

When Aslan came bounding in: C.S. Lewis and the old, old story

Colin Gibson: MNZM PhD (Otago), MA, Dip Hons, Dip Teaching, LTCL.

Born in 1933, Colin Gibson is Emeritus Professor of English (University of Otago) and organist and choirmaster at the Mornington Methodist Church, Dunedin, a position he has held for more than forty years.

*Colin was formerly Donald Collie Professor of English and Head of the English Department at the University of Otago, where he still teaches and carries out administrative work. He taught a 2006 Summer School on Fantasy Worlds, including those of Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and J.K. Rowling and will repeat this course in 2007. He is an internationally distinguished scholar with editions of Renaissance dramatists published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford, Cambridge University Press, Macmillan and the St Martin's Press. He has published numerous articles and essays and edited a variety of journals. He is currently the editor of *Word and Worship*, an ecumenical journal for lay leaders for worship. He regularly conducts workshops, teaches and gives lectures on literary and music topics, both in New Zealand and overseas. He takes a special interest in the visual arts as they relate to literature and religion.*

Thank you for this invitation to speak on what I believe to be an important subject: the way in which creative authors reflect on and explore religious themes. I will be focusing on just one work by one early modern author, C.S. Lewis, and his fantasy novel *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the first book in his seven-volume Narnian Chronicles. I am sure that Matthew Arnold, the poet who wrote 'Dover Beach', that melancholic sonnet about the decline of faith and certainty in late Victorian England—and the poem from which the name of this Sea of Faith community was taken—would have approved your willingness to consider the way in which literature commonly takes familiar stories (in this case religious stories), familiar structures of thought, familiar characters, even familiar worlds, and so transforms them into something unfamiliar that we are compelled to think again, to feel again, to entertain fresh ideas—even new attitudes.

I am convinced that so-called 'fictions' (and I include a great deal of the Bible under that label) offer a significant means of examining and testing our own moral and religious notions. They do so by offering the reader not the whole of life as we experience it, in all its bewildering detail, but an abstracted, selective, manageable sample of life. And fiction, or, if you prefer the term, literature, usefully allows the reader to undertake an objective consideration of the stories it relates: stories, life-like art, not real life with its actual relationships and demand for responses to everyday responsibilities.

If the writer chooses to adopt a prophetic voice, a work of literature may openly challenge our settled attitudes, our hidden prejudices, or seek to subvert them by showing us attractive alternatives. A fictional work like Orwell's *1984* sets out to educate or warn us about trends in contemporary behaviour and attitudes by projecting a fictional world into the near future for his readers.

Historical or fantasy fiction may lay out alternative cultural or social models disguised as communities of midgets or giants or horses, or dwarves or elves or orcs for our consideration. (I'm thinking, of course of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.)

And the great thing about 'fiction' (or literature) is the opportunity it provides to escape from received rules or stereotypes. Fiction offers the grateful reader an arena characterized by imaginative freedom; even when in its make-believe worlds it is actually projecting—in disguise as it were—real-life experiences and the hard questions which go with them. So, literary works can escape from the straitjacket of God-thought, doctrines and dogmas couched in the sort of religious language which characterizes religious texts.

Finally, I would argue that literature provides 'truths' about ourselves and our lives of at least equal validity with so-called scientific 'facts' (which themselves are often imaginative metaphors expressing otherwise inaccessible and incomprehensible information).

But without further ado, let's test some of these propositions by venturing into Narnia. My argument will be that in this significant literary work (significant at least because it has attracted so many readers and film goers) the author draws on familiar and conventional Christian doctrines but opens up new readings of them by his use of fantasy as his chosen mode of writing.

There are hopeful signs that Lewis's Narnia chronicles will allow us imaginative freedom—that is, escape from the dogmatic, conventional ideas and language of orthodox religion—in the disputes between orthodox and conservative Christians that broke out immediately over the author's own faith-stance as demonstrated in these books, and particularly in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

For Richard Wagner, author of *C.S. Lewis and Narnia for Dummies* (and *Christianity for Dummies*), Lewis is the great Christian apologist. 'The Narnian Chronicles are packed with Christian truth that's just waiting to be discovered', he says. For Wagner, Aslan is a simple incarnation of Christ: his return to Narnia symbolizes the Second Coming, his death at the hands of the White Witch symbolizes Christ's sacrificial death to redeem the

sin of the world. Unsurprisingly, Wagner spends several pages arguing that the central plot of all the Narnian stories deals with temptation and sin, the effects and consequences of sin and the portrayal of Satanic evil. (Sin, of course is an obsession with some Christians.)

However, for even stricter fundamentalists, Lewis is no apologist for Christianity, his fiction is itself an act of satanic evil. While they can cheerfully accept a literal biblical world of singing angels and raging demons, divine wonders and miracles in nature, they utterly reject the Narnian world with its talking beavers and wolves, its centaurs, satyrs, ogres and fauns, its death-dealing magic wands, and especially the witches, as manifest signs of Lewis's collaboration with the Devil.

Lewis himself labels his writing a 'fairytale' (not a word to endear himself to the religious elect), though he hints that there is more in it that such a word might suggest, when he tells his goddaughter Lucy Barfield (to whom he dedicated *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*) 'You are already too old for fairy tales, and by the time it is printed and bound you will be older still. But some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again.' In using the term 'fairy tale' Lewis is reflecting the kind of deep discussions he and Tolkien and their group of Oxford academics, the Inklings, were having about the profound nature and value of story and myth. And I'd like to quote a passage from a letter Lewis wrote to his friend Father Peter Milward about the imaginative freedom and the serious pursuit of ultimate truth made possible for any writer by the choice of story (imaginative fictions) as his or her medium of expression.

My view would be that a good myth (that is, a story out of which every-varying meanings will grow for different readers and in different ages), is a higher thing than an allegory (into which one meaning has been put). Into an allegory a man can only put what he already knows; into a myth he puts what he does not yet know, and could not come by in any other way. (Letter, 22 September 1956)

That Lewis started with the unknown and the unfamiliar, not the familiar, is clear from his own account of the beginnings of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

In an essay he wrote in 1960 called 'It all began with a picture' he explained that 'All seven of my Narnia books...began with seeing pictures in my head. At first they were not a story; just pictures. *The Lion* all began with a picture of a faun carrying an umbrella and parcels in a snowy wood. This picture had been in my head since I was about sixteen. Then one day when I was about forty I said to myself, 'let's try to make a story about it.'

At first I had very little idea how the story would go. Then suddenly Aslan came bounding into it. I think I had been having a good many dreams about lions about that time. Apart from that I don't know where the Lion came from or why he came. But once he was there he pulled the whole story together, and soon He pulled the six other Narnian stories in after him.

In another passage Lewis dismisses the idea that the Narnia books were ever deliberately written as a tract on Christianity and the life of Christ:

After describing how 'in the Author's mind there bubbles up every now and then the material for a story—which for himself invariably began with mental pictures—followed by a longing to see that bubbling stuff poured into a form (verse or prose, short story, play or what not) as the housewife longs to see new jam poured into a new clean jam jar'; he goes on

Some people think that I began by asking myself how I could say something about Christianity to children; then fixed on the fairy tale as an instrument; then collected information about child psychology and decided what age-group I'd write for; then drew up a list of basic Christian truths and hammered out 'allegories' to embody them. This is all pure moonshine. I couldn't write in that way at all. Everything began with images; a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion. At first there wasn't even anything Christian about them; that element pushed itself in of its own accord. It was part of the bubbling.

Then came the Form. As these images sorted themselves into events (i.e., became a story) they seemed to demand no love interest and no close psychology. Now the Form which excludes these things is the fairy tale. And the moment I thought of that I fell in love with the Form itself: its brevity, its severe restraints on description, its flexible traditionalism, its inflexible hostility to all analysis, digression, reflections and 'gas'. I was now enamoured of it. Its very limitations of vocabulary became an attraction; as the hardness of the stone pleases the sculptor or the difficulty of the sonnet delights the sonneteer.

On that side (as Author) I wrote fairy tales because the Fairy Tale seemed the ideal Form for the stuff I had to say. Then of course the Man in me began to have his turn. 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 I could.

What had brought him to this?

We now know that Lewis's mind and imagination, not to speak of his Christian faith, had been frozen over since childhood by his experience of the language and dogma of organized religion. In his case, that means fundamentalist Northern Irish Protestant religion.

His release from the winter world of Puritanism directly led to the release of his imagination and creativity and the writing of the Narnia Chronicles between 1950 and 1956.

In the spring of 1932, after the death of his parents, Lewis returned from Oxford to Northern Ireland and his birthplace, Belfast. He was 34. 'We have come to Puritania', he said, 'and that was my father's house. I see that my father and mother are gone already beyond the brook. I had much I would have said to them. But it is no matter.'

In that year he started writing *The Pilgrim's Regress*, a satirical work following the travels of an imaginary Pilgrim named John—just as Bunyan had earlier written the adventures of an unnamed pilgrim. In the course of this book, a character named Neo-Angular has this to say:

So you have met Mother Kirk? No wonder that you are confused. You had no business to talk to her except through a qualified Steward. . . Reason is divine. But how should you understand her? You are a beginner. For you, the only safe commerce with reason is to learn from your superiors the dogmata in which her deliverances have been codified for general use.'

His escape route from 'Mother Kirk' was through images and the exercise of the creative imagination at play with those images.

In the course of his Oxford friendship with J.R.R. Tolkien, Tolkien (who was also instrumental in his 'conversion' or recovery of Christian faith), taught him that inability to believe in Christianity was primarily a failure of the imagination. (We might think long and deeply about that in these days of shrinking church attendance!) As A.N. Wilson, in his important biography of Lewis has said:

This insight enabled Lewis to recover all the things in art and in life which he had been enjoying since imaginative awareness dawned. In Puritania, religion had been the stuff of cant, of laws, of promised punishments for behaviour which John the Pilgrim's inner conscience could not condemn. But there had also been this other vision—of the 'green wood full of primroses'—which he had glimpsed through a hole in the wall, and which promised all the things which Lewis and his close friend Arthur Greeves had come to label 'It' or 'Joy'. These were the pleasures he got from the beauties of nature, from the music of Wagner, from the watercolours of Beatrix Potter, from the books of William Morris, George MacDonald and the poems of Wordsworth. What he discovered was that all these things were echoes of the heavenly places.

This is a kind of Christian Neo-Platonism; at the time it was just what Lewis had needed for many years.

The sense of a new 'Permission' to use all his faculties—his imagination, as well as his acute mental powers and his extraordinary memory—was not just his escape route to creative writing, ultimately to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and the Narnia Chronicles. It also opened the gate to the recovery of a living faith, which he exercised in worship and the industrious practice of Christian apologetics for the rest of his life.

Lewis had lost his faith like so many others in his early teens. Like so many others, he had been overwhelmed by the conflict between an imagination that gloried in nature, myth and romance, and a severe, Puritanical 'grown-up' intellect that dismissed such things as a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing. He had read Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, a massive study of comparative religion that discovers the existence of the myth of a dying god in many cultures and in many cultures more ancient than Christendom. As a teenager, Lewis had concluded that there was therefore nothing unique about Christian narratives of a God who came to earth, lived, died and rose again.

I find it ironic that one of the 'hot' texts in contemporary theological reading lists is Tom Harpur's *The Pagan Christ: Is blind faith killing Christianity?* His thesis is Frazer's: that the Gospel stories plus 'about 95 per cent of the rest of the Bible' consist of myths widespread in other human cultures. But far from dismissing the Bible or the Gospel stories on these grounds, Harpur (drawing on Alvin Kuhn and Joseph Campbell) argues—as Tolkien did to Lewis before him—that since myth is 'the only true narrative of the reality of human experience...the only ultimately true history ever written', in reading the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ we are reading a 'true myth', one that reaches profoundly into the deepest intuitions of humanity about the nature and purpose of life.

So a mythic story might be ultimately true, and Lewis recognised this as one way of recovering from the arid dogmas of his childhood experience of religion, a way of embracing and affirming once more what seemed to him his core identity since childhood—a complex of wonder, imagination, mythology and faith.

Lewis went on to perceive the imagination and the intellect as complementary, not competitive. He would call the imagination 'the organ of meaning', and intellect 'the organ of truth'. The first generates pictures, metaphors and myths by which we understand the world. The second weighs, sifts and analyzes, discerning which products of the imagination correspond most closely with reality.

Later still, he came to believe that the creative imagination was a vehicle for truth and insight derived from God. In a letter to his friend, fellow author, and Anglican nun Sister Penelope, he wrote:

'Creation' as applied to human authorship seems to me an entirely misleading term....We re-arrange elements He has provided....Writing a book is much less like creation than it is like planting a garden or begetting a child; in all three cases we are only entering as one cause into a causal stream which works, so to speak, its own way. I would not wish it to be otherwise.

Which brings me now first to Lewis' imaginative treatment of what is for many the fundamental Christian doctrine of the atonement; then to the roaring lion and freezing ice queen—the conflicting principles of good and evil in *The Narnia Chronicles*, or, as they are known to many of us, Aslan the Lion and Jadis the White Witch.

As a Christian, Lewis refused to be pinned down by a single formulaic reading of the life and (importantly) the death of Christ. He wrote in *Mere Christianity* (1952), his handbook of the faith for unbelievers like his former self,

Of course, you can express this in all sorts of different ways. You can say that Christ died for our sins. You may say that the Father has forgiven us because Christ has done for us what we ought to have done. You may say that we are washed in the blood of the Lamb. You may say that Christ has defeated death. They are all true. If any of them do not appeal to you, leave it alone and get on with the formula that does. And, whatever you do, do not start quarrelling with other people because they use a different formula from yours.

As an author, Lewis, introduces no less than three different ways of dramatizing what as a kind of short hand I might call the drama of 'salvation' or 'redemption'.

First Mr Tumnus, the faun whom Lucy first meets in the magical land of Narnia, invites her to tea in his cave home, meaning to lull her to sleep and hand her over to the White Witch. However, he finds he can't do it, and despite his fear of the Witch and the consequences of his action guides her back to safety. In this case, the 'traitor' (Lewis's sword in this book for 'sinner') overcomes his own 'sinfulness', expresses his remorse and 'saves' the innocent child. There is no divine intervention; the faun acts well by nature, responding to Lucy's trust and simplicity (it is also hinted that he is influenced by thoughts of his old father who 'would never have done a thing like this'). He is turned to stone by the Witch and brought back to life by the Lion.

Next, Edmund, the crucial case of betrayal (read 'sin'). Edmund collaborates with the Witch, bringing his whole family into peril. He is rescued from the Witch's knife by the forces of Aslan and then brought before the Lion:

THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE 13: 150

In this case, Lewis leaves the transaction between Aslan the Christ-Lion and Edmund a mystery. Edmund is sincerely repentant, his repentance restores the broken bonds with his family, and that is the end of the matter. No humiliation or punishment, but Edmund has been transformed, becoming a champion of good, who saves his brother's life in the final battle against the Witch and her forces.

But Edmund becomes the conventional representative of helpless, 'fallen' humanity in the third episode, in which the Lion accepts the Witch's claim to the life of every traitor, subjects himself to the Witch's cruelty in place of Edmund, and is killed, only to rise again—in an obvious reference to the crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ. Here, Lewis (or rather Aslan) explains what has happened, in Atonement language.

"But what does it all mean?" said Susan when they were somewhat calmer. "It means," said Aslan, "that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that 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."

In Lewis' words, this generous fiction allows us to 'get on with the formula that most appeals' to us. The familiar is accompanied by two attractive alternatives to the doctrine of atonement by substitution—human repentance, or divine forgiveness of 'sin'.

Now for Aslan and the Witch.

They are two of the most memorable of the many memorable creatures in these books, and it is no accident that modern filmmakers, artists, illustrators and publicists focus on the leaping lion (with the two girls Susan and Lucy hanging onto his mane as he bounds through the air) or on that sleigh drawn by reindeer pulling the icy Queen in her sledge through the frozen world of Narnia.

They are Lewis's way of thinking theologically; they are his mythic forms of good and evil; they are spiritual beings as well as characters in an exciting fiction, and they escape from the cramping confines of Mother Kirk and her vocabulary of worn-out biblical imagery and theological abstractions—or to put it in

another way, they excite and interest contemporary readers of all ages just because they open up fresh and imaginative ways of experiencing (not just thinking about) the Christian faith.

Where did they come from?

We now know that Lewis at the time of writing the novel was experiencing nightmares with lions in them; that in a letter to a little girl named Anne Lewis explained that he had made Aslan a lion because Christ is called by the ancient Jewish title of the Lion of Judah (Revelation 5: 5), and because in the medieval scheme of the Great Chain of Being (Lewis was a medieval scholar) the Lion was considered to be the King of the Beasts, analogous to human rulers generally and in particular the King of Heaven, a place reserved for Christ in apocalyptic literature—‘worthy is the Lamb upon the Throne’. We also know that at the time he was teaching the epic poem *The Faerie Queene*, by the English Renaissance poet Edmund Spenser, in which a lion figures as a protective figure for the Red Cross Knight; and that he was reading his associate Charles Williams’ novel, *The Place of the Lion* (1931)

The name Aslan is Turkish for Lion (it’s still in common use, and Lewis said he found the name in an edition of *The Arabian Nights*); later scholars have noted that As is the Scandinavian word for ‘God’ (cf Asgard=home of the Gods), and we do know that Lewis, Tolkien and their Oxford friends frequently met to discuss the vocabulary of Norse and other legendary material.

Lions in all directions!

Earnest and pious Christian readers and scholars have toiled to identify the Christ-like characteristics of Aslan (One academic lists them thus: Aslan as Numinous Being, Aslan as supremely good; Aslan’s many forms of presence; Aslan as creator; Aslan as fellow sufferer; Aslan as redeemer; Aslan as comforter and guide; Aslan as judge. But this is just to trawl through the text to stick theological labels onto a wonderful symbolic creation; to put Aslan back into the familiar Christ-cage. Conservative Christian scholar Richard Wagner, in the book I’ve already mentioned, *C.S.Lewis and Narnia for Dummies*, offers an even more extensive list of standard theological features in his chapter ‘The Gospel according to Aslan’—naturally there’s plenty of mention of ‘sin, evil and all things yucky’, of obvious parallels between Christ and Aslan, of judgement and heaven. Like the Bible, it seems you can read back whatever theological positions you wish to into this fictional work.

I am attracted by the thought of Aslan as ‘numinous being, especially when that numinous quality is defined in terms of Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* (1923), a book Lewis himself drew on later in his own book *The Problem of Pain* (1940).

Otto associates the ‘numinous’ (by which he means ‘that which is supreme above all creatures’) with experiences of

Fear, awe, holy dread
Fascination, attraction, yearning
A sense of unspeakable magnitude and majesty
Energy, urgency, intense dynamism
Wonder, astonishment, stupefaction
Mystery, Otherness, incomprehensibility

But such an impressive list includes neither the wildness nor the playfulness of the Aslan Lewis creates. Nor does it include the paradoxes Lewis creates to take us beyond the limits of rational explanation. ‘People who do not live in Narnia sometimes think that a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time. If the children had ever thought so they were cured of it now. For when they tried to look at Aslan’s face they just caught a glimpse of the golden mane, and the great, royal, solemn, overwhelming eyes, and they found they couldn’t look at him and went all trembly (12:137-9)

No; if you’re going to understand what Lewis means by Aslan, and so expand your ideas of the spirituality and the wonder of goodness you just have to read the text and get the imaginative charge at full force:

THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE 15-16: 176-182

‘I mean, is it safe?’ When I was a small boy at Sunday School there was a large poster on the wall. It showed Jesus walking in a garden in the company of a few adoring children. He was tall and very European, with auburn curly hair and beard. He was dressed in a white toga or something like it and he wore open sandals. If I remember correctly one of the children was supposed to be asking him politely why he had small wounds in his hands. I could never have imagined him roaring, or leaping or breathing life into anything. He was just a nice man, he was safe... like your uncle or father taking you children for a walk. He wouldn’t have lasted five minutes with real children. Aslan might. He isn’t safe.

Now for Jadis or the White Witch, Lewis’s image of evil. And let’s start by remembering that Lewis had put behind him the puritanical sin, guilt and punishment-haunted world of Irish Protestant fundamentalism.

The sources for this character are even more numerous than for Aslan.

The name probably comes from the title of a medieval French poem about the short-lived beauty of beautiful women, *les belles dames du temps jadis* (olden days): a hint of 'once upon a time it was like this'?

The primary source is certainly Hans Christian Anderson's *The Snow Queen*. In that story a devilish hobgoblin creates a distorting mirror which is shattered and whose tiny shards pierce the eyes and the heart and destroy the capacity to see clearly or love what is good. A boy (Kay) is so wounded and then falls prey to a Snow Queen remarkably like Jadis.

. . . [A] great sledge came by; it was painted white, and in it sat someone wrapped in a rough white fur and wearing a white cap. The sledge drove twice round the square, and Kay fastened his own little sledge to it, so that when it went away, he followed with it. It went faster and faster right through the next street, and then the person who drove turned round and nodded pleasantly to Kay, just as if they were acquainted with each other, but whenever Kay wished to loosen his little sledge the driver nodded again, so Kay sat still, and they drove out through the town gate. Then the snow began to fall so heavily that the little boy could not see a hand's breadth before him, but still they drove on; then he suddenly loosened the cord so that the large sledge might go on without him, but it was of no use, his little carriage held fast, and away they went like the wind.... The boy was frightened, and tried to say a prayer, but he could remember nothing but the multiplication table. . . . All at once the great sledge stopped, and the driver rose up. He saw a lady tall and white: it was the Snow Queen. "Why do you tremble?" she asked. "Here, creep into my warm fur." Then she seated him beside her in the sledge, and as she wrapped him in fur around him he felt as if he were sinking into a snow drift.

Such a Queen is of course a northern mythic creature symbolizing the cold of death.

There are other possible sources, like Rider Haggard's character Ayesha, the seductive, cruel arrogant goddess also named 'She-Who-Must-be-obeyed' who rules a lost African world; and Lilith, a fascinating demon from ancient Mesopotamia who seduced men and stole children. Mr Beaver explains that Jadis is a daughter of Lilith, 'your father Adam's first wife, her they called Lilith. And she was one of the Jinn.' (chapter 8). Which makes a neat connection with the biblical background of the Pevensie children as sons and daughters of Adam. And of course Devil hunters are quick to find in Jadis and her tempting offer of Turkish Delight the equivalent of Satan the Serpent-Tempter. Lewis, himself, also mentioned Circe, who turned men into swine; and there is Medusa who in another Greek legend turned them to stone.

All of these sources show Lewis exploiting and combining older mythical figures into a super inhuman evil, though her only success with humans in Lewis's novel is with Edmund, and that only temporarily.

What is Lewis's vision of evil? No, I'm not talking about his theology but about his sense of spirituality, of the spirituality of evil. The novel offers the best, indeed the only evidence. (I am happy to report that there is no suggestion whatever of a Satanic figure trawling for human souls.)

Evil masks its own nature

Compare Edmund's first sight of the White Witch—'a great Lady, taller than any woman Edmund had ever seen...her face white, not merely pale, but white like snow or paper or icing-sugar, except for her very red mouth...A beautiful face in other respects, but proud and cold and stern...holding a long straight golden wand in her right hand, wearing a golden crown on her head.' (3: 37) with Lucy's horrified view of her at the Stone Table, seeing her now with bared—her true nature revealed—arms, whetting a knife of stone, not of steel and of a strange and evil shape. 'She looks like a human but she isn't', says Mr Beaver, and we are told (13) 'it was part of her magic that she could make things look like they weren't'.

This aspect of evil as Lewis imagines it is best seen in Chapter 13 as the Witch prepares to kill Edmund, her arms again bared and 'terribly white'. And let's have a look at the passage where as the rescue party saves Edmund from the Witch and her Dwarf they rematerialize from the natural forms they have assumed to escape the rescuers

THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE 13: 149

Evil is that which controls and enslaves others; it takes away human freedom and delights in cruelty and even the murder of its victims

Edmund's first view of the Witch is of a ruler free to roam her own kingdom but allowing none of that freedom to others: the sleigh, the crown, the wand and the whip symbolize her tyrant rule, as the Dwarf servant suggests her association with belittlement, degradation and deformity. The Witch's servant is not one of your hard-working, cheerful and valiant dwarves of Walt Disney or Tolkien but a murderous, cursing, whip-waving creature...well-shown in the film. And just look up the list of the Witch's associates round the Stone Table: Ogres, wolves, Cruels and Hags and Incubuses...(14: 163)

Look at Edmund when the Witch's sledge is stuck in the melting snow (11). No Turkish delights there! The witch's tyranny is made evident; Edmund is literally enslaved, bound and beaten and forced to walk while the

Witch walks behind the dwarf calling out 'faster! Faster!' Worse follows for Aslan at the Stone Table, where he is forced to endure a ritual humiliation and shaming before his actual killing.

Don't be too hasty to assign this kind of evil to non-Christians or to 'others'. Just look at the history of the Christian Church!

Evil is the reduction of all the world to silence, hardness, stillness, cold and uniform whiteness.

What a powerful concatenation of awfulness; and Edmund again first senses its nature when he reaches Narnia on his own. 'Everything was perfectly still, as if he were the only living creature in that land... There was not even a robin or a squirrel among the trees, and the woods stretched as far as he could see in every direction. He shivered...he did not much like being alone in this strange, cold, quiet place.' (3: 36)

These states have symbolic and religious resonances. Snow suggests its transience (evil cannot rule forever), but stone suggests hardness of heart and inhumanity. Evil is the winter of the human heart; as Aslan is the Spring of the world; the restoration of life, movement, colour, warmth and sound.

Just as Aslan is associated with movement and energy, with leaping and bounding, the White Witch characteristically arrests movement, turns creatures to stone. Free individuals become stone statues in a walled courtyard. Does that sound like the effects of some brands of religion?

What is evil like? Lewis makes us feel it, sense it, hear it, touch it, shudder at it. We may not understand it, but we can experience it.

THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE 11: 123-7

Roaring Lions and Freezing Ice-queens; that's what's impressive about this novel and its successors, Spirituality has become not a set of dogmas or theological ideas but astonishing figments of the imagination; vivid experiences, felt on the pulses. If only the Church could learn that that's how it's done. But then I expect you all know that.

Thank you for your attentive listening.