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C.S. Lewis's Two Satyrs

Abstract

Two very different satyrs appear in C.S. Lewis's works, one in his early pre-conversion poem "The Satyr" in *Spirits in Bondage* and one in his more mature Narnia books (Mr. Tumnus, but Narnia is also home to a whole race of Fauns). Lewis handles the imagery and associations of the satyr or faun quite differently at these points in his writing career, but both represent a split in the psychology of the human male.

Additional Keywords

Fauns; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Mr. Tumnus; Lewis, C.S. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*; Lewis, C.S. "The Satyr" (poem)



C.S. LEWIS'S TWO SATYRS

JOE R. CHRISTOPHER

A DISCUSSION OF TWO SATYRS MAY SEEM A VERY ODD TOPIC connected to Lewis, but he did indeed write about two satyrs—although he called one of them by its Roman name of *faun*.¹ This essay, before its end, will reiterate something about Lewis's method of composition, but its basic point will relate to the development of the second satyr, the faun.

Lewis's first satyr appears in his first book, a collection of poems, *Spirits in Bondage*, published under the pseudonym of Clive Hamilton in 1919. "The Satyr" consists of six quatrains, rhyming AABA CCBC and so on, the third line rhyming between every two stanzas. The lines are tetrameters, described either as headless iambs or tailless trochees. The third lines have feminine endings, so they are clearly trochaic. In other words, a lyric form, if not a completely traditional one.

The first two stanzas set the scene. When springtime comes, says the poem, the satyr goes singing through the countryside. This country side is extended: "woodland," "meadows," "valley," "mountain," "moor," "forest" (perhaps denser in trees than the "woodland"), and "ocean shore." In this way, the satyr's carol "rallies" "[a]ll the faerie kin." Obviously Lewis associates the folk of faerie with nature; almost like hibernating bears, they come forth in the spring. Perhaps, more specifically, in the spring they visit earth from their faerie mounds and other other-worldly domains.

At this point one might expect a catalogue of the faeries to match the catalogue of nature, but the poem goes in a different direction. The next three stanzas—technically all one sentence—describe the satyr. The reader notices—or should notice—that the description is based on contrast of the bestial and the human. First the bestial:

¹ Most reference books refer to both satyrs and fauns as half man and half goat. It is possible that many Greeks considered satyrs to be half man and half horse, for the paintings of satyrs on Greek pottery show them with horses' tails. For the purposes of this paper, these images of the Grecian half-horses do not matter. In "The Satyr" Lewis does not mention the tail, and in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* Mr. Tumnus has a long, flexible tail (perhaps with fur, perhaps not), which he drapes over his arm (15)—certainly neither a horse's nor a goat's tail. But Lewis is mainly thinking of goats: as quoted above in this essay, the satyr has cloven feet and Mr. Tumnus has the legs and hoofs of a goat. Both have horns, unlike horses.

See! the shaggy pelt doth grow
On his twisted shanks below,
And his dreadful feet are cloven[.] (ll. 9-11)

Twisted and *dreadful* are the operative words. Of course, this is not modern poetry where the general instruction is to show and not tell. A modern poet would not say something was dreadful. At least Lewis says that the feet are even-toed, as goats have; the poem's word is "cloven," which describes the appearance of the two large, front toes. In the fifth stanza comes the other bestial aspect: from the sides of the satyr's head, from his "temples," grow two horns.

It is possible to read these bestial images as demonic, since the traditional image of devils derives in part from nature deities such as Pan. Even though Lewis would have privately declared himself an atheist or an anti-theist about the time he wrote this poem ("I believe in no religion" [*They Stand Together* 135, letter of 1916]), he certainly used some demonic imagery in *Spirits in Bondage*—and the demonic implies a spiritual world of some type. For an example, the first poem of the numbered sequence is titled "Satan Speaks" (as is the thirteenth also). So the cloven hooves—even if they are not described as hooves—and the horns may carry connotations beyond the poem's literal level of Greek and faerie mythology.

In contrast to the bestial images comes the human, with emphasis on the whiteness of the satyr's skin:

And his dreadful feet are cloven
Though his brow be white as snow[.] (ll. 11-12)

The next stanza emphasizes that whiteness:

Though his brow be clear and white
And beneath it fancies bright,
Wisdom and high thoughts are woven
And the musics of delight[.] (ll. 13-16)

The reader meditating on that white brow may decide that this seems more like an English (or Northern Irish) satyr, rather than a Greek satyr. This seems a use of stereotyping by skin color—white is good. One notices that Lewis emphasizes it is the brow that is white. Also, this satyr is not singing songs about sexual pleasure or lustful desire. Instead, he produces "fancies bright, / Wisdom and high thoughts [...] / And the musics of delight[.]" Perhaps the delights could be sexual poems, but "wisdom and high thoughts" suggest the

whole productive list is to be interpreted non-sexually. Or perhaps “the musics of delight” are not songs at all; they could be flutings.

Lewis's emphasis on the satyr's brow and, in the next stanza, his temples, suggests that, this early, Lewis has a belief in reason and in the mind as a guide to life. Of course, he was thinking of philosophy as the guide, rather than of Christian faith, as he later believed. But, even in his Christian period, he wrote *The Abolition of Man* (1943), which was a defense of Natural Law in the old sense of the term—a defense of reason as leading to a universal morality. Another way to illustrate this is from the appearance of “bull-headed men” (that is, Minotaurs) in the group of the followers of the White Witch shortly before she kills Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (140): creatures with animal heads are evil, because they do not have the rationality of men with their human brows and temples; here one should say, “with their *white* brows and temples.”

The satyr is a mixed form. Animal-like (or perhaps devilish) in his lower portion and in his horns, but human and productive of good songs above the waist. Primly, like a Victorian, where just barely his birth places him, Lewis does not mention the satyr's genitalia, but the lower half is bestial—that he says. As the poem suggests, the satyr is “twisted [...] below.” The bestial sexual drive is a danger to others.

Is Lewis symbolizing himself in this poem, not just generalizing about men as seen through Victorian eyes? Perhaps so. Besides at least a normal sexual drive, Lewis had sadomasochistic fantasies of whipping women in his late teens and twenties—as George Sayer suggests in his biography of Lewis, caused in part by Lewis's puberty coinciding with attending Wynyard School, where the headmaster, the Reverend Robert Capron, was a sadist who caned the poorer students in front of the class time after time (Sayer, *Jack* 63). Lewis claims his attitudes were mainly non-moral in his teens and twenties (cf. *Surprised* 70), but this poem suggests he sometimes wrote with more morality, if philosophical morality, than he claimed this early in his career.

Then the poem ends with a last stanza introducing a new topic: the reaction of the faerie maidens to the satyr.

Faerie maidens he may meet
 Fly the horns and cloven feet,
 But, his sad brown eyes with wonder
 Seeing—stay from their retreat. (ll. 21-24)

This certainly is not *outwardly* autobiographical on Lewis's part, for he wrote the poem in the summer of 1916 (King 309), and he did not have anything like a serious friendship with a young woman until he briefly was attracted to his

second cousin, Cherry Robbins, in May 1917 (Lewis, *They Stand* 187, 189, 192, 195). Possibly the motif of maidens fleeing the satyr was suggested to Lewis by the first line of one of Horace's odes, "*Faune, Nympharum figientum amator*" (*Carminum* Book 3, No.18). That is translated by C.E. Bennett as "O Faunus, lover of the flying nymphs" (239). But Horace does not discuss the maidens any further; no suggestion is made that they look back and pause in their flight.

In the poem, the fairie maidens—in the Victorian symbolism that is being suggested, just maidens—flee from man's bestial nature. But his "sad brown eyes" make them pause. Again, it is part of his head that stops them—they are attracted to the sadness created by his self-knowledge of his internal split. As was believed at least popularly in the Victorian age, the women are pure; the men are partly bestial. The women are attracted to the nobler aspects of the man, but have to endure the ignoble, sexual aspects.²

What has just been written about the Victorian age is a cliché, both about men and about women; but it seems to fit what this poem, under its classical and elvish guise, is saying. This prepares a reader for Lewis's later use of a satyr—or a faun—in his first children's book. A transition may be made by considering the appearance of a troop of satyrs in the second Narnian book, *Prince Caspian*.

[...] Caspian had nearly dropped off to sleep when he thought he heard a faint musical sound from the depths of the woods at his back. Then he thought it was only a dream and turned over again; but as soon as his ear touched the ground he felt or heard (it was hard to tell which) a faint beating or drumming. He raised his head. The beating noise at once became fainter, but the music returned, clearer this time. It was like flutes. [...] The moon was bright; Caspian had been asleep longer than he thought. Nearer and nearer came the music, a tune wild and yet dreamy, and the noise of many light feet, till at last, out from the wood into the moonlight, came dancing shapes such as Caspian had been thinking of all his life. They were not much taller than Dwarfs, but far slighter and more graceful. Their curly heads had little horns, the upper part of their bodies gleamed naked in the pale light, but their legs and feet were those of goats.

"Fauns!" cried Caspian, jumping up, and in a moment they were all around him. [...] Before he knew what he was doing he found himself joining in the dance. [...] The Fauns footed it all round Caspian to their reedy pipes. Their strange faces, which seemed mournful and merry all

² Cf. the present author's earlier, brief treatment of this poem in much the same terms in "C.S. Lewis Dances among the Elves" (13-14).

at once, looked into his; dozens of Fauns, Mentius and Obentinus and Dumnus, Voluns, Voltinus, Girbius, Nimienus, Nausus and Oscuns. [...]

When Caspian awoke next morning he could hardly believe that it had not all been a dream; but the grass was covered with little cloven hoof-marks. (74-76)

Lewis, in his essay "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said," describes some images that appeared in his imagination, including that of "a faun carrying an umbrella," and how he began to arrange them into a narrative. He writes:

As these images sorted themselves into events (i.e., became a story) they seemed to demand no love interest and no close psychology. But the Form which excludes these things is the fairy tale. (527)

Thus, Lewis's first plan for his first Narnian tale included a faun, so this later appearance of a troop is not too surprising. He says that his stories were intended for children only in the sense that what he wanted to write excluded things that he thought they "would not like or understand," but otherwise the Narnian stories are available for "adult attention" (528). Perhaps the appearance of fauns is part of that availability for adults. Certainly he was right in the consequence that much such attention has been expended on the Narniad, including the production of a number of books.

The lack of close psychology is not to the point of this essay, but the lack of love interest is. Love and more-or-less-closely-related erotic material is not the stuff of these fairy tales, except, at times, through symbol. Here a group of fauns dance. Fauns and satyrs are usually figures of a sexual nature, but here they are not. Perhaps Lewis was influenced by the "troupe of Faunes and Satyres" (stanza 7), in Book One of *The Faerie Queene*, Canto 6, who rescue Una from Sansloy; they were dancing, heard Una crying for help, and came, scaring off her would-be rapist. Una is afraid of them at first—for obvious reasons—but this group is moved by her distress and then celebrated her and crowned her their queen, without sexual emphases.³

³ Later Spenser describes a more sexual group of satyrs: in Book 3, Canto 9, he introduces Dame Hellenore, wife of old Malbecco; she is seduced by Sir Paridell, who then abandons her (Canto 10), and she, wandering in a wood, comes upon a group of satyrs, who take her as housewife, goat-milker, maker of cheese and bread, and common sexual partner ("euery one as commune good her handeled," stanza 36). One night, with one of her new partners, she has intercourse nine times (stanza 48). Her husband finds her, but she refuses to leave the satyrs for him (stanzas 51-52).

One may note that later in *Prince Caspian* there is a romp by some wild girls, accompanied by Silenus and Bacchus (139-141). Although the girls are never given a name, these have to be the Maenads. That this group is seen by Susan and Lucy is appropriate to their gender, as Caspian's gender made him appropriate for a dance with the fauns. Susan's comment that she wouldn't have liked to meet the wild girls without Aslan being there (141) suggests the Christian control and the generic control of this material, making it safely non-erotic (or lacking in "love interest").

Lewis's second satyr announced in this essay's title—called a faun only—is Mr. Tumnus. He appears when Lucy Pevensie has reached snow-covered Narnia through the wardrobe and she has advanced to a lamp-post in the woods. This is at the end of the first chapter of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*:

[...] a very strange person stepped out from among the trees into the light of the lamp-post.

He was only a little taller than Lucy herself and he carried over his head an umbrella, white with snow. From the waist upward he was like a man, but his legs were shaped like a goat's (the hair on them was glossy black) and instead of feet he had goat's hoofs. He also had a tail, but Lucy did not notice this at first because it was neatly caught up over the arm that held the umbrella so as to keep it from trailing in the snow. He had a red woolen muffler round his neck and his skin was rather reddish too. He had a strange, but pleasant little face, with a short pointed beard and curly hair, and out of the hair there stuck two horns, one on each side of his forehead. One of his hands, as I have said, held the umbrella; in the other arm he carried several brown paper parcels. What with the parcels and the snow it looked just as if he had been doing his Christmas shopping. He was a Faun. (14-15)

A surface-level response to this description is that, at least, Lewis is no longer writing about a white-skinned satyr; this faun has reddish skin. More significantly, this faun seems to be suggestive of a devil. He has red skin and black hair, and red and black are the devil's colors in his popular depictions. Mr. Tumnus stands on goat's hoofs; he has horns and a pointed beard—a goatee—and, quite like the popular picture of devils, he has a long, flexible tail.

This tail is not that of a goat, obviously. Lewis writes in "It All Began with a Picture . . ." about the mental image mentioned above:

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.' (529)

Perhaps Lewis's youthful mental picture was that of a devil with an umbrella and packages.

W.H. Lewis writes in his diary that both he and his brother could "only imagine what comes into our heads, but cannot direct our imaginations" (193-94). If so, perhaps C.S. Lewis began with a mental picture of a devil which he could, in writing, call a faun but could not change its appearance.

Obviously, Lewis blunts this depiction of a sexual predator, a spiritual predator, by the comparison to a Christmas shopper. Perhaps Lewis deliberately chose to use the Roman *faun* over the Greek *satyr* because *faun*, for English ears, has a suggestion of the innocence of a *faun*. But the seduction begins with the invitation to Tumnus's cave to have tea. Lucy finds the cave snug and delightful, but she does notice a door—"In one corner there was a door which Lucy thought must lead to Mr Tumnus's bedroom [...]" (19). She also looks at Mr. Tumnus's bookshelf—of the four titles given, one is suggestive: *Nymphs and Their Ways*. (Tolkien's negative comment about the Narnian beginning to Roger Lancelyn Green included a more suggestive title in addition to *Nymphs and Their Ways*—*The Love-Life of a Faun* [Green and Hooper 241]. If that was ever in the manuscript, it must have been cut because of Tolkien's objection.) Of Mr. Tumnus's stories that he tells her, one is "about the midnight dances and how the Nymphs who lived in the wells and the Dryads who lived in the trees came out to dance with the Fauns" (20-21). "Dance" is sometimes an euphemism for something more sexual. Again, Mr. Tumnus tells Lucy

[a]bout summer when the woods were green and old Silenus on his fat donkey would come to visit them, and sometimes Bacchus himself, and then the streams would run with wine instead of water and the whole forest would give itself up to jollification for weeks on end. (21)

These accounts are on the edge of the sexual riots that satyrs are known for.

Mr. Tumnus has fed Lucy well, told her these and other stories, and then plays his flute in a way that, among other things, makes Lucy want to go asleep (21). The seduction is almost finished.

One should also consider what Mr. Tumnus says has been his intention, after he breaks down and confesses that he is a servant of the White Witch:

Look at me, Daughter of Eve. Would you believe that I'm the sort of Faun to meet a poor innocent child in the wood, one that had never done me any harm, and pretend to be friendly with it, and invite it home to my cave, all for the sake of lulling it asleep and then handing it over to the White Witch? (24)

Only the substitution of the White Witch for a reference to rape keeps this within the area of a fairy tale as Lewis understood it. The substitution of *it* for *her* in the passage both suggests that the would-be rapist has no humane connection with his prey and also, for naïve or young readers, removes the grammatical series from sexual obviousness. At the youthful Lewis's personal level, the White Witch is a substitution for bondage and whipping. One example of Lewis's fantasies about whipping a beautiful woman is found near the first of his [28 February 1917] letter to Arthur Greeves, his teenage friend (*They Stand Together* 171). (The Witch's dwarf driver—not the Witch herself—uses a whip on the two reindeer of the Witch's sledge [110] and on Edmund Pevensie, her captive [112].)

Why did Mr. Tumnus stop the captivity he had engineered? He weeps, says he is a bad faun, and refers to a picture of his father—"My old father, now [...]; that's his picture over the mantelpiece. He would never have a done a thing like this" (23); but family mores are only part of his reason. His main reason is that he has met and got to know Lucy—to know what a human was like—and (to substitute modern jargon) he could no longer consider her just an object, an *it*, as in his described seduction sequence (25). (The second reason is stronger than the first, for Mr. Tumnus's father was another faun, after all—at least in mythological terms. In Narnian terms, his father could have been moral and self-controlled.)

If one compares Lewis's two satyrs, one finds that that both are about the split in the male human. Partly he is led by reason, by wisdom and high thoughts, by family mores and *philia*; and partly he is driven by sexual or bestial or devilish (and/or traitorous) impulses. The satyr attracts fairie maidens by his unhappiness—perhaps he is unhappy because women flee from him but more likely (as suggested before) he is unhappy because he is self-divided himself about his relationship to women. The faun, Mr. Tumnus, shows that a man can control his impulses, his animal or devilish side, and treat a woman well.

Of course, "The Satyr" is a poem by an adolescent atheist; the poem does not reach a certain conclusion. How is the satyr going to treat the faerie maidens who pause? *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is a book by a middle-aged Christian who has learned to control his impulses. He told George Sayer that sadistic desires "fairly easily" could be controlled "by prayer and fasting"

(*Jack* xiv).⁴ But the view of man as a split being is basic to both depictions. Indeed, it is almost implicit in the choice to write at a serious level about a satyr.

At this point the essay's argument is technically completed; but if it were halted now, some reader would be certain to say the latter part proves that Mr. Tumnus "is only" a devil, "is only" a satyr planning to rape Lucy Pevensie. No, that is not what the essay has said.

The thesis is that, at the level of the Narnian story which was intended for adults, this is a conversion story. Mr. Tumnus, like Lewis in his youth, like all men to one degree or another after puberty, is driven by his hormones.⁵ Some in distorted ways. What is depicted in the first two chapters of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is a conversion to morality, to what Lewis in *The Abolition of Man* referred to as the *tao*. (Lewis uses that Chinese term in the sense that Confucius used it, not as Laozi did.)

Some Christians, although with reservations about turning the Narnian book into an allegory, may want to take the matter further, beyond the second chapter. After that opening, Mr. Tumnus finds the philosophic belief difficult to sustain—that is, at the narrative level, he is recaptured by the White Witch (evidence on 57-59) and ends up in an emotionally and intellectually petrified state (probably seen as a statue in the White Witch's castle, 93). He is only saved by the reception of the Holy Spirit through Christ, as depicted in Aslan's breath (154, 158), in the breath/wind/spirit pun of *ruach*, *pneuma*, and *spiritus*.⁶ The analogy to Lewis's life is the relatively short time between his conversion to Theism (*Surprised* 214-15) and his return to Christian belief (*Surprised* 221-23), although he does not separate the stages with a period of petrification. This seeking of parallels to Lewis's life need not be a simple attempt to experience Lewis's personality through his works (which he depreciated in his first essay in *The Personal Heresy*) but may be taken as seeking evidence that Lewis writes out of what he experienced, out of what he truly believes, not just writing what he thinks he should be saying to his readers. Even the earlier mentioned sadistic impulses are an adult example of what service to the White Witch may entail.

⁴ Sayer's essay version of his introduction to the second edition of *Jack* also quotes Lewis on the point: "That sort of thing [...] can be fairly easily overcome by prayer and what they called 'fasting'" ("C.S. Lewis and Adultery" 103).

⁵ The effect of puberty on women is not to the point: this is an essay on satyrs, not—despite the earlier reference to wild girls—maenads.

⁶ Of course, Mr. Tumnus' eventual salvation is assured by his appearance in the New Narnia (*Last Battle* 179-182), but that is to take the semi-allegorical argument ("Mr. Tumnus' Progress") outside the covers of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

Some will find this specifically Christian reading of Mr. Tumnus's book-long career to be strained, to be too nearly allegorical; others will accept it readily. For the purposes of this essay, the conversion of the faun from self-centered pleasure-seeking (that is, nearly sexual service of the White Witch) to an acceptance of morality, the *tao*, at the interpersonal level, is all that is argued. "The Satyr" shows the same figure before conversion, but with the hint of discomfort with his attitude in those "*sad*, brown eyes" (stress added).

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The Mythopoeic Society (founded in 1967) is one of the oldest organizations extant for those interested in fantasy and its study and appreciation. Though we have made impressive contributions to Mythopoeic Studies, we have always been a small nonprofit, run totally by unpaid volunteers. *Without memberships, we'd cease to exist.* We cover all the Inklings. We welcome scholars from a variety of disciplines, independent scholars, and *anyone* who reads and loves fantasy literature. **As a member you can have influence on the direction of the Society by voting on its leadership—or become part of that leadership yourself.**