

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe: C.S. Lewis' Use of Mooreeffoc to Gain a Hearing for the Gospel

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Walt Disney Pictures and Walden Media have recently released a film version of C. S. Lewis' beloved book for children, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the first of his seven-book series *The Narnia Chronicles*. As in converting any book to film, the producers have made significant changes to translate from the one medium to the other. But here (it seems to me) the general atmosphere and the major features of the book have been well-preserved, and they have made an excellent film to boot.

Though Lewis' first idea for his series arose from an incongruous picture that had been in his mind for years – a faun of classical mythology walking through a snowy wood carrying an umbrella and packages¹ – a significant reason for his developing this picture into a story was his own experience as a youngster growing up in the Church of Ireland:

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed 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. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. 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 those watchful dragons? I thought one could.²

Lewis chose to transfer his story about what God is like and the sufferings of Christ into an imaginary world called Narnia, where the reader (especially a child) might feel the force of all this without at first recognizing that this is the Gospel story. I think he succeeded very well!

In doing this, Lewis was using a technique some call *Mooreeffoc*. As Lewis' friend J. R. R. Tolkien explains it:

And there is (especially for the humble) *Mooreeffoc*, or Chestertonian Fantasy. *Mooreeffoc* is a fantastic word, but it could be seen written up in every town in this land. It is Coffee-room, viewed from the inside through a glass door, as it was seen by Dickens on a dark London day; and it was used by Chesterton to

¹C. S. Lewis, "It All Began with a Picture," in *Of Other Worlds*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), p. 42.

²C. S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What=s to Be Said," in *Of Other Worlds*, p. 37.

denote the queerness of things that have become trite, when they are seen suddenly from a new angle.³

By transferring the Gospel story to another world, where humans are not the only rational beings, where animals can talk and the various figures of classical and northern mythology have real existence, Lewis allows us to see things from a different angle. Here God is the unseen emperor over the sea, and the lion Aslan is his son and the Christ-figure of Narnia. This transfer to another world also allows Lewis to use some of the figures and symbols of the Bible as hints for his readers, just as Jesus does in his parables. So Jesus, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, becomes the Lion of Narnia.

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe opens with the Pevensie children (Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy) leaving World War 2 London to escape the German bombardment and coming to live in the mansion of an elderly Professor out in the country. Soon after their arrival, Lucy travels to Narnia accidentally by hiding in an old wardrobe. There she meets the faun Tumnus and has tea with him, and she learns of the White Witch who holds Narnia in bondage, making it always winter, but never Christmas.

At Tumnus' home, Lucy encounters a minor mooreffoc among the titles on his bookshelf. She spots a book, *Men, Monks and Gamekeepers: A Study in Popular Legend, or Is Man a Myth?*⁴ The reader can hardly help wondering: If man, whom we know exists, is considered mythological by some fauns, may it not be that some of the beings we consider mythological also exist? This could easily serve to open the minds of children (and adults) schooled in modern materialism to a more sympathetic reading of those biblical narratives containing angels and demons.

When Lucy returns to our world, her brothers and sister don't believe her. She claims to have been in Narnia for several hours, though no time has elapsed here. Her siblings are unable to reproduce her experience.⁵ Again from a different perspective, we see the common resistance of moderns to the supernatural.

Later Edmund, following Lucy, makes the same trip, meeting and allying himself with the White Witch. But on his return, he lets Lucy down when Peter and Susan ask whether he has really been to Narnia, claiming that he was just pretending. The older children become alarmed that Lucy is cracking up, but are stopped from doing anything drastic when the Professor (who, we learn from a later volume of *The Narnia Chronicles*, has already been to Narnia) challenges their assumption that Narnia is imaginary just

³J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 58.

⁴C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The first page citation will be from the original hardback edition (New York: Macmillan, 1950), the second (following the semicolon) from the later paperback edition (New York: Collier, 1970); p. 11; p. 12.

⁵*LWW*, 18-20; 20-22.

because they haven't experienced it, particularly when Lucy appears sane otherwise and is regularly more truthful than Edmund.⁶ This provides us with another perspective on how we might judge stories of the miraculous, whether ancient or modern. Do the storytellers value and practice truth?

Finally, all four Pevensie kids wind up in Narnia. Here they make contact with the Beavers, who will take them to meet Aslan. Edmund slips away just before they set off, and goes to find the White Witch. He soon learns that she is not so nice now as she was before. There is, indeed, a real difference between good and evil!⁷

The other Pevensies and the two Beavers travel on to meet Aslan at the Stone Table. On the way, they encounter Father Christmas, who gives them gifts (Lucy's ointment, Peter's sword and shield, Susan's bow, arrows and horn).⁸ The reader may wonder, Is Father Christmas a friend of Aslan? What is Christmas really about, anyway? Lewis' answer to the first question is yes. His answer to the second is found in his delightful little piece of mooreffoc, "Xmas and Christmas."⁹

The three Pevensies (minus Edmund) finally meet Aslan at the Stone Table. Peter rescues the girls from the wolf sent by the White Witch, and a detachment of Aslan's troops rescue Edmund. We get a picture of what forgiveness looks like in Edmund's talk with Aslan.¹⁰

The White Witch comes to parley, demanding that Edmund be put to death on the Stone Table as a traitor. Aslan makes an agreement with her to spare Edmund, which turns out to be on the condition that Aslan die in Edmund's place.¹¹ Here we get a picture of what Edmund's forgiveness will cost Aslan, a powerful and individualized picture of Jesus' atoning work.

That night, Aslan goes to the Stone Table, Susan and Lucy accompanying him part way. Aslan is bound and mocked by the White Witch's people, and then she kills him with the stone knife.¹² Do we get some interpretive hints here? The Stone Table, which is broken by Aslan's death and subsequent resurrection, recalls the stone tables which Moses

⁶*LWW*, 38; 44.

⁷*LWW*, 80; 94.

⁸*LWW*, 87-88; 104-05.

⁹C. S. Lewis, "Xmas and Christmas," in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 301-303.

¹⁰*LWW*, 111-12; 135-36.

¹¹*LWW*, 115; 141.

¹²*LWW*, 125-26; 152.

brought down from Sinai. The stone knife the Witch uses to kill Aslan reminds us of the Biblical rite of circumcision, perhaps viewed as the cutting off of the Seed to come. The risen Aslan explains to the girls that death will reverse itself when an innocent victim is killed for the guilty.¹³ Each of these features gives us a glimpse of the death of Jesus from a new perspective.

While Peter, Edmund and Aslan's army are defending themselves against the White Witch and her army, Aslan takes Lucy and Susan to free the White Witch's victims who have been turned to stone around her castle. Aslan breathes on them, and they are restored.¹⁴ Is this a picture of regeneration?

Meanwhile, the battle is going poorly for Peter, Edmund and company. Many are turned to stone by the White Witch until Edmund succeeds in breaking her wand, but he himself is mortally wounded in the process.¹⁵ Aslan arrives with the fresh troops, and he kills the White Witch. We see that without Aslan, we cannot win. The wounded are restored by Lucy's ointment (from Father Christmas) and the petrified by Aslan's breath.

Finally, the Pevensie kids are enthroned as kings and queens of Narnia, in fulfillment of an ancient prophecy. In Narnia, as on earth, we find that the original intention is that humans should benevolently rule the animals.¹⁶

Besides these smaller, individual examples of mooreffoc, there are several larger, overarching ones as well, seen here and throughout the Narnia series.

First of all, in the Narnia series, and especially in *The Magician's Nephew*, our world is seen to be only one of a number of other worlds – not just other planets in our universe, but (so to speak) other universes. This is one of the major ways in which the worldview of the Bible differs from the worldview of modern secularism: our world is surrounded by an invisible world or worlds, between which some beings can travel. It is important that children growing up today (not to mention grownups) should be aware of this possibility when thinking what life is all about. Lewis has provided his readers with this opportunity, even if they may initially view it as fantasy.

Second, in the course of the seven *Narnia Chronicles*, children travel by various means from our world to Narnia. This, too, becomes a sort of mooreffoc: the children function in these stories rather as angels do in our world, coming from somewhere else to

¹³*LWW*, 132-33; 159-60.

¹⁴*LWW*, 136-37; 164-65.

¹⁵*LWW*, 145-46; 175-76.

¹⁶*LWW*, 148; 178-79.

carry out redemptive tasks.¹⁷ Since the reader tends to identify with the children, we in effect become angels in these stories. What other stories have you ever read in which you identify in this way with the angels?

Third, magic in Narnia more or less corresponds to the supernatural in our world. This is an important perspective to give to children who are typically being educated to a worldview in which the natural is all that there is. Even in (non-charismatic) evangelical circles, there has been a tendency in the past few centuries to downplay the miraculous, in reaction perhaps to Roman Catholicism and the occult. How much more in our secular education and media. Yet here in Narnia we are reminded that both good and evil beings can do magic, a theme which is significant in the biblical picture of both the angelic and demonic.

So, we see that Lewis has produced a work of considerable popularity that slips past the watchful dragons of antagonism to Christianity and of secularism which pervade our society. By his effective use of *mooreeffoc*, he helps his readers experience a supernatural world analogous to the one we really live in, and to feel the power of the Gospel message to which they may have become hardened in one way or another.¹⁸ Since *the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* has done so well at the box-office, we may expect in the coming years to see the entire series made into films, Lord willing. May He grant that the others in the series will be done so nicely!

¹⁷C. S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), pp. 83-84; or paperback (New York: Collier, 1971), p 96.

¹⁸For further discussion of *mooreeffoc*, see Robert C. Newman, "Mooreeffoc in Narnia ... and the Bible," *Concordia Journal* 26:3 (July 2000): 232-237.