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Abstract

Considers Lewis as a member of a writing group, and its effect on his narrative techniques. Examines Lewis's self-imposition of tight structure when writing for children, and the moments when his story escapes his own rules. Discusses using Lewis in the creative writing classroom.

Additional Keywords

Inklings; Lewis, C.S.—Technique; Lewis, C.S. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*; Lewis, C.S. *The Screwtape Letters*; Lewis, C.S. *Surprised by Joy*; Writing groups; Writing pedagogy

“GOOD, NOT SAFE”:
STRUCTURE VS. CHAOS IN NARNIA
AND THE WRITING WORKSHOP

ETHAN CAMPBELL AND ROBERT JACKSON

NO ONE MORE EAGERLY ANTICIPATED last winter’s release of the blockbuster film *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* than the students at our small Christian liberal arts college in midtown Manhattan. The movie brought into our writing classrooms a renewed interest not only in the children’s novel on which the screenplay is based, but in the entire spectrum of literature by C.S. Lewis, one of the 20th century’s most lucid Christian apologists—a collective excitement comparable to the rekindled passion for J.R.R. Tolkien that accompanied the *Lord of the Rings* films. More than that, however, it gave us faculty members a legitimate excuse to revisit the fantasy world of Narnia, most for the first time since childhood. As college writing professors, we looked to the book for ways to harness newfound student energy in the classroom. But as creative writers ourselves, our second tour of Narnia, more critical and methodical this time around, proved even more fruitful.

The book version of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (*LWW*), first published in 1950, could be viewed as the product of a group that nearly every contemporary fiction writer is intimately familiar with: the writing workshop, in this case the informal writers’ group known as the Inklings. As participants in numerous creative writing workshops ourselves, we have been conditioned to read literature from that particular perspective—not as passive subjects or strictly analytical critics, but as fellow craftsmen. With *LWW*, a workshoped novel that reaches the very peak of craftsmanship in its genre, this form of reading is irresistible.

Every writing workshop shares a few distinctive characteristics. To start on the level of individual sentences, workshop readers almost always prefer specific and tangible language that appeals to all five senses over descriptive passages that are vague or abstract. This preference is so common and assumed, it has birthed its own writerly cliché: “Show, don’t tell.” Workshops also commonly deal with broader issues related to structure, which is a crucial element of any written piece, regardless of how free-form or emotional it might appear. But perhaps the most valuable service a writing workshop can provide is simply a diverse critical audience. The varied reactions of individual workshop

members, who might argue and even contradict one another, serve as a healthy reminder to keep our potential audience in mind at all times—not to speak down to them or over their heads, to be careful not to offend even one’s adversaries, and to strive to build rapport. We might wax poetic about the freedom that fiction or poetry allows, but workshop readers, like profit-conscious editors, usually spend much more time discussing the *limitations* imposed by an audience or market.

All of these basic principles were directly relevant to Lewis as he composed *LWW*. After the novel’s publication and runaway success, Lewis, whose published work to that point consisted of academic literary criticism and adult-level works of didactic religious apologetics, spoke of the limitations he had imposed on himself in writing for children. In his own words, from a 1962 letter to James Higgins:

- a) it imposed a strict limit on vocabulary.
- b) excluded erotic love.
- c) cut down reflective and analytical passages.
- d) led me to produce chapters of nearly equal length for convenience in reading aloud. (qtd. in Higgins)

Lewis’s list of predetermined “rules” for children’s writing—a specific vocabulary, careful consideration of the audience, a limit on didacticism, and concern for underlying structure—sound remarkably similar to the advice one might receive from a contemporary writing workshop. Locating the places in Lewis’s novel that most clearly illustrate his adherence to these strictures can serve as a valuable first step in discerning what the novel can teach us as creative writers.

As important as structural guidelines and self-imposed limitations are, though, we also know from experience that writing is a mysterious and often chaotic process. Finding those places in the same novel where Lewis appears to *lose* control, where his prose unexpectedly breaks free from its predetermined boundaries, might also provide us with inspiration as we strive to master our own hard-to-control voices.

Our analysis of *LWW* can therefore be divided into two distinct sections. First, we will explore Lewis’s structure and concern for audience; then we will look at two places in the story where those concerns get tossed aside and chaos descends—two places, incidentally, that we were disappointed to see downplayed in the film. Our title, “Good, Not Safe,” refers to one of the ways Lewis describes the lion Aslan: as a kingly ruler, he is good, but as a wild animal, he is anything but safe. In the same way, we strive for our own creative work to be “good,” to pay attention to formal constraints in a way that renders it most accessible to our chosen audience; on the other hand, we have no desire to “play

it safe." The most compelling fiction is that which dances on the edge of unpredictability, even danger—and the most courageous fiction writers are those who lean over that edge and leap.

Part 1: Playing by the Rules

Lewis most likely came to recognize the importance of tangible language and a clear structure in his favorite intellectual venue: public readings. As a professor at Oxford, he loved to hear the written word read aloud, and the Inklings—which included other Oxford scholars like J.R.R. Tolkien, Owen Barfield, and Charles Williams—provided a forum for this passion. Lewis's most recent biographer, Alan Jacobs, says that when the group met to share their latest work, "[r]eading aloud was the main thing" (194). For nearly two decades before he ventured into children's writing, Lewis and his colleagues shared stories and essays through oral recitation, discerning the rhythms, tone, and style of the spoken word.

Throughout the composition process for *LWW*, these oral performances must have taken on a special significance for Lewis, with his understanding that, in contrast to a book of criticism or apologetics, much of his young audience would first encounter the story in verbal form. To be performed aloud, a tale for children must take into account its young audience's attention span, while providing reasonable breaks between scenes. In *LWW*, each of the seventeen chapters is neatly packaged at approximately 2,000 words. Given a moderate pace, an adult reader can manage a single chapter in 10–15 minutes—a convenient length for an afternoon story or a child's bedtime ritual. One of us (Robert) has undertaken this exercise with his pre-school children, and found the chapter length ideal.

With this same audience in mind, the plot outline for *LWW* also develops along a fairly straightforward trajectory. Four children, boarding at a house in the country, happen upon a magical wardrobe that transports them to a fantastic land called Narnia. In that world, the children become participants in a dramatic confrontation between good and evil, in which the combatants on both sides are readily distinguished. The climax involves the rightful King of Narnia, Aslan the Lion, who becomes personally involved in the strategy, the battles, and the eventual victory. Throughout all of this, Aslan is aided by the four young protagonists. Finally, a restored Narnia produces a happily-ever-after ending.

The story's momentum depends on a crisis involving the morally weakest member of the four Pevensie children. Edmund, the struggling, resentful middle child, chafes against the other three, as he strives to be his own little man. In his insecurity and his desire for position, he eventually betrays his siblings for a few mouthfuls of candy, a moment of weakness which most members of a child audience can simultaneously understand yet deplore—much as an adult

audience might feel both attracted and repelled by the Judas character in a Passion play.

However, the power of the Narnia books to connect to their audience involves more than just a formulaic outline or a simple plot structure. Lewis also had to adapt the language of his narrator at the level of sentences and paragraphs. As his own “strict limits” show, he believed a narrower range of vocabulary and a simpler syntax were essential to the story. For a professor of literature who specialized in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, writing for 20th-century children was a significant change of pace for his prose, not to mention his lexical stride.

To prepare himself intellectually for the enterprise, Lewis kept imaginative company with other children’s authors. He read the tales of Beatrix Potter, Kenneth Grahame, J.M. Barrie, and others—stories of talking rabbits and toads in motor-cars and Peter Pan, written with common speech and simple descriptions. Jacobs suggests that Lewis may not even have been aware “just how extraordinarily receptive he was to the voices and styles of his favorite writers,” but that “[h]e had an almost unmatched ability to absorb those styles and voices” (200-201). And in every case, his favorite children’s writers, after whom he consciously or unconsciously modeled his own style, were those who presented fantastic events with a matter-of-fact tone. We might even include Tolkien in this list of influences, since *The Hobbit*, read aloud to the Inklings in the 1930s, features a similar narrative voice.

At the same time, Lewis worked from a similarly uncomplicated text within his own imagination. He reported that Narnia’s inspiration was a simple vision of three characters. In his words, “[e]verything began with images: a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, [and] a magnificent lion” (“Sometimes Fairy Stories” 36). Whether these images ultimately find their roots in Lewis’s reading list of classic children’s literature and classical mythology or, as Lewis suggests, in some freestanding archetypal vault within his own mind, the point remains—when it came to fleshing the images out into characters, he gave life to stories with a similar style and tone to those he had studied. In other words, he wrote good children’s literature because he read good children’s literature. Imbibing the spirit of earlier masters in one’s chosen genre might seem an obvious strategy, but it should be well noted by any novice who believes that “original” fiction simply springs from a writer’s imagination *ex nihilo*.

Like Potter and Grahame before him, Lewis took care to relate the images of his imagination to common experiences from childhood, in his case the cottage life of an English village. The house where the magic takes place is comfortably situated, a wonderfully exotic and mysterious setting, “the sort of house that you never seem to come to the end of [...] full of unexpected places” (4). Beginning with the ordinary (a wardrobe), Lewis moves into the

extraordinary (Narnia). On the other side of the wardrobe-divide, the youngest character, Lucy, enters the magical world ahead of her older siblings. Although this is a fantastic tale, Lewis maintains credibility by painting Lucy's first encounter in Narnia with straightforward, unvarnished description. The following passage reveals to the child audience an otherworldly creature:

He was only a little taller than Lucy herself and he carried over his head an umbrella, white with snow. From the waist upwards 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. (8-9)

Lewis presents the characteristics of the Faun with simple language and common body features—goat-shaped legs that were glossy black, a tail, reddish skin, a short beard, curly hair. The objects that surround the fanciful creature are equally accessible—umbrellas, mufflers, and parcels. The narrator also mentions "Christmas shopping," a familiar activity that would have conjured friendly and pleasant experiences, thus endearing the Faun to the reader.

Just as the good Faun is brought to life through simple, concrete description, so the evil characters also become tangible. When the antagonist of the story, the White Witch, makes her dramatic entrance in Chapter 3, she is a sheer force of physical presence. Here the Witch is described in perfect detail:

[She was] a great lady, taller than any woman that Edmund had ever seen. She was covered in white fur up to her throat and held a long straight golden wand in her right hand and wore a golden crown on her head. Her face was white—not merely pale, but white like snow or paper or icing sugar, except for her very red mouth. It was a beautiful face in other respects, but proud and cold and stern. (33-34)

The relative references for height—"taller than any woman that Edmund had ever seen"—and color—"like snow or paper or icing sugar"—make the text instantly readable and recognizable for a child-listener, just as they did with the Faun. The text describes a beautiful woman—a queen, no doubt, given her crown—but the metaphors of snow, paper, and icing also connote a face that is

cold, and blank, and perhaps *too* sweet, even sickly. The language of “proud and cold and stern” also portends an ominous purpose for this character.

Beyond the use of adapted language, *LWW* presents a narrator who consciously speaks to his audience in a friendly and trustworthy manner; he is the reader’s older, wiser guide. Perhaps “Uncle Jack” would be a fitting moniker for the author using this narrative technique, for he makes every effort to win the child’s confidence. He speaks *to* his audience, not down *at* them.

To begin, the narrator openly relishes simple pleasures, something every child can appreciate. When all four children have finally entered Narnia and the Beavers are explaining the current, dramatic state of affairs, Lewis introduces a wonderful scene from a facsimile English cottage in miniature: Mr. Beaver has his beer and pipe, Mrs. Beaver sits by the fire in her rocking chair, and the children indulge themselves in “creamy milk [...] and a great big lump of deep yellow butter” for their potatoes (81). Without excuse, the narrator breaks into this tranquil domestic scene to offer his own opinion, alongside that of his young protagonists: “all the children thought—and I agree with them—that there’s nothing to beat good freshwater fish if you eat it when it has been alive half an hour ago and has come out of the pan half a minute ago” (82). Hardly a concealed narrator.

A more dramatic example of active narration can be found when Aslan is first mentioned. When Mr. Beaver explicitly uses this awesome creature’s name, the narrator reports that “the children felt something jump” in their insides (74). The narrator then turns directly to his audience and further elaborates on the emotional import of this moment:

Perhaps it has sometimes happened to you in a dream that someone says something which you don’t understand but in the dream it feels as if it had some enormous meaning—either a terrifying one which turns the whole dream into a nightmare or else a lovely meaning too lovely to put into words, which makes the dream so beautiful that you remember it all your life and are always wishing you could get into that dream again. It was like that now. (74)

One by one, Uncle Jack enters each child’s head to tell us what he or she thinks and feels at the sound of Aslan’s name—Peter feels brave, Susan hears music, Edmund is horrified, and Lucy feels as if summer vacation is about to begin.

More than a few critics have complained that this narrative device is overwrought and violates the integrity of the story. Roger Sale, for instance, calls this scene “a very cleverly written passage, but [...] false as well,” because Lewis causes child readers to feel anticipation without giving them any further clue about what to anticipate. Sale concludes that “[i]t is set-up language, designed for those children who want to be set up, who enjoy Lewis’s cue-card writing.

[...] This is religion for children, calculated to give just as much awe and wonder as Lewis thinks a child can stand" (82). Many other critics simply find the narrative voice in these types of passages intrusive and unwelcomed, a didactic inclusion to promote an explicitly Christian message.

Even if one disagrees with the novel's religious vision, however, it is also possible to view Lewis's narrative voice positively, as that of a friendly adult who counsels and consoles. Whichever side of the didacticism debate one chooses, it is clear that Lewis seeks in this passage to tap deep emotions, like the deep magic of Narnia, because he believes that visceral emotions are the fount of personhood. Whether he is ultimately successful or not, Lewis makes a genuine attempt here, and elsewhere, to connect to his young audience by touching their hearts. A prime example of such deep pathos can be found in the scene where Susan and Lucy witness Aslan being sacrificially slain on Edmund's behalf:

I hope no one who reads this book has been quite as miserable as Susan and Lucy were that night; but if you have been—if you've been up all night and cried till you have no more tears left in you—you will know that there comes in the end a sort of quietness. (173-74)

Here Lewis's narrative didacticism serves what any critic would concede is a noble purpose, to relate empathetically to his audience. For parents reading to young children, there is something comforting about a narrator who kindly attends to his child-reader. Children themselves often want to know the boundaries between good and evil within a story; they have an innate need to understand its moral order. Thus, providing a clear depiction of that order serves a legitimate psychological need of the child. In that light, Lewis's didactic technique registers as sympathy with children's desire for guidance from an omniscient narrator.

But the critics' complaint is legitimate when didactic instruction disables the story and causes the plot to fail. After all, workshop readers often try to correct the efforts of writers who are all too eager to explain "what's what" and "who's who," either through lengthy exposition or off-putting moral pronouncements. Keeping such outbursts in check must have been especially challenging for Lewis, who was a pugilist by nature. He would as soon spar with a debate opponent as enjoy the fresh fish mentioned earlier. Ralph Wood describes the Oxford don as "a hale and bluff arguier. He engaged his students at Magdalen College with an intellectual fierceness that many of them found forbidding, and he delighted in confronting his debating opponents with rationalist rigor at the Oxford Socratic Club" (315-16). This was a man whose wit was honed by the thrust and parry of debate, for he believed in the power of persuasion, and he used his estimable rhetorical skills to defend his most

cherished beliefs. In publications and lectures, Lewis developed an apologetic approach in defense of what he called “Mere Christianity,” a phrase that became the title of his best-selling book for adults.

What must also have made such self-restraint difficult was that Lewis did not view giving explicit moral direction to readers as necessarily a weakness, even within imaginative works of literature. In his *Preface to Paradise Lost*, a seminal work on Milton, Lewis claims that “when the old poets made some virtue their theme they were not teaching but adoring, and that what we take for the didactic is often the enchanted” (v). In his own life, Lewis was deeply enchanted by the Christian faith, and he could not help but profess, didactically, his adoration of its truth.

His impetus to write for children, however, came from a more unusual source, and required him to adopt a less argumentative approach. In 1947, at a meeting of the Oxford Socratic Club, Lewis found himself face-to-face with a superior philosopher and fellow Christian, Elizabeth Anscombe. He engaged Anscombe in a debate over essential arguments from his book *Miracles*, and while various interpretations surround the event, most observers report that he was soundly defeated. Lewis took up his Narnian project almost immediately after his encounter with Anscombe. Jacobs posits that the debating defeat convinced Lewis of the limits and incompleteness of rational proofs for the Christian faith, and that he perceived that something more was needed to capture the human heart (231-33). A fanciful children’s story, unlike any other mode, provided Lewis with a powerful means for presenting religious truths in a format that could not easily be debated away. And his strict rules for composition—a read-aloud narrative; simplified, tangible language; a limit to exposition and didactic instruction; and the tender rapport of his “Uncle Jack” narrator—all help to package, in a convincing way, Narnia’s simple message of redemptive hope.

Part 2: Harnessing Chaos

All of our talk of structure and limitations is not to say, of course, that every aspect of the writing process can be controlled. We know from experience that the act of translating thoughts into words is by its very nature chaotic. No amount of planning or adherence to rules, prudent as they may be, can wholly keep the mind’s whirlwind in check, for better or worse. Even writers with tightly controlled prose styles can speak of a story taking on a “life of its own” or of becoming “possessed” by characters who seem to act of their own accord. As much as we try to keep in mind all of the formal elements we learn about in a workshop or decide upon in advance, we know that when pen actually touches paper (or fingers strike the computer keyboard), something uncontrollable, almost mystical, starts to happen.

C.S. Lewis might not seem an obvious candidate for an object lesson in the virtues of breaking free from the constraints of structure. After all, as we have just illustrated, Lewis is one of the most "structured" fiction writers in modern memory. His prose is tightly controlled and always considerate of its audience, usually to his advantage. Even Lewis, however, cannot escape the chaos of language. At times, usually in small bursts, his prose finds ways to transcend its self-constructed barriers and achieve a level of freedom and on-the-fly insight that could not have been anticipated. To be more specific, there are moments in the story when Lewis breaks his own four simple rules for writing children's literature—most notably, his ban on eroticism, and with it, any accompanying ban on graphic violence. Whether the admission of such themes was a conscious choice on Lewis's part or not is a matter of debate, but both blood and sex find their way into the novel through a pair of scenes that seem far less controlled than the tight, almost legalistic, scenes that surround them.

The violence in *LWW* is muted, admittedly, despite the fact that the novel's two central climactic events are an execution and a battle between two armies of fantastical creatures. The girls, through whose eyes we witness the moments leading up to Aslan's death, "did not see the actual moment of the killing" because they "couldn't bear to look and had covered their eyes" (170). In the same way, when Lucy arrives at the battle scene, the narrator tells us simply that "Horrible things were happening wherever she looked" (194). These two scenes, at least when viewed from the perspective of the girls, seem intentionally scrubbed clean of any physical description potentially disturbing to a young audience.

One character, however, through whose eyes Lewis seems to have no trouble showing us the true nature of war's bloody reality is Peter. As the elder male in this patriarchal world, he is the only one of the children who is both given a weapon by Father Christmas—a sword—and told that he is expected to use it (118). Peter's first opportunity to use this sword, to rescue his sister Susan from the wolf Maugrim, marks the first moment of overt physical violence in the novel. It is also the most graphic:

Peter did not feel very brave; indeed, he felt he was going to be sick. But that made no difference to what he had to do. He rushed straight up to the monster and aimed a slash of his sword at its side. That stroke never reached the Wolf. Quick as lightning it turned round, its eyes flaming, and its mouth wide open in a howl of anger. If it had not been so angry that it simply had to howl it would have got him by the throat at once. As it was—though all this happened too quickly for Peter to think at all—he had just time to duck down and plunge his sword, as hard as he could, between the brute's forelegs into its heart. Then came a horrible, confused moment like something in a nightmare. He was tugging and pulling and

the Wolf seemed neither alive nor dead, and its bared teeth knocked against his forehead, and everything was blood and heat and hair. A moment later he found that the monster lay dead and he had drawn his sword out of it and was straightening his back and rubbing the sweat off his face and out of his eyes. He felt tired all over. (144)

The scene flashes past the reader, as it does for Peter, “quick as lightning”; we might wonder if it moved as quickly for Lewis as he sketched it at his writing desk. In spite of the somewhat overdetermined nature of the Christian allegory at this point—a leader named Peter (the Church) is using a sword (the Word of God) to slay a wolf (heretics, or false teachers, or Satan himself)—the moment does manage to achieve a *frisson* at its start, a thrill of uncertainty about the battle’s outcome when the “stroke never reached the Wolf,” and the potential that the beast could take Peter “by the throat” emerges suddenly, unexpectedly, as a real possibility.

The truly unexpected, almost shocking part of this passage, however—and there is no reason to suspect it was any less surprising for Lewis in the heat of composition than it is for us—is the “horrible, confused moment” between the sword’s plunge and the beast’s eventual death. The “moment” is one of genuine supernatural horror, as the wolf morphs into a creature “neither alive nor dead.” In this instant, the wolf becomes what we might have suspected he was all along, from the moment he opened his mouth to speak “in a growling voice” to Edmund (105). He is a *werewolf*, half-man, half-animal, dwelling somewhere in the region between life and death. Even in his undead state, his slack jaws threaten to do damage, and his presence fills the entire world of Peter’s perspective with “blood and heat and hair.” Like the ever-advancing creature of a child’s nightmare, the wolf for this brief second is the ultimate figure of terror, relentless and impossible to kill. The scene has stayed with both of us, years after our childhood reading, because Lewis taps into an emotion that runs deeper than anything that his allegorical structure or direct discourse with the audience could ever achieve on its own—an emotion at once violently sexual (Peter’s sword “plunges” into “blood and heat and hair”; he withdraws exhausted and covered with sweat) and archetypally horrific.

After the Wolf has been declared dead, the friendly narrator returns almost immediately, to reassert his control over the narrative and comfort the characters and us:

Then, after a bit, Susan came down the tree. She and Peter felt pretty shaky when they met and I won’t say there wasn’t kissing and crying on both sides. But in Narnia no one thinks any the worse of you for that. (144-45)

It is okay to cry, the kind uncle tells us, especially after performing a difficult duty. It might also be helpful for recovering from such an unbounded creative outburst as that which laid the wolf low. The same authorial hand that lost control, just long enough for us to feel genuine fear and doubt, now comforts us in our emotional restoration. (As a side note, the film version all but deletes this scene, a decision no doubt based on the desire to preserve a PG rating, but one that renders Aslan's command afterward for Peter to "clean your sword" essentially meaningless.)

The only other scene that achieves a similar level of graphic violence is one that Lewis more carefully sets boundaries around—Aslan's execution. As we have already mentioned, the two girl witnesses cover their eyes at "the actual moment of the killing," but the directly described scene of mockery and torment leading up to it is perhaps equally traumatic, just as Christ's torture and insults at the hands of Roman soldiers is perhaps more memorable than the "actual moment" of his death.

These executioners, however, are no soldiers, and their taunts are not the offhand cruelties of ordinary human oppressors. They are the physical embodiment of evil itself. The narrator seems to relish the opportunity to describe them to us:

But such people! Ogres with monstrous teeth, and wolves, and bull-headed men; spirits of evil trees and poisonous plants; and other creatures whom I won't describe because if I did the grown-ups would probably not let you read this book—Cruels and Hags and Incubuses, Wraiths, Horrors, Efreets, Sprites, Orknies, Wooses, and Ettins. In fact here were all those who were on the Witch's side and whom the Wolf had summoned at her command. And right in the middle, standing by the Table, was the Witch herself. (165)

The narrator is ultimately more conscious of his audience here than he appears to be during Peter's wolf-slaying scene. As critic Glen Mynott puts it, he "cleverly reinforces his relationship with the child reader by presenting himself as one of them, someone who would tell them more if he were permitted" (43). But what is most striking about this descriptive passage is the laundry list of proper names, scary-sounding creatures from Greek, Roman, Arabic, Saxon, and English mythology. Surely the narrator does not intend his child audience, conscious of them as he is, to recognize, let alone tease out the significance, of all of these allusions. In fact, we *know* he does not, since two of the creatures (Orknies and Wooses) come from no tradition at all besides Lewis's imagination.

But the child reader's ignorance of these signifiers may be precisely the point. Lewis here is flagrantly breaking the first, and perhaps most important, of his four predetermined rules for children's literature—he is using a vocabulary

beyond the reach of his audience. The move is so blatant, however, that it must be intentional. From a storyteller's perspective, two main desirable effects may be reached from such a strategy of keeping readers in the dark. First, it increases the level of mystery and potential horror. As the vaguely menacing, foreign words wash over us, punctuated by a few that are recognizable in other contexts as signals for terror or pain—"cruel," "hag," "horror"—a sense of mystical foreboding and then panic creeps up, as it did earlier when the Wolf straddled the border between life and death. Lewis even reminds us at the end of the list that these creatures are related to the were-Wolf, his supernatural cousins—though now dead, Maugrim is the one who has "summoned" them into our vision. The second effect of the mysterious names is that they allow Lewis to insert another hint of perverse sexuality. In the middle of the list of creatures come Incubuses, the demons who, according to Thomas Aquinas and other medieval theologians, could briefly assume corporal form to rape and impregnate women in their sleep.

This is not the first time Lewis has used sexual allusions that he expects his child readers to miss. In the aforementioned scene of Lucy's first meeting with Mr. Tumnus, the narrator describes Tumnus as a manlike creature with a goat's legs and hoofs (8). An adult reader familiar with Roman mythology might recognize this creature as a satyr, the sexually playful and devious goat-man who often stands as a symbol for unbridled masculinity in works such as Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. As soon as the thought crosses our mind, however, the omniscient narrator yanks us out of Lucy's perspective and informs us that "He was a Faun" (9). He is the Greek, not the Roman, version of the goat-man, one that is scrubbed clean of sexual innuendo. The shift from potential satyr to faun might also signal a shift away from our adult suspicions toward a grown man approaching a little girl alone in the woods—he changes from potential pedophile to kindly neighbor.

Another sexually charged reference that children are likely to miss is the description of the White Witch's ancestry. Mr. Beaver tells the children that she comes from "your father Adam's first wife, she they called Lilith. And she was one of the Jinn. That's what she comes from on one side. And on the other she comes of the giants" (88). Lilith is a relatively obscure figure from Jewish apocryphal mythology, but she played a major role in medieval cosmology as the queen of the demons, who was banished from the Garden of Eden after proposing to Adam that she take the masculine top position during intercourse (Graves 65-69). The Jinn, to whom Mr. Beaver says she is related, are demon-gods of the Muslim tradition, connected to an exotic culture often imagined by medieval European writers as overly sensual. And the "giants" on the other side of the Witch's family tree are most likely a reference to the "men of renown" in Genesis 6:4, the offspring of women and demons—in other words, Incubuses.

Though Mr. Beaver concludes his description by saying that "there isn't a drop of real human blood in the Witch" (88), her origins are bound up at every turn with a very human, deviant sexuality.

Even so, Lewis does not break away from his stated strictures against eroticism in these passages, since the allusions presumably pass far over the heads of his child audience. Parents reading the book aloud to their children might catch these references, but they are far less likely to be confused or disturbed by them, as long as they feel certain that their children do not "get it." In fact, these submerged connections to more mature themes might serve to make the reading experience richer and more complex for adult readers. By hinting that there is another, more "real" story behind the story actually being told, one which must be censored for children, the narrator also whets the child reader's appetite for more substantial literary fare. Lewis clearly articulated the supposed boundaries of his writing for children, but he also found inspiration from the fantasy writer George Macdonald, who said that he did not "write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five" (426).

Throughout most of the book, though, Lewis is scrupulously attentive, almost paranoid, about removing any hint of sexuality from the child characters. The Witch and Mr. Tumnus are one thing—they are, after all, two of the three characters, along with Aslan himself, whose images inspired Lewis in the very earliest stages of the project. As such, we might view them as the characters who most clearly take on "lives of their own," who fall the furthest outside of Lewis's ordering scheme. The four innocent, pre-pubescent children, however, are another matter. They are later additions, layered on top of the archetypal story—self-consciously English, civilized, Christian. Their young bodies are so pure, the narrator rarely feels the need to describe them physically; they desire nothing more sensual than a piece of Turkish delight or cup of hot tea. Even at the end of the novel, when they become rulers of Narnia and an unspecified number of years carries them, presumably, through puberty, Lewis avoids describing their adult bodies in anything but the most general terms. He tells us vaguely that "they themselves grew and changed"; Peter is "tall and deep-chested" and Susan is "tall and gracious" (201). Kings and princes from foreign lands, we are told, seek Susan and Lucy's hands in marriage, but we hear nothing more of these exotic unnamed suitors, let alone whether our indefinitely aged heroines desire or accept their proposals. No matter, since literally a page later, all four monarchs are vaulted back through the wardrobe, morphed back into children once more, and any sexual maturity they might have achieved is instantly erased.

It is ironic, then, considering Lewis's careful attention to these sorts of details, that the most overtly erotic moment in the novel—Susan and Lucy's romp through Narnia with the resurrected Aslan (another scene trimmed to near non-existence in the film)—involves these same children. The difference is that

this scene also involves Aslan, the third of Lewis's trio of originary, "untamed" characters. When Aslan steps into a scene, literally anything might happen, Lewis's innocent intentions or the "rules" of children's literature or Christian allegory notwithstanding. Were it not that Aslan is a lion and that he repeatedly calls the girls "children," it might be difficult to imagine the following paragraph is intended for a young audience:

"Oh, children," said the Lion, "I feel my strength coming back to me. Oh, children, catch me if you can!" He stood for a second, his eyes very bright, his limbs quivering, lashing himself with his tail. Then he made a leap high over their heads and landed on the other side of the Table. Laughing, though she didn't know why, Lucy scrambled over it to reach him. Aslan leaped again. A mad chase began. Round and round the hill-top he led them, now hopelessly out of their reach, now letting them almost catch his tail, now diving between them, now tossing them in the air with his huge and beautifully velvety paws and catching them again, and now stopping unexpectedly so that all three of them rolled over together in a happy laughing heap of fur and arms and legs. It was such a romp as no one has ever had except in Namia, and whether it was more like playing with a thunderstorm or playing with a kitten Lucy could never make up her mind. And funny thing was that when all three finally lay together panting in the sun the girls no longer felt in the least tired or hungry or thirsty. (179-80)

The prose here feels more unbounded than it does at any other point, free of any constraints. Here Lewis clearly ignores, or at least loosens up, his own ban on erotic imagery—limbs quiver, bodies roll over in laughing heaps, and afterward everyone pants in the sun, refreshed. The experience is both fearsome ("a thunderstorm") and delightful ("a kitten"). It might be painful, if not for Aslan's "velvety paws," but when it is all over, two pages later, the girls find themselves "breathless and unhurt" (182). It would be absurd to think that Lewis did not notice this breach in propriety, since he was reportedly watching out for it, but it is fair to suggest that he did not anticipate it at the time of composition—perhaps it caught him, as it does us, by surprise.

After the first paragraph of romping, Aslan roars in triumph, then the girls go for a ride on his back. At this point, the kindly, audience-conscious narrator returns in an attempt to ground the wild descriptions in something more recognizable and tame. After only a few lines, however, he gives up, and once again joyous chaos reigns:

Have you ever had a gallop on a horse? Think of that; and then take away the heavy noise of the hoofs and the jingle of the harness and imagine

instead the almost noiseless padding of the great paws. Then imagine instead of the black or gray or chestnut back of the horse the soft roughness of golden fur, and the mane flying back in the wind. And then imagine you are going about twice as fast as the fastest racehorse. But this is a mount that doesn't need to be guided and never grows tired. He rushes on and on, never missing his footing, never hesitating, threading his way with perfect skill between tree-trunks, jumping over bush and briar and the smaller streams, wading the larger, swimming the largest of all. And you are riding not on a road nor in a park nor even on the downs but right across Narnia, in spring, down solemn avenues of beech and across sunny glades of oak, through wild orchards of snow-white cherry trees, past roaring waterfalls and mossy rocks and echoing caverns, up windy slopes alight with gorse bushes and across the shoulders of heathery mountains and along giddy ridges and down, down, down again into wild valleys and out into acres of blue flowers. (179-81)

The horse metaphor works well for a few lines—at least, it would for middle-class English children with experience riding horses—but as the differences compound and the comparison grows more and more unlikely, the metaphor collapses, and Narnia appears before us in its purest form. It, too, is similar to England, but an idealized England; all of its most wonderful parts, all at once. The world in this scene is no longer a product, if it ever was, of Lewis's intellect, but a paradisaic fantasy driven by deep emotional impulses, as his pen rushes "down, down, down" into a subconscious he can hardly anticipate, let alone control.

With the mention of Lewis's "subconscious," we want to make clear at this point that we are not attempting a psychoanalytic reading of *LWW*. While we would agree with Freudian and Lacanian critics in a very broad sense that writers often tap into subconscious emotions and impulses, and that they are not always fully aware of those impulses even after they have manifested themselves on the page, we are not attempting to explain in any precise way how Lewis's work reveals specific information about his childhood or sexual history, or to make a diagnosis of his mental or emotional state. From our standpoint as creative writers, we simply wish to show that the act of writing, for Lewis as much as for any writer, involves forays into parts of the mind that the writer himself often has little understanding of or control over.

When exploring this scene as part of a writing workshop, however, it is also important to recognize that this moment of freedom and playfulness does not simply appear out of the textual blue. It actually relies a great deal on the rigid structuring that precedes and frames it. It is perhaps also ironic, though understandable from a writer's standpoint, that this most creative and

memorable scene immediately follows two chapters of the story's most carefully plotted, expository scenes.

After Aslan rescues the traitor Edmund and gives him an offstage talking-to, the Lion enters into a lengthy negotiation process with the Witch to determine how the justice established by Aslan's father, the Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea, can be satisfied now that Edmund has switched sides. The legal wrangling that ensues spans several pages, some of which we hear through direct dialogue and much that we do not. The Emperor's ancient, arcane laws regarding treachery resonate strongly with the Old Testament concept of blood-guilt and the Christian doctrine of substitutionary atonement—after an act of treachery, the Witch must exercise her “right to a kill” (155) and execute either the traitor or an innocent victim, just as the Biblical God's wrath must fall on the sinner or a sacrificial animal. More to the point, though, the explanation of these laws and the debate that follows bring the momentum of the novel's plot to an abrupt standstill, even as the narrator tries to keep a healthy mix of speakers in the dialogue and interject physical descriptions.

For all of the exposition in these chapters, though, the legal debate does not ultimately work as a Christian allegory, or even carry any consequences. This fact deeply disturbs the Anglican critic Howard Worsley, who sees it as ethically problematic that good defeats evil in *LWW* through what he calls “a hook and bait” scheme (155). Aslan defeats the Witch not through his superior power or careful legal reasoning, but through an act of deception—he knows of an even more ancient law, “deeper magic from before the dawn of time” (171), which supersedes all of the laws they have just been debating.

So all is rendered moot in the end by Aslan's rise from the dead, but it seems that Lewis considered this preparatory legal material necessary to get us there. Just as Christ's sacrificial death makes little sense apart from the laws that call for blood sacrifice, so Lewis may have felt that Aslan's substitution for Edmund needed a uniquely Narnian theological justification. Even after Aslan rises, he is not immediately free. First, he is compelled to spend at least a page explaining to the astonished girls what has just happened. “It is more magic,” he says at the start, as if to warn us of further exposition ahead. The last sentence of his elucidation comes out in one long, drawn-out breath—“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 backward”—and we can almost hear him catch his breath in relief with the next incomplete thought: “And now—” (179). The explanations, at last, are over. Lucy jumps up in excitement, with us, and the romp begins.

Lewis's pre-set limitations help him in other ways to reach this limitless point. For example, his resolution to “cut down reflective and analytical passages” helps him immensely here, in that it pushes the story forward in ways

it might not have otherwise. Aslan's discussion with the girls is essentially a reflective analysis on the mysteries of bodily resurrection, part and parcel with the preceding chapters, but Lewis, perhaps with his rules in mind, knows he must end it and keep the story moving. The advance decision to limit exposition—whether ultimately successful or not—does at least nudge the prose in the direction of creativity and emotion. Even the uniform chapter lengths allow for freedom in this case. After taking eight pages to raise Aslan from the dead and explain how it happened, Lewis is left with two or three pages with no plot points to accomplish besides getting Aslan and the girls to the Witch's castle. What better way than with a prose poem that sings the childlike joy of life and covers the entire landscape of Narnia? What better exclamation point to the hero's resurrection than a messy, freewritten passage that dances on the edge of Lewis's subconscious and slips yearningly into our collective fantasies of heaven?

The risk, and the pleasure, of writing creatively, is that in those moments when the borders suddenly dissolve and a writer connects with his truest self in his most honest voice, no one, not even a didactic scholar as venerable as C.S. Lewis, can predict what will come out. Sometimes, because we are creatures with animal-like desires and fears—a point Lewis would concede as a Christian apologist—it is violence, horror, perversion. At other times, because we are also creatures who yearn for the divine, what comes out is wild, inspired beauty.

Conclusion

So where do we go from here, after combing through this work of children's fiction for inspiration? One obvious region to explore alongside Narnia is Lewis's imaginative work for adults—and in particular, those places where his prose breaks free of its structural bonds and makes unexpected moves. Though most of Lewis's work is, like *LWW*, rigidly structured and the voice tightly controlled, moments of temporary chaos are surprisingly plentiful in his adult-centered fiction.

For example, in *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis takes on the voice of a devil who corresponds with a younger demon, and his diabolical messages, read ironically, become a well-organized Christian apology. At a few moments in the text, however, Lewis's otherwise flat narrator begins to sound like a *real* devil, so wrapped up in his petty concerns and emotions that his work as a cardboard apologist gets shunted aside. In one self-consciously out-of-control letter, Screwtape describes a Christian girl with a breathless string of insults that rivals Falstaff in its ridiculous ferocity:

Not only a Christian but such a Christian—a vile, sneaking, simpering, demure, monosyllabic, mouse-like, watery, insignificant, virginal, bread-

and-butter miss! The little brute! She makes me vomit. She stinks and scalds through the very pages of the dossier. It drives me mad, the way the world has worsened. We'd have had her to the arena in the old days. That's what her sort is made for. Not that she'd do much good there, either. A two-faced little cheat (I know the sort) who looks as if she'd faint at the sight of blood, and then dies with a smile. A cheat every way. Looks as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, and yet has a satirical wit. The sort of creature who'd find *ME* funny! Filthy, insipid little prude—and yet ready to fall into this booby's arms like any other breeding animal. (117-18)

The passage uses a clever sort of reverse psychology—Lewis intends for every insult from *Screwtape* to be read as a compliment to the girl's Christian character—but the tirade continues for so long, we might wonder how controlled the narrator's voice truly is. Lewis obviously has fun pushing *Screwtape* over the top here, but the passage expresses such unrelenting misogyny (with female-specific insults like "mouse-like" and "virginal"), sadism (with the reference to lions in the arena, and the girl "dying with a smile"), and distaste for reproductive sexuality (the girl is a "breeding animal," her male lover a "booby"), perhaps he has tapped inadvertently into a much darker fantasy of hell than the one he started with, one that does not obey the rules of structured apologetics quite so readily.

Lewis himself seems to realize that he has crossed a boundary with this monologue that cannot be recrossed without either fracturing the character or disturbing the story's fantasy. So after a few more lines, he breaks off abruptly, mid-sentence, and *Screwtape* returns only after a space break to confess: "In the heat of composition, I find that I have inadvertently allowed myself to assume the form of a large centipede" (120). Devils, apparently, can lose control in the "heat of composition" as easily as human writers can.

To use another example, in a notable and oft-quoted passage from *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis attempts to downplay his service in the Great War with a parenthetical dismissal, but in the very act of explaining it away, he reveals the profound influence the War continues to have on him emotionally:

But for the rest, the war—the frights, the cold, the smell of H.E. [High Explosive], the horribly smashed men still moving like half-crushed beetles, the sitting or standing corpses, the landscape of sheer earth without a blade of grass, the boots worn day and night until they seemed to grow to your feet—all this shows rarely and faintly in memory. (194)

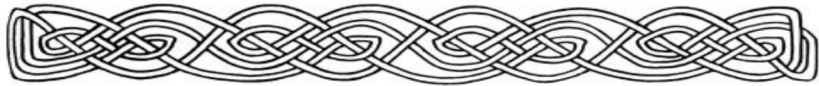
Lewis's uncontrolled dive into the subconscious between those em dashes, with a series of painfully tangible images, is bracketed by a dismissal that becomes

more absurd the longer the middle section stretches on. But his final statement is not ironic. He catches himself falling and attempts to restore order, with a summary phrase, "all this," and a pair of abstract adverbs, "rarely and faintly," a rhetorical move that looks, in miniature, strikingly similar to the moves he makes in Peter's wolf-slaying and Susan and Lucy's romp scenes.

Our goal in searching for such moments throughout Lewis's works is not to "catch" him expressing sentiments contrary to Christian beliefs, or to psychoanalyze him, or to give his stories clever alternate interpretations. Rather, we hope that looking to the uncontrolled and chaotic in Lewis's work will ultimately help us to recognize such moments of creative chaos in our own. Recognizing and controlling are not the same thing, of course, but simply learning to locate moments of boundlessness, and to surrender to them, knowing that the attempt to harness chaos is largely futile, may be an important step toward making our writing more inspired.

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