

A Lion's Tale:
Faith in Narnia

A college research paper by:
Brooke M. Brown

Professor Dan Cutrara
FMS 494: TTH 3:15-5:30
Arizona State University

December 3, 2006

Fairy tales are designed to be the keys to unlock children's imaginations. However, acclaimed author C.S. Lewis strongly believed that fairy tales have two functions in a reader's life. The first obviously being to awaken the mind in childhood. Although, this phase may only last a few years until they become an embarrassment because the children consider themselves "too old" for fairy tales (Dedication of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe).

"In the first installment of a seven volume series, The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe, C. S. Lewis offers us an extraordinary tale involving four children who enter a magical land, Narnia, a myriad of talking animals, a Christ like lion named Aslan and a satanic creature known simply as the Witch. At the heart of the story a drama of salvation, or at least saving deliverance. One of the children, Edmund, is held captive by the Witch and will be released only on the condition of Aslan's taking Edmund's place. Aslan is the ransom for Edmund. In rough outline, Aslan's ransoming Edmund and his subsequent resurrection fits the classic ransom theory of the atonement, a theory which can hardly boast of enormous contemporary appeal. I do not think its unpopularity is altogether deserved" (Taliaferro 75).

As the children grow, however, they may find new appreciation for fairy tales. This function is to keep the imagination healthy in spite of the oncoming worries of adulthood. Through in these stages parents may worry about the influence the stories have on their children's spiritual beliefs and thus many Christians shy away from magical tales. That fact is very disappointing because many fairy tales carry images of Christianity within them.

In fact, the right fairy tale can be an excellent learning tool. Although "Lewis believed that your faith shouldn't impact your enjoyment of the stories themselves" (Wagner 75). And that is an understandable sentiment, but sometimes choosing a story

for the purpose of guiding a child toward a spiritual Truth will bring them to faith even faster.

Today's children are exposed to the majority of modern fairy tales in the form of films. Until recently, there have not been many children's films to hit the big screen with Christian undertones. Last Christmas season (2005) Disney and Walden Media changed the trend with the film version of C.S. Lewis' "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe." Even though the Christian symbolism may not be blatantly obvious to all viewers, it is a perfect demonstration of John C. Lyden's thesis in Film as Religion. Lyden uses Clifford Geertz's definition religion to suppose that film can be viewed as a religious experience in its own right. Geertz believes "that we should attempt to "describe" rather than "explain" religion" (Lyden 41). Within Geertz' model, he set out five criteria for describing religion. They are:

- “1) A set of symbols which act to
- 2) Establish powerful and long lasting moods and motivations in men by
- 3) Formulating conceptions of a general order of existence
- 4) Clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that
- 5) The moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Lyden 42).

When Geertz's criteria is applied to "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," we see the following: the old Narnian prophesy of: " Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight, At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more, When he bears his teeth, winter meets its death, And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again" (Lewis 146) becomes the driving force behind the day to day living of all the citizens of Narnia. Each one knows that the reign of the White Witch will end when Aslan returns. Therefore, this prophesy helps to establish the motivation of every character by explaining the way their world works. Also, when the second prophesy, which is the

only one explicitly stated in the film as “When Adam’s flesh and Adam’s bone sits at Cair Paravel in throne, The evil time will be over and done” (Lewis 147) comes true with the arrival of Lucy, Susan, Edmund and Peter, the concepts of life for that society become realistic within the world of the film.

“Lewis’s imagination was a transforming one: he took the people he knew and loved, the great events he experienced, the books he read, and swept them all together into the great complicated manifold world of Narnia... He was a Narnian long before he knew what name to give that country; it was his true homeland, the native ground to which he hoped, one day, to return” (King 575).

“First, as a set of symbols, religions provide both models ‘of’ reality and models ‘for’ reality”(Lyden 42). “The difference is reflective of that between worldview and ethos, that is, the way the world is believed to be and the way it is believed the world ought to be. Although his views are firmly based in the observation of actual religions, Geertz does not reduce the data of religion to the recording of religious behavior, as he believes some social-scientific accounts have attempted to do. Rather, utilizing a semiotic approach, he insists that one must understand the meaning intended by a religious behavior in order to understand its function in a religion”(Lyden 41-42). “Models ‘of’ reality described the way we think the world really is, while models ‘for’ reality describe how we would like it to be. We might also say that religions model both beliefs and ethical values” (Lyden 42).

“In elucidation of this point, Geertz suggest that the primary purpose of religious symbols is to deal with the encroachment of chaos on our lives and to offer a sense that life is meaningful and orderly in spite of the challenge of chaos. In three fundamental areas are we threatened by chaos: at the limits of what we can explain intellectually; at the limits of what we can endure in suffering; and at the limits of morality, with the need to deal with the injustice of life. Although all

three may be related to what is sometimes called the ‘problem of evil’, they are distinct in that they deal with different mental faculties and the different challenges posed to each by chaos. It is worth noting that, in Geertz’s view, religion does not ‘explain away’ the problems of life as if they did not exist; rather, in response to very natural suspicion that the world has no order or coherence, religion offers” (Lyden 43).

Many readers and viewers consider “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe” to be simply an allegory, but Lewis argued that his story was written to be something he called a “supposal.” Looking at the story in terms of Geertz’s model, with its own set of symbols that act to give the characters their motivation, there is much support for the “supposal” theory.

“Moods and motivations are based in ‘conceptions of a general order of existence.’ Here Geertz specifies how religious feelings or inclinations differ from other sorts of feelings and inclinations: they are ‘directed toward the achievement of an unconditioned end’ and are ‘symbolic of some transcendent truths.’ By this he does not seem to mean that a ‘belief in spiritual beings’ is the central characteristic of religion, but that something greater than the ordinary is referenced. Religion involves conceptions of the ‘all pervading’ that affects all life and not just a part of it” (Lyden 43).

Lewis explained his concept in reference to the comparison of Aslan to Christ in this way: “ I don’t say, ‘Let us represent Christ as Aslan,’ I say, ‘Supposing there was a world like Narnia, and supposing, like ours, it needed redemption, let us imagine what sort of Incarnation and Passion and Resurrection Christ would have there’” (Wagner 99). It is not then that religion is simply one’s highest concern, but that it relates to one’s view of life’s purpose and meaning grounded in general concept of reality” (Lyden 43).

Lewis’ words on this are:

“I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralyzed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did

one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings... But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past these watchful dragons? I thought one could” (King 574).

Given that children, in particular, have very active imaginations and most of them enjoy stories of fantasy rather than reality, parents would be greatly benefited by being aware of the Christian principles that can exist in a “supposed” world like Narnia. For example, if a parent has a child who likes on-screen stories and finds the Bible difficult or even boring; the Narnia film can be a tool to introduce the concept of sin, forgiveness, God’s love and most importantly, His sacrifice for us. In the film, Edmund is persuaded by the White Witch to betray his family with promises of power and, of course, more Turkish Delight. Eventually, he comes to see the error of his ways and tries to return to his brother and sisters but the White Witch protests by going to Aslan with her plea “Edmund’s life is forfeit to me. His blood is my property” (Wagner 126).

“The ransom theory conceives of Christ’s redemption of us as a dramatic deliverance from the power of the evil one, Satan. When we do evil we come under the sway or spell of a hostile, cosmic force. We can develop real tendencies or dispositions to act in vicious, wrong ways and this addiction to evil-doing may become as serious as Edmund’s dependency on Turkish Delight. Typically, patristic Ransomists do not spell out precisely what it means to come under the spell or reign of Satan” (Taliaferro 77-78)

The witch believes she can make this claim because per the “Deep Magic,” she considers herself Queen of Narnia. In fact, that is why the White Witch is a representation of Satan in Narnia. John 12:31 calls Satan “the ruler of this world” because he gained his title by conquest and not by right. So too did the witch claim her “crown”

by conquest (Veith 57). Although, the Deep Magic is, first and foremost, “a divine, irrevocable law: ‘The wages of sin is death’” as found in Romans 6:23. Therefore, “the sinners in Narnia belong to the witch, just as the sinners in our world belong to the Devil” (Veith 91).

“Divine forgiveness of sin, is not enough for full at-one-ment with God. The effects of sin, the work of hatred and malice, must be faced and healed. Moreover, the evil one, him or herself, must be confronted and more than one representative of the Christus Victor tradition has held the goal of this latter confrontation is as much to complete our atonement as it is also to win over the evil one to a Godward life. The ransom theory does not, then, face the difficulty of accounting for how an innocent person may bear another’s guilt. Rather, its account of salvation is not too dissimilar to a tale of a morally innocent, spiritual warrior, a commando, breaking free captives” (Taliafarro 82).

Here, the film displays two things: Aslan’s unconditional love and forgiveness of Edmund, which is the ultimate comparison to Christ. “Not only does Aslan die for Edmund, he died in Edmund’s place. He takes the punishment Edmund deserved, just as Jesus did for us” (Veith 95).

The Stone Table became the counterpart to the Cross. “The White Witch isn’t content with killing Aslan; she wants to humiliate him as well. So after he’s bound to the Table, she muzzles him and shaves his mane – which would seem to be most disgraceful punishment for a lion” (Wagner 127). It “parallels the stripping and mockery of Christ and the shearing of Aslan underscores the fact that he was giving himself as a sacrificial victim” (Veith 95). Isaiah 53:7 says:

“He was oppressed and afflicted,
Yet he did not open his mouth;
He was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
And as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
So he did not open his mouth” (NIV).

Since Aslan is a representation of what Christ would be like in Narnia, if it actually existed, this verse acutely describes his demeanor while being abused and tormented by the White Witch's minions - a picture likened to the taunting of Jesus by the Roman guards: "He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him'" (Mark 27:42 NIV).

And Jesus responds with that famous and powerful plea to the Father for the forgiveness of his accusers. However, it's a little different in Aslan's case. He remained silent, while a quite poignant observation came instead from young Lucy, who was watching with Susan in the distance. "The shorn face of Aslan looked to her braver, and more beautiful, and more patient than ever" (Lewis 181). Sadly though, her observation is not made explicit in film. If the filmmaker had found a more efficient way to communicate Lucy's thoughts, it would have added to the weight of the film.

Nevertheless, it's almost impossible for audiences not to be moved in some way by the scenes that follow. The White Witch brings Aslan into the pit of despair before killing him with the proclamation that he's given his life for nothing because with the "great cat" dead, Edmund is not safe (Veith 96). Even with his broken heart, in the back of his mind somewhere, Aslan knew that the story would not end with his death. There was "Deeper Magic" written on the Table that escaped the witch's attention. If she had been more careful, she would have seen that Deeper Magic is: "when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards" (Lewis 185).

Thus, audiences are given the golden colors of the film's most affective moment: A

larger-than-before Aslan appearing before a terribly frightened Lucy and Susan. It is an excellent icebreaker for parents to use in discussing the meaning of Christ's death on the Cross with their children. Imagine their excitement when they learn that the brave lion they hold so dear actually lives in our world and traded Himself to the Devil so every child who believes can go to Heaven.

The fact that many parents fear exposing their innocent children to the darkness of the occult is quite understandable. Yet, one could challenge them to remember the kinds of characters found in the Bible: angels, demons and even talking animals. In light of this challenge, it can be observed that majority of Christian denominations hinge their faith on the belief that the entire Bible is an accurate historical record as well as the word of the living God. So it is not that difficult to understand why He would allow fairy tale writers to use the same elements while teaching children about Him. Even when we view fairy tales films that do not have explicit Christian images the audience should remember this one principle:

“All fantasy stirs up the longing for heaven that is part of the human makeup. Even the stories of myth—though the basis for pagan religions and, the neo-paganism cultivated by the New Age Movement—bring up repeated patterns (fall, trial, restoration; death, burial, resurrection) that point, even despite themselves, to Christian truth” (Veith 125).

Just as fairy tales unlock children's' imaginations, “imagination is also an important means of grasping the truth, a fact that Christians often neglect” (Veith 124). It is a well known fact that a child who exercises their imagination regularly often is better developed emotionally than a child who does not get enough mental stimuli to help their imagination grow. Therefore, if the Christian God is truly all knowing it makes sense that He puts His message in fairy tale form to reach children before they become hardened to

faith. These stories help people come to terms “with spiritual reality and in reaching people with the gospel. There really are universal themes in nearly all literature that are testimonies to our spiritual nature and that can be used to point to Christ” (Veith 126).

When stories like Narnia are put on the big screen they will leave children with powerful images and will take God out of a boring church service and make Him a hero for them to remember.

Sources:

King, D. W. Gold Mining or Gold Digging? The Selling of Narnia.
Christianity & Literature v. 55 no. 4 (summer 2006) p. 567-86

Lewis, C.S. The Chronicles of Narnia. New York:
Collins, 2001.

Lyden, John C. Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals. New York:
University Press, 2003.

Taliaferro, C. A Narnian Theory of the Atonment.
Scottish Journal of Theology v. 41 no. 1 (1988) p. 75-92

The Holy Bible, New International Version®
Copyright 2002, by The Zondervan Corporation

Veith, Gene. The Soul of the Lion, the Witch, & the Wardrobe. Ontario:
Cook Communications, 2005.

Wagner, Richard. C.S. Lewis & Narnia for Dummies. Indianapolis:
Wiley Publishing, 2005.