a narrative account of a series of events that proceed along an arc, including an opening, the rise of a central conflict, a climax, and a resolution. As will be seen in more detail, Chesterton interprets this story arc as applying not only to each person's life but also to the course of history, which is precisely the Christian position. Each person's life begins with years of childhood innocence followed by the age of reason and the battle against evil forces in preservation of the good. The climax is the realization of one's purpose in life, and the resolution is the fulfillment of the story after death as it finds its place more perfectly among other human stories and God's ultimate story

4. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 57.

for existence. This story arc present in each person's life mirrors the greater story of salvation history, which begins when human beings are created by God in a state of innocence and is followed by the fall of humanity, the battle against evil for ages to come, and the climax of God's coming to earth to finally defeat evil. The resolution will be the consummation of the grand story of creation at the end of time.

Moreover, stories can take on any number of genres, such as fantasy, mystery, and horror. This raises questions about what genre or genres Chesterton was referring to when he called life a story. Does each person's story have its own genre? Is there an ideal genre that each person's story should take on? We might also then wonder what genre the story of salvation history is. Fortunately, the answer to all of these questions is very easy to identify from Chesterton's writings and his worldview, because the answer is nearly everywhere he put pen to paper. According to Chesterton, life, when it is lived to its fullest, is best characterized as a *romance* story, which connotes everything from the sensation of love to the thrilling adventure of battle. To offer only one example here, Chesterton finishes his autobiography referring to his own life as a romance story: "I am finishing a story; rounding off what has been to me at least a romance."<sup>5</sup>

Just as important as identifying the genre that life's story should take on—namely, romance—is pointing out the genres that life should not take on. Other philosophies, if they view life as a story at all, may view life as a tragedy or a horror story, wherein one's life is a series of unfortunate events logically tending toward downfall or beset constantly by suffering and negative forces with little hope for a happy ending. Surely, this is the position of the pessimist, who does not stop at complaining about there being too little good in the world but goes so far as to

5. G.K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton*, in *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 16:329–330.

question the value of good itself.<sup>6</sup> Many other philosophies, such as fatalism, do not even grant that life is a story but instead treat life more as a “science or a plan, which must end up in a certain way.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, for those who grant that life is a story, the type of genre will impact how every element of the story is interpreted and where the story is headed, whether glory or doom.

Perhaps most obvious, yet most foundational, in Chesterton’s understanding of the story of life is that it has a storyteller. Out of this simple truth arises every philosophical implication about design, purpose, meaning, and freedom. On the most basic level, to claim that a story has a storyteller is to attribute every detail of the story, every description of color or environment or personality, to the intentional choice of the author. The point is almost so self-evident that it risks jeopardizing the significance of the claim. To say that there is a personality behind the story is to make a definitive ontological claim that the story has meaning. Applied to the story of life, if God is the storyteller of our lives and the storyteller behind history, then he must be meaning something in the details that he chose, because this existence could have been very different. It means that a purpose underlies everything that has been created, almost literally in the sense that purpose is lying in waiting to be discovered, where “everything has a story tied to its tail.”<sup>8</sup> It is likewise a bold claim about the objectivity of meaning that logically results from the choice of the divine storyteller. This flies in the face of popular philosophies and subscribers to those philosophies who, on scientific or philosophical grounds, deny the existence of any objective meaning to be found outside of the relative meaning that individuals create.

6. Chesterton, 104.

7. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 137.

8. Chesterton, 161.

But God is not the only storyteller. We are also the storytellers. If God is truly free, and if man's freedom is not an illusion but a powerful capacity to effect change upon reality, and if the divine and human freedoms are not mutually exclusive or in competition, then we arrive at the concept of co-creation, whereby both God and man are cooperatively writing the story. Both God and man, through the ordering capacity that is the will, order creation in such a way that it becomes meaningful. This ability to make life meaningful by ordering creation toward objective values is the capacity that God equipped humanity with above all other creatures, by virtue of creating man in his image and likeness. However, unlike God's omnipotent capacity, humanity's capacity to order creation is limited. God's freedom is the capacity to both create from nothing and to order what he created, while man can only order what God has already created. Put another way, God, in his very nature, is the standard of beauty, goodness, and truth, and he orders creation to himself; we do not create these ends, but can use our freedom to order creation toward the reality established by God. This is an inherent limitation to man's ability to create meaning, which is not to render the capacity as ultimately futile—as many other dominant philosophies might conclude. But even those who do not grant the existence of God or the existence of objectively determined meaning must still admit, unlike many resistant postmodern thinkers, that the ability to create meaning has its natural limits within which to operate.

#### **STORY: WORK OF ART**

In addition to having a trajectory, a genre, and a storyteller, Chesterton considered a story to be a work of art. As a work of art, a story is an expression of the artistic capacity to create and order details in a way that expresses beauty and truth. According to Chesterton, "Art is the signature of man," a creative capacity that



separates mankind from the animal kingdom.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the rest of the animals, man is “a creator as well as a creature. . . . Man is the microcosm; man is the measure of all things; man is the image of God.”<sup>10</sup> Implicit in this statement is the claim that art is the signature of God as well, who created mankind in his image and likeness. If God and man are related in this way, it is not a stretch to apply the criteria of human artistic creations to God’s creation, which is certainly no less artistic in its expression. Indeed, Chesterton does call God an artist of his creation: “For this world of different and varied beings is especially the world of the Christian Creator; the world of created things, like things made by an artist.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, in being the divine storyteller, God also is artist of a masterful creation.

Just as a story is shaped by intentional details of the author, a work of art similarly conveys an intentional act of the will by the artist. The fact that “art is limitation” is “the most decisive example of pure will.”<sup>12</sup> Art is a willful limitation in the sense that to draw a particular thing, like a giraffe, the artist is required to draw an animal with a long neck and not a short one.<sup>13</sup> Though there is considerable room for creative license, to deviate from the rules and alter the details in the extreme would be to lose the sense of what the artist wanted to draw in the first place. A paradox though it may be, God made an act of self-limitation in creating a world with very particular proportion, definition, and variety. God “limited” himself—however this may be theologically interpreted—when making the world as it is and not another way; he made a specific choice for how the world would unfold, with certain laws and rules, though God himself is not

9. G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, in *The Everlasting Man: A Guide to G.K. Chesterton’s Masterpiece*, ed. Dale Ahlquist (Elk Grove Village, IL: Word on Fire, 2023), 39.

10. Chesterton, 41–42.

11. G.K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, in *The Collected Works*, 2:538.

12. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 36.

13. Chesterton, 36.

bound by his own created laws.<sup>14</sup> Even in entertaining this idea of God's self-limitation in the act of creating, the creation of the world was also paradoxically an over-flowing of God's love. Creation is both divine thrift and divine overabundance at the same time.

Art is also an expression of will in another sense—the artistic motive is to express a story or to find one already within things. As artist, man feels what Chesterton calls “the ache of the artist,” understood to be the longing “to find some sense and some story in the beautiful things he sees; his hunger for secrets and his anger at any tower or tree escaping with its tale untold. He feels that nothing is perfect unless it is personal.”<sup>15</sup> Chesterton expresses in an early notebook how the various details of life find their purpose fitting into one's story: “What is the good of all songs, poems, denunciations, schools, ideas, what is the use of any genius, prophet, poet, of any Bible or Church if not as something entering into the plain story of a man's life. A story is the highest work. For the world is a story, every part of it. And there is nothing that can touch the world or any part of it that is not a story.”<sup>16</sup> Every detail of life demands explaining; every created thing will not let the human heart rest until it shows its purpose in the big picture or its proportion to everything else. This notion of the ache of the artist seems related to what Chesterton conveys as a tendency toward personification or anthropomorphism of created things.<sup>17</sup> Personification expresses a longing to establish a personal connection with impersonal, inanimate objects. One could say that the Incarnation satisfied a desire to see God in a way that man could relate to. We might wonder if

14. This is a similar principle to how God has ordered the economy of salvation through the sacraments: “God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments” (CCC 1257).

15. Chesterton, *Everlasting Man*, 161.

16. Chesterton, “Ex B-Lib,” no. 1EE in GKC Photocopies, GKC Library.

17. Chesterton, *Everlasting Man*, 161.

Chesterton was hinting at the self-limiting act of the Incarnation when suggesting that mankind longs to anthropomorphize the entire universe: “And when the whole universe looks like a man we fall on our faces.”<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, if this existence was created by an artist, then the artist must have necessarily made deliberate choices about every detail of its composition. Consistent with the Christian worldview, Chesterton has a providential view of the world, which he believes to have been designed and intelligently wrought together by God: “Proportion cannot be a drift: it is either an accident or a design.”<sup>19</sup> Chesterton rules out the former theory that this proportion is an accident because even the smallest details of creation, such as the colors of things, struck him as too deliberate to have been random: “Every colour has in it a bold quality as of choice; the red of garden roses is not only decisive but dramatic, like suddenly spilt blood. He feels that something has been done.”<sup>20</sup> Chesterton views God as the artist and creation as an intentional work of art with proportion.

#### STORY: PROPORTION

So far, we have already seen glimpses of how Chesterton’s view of life as a story establishes a position on what is subjective and what is objective. For instance, the divine Author has set an objective order for creation within which humanity, as co-author, has the capacity to subjectively co-create meaning aligned to the objective order. How this worldview fully accounts for the balance of objectivity and subjectivity relative to other philosophical positions is a task for a later chapter, but we are beginning to see how the principles of story set up this framework.

18. Chesterton, *Heretics*, 120–121.

19. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 112.

20. Chesterton, 55.

An additional principle that contributes to the objectivity of the story is that of “proportion.” As a work of art, a story has proportion, which for Chesterton is an objective arrangement by a personal will and intelligent mind, and it is an inherent property of a story. Stories contain many elements, some objective and others subjective: “A story has proportions, variations, surprises, particular dispositions, which cannot be worked out by rule in the abstract, like a sum.”<sup>21</sup> If life is a story, then there is a personal author of this story.<sup>22</sup> And if there is a personal author, then the world may not be tending toward a simple, one-sided objectivity but rather toward a complex, multi-faceted objectivity that only a rational being could create. This “one particular arrangement” of qualities is what Chesterton calls the “proportion” of a story or work of art.<sup>23</sup>

Without a personal will and intellect behind existence, Chesterton supposes that this world would tend toward one simple end, not a complex balance of values and features. Chesterton challenges the conclusion that the world is impersonal simply based on an exact proportion that does not vary. Against the materialist’s claim that the world is clockwork because the sun rises without variation, Chesterton suggests that the repetition might be due to an excess, not absence, of life. On the flip side, variation could be due to an absence of life and absence of will.<sup>24</sup> This is all to suggest that the divine will can very well be active in maintaining the objective proportion of this world, while the human will can contribute to subjective variations in the story.

Given the personal will behind the exact proportion of the world, Chesterton suggests that the story of existence would be more satisfying to us if it were to culminate in a particular proportion determined by the divine Author. In Chesterton’s

21. Chesterton, *Everlasting Man*, 411.

22. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 57.

23. Chesterton, 112.

24. Chesterton, 56.

theological imagination, the end goal of the story and artwork of creation may very well be a complex, multifaceted picture:

It must not (if it is to satisfy our souls) be the mere victory of some one thing swallowing up everything else, love or pride or peace or adventure; it must be a definite picture composed of these elements in their best proportion and relation. . . . If the beatification of the world is a mere work of nature, then it must be as simple as the freezing of the world, or the burning up of the world. But if the beatification of the world is not a work of nature but a work of art, then it involves an artist. . . . But only a personal God can possibly be leading you (if, indeed, you are being led) to a city with just streets and architectural proportions, a city in which each of you can contribute exactly the right amount of your own colour to the many coloured coat of Joseph.<sup>25</sup>

This passage begins to offer an understanding of how the subjective elements comprise the objective whole. According to this passage, individuals are their own color—here is the subjective element of the picture. Every person’s color is meant to “contribute exactly the right amount”—here is the objective proportion of the picture. As time goes on, the unfinished picture gains more colors and details, but it ought to look a certain way when it is finished at the end of time. The ideal would be for everyone to contribute his or her own color and the right amount of it. However, if some individuals decide to not become part of the picture, the divine artist will have to be creative in making up for the lost colors.

25. Chesterton, 113–114.

## STORY: MAY END IN ANY WAY

A final principle of story for consideration, as it relates to Chesterton's understanding of stories and the implications for objectivity and subjectivity, is that a story "may end in any way." In claiming that there is not one inevitable ending of a story, Chesterton is arguing directly against an entirely opposite tendency toward a pure objectivism—viewing an outcome as predestined or necessary due to (or in spite of) preceding events. One such target of Chesterton's argumentation was the Eastern philosophical tradition, which Chesterton knew to differ greatly from Christianity on the notion of inevitability: "To the Buddhist or the eastern fatalist existence is a science or a plan, which must end up in a certain way. But to a Christian existence is a story, which may end up in any way."<sup>26</sup> To assert free will is to sacrifice a single ending—one that could have been objectively best—to an infinitude of endings, because each free action of each free human being will cause a different course of action. This is a common objection against the Christian view of divine freedom and human freedom, that the Christian God would seem to give up an objectively best plan to limited humans by making them free. This dilemma is also at the core of theodicy: "Why would an all-good God allow for evil to exist when the troubled existence that we experience could have been avoided?" This question is not easily answerable, but Chesterton provides a hint at an answer in his play *The Surprise* and his novel *The Man Who Was Thursday*, which we will consider below.

Regarding the trajectory of life, when asked by an agnostic if he supposed "mankind grew better or grew worse or remained the same," Chesterton answered that "it might depend on how mankind chose to go on."<sup>27</sup> In other words, the future state of humanity is contingent upon current decisions, which are indeed

26. Chesterton, 137.

27. Chesterton, *Everlasting Man*, 408.

effective in changing the future course. In the same passage, he suggests that life is not an unwavering line or curve, as if it were to reach a particular point on a graph without redirection.<sup>28</sup> Just because one may head in every direction before arriving at the final point does not dismiss the possibility of fate, except Chesterton explicitly states that one makes willful decisions according to his liking, “going where he like[s] and stopping where he cho[oses], going into a church or falling down in a ditch.”<sup>29</sup>

That the story could end in any way is consistent with the Catholic conception of heaven and hell, either of which we have a part in choosing by the actions of this life. Chesterton suggests that the moral life is thrilling in that every “instant” is “an immortal crisis” since each moral choice is a matter of life and death.<sup>30</sup> “Will a man take this road or that?—that is the only thing to think about, if you enjoy thinking,” suggests Chesterton. The moment of death is one that Chesterton calls “exciting” and suggests is a strong instance of free will: “You can finish a story how you like.” If not at the moment of death, then by all of life’s free actions one will have given an answer.<sup>31</sup>

This is not to suggest a Pelagian view in which one merits heaven or hell in direct proportion to the quality of one’s actions. Salvation is ultimately for God to give, but the economy of salvation is such that God allows mankind to freely accept and participate in the salvation he offers. For these reasons, Chesterton denies elements of fate even within the Christian tradition, an example of which is Calvinist predestination. Chesterton considers predestinarian beliefs to rob life of its excitement because they ultimately are a denial of the great gift of free will:

28. Chesterton, 408.

29. Chesterton, 408.

30. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 138.

31. Chesterton, 138.

To the Catholic every other daily act is dramatic dedication to the service of good or of evil. To the Calvinist no act can have that sort of solemnity, because the person doing it has been dedicated from eternity, and is merely filling up his time until the crack of doom. . . . The difference is that to a Christian of my kind this short earthly life is intensely thrilling and precious; to a Calvinist like Mr. Shaw it is confessedly automatic and uninteresting. To me these threescore years and ten are the battle. To the Fabian Calvinist (by his own confession) they are only a long procession of the victors in laurels and the vanquished in chains. To me earthly life is the drama; to him it is the epilogue.<sup>32</sup>

As it relates to story, predestination casts life as the resolution of the story, not a story as it plays out in the decisions of the characters. Life must end a certain way, so freedom is an illusion, and the instant loses its dramatic features as a moral decision goes from affecting eternity to affecting only aspects of earthly life without relevance to eternity. We might suppose that God is taking us seriously when he lets our actions mean what they do, answering for how we wish to live in this life and the next life. For Chesterton, this spiritual truth allows him to compare life to a “serial story” in which “life ends with the promise (or menace) ‘to be continued in our next.’”<sup>33</sup> For the second installment of a story series to ignore the actions of its characters in the first would be a poor serial story.

While Chesterton asserts that a story may end in any way, this does not mean that he believes it ought to end in any way, as if one ending were just as good as another. Every author, by virtue of the willful choice of every detail, has an ultimate purpose for the characters. An author sets a standard for how the

32. G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World*, in *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 4:153–154.

33. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 138.



story ought to end, but the characters have the freedom to make decisions that will bring them closer to or further from achieving this purpose. This metaphor begins to shed some light on the relationship between the free will of the author and that of the characters in the story. The romance that arises from this principle, as well as the other aforementioned principles of a story, lends to the drama of life, which we will next consider.

## CHAPTER 2

# The Genre of Romance

*“But nearly all people I have ever met in this western society in which I live would agree to the general proposition that we need this life of practical romance; the combination of something that is strange with something that is secure. We need so to view the world as to combine an idea of wonder and an idea of welcome. We need to be happy in this wonderland without once being merely comfortable.”<sup>1</sup>*

### INFLUENCES ON CHESTERTON’S ROMANTICISM

While many different types of stories are important to Chesterton and are often representative for him of human life, such as detective stories and fairytales, the type of story that perfuses his works and seems to pop up explicitly every few lines is the romance story. Romance is part and parcel of Chesterton’s worldview of life as a story. In fact, from a consideration of the ideals of romance compared to other genres through Chesterton’s perspective, we can ultimately arrive at the conclusion that romance is the ideal genre that the story of life ought to take on. The moral imperative for the story to be a romance story will become more evident when considering what romance represented for Chesterton—namely, a fight for the achievement of good, an exhilarating love that drives the protagonist to seek the good of the one who is loved, the thrift of freedom within a world of

1. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Classics, 2017), 3.

limits, and the adventure of life arising from the real dangers and drastic consequences of human decisions.

Lest Chesterton's ideal of romance be dismissed as a bias derived from early life experiences or the sentimental longings of a hopeless romantic or an ideal simply adopted from the British and American Romanticism literary movements that Chesterton admired in part, the ideal of romance is much bigger and beyond the personal tastes of Chesterton. In fact, it is a set of principles that have been represented and defended by the Christian tradition up and down the centuries. It would not be inaccurate or reductive to say that the Christian story of salvation is the quintessential romance story. Far more ancient than any romantic musings of Percy Bysshe Shelley or Walt Whitman, the Christian story tells the narrative of a cosmic battle of good and evil, wherein humanity's entire earthly existence is a struggle against the onslaught of evil, which only a divine being could save them from out of love for the people he created. This cosmic narrative of salvation history was of ultimate significance for Chesterton, and how the principles of romance are expressed by this cosmic story will be explored further. For now, let us first consider the core influences on Chesterton's romanticism before assessing the key principles of romance from Chesterton's perspective.

#### *Chesterton's Toy Theater*

Where did Chesterton's romantic worldview begin? We can trace it back to his childhood home in the Kensington area of London. It was during these humble beginnings in the 1870s that the young Chesterton would first encounter the toy theater, a play device that he would continue to use for the rest of his life even into adulthood. Long before the grown G.K. Chesterton would cut out and color the cardboard characters for his self-written and self-directed plays, it was his creative father who ran the show for his two young sons, Gilbert and his brother, Cecil: "He [Mr. Edward Chesterton] wrote the plays. He drew,

cut out and pasted up the actors and actresses (which were only a few inches high), and he acted as stage-director, carpenter and scene-shifter.”<sup>2</sup> It is remarkable to consider that all of G.K. Chesterton’s works, his creative mind, and his romantic worldview were largely influenced by a simple, imaginative, and homemade toy theater set.

Deep into his married life, Chesterton would continue this playful practice that he learned from his father. In their house in Battersea soon after his marriage to Frances Blogg, Chesterton would write plays for his toy theater and cut out and color cardboard characters and scenery,<sup>3</sup> not only putting on plays for his own pleasure but also entertaining the neighborhood children.<sup>4</sup> When later settling down to live in Beaconsfield, there, too, Chesterton would put on his plays for the local children. Fr. John O’Connor, the inspiration for Chesterton’s character Fr. Brown, remarked about the figure behind the local spectacle, “He is incurably romantic. For his own amusement—and the real enjoyment it invariably gives to about two hundred neighborhood children—he has constructed a toy theatre in which the most incredible melodramas and farces are produced with the greatest gusto.”<sup>5</sup>

The toy theater was far more than a mere pastime for Chesterton. For one, the toy theater was characteristic of play, in both senses of the word. All throughout his life, Chesterton would consider children’s play to be a more serious act than any of the writing he would ever do, a claim as serious as it may be

2. Joseph Sheridan, “The Boyhood of G.K. Chesterton,” in *The Catholic Boy*, May 1957, article, box 2 in G.K. Chesterton Collection, University of Notre Dame Rare Books & Special Collections, Notre Dame, IN (hereafter cited as GKC Collection), 18–19.

3. G.K. Chesterton, “The Toy Theatre,” leaflet, no. 200 in Printed Ephemera I, GKC Library. Also published as “The Toy Theatre” in *Tremendous Trifles*.

4. George Knollys, “Mr. Gilbert Keith and His Toy Theatre,” GKC Library, 617.

5. John O’Connor, “Gilbert Keith Chesterton,” *PAX* 12, no. 4 (January 1936): 108, box 2, GKC Collection.

self-deprecating.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, a simple play (in the sense of a drama) was a powerful vehicle capable of expressing the deepest philosophy. Just as the Greek tragedies evoked the full range of human emotions and questions about meaning and morality, Chesterton claimed the same revelatory power about the plays of his toy theater: “My toy theatre is as philosophical as the drama of Athens.”<sup>7</sup> The toy theater expressed the “the main principle of art”—namely, that art “consists of limitation,” from the frame of the toy theater to the trimming of cardboard characters.<sup>8</sup> Even within the small bounds of the frame, there existed such creative potential for writing plays and making characters that told a much larger story and symbolized a much more profound reality. As Chesterton put it, “By reducing the scale of events it can introduce much larger events. . . . Because it is small it could easily represent the Day of Judgment. . . . You can only represent very big ideas in very small spaces.”<sup>9</sup>

The plays of Chesterton’s toy theater were able to represent a much larger story through the power of symbolism, which is, in a sense, a form of limitation. The cosmic realities of good and evil, for example, could be represented by the colors white and black in the tiny cardboard figures. Chesterton considered the significance of his plays to lie largely in the symbols, colors, and minute details of his characters, claiming that “indeed the whole art of making a play for the toy theatre consists in making as much as possible of it depend on these emblems and external signs.”<sup>10</sup> One elucidatory example lies in his play *St. George and the Dragon*, which he wrote for his toy theater while living in

6. Chesterton, “The Toy Theatre.”

7. Chesterton, “The Toy Theatre.”

8. Chesterton, “The Toy Theatre.”

9. Chesterton, “The Toy Theatre.”

10. Chesterton, “The Toy Theatre.”

Battersea.<sup>11</sup> Chesterton accentuated certain symbolic details in the characters of this play, such as the bright red-and-white shield and the halo of St. George, as well as the fierce dragon (see fig. 1 & 2).<sup>12</sup> The purpose of the details was to powerfully allude to the greater cosmic reality behind the story. The audience would find the frame of the theater, containing the tiny characters of the play, to be a window into a deeper reality. When they noticed that the character St. George had the tumultuous decision “of becoming a saint or to remain uncanonised,” they might have remembered their own moral choices between heroism and mediocrity in real life.<sup>13</sup> Chesterton achieved this dramatic effect by making multiple versions of the character St. George, one with a halo and another without. All things considered, the toy theater proved to be both a key influence on and representation of Chesterton’s romantic worldview, planting the earliest seeds of a view of limits, play, and romance that would undergird his view of life as a story from then on.

11. Knollys, “Mr. Gilbert Keith and His Toy Theatre,” 617. Many of the characters and scenery pieces from this play are still extant at the Notre Dame London Global Gateway archive (GKC Library). Additionally, a full outline of the play *St. George and the Dragon* is etched in one of Chesterton’s notebooks, currently at the British Library (Reference: Add MS 73355 D [c 1907]).

12. Chesterton, “The Toy Theatre.”

13. Knollys, “Mr. Gilbert Keith and His Toy Theatre,” 619.

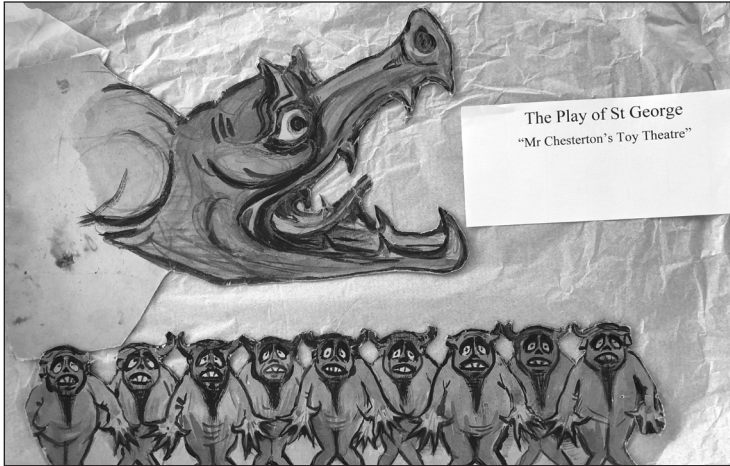


Figure 1. Photograph of the blue dragon and blue devils from the toy theater collection. G.K. Chesterton Library, University of Notre Dame London Global Gateway, London, UK.<sup>14</sup>



Figure 2. Photograph of the blue dragon, St. George, and princess characters from the toy theater collection. G.K. Chesterton Library, University of Notre Dame London Global Gateway, London, UK.

14. In an early tale titled “Half Hours in Hades: An Elementary Handbook of Demonology” (1891), the young Chesterton identifies the blue devil as the devil of pessimism, which most frequently makes its home among the noble class. Interestingly, Chesterton depicts the dragon and devils as blue in his toy theater set.

*American and British Romanticism*

In addition to the early influence of the toy theater, another significant influence on Chesterton's romantic worldview was the American and British Romanticism literary movements. While Chesterton may not have been a full proponent of all the figures of this movement on either side of the Atlantic, a figure that Chesterton praises and traces his worldview to is Walt Whitman. An author who expressed great wonder at creation, Whitman epitomized for Chesterton the "joie de vivre," which helped carry Chesterton from his nihilistic art-school years toward a life of gratitude and wonder lived in the Catholic Church. Having "hung on to the remains of religion by one thin thread of thanks," Chesterton attributes this major turning point in his life to the writings of Walt Whitman, Robert Browning, and Robert Louis Stevenson. The elements of this romantic movement contribute greatly to Chesterton's worldview of gratitude to God for existence and for the small, often overlooked things that are indeed created with design and intention.

Influenced by both the toy theater that his father introduced to him at a young age and the Romanticism literary movements, Chesterton's romantic worldview saturates every page of his writing, from a delicious description of the world around him to the most solemn philosophical claims. If life was a story for Chesterton, then romance was the dramatic shape and defining trajectory of the quintessential human story. Romance encompassed and best expressed Chesterton's deepest intuitions about life—namely, that life has inherent limits, that life is thrilling because of (not in spite of) its limits, and that there exists a strong sense of the "good" (in both abstract and concrete forms) that ought to be defended. Far more than an intuition, these characteristics of romance are in fact strong philosophical claims about human freedom and purpose. In particular, romance claims that human freedom must operate within the bounds of inherent limits, however paradoxical it is to say that freedom is inherently limited.



Likewise, it proposes that human purpose arises from a sort of battle, such that it would be hard to imagine a meaningful story that did not involve a struggle and an overcoming of conflict. In summary, Chesterton's far-reaching romantic worldview can be understood under the following characteristics, each of which grants depth, shape, and purpose to the human story: adventure, fighting and loving, chivalry, and thrift.

#### ROMANCE: ADVENTURE

Treating the first characteristic, romance as an exciting adventure is very indicative of Chesterton's view of life and his defense of the Catholic Church, which he claims "went in specifically for dangerous ideas; she was a lion tamer."<sup>15</sup> Romance, which Chesterton suggested is a product of Christianity, conveys a sense of danger and excitement, "for romance consists in thinking a thing more delightful because it is dangerous; it is a Christian idea."<sup>16</sup> This notion of romance as dangerously thrilling is tied in with his view of life as a story, since the end of the story is largely dependent upon the actions and intentions of the faithful believer. Salvation is not guaranteed, and the Christian who summons the courage to accept this reality can rejoice at the responsibility to guard this one life—the only one given—from assaulting dangers that threaten the attainment of the good. Because of the elements of danger on our spiritual journeys, the adventure of life becomes "an opportunity" to avoid dangers and conquer evil in pursuit of the good.<sup>17</sup>

The romantic elements of thrift and fighting and loving are also present here. In the passage in which he speaks of the "thrilling romance of Orthodoxy," which is anything but "heavy, humdrum, and safe," he offers an illuminating image that expresses

15. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 99.

16. G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, in *The Collected Works*, 1:126.

17. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 50.

the improbability of being in the one right position: “It is always simple to fall; there are an infinity of angles at which one falls, only one at which one stands. . . . But to have avoided them all has been one whirling adventure.”<sup>18</sup> While this may be more of a helpful image than a definitive claim about reality, Chesterton seems right to point out the objective scale of truth; all positions that one can assume are determined relative to the one right position, the objective standard.

Moreover, Chesterton mentions in the next chapter of *Orthodoxy* that he heard this statement, as if God were giving him an answer about the ideal trajectory of his life: “You will have real obligations, and therefore real adventures when you get to my Utopia. But the hardest obligation and the steepest adventure is to get there.”<sup>19</sup> Here, Chesterton relates obligation to adventure as if to claim that having responsibility is what makes life exciting and eternal life worth striving for. To know ahead of time that our actions contribute nothing to our salvation would seem to rob the excitement from our moral actions, each of which has eternal consequences. Perhaps Chesterton hinted at a similar problem when he noticed the vibrancy of Christian morality being replaced by the dullness of social propriety: “The romance of conscience has been dried up into the science of ethics; which may well be called decency for decency’s sake.”<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, Chesterton guards against the notion of a thrilling adventure as something earned. Rather than being earned, the adventure must be given and must take one by surprise: “For with the removal of all question of merit or payment, the soul is suddenly released for incredible voyages. . . . A man cannot deserve adventures; he cannot earn dragons and hippogriffs. The mediaeval Europe which asserted humility gained

18. Chesterton, 100.

19. Chesterton, 123.

20. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World*, 112.

Romance; the civilization which gained Romance has gained the habitable globe.”<sup>21</sup> Here, Chesterton is upholding medieval romanticism as an ideal to replicate, for the adventures of life, if they are to be most exciting, must be given by God and humbly received. He puts it another way pages later: “Adventures are to those to whom they are most unexpected—that is, most romantic. Adventures are to the shy: in this sense adventures are to the unadventurous.”<sup>22</sup> The paradox of the beatitude “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5) is one that comes to mind as expressing this truth; in fact, Chesterton himself connects the two ideas.<sup>23</sup> Maybe it is not an accident but an expression of this paradoxical truth that God has tended to call the weak, the poor, or the least adventurous to a divinely appointed mission that would never leave them or the world the same. Indeed, we see in all of these cases that “adventure . . . is a thing that chooses us, not a thing that we choose.”<sup>24</sup>

#### ROMANCE: FIGHTING AND LOVING

Second, the notion of fighting and loving is a key expression of Chesterton’s romanticism, one that perfuses his defense of patriotism and perhaps is best expressed by the story of St. George. The story of St. George was beloved by Chesterton, one that seemed to have personal significance for him for many reasons. In a well-known passage characteristic of Chestertonian paradox, he explains how the Church is able to uphold two extremes at once, “like the red and white upon the shield of St. George. It has always had a healthy hatred of pink.”<sup>25</sup> The national flag of England, bearing this red-and-white pattern of its patron saint, is a symbol that Chesterton draws upon to defend paradox and

21. Chesterton, *Heretics*, 71–72.

22. Chesterton, 74.

23. Chesterton, 69.

24. Chesterton, 142–144.

25. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 96.

patriotism, fighting for and loving one's nation. *St. George and the Dragon* was one of many plays that Chesterton wrote for his homemade toy theater. The character collection for this play contains many versions of the three main characters—St. George, the dragon, and the princess—to track the progression of a dramatic battle of which St. George proves to be the victor, though not without the cost and romanticism of fighting. Regarding these three characters very familiar to him, Chesterton offers a very clear and important parsing of romance:

In every pure romance there are three living and moving characters. For the sake of argument they may be called St. George and the Dragon and the Princess. In every romance there must be the twin elements of loving and fighting. In every romance there must be the three characters: there must be the Princess, who is a thing to be loved; there must be the Dragon, who is a thing to be fought; and there must be St. George, who is a thing that both loves and fights.<sup>26</sup>

In this short passage, Chesterton establishes a framework for understanding romance, accounting for the two necessary elements of loving and fighting and the three categories into which persons or entities will fall. Of course, the Christian imagery is evident in the characters and the story of St. George. The story alludes strongly to the book of Revelation, which tells of the Lamb who defeats the devouring dragon and who is the Bridegroom of the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 20–21). The three main characters in the play have broad application to Christian truth, since this story is representative of Chesterton's romantic worldview, which has relevance to the entire Christian tradition. One

26. G.K. Chesterton, *Appreciation and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, in *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 15:255.

possible application is to view the devil as a personal adversary to one's own story, and one is fighting to guard his beloved soul from the powers of hell. Another is Chesterton's idea of patriotism: "That a thing must be loved *before* it is loveable."<sup>27</sup>

In fact, Chesterton's idea of "patriotism" is integral to his view of romance, and this notion of patriotically fighting for and defending the good goes hand in hand with his view of life as a story. What is the relationship between patriotism and story? Patriotism, as the alternative to optimism and pessimism, as Chesterton explains in "The Flag of the World," chapter 5 of *Orthodoxy*, is the proper approach to one's story. If one's story is not "loveable" in its current state—in the sense that one is not satisfied with his habits, decisions, and life trajectory—one must love it into becoming loveable. If it is on the right trajectory, one must actively keep it on the right trajectory, because there always exists the possibility that it goes off-kilter. One must love his story, because just as a "man belongs to this world before he begins to ask if it is nice to belong to it," one is given his life before he can question its details and trajectory.<sup>28</sup> As will be explored later on, the devil is the ultimate "anti-patriot," the enemy of our stories and the antithesis of the attitude we are meant to take toward life. Like the pessimist, we are meant to chastise, but unlike the pessimist, we must love what we are chastising. Like the optimist, we must be hopeful about what we are fighting for, but unlike the optimist, we must love it without reason and for its own sake rather than for some conception of it or for a particular aspect of it.

Though the application of fighting, loving, and patriotism to life may seem like an abstraction, for Chesterton, the romantic idea of fighting and loving is far from unrealistic. Romanticism is not the opposite of realism, just as he points out in *Heretics*

27. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 45 (emphasis in original).

28. Chesterton, 64.

that serious is not the opposite of funny.<sup>29</sup> “It is idle,” he says, “in speaking of war, to pit the realistic against the romantic, in the sense of the heroic; for all possible realism can only increase the heroism; and therefore, in the highest sense, increase the romance.”<sup>30</sup> The romantic stories that fill the air, including “tales about gods and ghosts and the invisible king,” are not mere fabrications unrelated to eternal truths; rather, these three types of tales can be said to point to their real Christian counterparts—gods point to God, ghosts point to the soul and spiritual realm, and the invisible king points to the divine sovereign over creation.<sup>31</sup> Just so, the ceaseless production of stories about battles and falling in love are clear “evidence of the eternal interest of the theme” of romance as well as the realism of the truths they convey.<sup>32</sup> For instance, fighting and loving can appear purely sentimental until the inevitable encounter with sacrifice and hardship, when love must transform from a feeling into a self-forgetting commitment that will not raise the white flag of surrender when the circumstances are dire. Perhaps the best exemplar for Chesterton of romanticism’s realism is Christian marriage—“the chief subject and centre of all our romantic writing”—because the lovers’ commitment to each other is proven to be authentic by virtue of promising the rest of their lives to each other and no other person. The “happily ever after” promise at the end of romantic tales is a hope that only fighting and loving can bring to fruition.

29. Chesterton, *Heretics*, 159–160.

30. G.K. Chesterton, *The Superstition of Divorce*, in *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 4:274–275.

31. G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, in *The Everlasting Man: A Guide to G.K. Chesterton’s Masterpiece*, ed. Dale Ahlquist (Elk Grove Village, IL: Word on Fire, 2023), 451.

32. Chesterton, 451.

## ROMANCE: CHIVALRY

Chivalry, a medieval ideal important to Chesterton, could be considered a subcategory of the second expression of romance—that is, fighting and loving. Chesterton defines chivalry as “not the romantic, but the realistic, view of the sexes.”<sup>33</sup> Chesterton is not pitting realism against romanticism, since authentic realism heightens romance. Rather, Chesterton is again objecting to the understanding of the romantic as the purely sentimental. He is right to do so in a modern culture that would dismiss chivalry as a medieval ideal that is no longer an ideal for a sophisticated secular society. For Chesterton, to defend chivalry as realistic is to suggest that this view of the sexes has truths that are relevant even in his time. In fact, he would even go so far as to suggest that chivalry is in practice far more real, fulfilling, and true to humanity than contractual marriage. A modern expression of chivalrously courting one woman is the lifelong act of “keeping to one woman” (in the sense of steadfast monogamy), which manifests the reality that the woman is worth fighting for and has the honor and power of deciding if the man is worthy of her.<sup>34</sup> Dropping the medieval details of castles, dragons, and suits of armor, this expression of faithfulness is real in that it is both still possible and very difficult. Yet somehow this chivalrous ideal of unworthiness opens one’s eyes to see greater joys than if one were to think himself worthy of everything. Rather than complaining about being bound to his wife for the rest of his life, Chesterton marvels that he has the honor of “seeing one woman” at all.<sup>35</sup> To wish for other women would be to incapacitate the man from wonder at the opposite sex; to wish for all would be to lose them all.<sup>36</sup> Chesterton traces the losses of these chivalrous

33. G.K. Chesterton, *The Thing: Why I Am a Catholic*, in *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 3:170.

34. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 53.

35. Chesterton, 53.

36. Chesterton, 53–54.

ideals to pride: “Pride is a weakness in the character; it dries up laughter, it dries up wonder, it dries up chivalry and energy.”<sup>37</sup>

Interestingly, Chesterton equates the Catholic treatment of Mary with chivalry,<sup>38</sup> in which her loyal sons and daughters love her and give her honor as the mother of their king. While romanticism might be perceived by some as viewing the world in a dreamy or gushy manner for its own sake, Christianity distinguishes the means from the end by suggesting that pleasing God and Mary is the goal, but doing so casts a “supernatural light on natural things,” leading to greater joys than those resulting from seeking natural things for their own sake.<sup>39</sup> The story of Our Lady’s Tumbler conveys these sentiments for Chesterton, as the tumbler stands on his head not to see the world differently but to please Mary, which in turn allows him to see the world differently but in a higher way.<sup>40</sup> From monogamy to Mary, Christianity can be considered to contain core romantic ideals that are practical in their application, difficult in their achievement, and fruitful in their accomplishment.

#### ROMANCE: THRIFT

Just as with the three other expressions of Chesterton’s romanticism, understanding the romantic idea of thrift will be key in understanding the limits inherent to life. In his defense of thrift, Chesterton suggests that “economy is far more romantic than extravagance.”<sup>41</sup> He reiterates this firm conviction in a telling book chapter called “The Romance of Thrift”: “Thrift is the really romantic thing; economy is more romantic than

37. Chesterton, *Heretics*, 107.

38. G.K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton*, in *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 16:85.

39. G.K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*, in *The Collected Works*, 2:70.

40. Chesterton, 70.

41. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 60.



extravagance. . . . Thrift is poetic because it is creative.”<sup>42</sup> Thrift is creative in the sense of ordering the limited materials of this life to create something more meaningful than the sum of its parts. This characterization of thrift as creative is essential to an understanding of human free will as a creative capacity to order the materials of this life to become more meaningful—that is, more aligned to reality, more like life, and in stronger connection to objective values.

While different philosophical camps may quarrel about the extent to which human freedom is limited, Chesterton no doubt perceives thrift and limits as inherent to this life and to human freedom. Each person has only one life to live, and every moment of every day is unrepeatable. No two decisions are ever the same, because time will have passed, and the circumstances of the decision will be different even if the object of the decision is the same. Rather than trying to deny this reality or theorize away the weight of each moment, the Christian perceives the divine economy at work through thrift and limits, and the acknowledgment of one’s responsibility in each moment can give rise to the thrilling view of the moral life that views every moral decision as bearing upon eternity and presenting an opportunity to achieve the good.

Why else is thrift romantic? Thrift, as already seen in the moral life, grants greater value to the few things that one has to make good use of, including this one life, one’s possessions, and life’s circumstances. The novel *Robinson Crusoe*, which tells of a man who must survive a shipwreck using an eclectic assortment of salvaged items, is an allegory for Chesterton of human existence. Chesterton explains how one could view in a practical way the contingency of created things, even those things most mundane: “It is a good exercise, in empty or ugly hours of the

42. G.K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World*, in *The Collected Works*, 4:120–121.

day, to look at anything, the coal-scuttle or the book-case, and think how happy one could be to have brought it out of the sinking ship on to the solitary island.”<sup>43</sup> This way of seeing things, much more than a thought experiment, perceives the contingency of all things in a way that even a nonreligious person could understand. For instance, even if the unbeliever will not accept the classic Christian assumption about contingency that God is holding everything in existence, he could understand that the way things are presently could have been an infinitude of other ways. Even the unbeliever would grant that he only exists because of a particular sperm and egg of two particular people coming together, not to mention all the effects of the environment acting on him after conception. Whether one believes “that any man in the street is a Great Might-Not-Have-Been” can have drastic effects on one’s treatment of others and one’s own life.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, thrift and limits take this life seriously and allow life to be exciting. In his autobiography, Chesterton expresses his love for bridges, which he describes as accentuating the bottomless abyss below; each step along the narrow swaying bridge is the difference between life and death.<sup>45</sup> It would not be a stretch to understand this image spiritually, with the gaping jaws of hell ready to consume the careless adventurer who falls off the bridge. This image alludes to Jesus’ words about the narrow gate to heaven and the wide path to destruction (Matt. 7:13–14). Many other examples of thrift are evident throughout Chesterton’s corpus, from the act of everyday decision-making to the sharing of marriage vows.

In sum, adventure, fighting and loving, chivalry, and thrift are the characteristics of Chesterton’s conception of romance, and

43. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 60.

44. Chesterton, 60.

45. Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 40.

far from being impractical, they are timeless ideals represented in the larger Christian tradition and granting form, depth, and meaning to our stories. As the ideal genre for the stories of our lives, romance establishes a framework through which to understand our role in the story, what makes life meaningful, and what are the bounds of meaning. Viewing life as a romance presents life as a dangerous tension between two primordial forces—good and evil—with the whole trajectory revolving around the central question “Which side will you choose?” Every decision is one with temporal and eternal implications.

Not only are these romantic principles applicable to each person’s life, but they are also the principles of the Christian tradition, quintessentially represented in the larger story of salvation history. Even a cursory skimming of the Bible will reveal that the Christian God is a God of limits, a God of the high adventure, and a God in love. For a God beyond the world to enter the world and be killed is an extreme and unnerving act of limitation. To say that God loves the human race is a disarmingly bold claim about romance. There is no parallel example of an uncreated being (more precisely, *ipsum esse subsistens*, being itself) loving created beings. Nevertheless, the Christian story of salvation history is the quintessential romance story, and we now consider the strange shape and trajectory of this macrocosmic story, the story that all of our stories ought to comprise.