



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

---

Volume 31  
Number 3

Article 4

---

4-15-2013

## Disparaging Narnia: Reconsidering Tolkien's View of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

Josh B. Long  
*Independent Scholar*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Long, Josh B. (2013) "Disparaging Narnia: Reconsidering Tolkien's View of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 31: No. 3, Article 4.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol31/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:  
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSU<sup>TM</sup>

---

## Online Summer Seminar 2023

August 5-6, 2023: Fantasy Goes to Hell: Depictions of Hell in Modern Fantasy Texts

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2023.htm>



### Disparaging Narnia: Reconsidering Tolkien's View of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

#### Abstract

Addresses the perennial question of J.R.R. Tolkien's dislike for C.S. Lewis's Narnia books, carefully analyzing numerous first- and second-hand accounts from biographies, interviews, and letters. A previously unpublished letter from Tolkien to Eileen Elgar adds a new and more nuanced element to our understanding of this issue.

#### Additional Keywords

Elger, Eileen. Correspondence with J.R.R. Tolkien; Lewis, C.S.—Friends and associates—J.R.R. Tolkien; Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia—Attitude of J.R.R. Tolkien towards; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Attitude toward the Chronicles of Narnia; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Friends and associates—C.S. Lewis



DISPARAGING NARNIA: RECONSIDERING  
TOLKIEN'S VIEW OF *THE LION, THE  
WITCH AND THE WARDROBE*

JOSH B. LONG

IT IS WELL-KNOWN THAT TOLKIEN DISLIKED *The Chronicles of Narnia*, but what were his reasons? They appear to be complex and manifold. Part of the problem lies in the fact that we have only one (published) statement from Tolkien on the matter, and it remains ambiguous at best. Writing in 1964, he observes, "It is sad that 'Narnia' and all that part of C.S.L.'s work should remain outside the range of my sympathy, as much of my work was outside his" (*Letters* 352). This tells us almost nothing. My intention in this article is to come to terms with why Tolkien disliked Narnia. Many reasons have been offered, but it is not always easy to separate the facts from the fancy; more often than not, the lines between the two have been blurred. I will begin by reconsidering the secondhand accounts of Roger Lancelyn Green, Nan C.L. Scott, and George Sayer; Tolkien evidently told each of them at different times why he disliked Narnia. Second, I will defend Humphrey Carpenter's accounts in *Tolkien* and *The Inklings*, although several scholars have called them into question. Finally, I wish to introduce and analyze an unpublished letter in which Tolkien briefly discusses Narnia.

The most well-known secondhand account is certainly Green's. In 1974, he published a joint biography with Walter Hooper entitled *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*. In it, Green recalls that after Lewis had shared the opening chapters of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* with Tolkien, "who had disliked it intensely," Lewis then read it to Green. Shortly after, Tolkien saw Green and remarked, "I hear you've been reading Jack's [Lewis's] children's story. It really won't do, you know! I mean to say: '*Nymphs and their Ways, The Love-Life of a Faun*'. Doesn't he know what he's talking about?" (qtd. in Green and Hooper

241).<sup>1</sup> Green provides no explanation of what Tolkien meant; however, this has not prevented critics from interpreting Tolkien's comment.

Joe R. Christopher observes that *Nymphs and their Ways* is one of the books which appears on Mr. Tumnus's bookcase in Chapter II of *The Lion*. According to Christopher, Tolkien was bothered by this scene because Lewis was distorting and sentimentalizing the myth ("Narnian Exile" 41). He suggests, "[I]f Lucy had really met a faun—that is, a satyr—the result would have been a rape, not a tea party" (Christopher, *C.S. Lewis* 111). Hence, the reason Tolkien alludes to *The Love-life of a Faun*—a book that doesn't actually appear on Mr. Tumnus's bookcase but is absurd all the same. In short, Lewis failed to maintain the mythical archetype of fauns as lustful.

From an aesthetic standpoint, Christopher's argument certainly seems valid. In contrast to Lewis, Tolkien preserved the traditional qualities of his races in *The Lord of the Rings*. In Appendix F, he notes that *dwarfs* have "at last" been relegated "to nonsense-stories in which they have become mere figures of fun"; he has employed the unconventional plural *dwarves* to "remove them a little, perhaps, from the sillier tales of these latter days" (1137). He comments similarly on the notion of *elves*: "This old word was indeed the only one available, and was once fitted to apply to such memories of this people as Men preserved [...]. But it has been diminished, and to many it may now suggest fancies either pretty or silly, as unlike to the Quendi of old as are butterflies to the falcon" (1137). Rather than adopt the modern notions of these races, popularized in such works as J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* and Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Tolkien sought to restore the historical integrity of these beings, found in such works as the *Völsunga saga*, *Beowulf*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Green also mentions in *C.S. Lewis* (1963) that Lewis "then set aside [*The Lion*] owing to criticism from one of his older friends by then rather out of touch with children and their books, and wedded to different modes of thought where fairy-tale and fantasy were concerned" (37). Green is evidently referring to Tolkien. Although this doesn't specify why Tolkien disliked Narnia, this remains the earliest known account of this incident; it even predates Tolkien's 1964 letter. Green also published an article entitled "C.S. Lewis" in the first *Puffin Annual* (1974). Interestingly, the article is more detailed than Green's joint biography about his meeting with Lewis; most notably, he provides several direct quotes from Lewis. The only reference to Tolkien is when Lewis says, "But Tolkien doesn't like them [the two chapters] . . . What do you really think?" (104, ellipsis in original). Green "pointed out how natural it was that Tolkien should not like it: for his fantasy world, the world of *The Hobbit*, was so very different—with a different greatness" (104).

<sup>2</sup> Tolkien once said in an interview, "By writing about elves as tall as men I am restoring tradition, trying to rescue the word from the nursery" (qtd. in Cater 10). Tolkien's most adamant defense of traditional archetypes can be seen in *Smith of Wootton Major*, in which the antagonist Nokes believes fairies are small and cute.

Lewis did not take the same approach towards his stories. In *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, he suggests that “mythical poetry ought not to attempt novelty in respect of its ingredients” but “[w]hat it does with the ingredients may be as novel as you please” (54). In other words, the archetypes of a myth should remain the same (i.e. giants, dragons, and gods); however, the way an author depicts them may be original.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Lewis felt completely justified in remaining true to the faun’s appearance, but refashioning its nature. Tolkien would have been bothered by such reworking. Tom Shippey notes that “Tolkien thought, indeed he knew, that he could distinguish many words and word-forms into two classes, one ‘old-traditional-genuine’, the other ‘new-unhistorical-mistaken’” (*The Road to Middle-earth [Road]* 55). Lewis’s faun certainly falls into the latter. Rather than a lustful, rural god, as portrayed in Roman mythology, Lewis’s faun is polite, domesticated, and sensitive.

Joseph Pearce provides another explanation for Tolkien’s remark to Green; he believes that Tolkien was displeased with the clash between the “mythical creatures worthy of respect” and “the descent into the vulgar vernacular” (125). Thus, fauns and nymphs are paired with “Love-life” and “their Ways.”

Tolkien’s main issue seems to be that Lewis was not taking his secondary world seriously enough. The titles on Mr. Tumnus’s bookcase confirm this—they are parodies of real-life books. A quick search for titles ending in “and their Ways” turns up books on insects, snakes, wasps, and birds, to name but a few. Thus, *Nymphs and their Ways* is meant to suggest a scientific or pseudoscientific book on nymphs. What Lewis intended as a lighthearted jest, Tolkien saw as a serious flaw—to suggest that Narnians study nymphs as humans study herbivores was just asinine. Alan Jacobs points out that for Tolkien “there was obviously no place in a ‘secondary world’ for such quaint jokes. No doubt Tolkien was offended by the very notion that fauns would have books at all” (273). Whatever the reason for Tolkien’s annoyance, he clearly felt Lewis did not know what he was talking about.<sup>4</sup>

While Green’s account remains rather ambiguous, Nan C.L. Scott’s is perfectly clear. According to Scott, Tolkien “expressed distaste for C.S. Lewis’s ‘Narnia’ books because of their allegorical nature” (80). Tolkien evidently expressed this view often. Robert Murray, who was close friends with Tolkien, observes that “he reacted with increasing dislike to the incursions into allegorical fiction by his closest friend, C.S. Lewis” (“A Tribute” 879).<sup>5</sup> It is apparent that it

---

<sup>3</sup> Lewis continues by distinguishing between bad originality and good originality, emphasizing that not all novelty is a good thing.

<sup>4</sup> For another interpretation of Green’s quote, see Miller (241).

<sup>5</sup> See also Murray’s “Sermon at Thanksgiving Service” (18). Thomas Howard, who corresponded with Lewis, also notes that Tolkien “thought Lewis’s Narnia was too

was not just the allegory that he was opposed to but also the religious undertones. Walter Hooper recalls that "Professor Tolkien once told me that he thought the Christian elements in the Narnian stories too 'obvious'" ("Narnia: The Author" 110).<sup>6</sup>

George Sayer's two accounts are certainly the most thorough. In 1988, Lewis's former pupil and friend published a book-length biography on him called *Jack*.<sup>7</sup> In it, he writes:

[Lewis] was hurt, astonished, and discouraged when Tolkien said that he thought the book was almost worthless, that it seemed like a jumble of unrelated mythologies. Because Aslan, the fauns, the White Witch, Father Christmas, the nymphs, and Mr. and Mrs. Beaver had quite distinct mythological or imaginative origins, Tolkien thought that it was a terrible mistake to put them together in Narnia, a single imaginative country. The effect was incongruous and, for him, painful. But Jack argued that they existed happily together in our minds in real life. Tolkien replied, "Not in mine, or at least not at the same time."

Tolkien never changed his view. He so strongly detested Jack's assembling figures from various mythologies in his children's books that he soon gave up trying to read them. He also thought they were carelessly and superficially written. His condemnation was so severe that one suspects he envied the speed with which Jack wrote and compared it with his own laborious method of composition. (189)

Sayer says much the same in his article "Recollections of J.R.R. Tolkien":

[Tolkien] described it to be "about as bad as can be". It was written superficially and far too quickly (I think that perhaps he envied Lewis his fluency), had an obvious message, but above all was a mix-up of characters from dissimilar and incompatible imaginative worlds. Dr. Cornelius, Father Time, The White Witch, Father Christmas and Dryads should not be included in the same story.<sup>8</sup> (25)

---

allegorical" ("J.R.R. Tolkien: In Middle-earth"). Howard explains that "I no longer have my sources for that quote about JRRT's strictures on CSL's allegorical stories, so I can't throw any light on it except to say that I had it on good grounds" (personal correspondence).

<sup>6</sup> Clyde S. Kilby, who befriended Tolkien late in life, notes that "Tolkien feels that the Christian element in Lewis is too explicit" ("Mythic and Christian" 132). George Sayer concurs, noting Tolkien disliked *The Lion* because it "had an obvious message" ("Recollections" 25). I am assuming by message, Sayer means "Christian" message.

<sup>7</sup> George Sayer was also friends with Tolkien. He read the manuscript of *The Lord of the Rings* and was, like Tolkien, a Roman Catholic.

<sup>8</sup> There is at least one other published comment that Sayer made on Tolkien and Narnia, and it can be found in Mike Foster's "'That Most Unselfish Man': George Sayer: 1914- 2005:

In both accounts, Sayer emphasizes that the primary reason Tolkien disliked Narnia was because of Lewis's joining of independent mythologies. Sayer appears to be basing this on personal recollections because he not only quotes Tolkien but also specifies that Lewis "was a frequent topic of conversation" ("Recollections" 25). Although it remains unclear how many of the Narnian stories Tolkien actually read, according to Sayer, Tolkien never finished the series as a whole.

In addition to Tolkien's dislike of Lewis's mixing of mythologies, Sayer suggests that Tolkien was opposed to Lewis's compositional carelessness, superficiality, and haste. This seems likely given Tolkien's own meticulous construction of Middle-earth. He once admitted to a correspondent that he dislikes "stories of an imaginary world that have not got any imaginary history."<sup>9</sup> Narnia certainly lacks the kind of depth that Tolkien felt was necessary for a secondary world.

One other point should be noted, and that is, we do not know to what extent Sayer drew from Humphrey Carpenter's books, which were written and published before *Jack*; in fact, he acknowledges, "I am grateful to Mr. Humphrey Carpenter for advice [...]. I have also derived much help from his splendid volume *The Inklings*" (*Jack* xiv). Notably, Sayer's two main points—that Tolkien disapproved of Lewis's mixing of mythologies and was critical of his carelessness—are also offered as reasons in *The Inklings*.<sup>10</sup>

This wouldn't have been a problem, but some scholars have questioned the reliability of Carpenter's books.<sup>11</sup> Joe R. Christopher, for example, points out that "Carpenter's lack of source notes in the back of *The Inklings* and his failure to mention anyone who gave him the information in *Tolkien* at least make his reasons sound like his own, and not Tolkien's" ("Narnian Exile" 39). He contends that "the four or five motives which Carpenter attributes to Tolkien probably should be taken more as Carpenter's interpretations than as Tolkien's reasons" (39). Christopher's point is well taken—there is no excuse for Carpenter's lack of documentation.

---

Pupil, Biographer, and Friend." Foster quotes substantially from a transcript of a videotaped interview with Sayer. Sayer says in passing, "Tolkien, for instance, didn't like or approve of the Narnia stories at all" (19).

<sup>9</sup> Unpublished letter from J.R.R. Tolkien to Mrs. Munby, dated 21 October 1963 (private collection). © The JRR Tolkien Copyright Trust 2012

<sup>10</sup> The situation is further complicated by the fact that Carpenter *might* have drawn some of his ideas from having interviewed or spoken with Sayer. Carpenter states in his Author's note to *Tolkien* that the content of the book is partially based "upon the reminiscences of [Tolkien's] family and friends" (n.p.). However, *The Inklings's* acknowledgement page, which makes mention of dozens of people, does not mention George Sayer.

<sup>11</sup> See also Seddon (62) and Schroeder (29).

Even so, I do not think that we should simply dismiss Carpenter's reasons as interpretations because 1) Sayer, who knew Tolkien and Lewis, concurred with several of them, 2) Christopher Tolkien played a key role in the composition of *Tolkien*, and 3) there is, to a greater or lesser degree, evidence for these reasons. The first point requires no explanation, so I will begin with the second one.

According to Rayner Unwin, while Carpenter was conducting research for *Tolkien*, he "found himself working closely alongside Christopher [Tolkien]" (249). Shortly after, Christopher Tolkien moved to France. Once Carpenter had completed the first draft, he met with him to discuss the book. Unwin recounts that "Christopher carefully and critically tore Humphrey's draft to pieces; Humphrey retreated to his bedroom for a week or two and re-wrote the whole book which, in its revised form, Christopher approved and it was given to us to publish" (249).<sup>12</sup> Although this doesn't necessarily prove that Carpenter's reasons are valid, it does establish that Christopher Tolkien, who shared a close bond with his father, was personally involved in this book project.<sup>13</sup>

Carpenter has had a tremendous impact on this area of Inklings studies because most writers refer to his books, directly or indirectly, in their discussion. Therefore, it is worth looking at what he actually has to say. His first book *Tolkien* puts forth the following two reasons for Tolkien's dislike of Narnia: 1) "Undoubtedly he felt that Lewis had in some ways drawn on Tolkien ideas and stories in the books," and 2) "the sheer number of Lewis's books for children and the almost indecent haste with which they were produced undoubtedly annoyed him" (201).

Whether Tolkien actually made the first criticism cannot be determined from Carpenter's biography. However, it seems probable that he did. Tolkien did convey to Lewis in 1948 that "it probably makes me at my *worst* when the other writer's lines come too near (as do yours at times)" (*Letters* 127, emphasis in

---

<sup>12</sup> I find Christopher Tolkien's careful critique of Carpenter's book particularly interesting. I imagine that Christopher Tolkien played a similar role to his father in particular and the Inklings in general. See, for example, *The Return of the Shadow* (297n13, 299) and *The War of the Ring* (123).

<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that Carpenter's books are inerrant. For more on this, see Hammond and Scull's "Truth or Consequences: A Cautionary Tale of Tolkien Studies." It should also be noted that members of the Inklings assisted Carpenter on *The Inklings*. In "Appendix D Acknowledgments," Carpenter states, "All surviving Inklings have responded with great kindness to my request for information, and I owe a considerable debt of thanks to [them]" (280). He adds, "Several of them have also read the book in manuscript, and it has benefited greatly from their comments; though it should not be assumed that everything in it necessarily represents their own views" (280).



original).<sup>14</sup> This letter was written before Lewis shared *The Lion* with Tolkien, but it is nonetheless telling.<sup>15</sup> What is more, Clyde S. Kilby affirms what Tolkien's letter merely suggests. He writes, "Although Tolkien spoke to me warmly of his long and happy association with Lewis, he also sometimes found fault with him. He mentioned that Lewis 'borrowed' from him. I pointed out that Lewis had acknowledged the borrowing of the word 'Númenor,' but Tolkien insisted there were unacknowledged 'echoes' in Lewis" (*Tolkien and The Silmarillion* 76). Elsewhere, Kilby notes more strongly, "He genuinely believed that Lewis had borrowed from his writings and once went so far as a broad hint of plagiarism" ("Woodland Prisoner" 55).<sup>16</sup> Tolkien was clearly offended by Lewis's borrowings, but we do not know for sure if it was Narnia that bothered him.

Carpenter's second point is also viable. I don't think the issue is prolificacy as much as haste. In Sayer's words, Tolkien felt the stories were written "far too quickly" ("Recollections" 25). At the heart of the matter, Tolkien and Lewis had two very different approaches to composition, which each identified in the other—Tolkien was painstakingly meticulous, while Lewis composed rather quickly. Just as Tolkien was at times exasperated by Lewis's haste, Lewis was equally bothered by Tolkien's slowness. In particular, Lewis was annoyed after their collaborative book on language fell through because Tolkien was too dilatory (*Collected Letters* 3:6).<sup>17</sup> Lewis knew that Tolkien took a similar approach to his fiction. In reply to an inquiry about when *The Silmarillion* would be available, Lewis writes, "When you'll get any more in print from him, Lord knows. You see, he is both a procrastinator & a perfectionist. You have no idea with what laborious midwifery we got the *Lord of the Rings* out of him!" (Letter to Edmund R. Meškys).

Carpenter's *Inklings* provides three reasons for Tolkien's dislike of Narnia. 1) "It had been very hastily written," 2) "[t]here were inconsistencies and loose ends in the story," and 3) "the story borrowed so indiscriminately from other mythologies and narratives" (*Inklings* 224). The first one appears in *Tolkien* and needs no further elucidation. The second reason is particularly interesting because Tolkien criticized the manuscript of *Out of the Silent Planet* for the same thing—"inconsistent details in the plot" (*Letters* 32-33). The main difference is,

---

<sup>14</sup> David Bratman suggested to me that this "might be a reference to *That Hideous Strength* and its borrowing of Tolkien elements" (personal correspondence).

<sup>15</sup> The common view is that Lewis read the beginning of *The Lion* to Tolkien in early 1949. For an alternative dating, see Part II of Joe R. Christopher's "J.R.R. Tolkien: Narnian Exile."

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of parallels between Middle-earth and Narnia, see Christopher (C. S. Lewis 110-18). For a discussion of Lewis's linguistic borrowings, see Gilliver, Marshall, and Weiner (84-85).

<sup>17</sup> For more on this collaboration and Lewis's recently discovered fragment of the book, see Beebe.

however, that *Out of the Silent Planet* benefited from Tolkien's careful critique, while Narnia did not. I am convinced that Lewis's Narniad would have had fewer inconsistencies had Tolkien been able to stomach it; he could not, of course, so Lewis turned to others for feedback.<sup>18</sup>

The third reason Carpenter offers deserves a bit more clarification. Lewis was, unlike so many of his contemporaries, completely unaffected by the anxiety of influence; as a result, he borrowed freely, even liberally, from his predecessors and contemporaries without the least bit of concern.<sup>19</sup> As noted above, Tolkien was certainly uneasy with Lewis's borrowings from Middle-earth. He was also uneasy about the influence Charles Williams exerted on Lewis, which, according to him, "spoiled the trilogy of C.S.L." He adds rather disapprovingly that Lewis was "very impressionable, too impressionable" (*Letters* 349). This is yet another way in which Lewis and Tolkien differed. While Lewis was "too impressionable," Tolkien was evidently not impressionable enough. In a 1966 interview, Tolkien observed that "one of the things I remember Lewis's saying to me—of course, Lewis was very influenced as you may know—was, 'Confound you, nobody can influence you anyhow. I have tried but it's no good'" (Resnik 40).<sup>20</sup>

The truth is Lewis's aesthetics stood in stark contrast to modernism's poetic imperative to "make it new." Lewis was of the mind that "no man who bothers about originality will ever be original" (*Mere Christianity* 226).<sup>21</sup> In a 1920 letter in which he disparages modernism's aimless pursuit of originality, he suggests, "All poetry is one, and I love to see the great notes repeated" (*Collected Letters* 1:504).<sup>22</sup> This was certainly his approach in composing Narnia, which resulted in its unabashed eclecticism.

For Tolkien, the issue wasn't so much that Lewis's secondary world was too eclectic; it was too incongruous. Tolkien had set out to construct an "elaborate and consistent mythology" (*Letters* 26). Lewis had created, what must have seemed to Tolkien, a world chock-full of so many diverse mythological traditions that it contained no cohesion. Tolkien was probably more bothered by Lewis's reuse of specific, mythical characters than Lewis's appropriation of

---

<sup>18</sup> Lewis had planned to revise *The Chronicles of Narnia* to make them more consistent, but unfortunately passed away before he could do so (Green and Hooper 307).

<sup>19</sup> Case in point: Lewis once acknowledged, "I have never concealed the fact that I regarded [George MacDonald] as my master; indeed I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him" (*George* xxxvii). Of his contemporaries, Owen Barfield, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams had a profound influence on him as a writer.

<sup>20</sup> For more on how Tolkien was influenced, see Glycer's *The Company They Keep*.

<sup>21</sup> He says almost the same thing in *The Weight of Glory*: "No man who values originality will ever be original" (175). See also *Collected Letters* (2: 518)

<sup>22</sup> See also *The Discarded Image* (211-12).

mythical races. After all, dragons, dwarfs (dwarves), eagles, giants, orknies (orcs),<sup>23</sup> werewolves, wolves, wooses (wooses), and wraiths appear in Middle-earth as well as Narnia. On the other hand, Tolkien would have felt that characters, such as Bacchus (Roman), Father Christmas (European), Lilith (Jewish), and the Phoenix (Near Eastern), should not be placed in the same world; each had its own separate, mythical tradition.

Thus far, I have devoted most of my discussion to what others have said about Tolkien; I would now like to look at one of his unpublished letters. This letter is important for the sheer reason that it remains the only account in which Tolkien explains, in his own words, why he disliked Narnia. In 1971, he wrote to Eileen Elgar: "I am glad that you have discovered Narnia. These stories are deservedly very popular; but since you ask if I like them I am afraid the answer is No. I do not like 'allegory', and least of all religious allegory of this kind. But that is a difference of taste which we both recognized and did not interfere with our friendship" (emphasis in original).<sup>24</sup> The most interesting part of this excerpt is not Tolkien's reason for his dislike (this letter merely confirms what others have already said), but his assertion that the "stories are deservedly very popular." At face value, Tolkien seems to be suggesting that the stories are good enough to garner popularity, though he personally does not care for them. On the other hand, Tolkien may have been trying to be polite to Elgar, who had corresponded with him for a number of years.<sup>25</sup> It is also possible that both motivations, to a lesser or greater degree, prompted this remark.

There is some evidence that Tolkien actually meant what he wrote. Regardless of how Tolkien personally felt about Narnia, he believed that the stories were good enough to share with his granddaughter. Joanna Tolkien recalls, "When staying with Granny and Grandfather at 99 Holywell, and later at Sandfield Road, I was handed from his bookshelf the Narnia books—C.S. Lewis—, *The Borrowers*—Mary Norton—and Andrew Lang Fairy Stories. The fact that he directed me to reading these other books before *The Lord of the Rings* is

---

<sup>23</sup> Both are derived from the Old English *orcneas*. For more on this, see Gilliver, Marshall, and Weiner (174-76).

<sup>24</sup> Unpublished letter from J.R.R. Tolkien to Eileen Elgar, dated 24 December 1971 (private collection). © The JRR Tolkien Copyright Trust 2012

<sup>25</sup> As an admirer of his work, Elgar began corresponding with Tolkien as early as 1963. After discovering that she lived close to the Hotel Miramar, Tolkien visited her in 1963 and probably again in 1965 (Scull and Hammond, *Chronology* 609, 630). Moreover, Tolkien lent her the typescript of *Smith of Wootton Major* before it was published and had his secretary send her *A Map of Middle-earth* after it was released (Scull and Hammond, *Chronology* 630, 751). By 1971, they were certainly on friendly terms.

perhaps an indication of his humility" (34).<sup>26</sup> Surely, Tolkien felt *The Chronicles of Narnia* had some merit; otherwise, why not just hand his granddaughter Norton and Lang?

Even so, there is also reason to believe that Tolkien was merely being polite. Shippey has suggested that Tolkien wrote "in the specialised politeness-language of Old Western Man, in which doubt and correction are in direct proportion to the obliquity of expression" (*Road* xviii). This is true of the letter Tolkien sent to Shippey and is also true of this one. From the context of the letter, it appears that Elgar enjoyed *The Chronicles of Narnia* and was inquiring to see if Tolkien felt the same: "I am glad that you have discovered Narnia. These stories are deservedly very popular; but since you ask if I like them I am afraid the answer is No." It would have been inappropriate, even offensive, if he had denounced Lewis's books. Instead, he discerningly affirms Elgar's opinion, while still maintaining his own.

Compared to Tolkien's initial judgment, he has tempered his critique of Narnia in two subtle ways. First of all, he has shifted from thinking *The Lion* "was almost worthless" to recognizing the book's value for others (Sayer, *Jack* 189). This is implied in the above letter and evinced when Tolkien introduced his granddaughter to the books. Secondly, although his personal aversion for the series has not changed, his reason for disliking the books has. Tolkien's letter confirms what Christopher suggested in 1988: Tolkien "shifted from an aesthetic objection to a temperamental one" ("Narnian Exile" 45). That is, rather than criticizing the series on the basis of aesthetics (Lewis's use of myth or carelessness), Tolkien suggests that his dislike is a matter of taste (his detestation of allegory). In short, Tolkien remained indifferent to Narnia, but conceded that there was value in the books for others.

According to Tolkien, the reason he disliked Narnia was because of its religious allegory; all other reasons are based on someone else's testimony or opinion, though that does not necessarily invalidate them. The irony is that Tolkien approached *The Lion* in the same way that many critics and readers interpreted *The Lord of the Rings*—by misclassifying it as allegory. Lewis, like Tolkien, repeatedly denied that his fantasies were allegories. He stressed that they were suppositions—what he called supposals. Lewis tried to answer the question of what might Christ look like if he entered another world. There are, of course, similarities between allegory and supposal, but the latter allows for more narrative freedom because the author doesn't have to maintain strict one-to-one correspondences, like most allegories do.

---

<sup>26</sup> I would like to thank Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond for bringing this to my attention in their excellent *Tolkien Companion and Guide*.

Another element of irony (or at least inconsistency) is this notion that Tolkien “cordially dislike[d] allegory in all its manifestations,” as he suggests in the Foreword to *The Lord of the Rings* (xviv). Regarding this statement, Shippey posits that “the evidence is rather against Tolkien here. He was perfectly capable of using allegory himself, and did so several times in his academic works, usually with devastating effect” (*J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* 161). In particular, Tolkien uses allegory three times in the opening of “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” (Shippey and Flieger 192-93). Other allegories can be found in his work. In his “Valedictory Address,” Tolkien employs an allegory (and describes it as such) of a Siamese twin (230). “Leaf by Niggle” is also an allegory; according to Tolkien, it “deals (in allegorical form) with [...] the relation of the artist or ‘subcreator’ to his work, and the relation of his work of ‘sub-creation’ to Creation” (qtd. in Glyer and Long 204).<sup>27</sup>

Tolkien not only wrote several allegories but also studied them, taught them, and translated at least one. Most significantly was Tolkien’s interest in the allegorical poem *Pearl*, which most critics believe was written by the same author as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Shippey observes that “Tolkien’s involvement with the *Gawain*-poet lasted almost the whole of his professional or writing life” (“Tolkien and the *Gawain*-poet” 213). Tolkien contributed part of the Introduction to E.V. Gordon’s (posthumous) edition of *Pearl*, a project that was initially planned as a collaboration between them. Tolkien also worked on a modern translation of the medieval work intermittently for the majority of his adult life.<sup>28</sup> In writing to his aunt in 1962, Tolkien commended the poem, noting, “Though not all acceptable to modern taste, it has moments of poignancy; and though it may in our view be absurdly complex in technical form, the poet surmounts his own obstacles on the whole with success” (*Letters* 317). In addition, Tolkien’s poem *The Nameless Land* was “inspired by reading *Pearl* for examination purposes” (qtd. in *Lost Road* 98). This is entirely characteristic of Tolkien. He once remarked “that his typical response upon reading a medieval work was to desire not so much to make a philological or critical study of it as to write a modern work in the same tradition” (West 85-86).<sup>29</sup> This wasn’t the only medieval allegory that inspired him. Tolkien’s satirical poem “Doworst” (that is, “do worst”) “is in the style and metre of the fourteenth-century alliterative poem *Piers Plowman*” (Scull and Hammond, *Reader’s Guide* 214).

---

<sup>27</sup> See also *Letters* (195).

<sup>28</sup> According to Scull and Hammond, Tolkien began his translation of *Pearl* circa 1925/1926 (*Chronology* 128). He was still working to bring it into publishable form in the 60s. In the end, the translation was published posthumously along with his translations of *Sir Gawain and Green Knight* and *Sir Orfeo*.

<sup>29</sup> This is not a direct quote from Tolkien.

Tolkien also had a profound respect for Dante, whom he called “a supreme poet,” though he found him to be petty at times (*Letters* 377). Moreover, he was encouraged by Lewis to join the Oxford Dante Society, which he was a member of for ten years. Several critics have even suggested that Dante’s *Divine Comedy* influenced Tolkien’s allegory “Leaf by Niggle”; Ivor and Deborah Rogers, for example, call it “Tolkien’s little *Purgatorio*” (57).<sup>30</sup> The fact of the matter is despite Tolkien’s incessant protestations and criticisms of allegory, he wrote them, wrote about them, read them, and enjoyed them in moderation. Allegory was certainly not his genre of choice, but neither did he universally hate it.

Something still remains to be said about the impact Tolkien has had upon others’s views of Narnia, especially Tolkienists. Given that Tolkien is widely regarded as the pioneer of modern fantasy, some have adopted his view of Narnia—that it is “about as bad as can be”—without really considering the books for themselves (Sayer, “Recollections” 25). As I’ve suggested before, we should be slow to adopt Tolkien’s dislikes. By his own admission, he was “a man of limited sympathies” and his “taste [was] not normal” (*Letters* 349, 34). Moreover, he acknowledged that “I seldom find any modern books that hold my attention” (*Letters* 377). Given what we now know about Tolkien, it would have been surprising if he had actually enjoyed the books.

Michael Ward makes the same point but takes a slightly different approach in *Planet Narnia*. He asserts, “Tolkien was the first to voice the view that the Chronicles are a hodgepodge, and his opinion has rumbled on in critical assessments of the series ever since” (8). According to Ward, Narnia is not the problem; Tolkien is (or rather his tastes are). He suggests that Tolkien neither read nor enjoyed most modern literature, and disliked the majority of Lewis’s work. Therefore, Ward writes, “we should not be surprised that Tolkien dismissed the Narniad” (9). Ward concludes by emphasizing that Lewis and Tolkien “must be allowed to attempt different things in different ways [...] irrespective of the other’s opinion” (10).

Tolkien and Lewis were clearly very different writers, but I think this is what allowed them to support one another—their differences. As Diana Pavlac Glycer observes, “[C]ooperative relationships thrive because of the ways in which opposites attract and then enhance one another” (32). Tolkien needed someone hammering him to be productive, while Lewis needed someone to remind him to slow down and pay attention to the details. It is a well-known fact that Tolkien would have probably never completed *The Lord of the Rings* without Lewis’s encouragement, but I think it is also fair to say that *Out of the Silent Planet* would

---

<sup>30</sup> See also Christopher (105) and especially Knowles (132-41).

have contained more loose ends and inconsistencies had Tolkien not provided Lewis with constructive criticism.

Scott's, Murray's, and Hooper's testimonies can be trusted because they were confirmed by Tolkien's letter—both the allegory and religion bothered Tolkien. Green's account is also reliable because he not only knew Lewis and Tolkien personally but also kept a diary recording some of the details.<sup>31</sup> The problem with Green's account, though, is he offers no explanation of what Tolkien meant; Tolkien's comment, in and of itself, really only tells us that Tolkien disliked *The Lion* and felt that Lewis did not know what he was talking about.

Sayer's two accounts also appear trustworthy as he knew both men and quotes Tolkien directly. However, if one is going to accept Sayer's reports, one must also accept Carpenter's *The Inklings*. I have tried to show that Carpenter's two explanations are reliable through outside evidence as well as compositional history. Nonetheless, this does not excuse Carpenter's lack of documentation. It just goes to show how important citations are.

Lastly, I would like to make two final observations. First, one other reason Tolkien almost certainly disliked the Chronicles was because they were geared towards children. Although *The Hobbit* was written for children, he later came to regret this fact. In "On Fairy-Stories," he suggests that children "neither like fairy-stories more, nor understand them better than adults do" (130). Later in the essay, he criticizes the "dreadful undergrowth of stories written or adapted to what was or is conceived to be the measure of children's minds and needs" (136). The Chronicles were indeed written in this vein. Second, if Tolkien were to praise *The Lion*, I think he would have appreciated the story's Eucatastrophe—the unexpected, good turning when Aslan returns and redeems all of Narnia from the rule of the White Witch. In "On Fairy-Stories," he notes, "A tale that in any measure succeeds in this point has not wholly failed, whatever flaws it may possess, and whatever mixture or confusion of purpose" (154).

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank Douglas A. Anderson, Michael D.C. Drout, and Verlyn Flieger, and especially David Bratman and Shelley Long, for their careful critique and valuable feedback. Any remaining faults are the author's own.

---

<sup>31</sup> I would like to thank Joe Christopher for pointing out the latter ("Narnian Exile" 40).

## WORKS CITED

- Beebe, Steven A. "C.S. Lewis on Language and Meaning: Manuscript Fragment Identified." *Seven: An Anglo-American Literary Review* 27 (2010): 7-24.
- Bratman, David. Email to the author. 7 July 2012.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Their Friends*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979.
- . *Tolkien: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.
- Cater, William. "Lord of the Hobbits." *Daily Express* 22 November 1966: 10.
- Christopher, Joe R. *C.S. Lewis*. Twayne's English Authors Series. Boston: Twayne, 1987.
- . "J.R.R. Tolkien, Narnian Exile." *Mythlore* 15.1 (#55) (1988): 37-45; 15.2 (#56) (1988): 17-23.
- Foster, Mike. "'That Most Unselfish Man': George Sayer, 1914-2005: Pupil, Biographer, and Friend of Inklings." *Mythlore* 26.3/4 (#101/102) (2008): 5-26.
- Gilliver, Peter, Jeremy Marshall, and Edmund Weiner. *The Ring of Words: Tolkien and the Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Glyer, Diana Pavlac. *The Company They Keep: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as Writers in Community*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2007.
- Glyer, Diana Pavlac, and Josh B. Long. "Biography as Source: Niggles and Notions." *Tolkien and the Study of His Sources: Critical Essays*. Ed. Jason Fisher. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011. 193-214.
- Green, Roger Lancelyn. *C.S. Lewis*. London: The Bodley Head, 1963.
- . "C.S. Lewis." *Puffin Annual*. Ed. Treld Bicknell, Frank Waters, and Kaye Webb. Number 1. Baltimore: Puffin, 1974. 104-106.
- Green, Roger Lancelyn, and Walter Hooper. *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*. Revised Ed. San Diego: Harcourt, 1994.
- Hammond, Wayne G. and Christina Scull. "Truth or Consequences: A Cautionary Tale of Tolkien Studies." *The Lord of the Rings Fanatics Plaza*. Last modified 30 January 2010. 2 April 2013. <<http://www.lotrplaza.com/showthread.php?16905>>.
- Hooper, Walter. "Narnia: The Author, the Critics, and the Tale." *The Longing for a Form: Essays on the Fiction of C. S. Lewis*. Ed. Peter J. Schakel. Kent: The Kent University Press, 1977. 105-118.
- Howard, Thomas. Email to the author. 6 July 2011.
- . "J.R.R. Tolkien: In Middle-earth." *Traces: Communion and Liberation International Magazine*. February 2002. <<http://www.traces-cl.com/feb02/inmiddle.html>>.
- Jacobs, Alan. "The Chronicles of Narnia." *The Cambridge Companion to C.S. Lewis*. Eds. Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 265-280.
- Kilby, Clyde S. "Mythic and Christian Elements in Tolkien." *Myth, Allegory, and Gospel: An Interpretation of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton, Charles Williams*. Ed. John Warwick Montgomery. Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974. 119-143.
- . *Tolkien and The Silmarillion*. Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1976.
- . "Woodland Prisoner." *Seven: An Anglo-American Literary Review* 27 (2010): 48-60.
- Knowles, Sebastian D.G. *A Purgatorial Flame: Seven British Writers in the Second World War*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990.
- Lewis, C.S. *Collected Letters*. Ed. Walter Hooper. 3 vol. London: HarperCollins, 2000-2007.



- . *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964.
- , ed. *George MacDonald: An Anthology*. New York: Macmillan, 1978.
- . Letter to Edmund R. Meškys, 3 October 1963. *Niekas* 7 (15 December 1963): 23.
- . *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.
- . *Mere Christianity*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
- . *A Preface to Paradise Lost*. New Delhi: Atlantic and Distributors, 2005.
- . *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
- Miller, Lauren. *The Magician's Book: A Skeptic's Adventures in Narnia*. New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2008.
- Murray, Robert. "Sermon at Thanksgiving Service, Keble College Chapel, 23rd August 1922." *Proceedings of the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Conference 1992 (Mythlore 80/Mallorn 30)*. Ed. Patricia Reynolds and Glen H. GoodKnight. Altadena: Tolkien Society, Mythopoeic Press. 17-20.
- . "A Tribute to Tolkien." Obituary. *The Tablet* 15 September 1973: 879-80.
- Pearce, Joseph. "Narnia and Middle-earth: When Two Worlds Collude." In *Revisiting Narnia: Fantasy, Myth and Religion in C.S. Lewis' Chronicles*. Ed. Shanna Caughey. Dallas: Benbella, 2005. 113-127.
- Resnik, Henry. "An Interview with Tolkien." *Niekas* 18 (Spring 1967): 37-47.
- Rogers, Ivor A., and Deborah Webster Rogers. *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Critical Biography*. New York: Hippocrene Books, 1980.
- Sayer, George. *Jack: C. S. Lewis and His Times*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988.
- . "Recollections of J.R.R. Tolkien." *Proceedings of the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Conference 1992 (Mythlore 80/Mallorn 30)*. Ed. Patricia Reynolds and Glen H. GoodKnight. Milton Keynes and Altadena, CA: Tolkien Society, Mythopoeic Press, 1995. 21-25.
- Seddon, Eric. "Letters to Malcolm and the Trouble with Narnia: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and their 1949 Crisis." *Mythlore* 26.1/2 (#99/100) (Fall/Winter 2007): 61-81.
- Schroeder, Sharin. "Invented, Borrowed, and Mixed Myths in the 'kinds of books we want to read.'" *The Ring Goes Ever On: Proceedings of the Tolkien 2005 Conference: 50 Years of The Lord of the Rings*. Ed. Sarah Wells. 2 vol. Coventry: The Tolkien Society, 2008. 1.22-32.
- Scott, Nan C.L. "Tolkien—Hobbit and Wizard." In *Eglerio! In Praise of Tolkien*, ed. Anne Etkin. Greencastle: Quest Communications, 1978. 77-81.
- Scull, Christian, and Wayne G. Hammond. *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide: Chronology*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- . *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide: Reader's Guide*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- Shippey, Tom. *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.
- . *The Road to Middle-earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology*. Rev. and exp. ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.
- . "Tolkien and the Gawain-poet." *Proceedings of the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Conference 1992 (Mythlore 80/Mallorn 30)*. Ed. Patricia Reynolds and Glen H. GoodKnight. Milton Keynes and Altadena, CA: Tolkien Society, Mythopoeic Press, 1995. 213-219.
- Shippey, Tom, and Verlyn Flieger. "Allegory versus Bounce: Tolkien's *Smith of Wootton Major*." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 12.2 (#46) (2001): 186-200.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. Letter to Eileen Elgar, dated 24 December 1971 (private collection).

- . *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Ed. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- . *The Lord of the Rings*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.
- . *The Lost Road and Other Writings*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: Unwin Hyman, 1987.
- . "On Fairy-Stories." In *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins, 1997. 109-161.
- . *The Return of the Shadow*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988.
- . "Valedictory Address." In *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins, 1997. 224-240.
- . *The War of the Ring*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990.
- Tolkien, Joanna. "Joanna Tolkien Speaks at the Tolkien Society Annual Dinner, Shrewsbury, April 16, 1994." *Digging Potatoes, Growing Trees*, vol. 2. Ed. Helen Armstrong. Telford: The Tolkien Society, 1998. 31-36.
- Unwin, Rayner. *George Allen & Unwin: A Remembrancer*. Ludlow: Merlin Unwin Books, 1999.
- Ward, Michael. *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C.S. Lewis*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.
- West, Richard C. "The Interlace Structure of *The Lord of the Rings*." In *A Tolkien Compass*. Ed. Jared Lobdell. New York: Del Rey, 1980. 82-102.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**JOSH B. LONG** completed his M.A. thesis on *Smith of Wootton Major* at Cal Poly Pomona in 2006 and worked as a research assistant on Diana Pavlac Glyer's book *The Company They Keep* (Kent State, 2007). He has been published in *Mythlore*, *Tolkien Studies*, and co-authored an article for Jason Fisher's *Tolkien and the Study of His Sources* (McFarland, 2011).

