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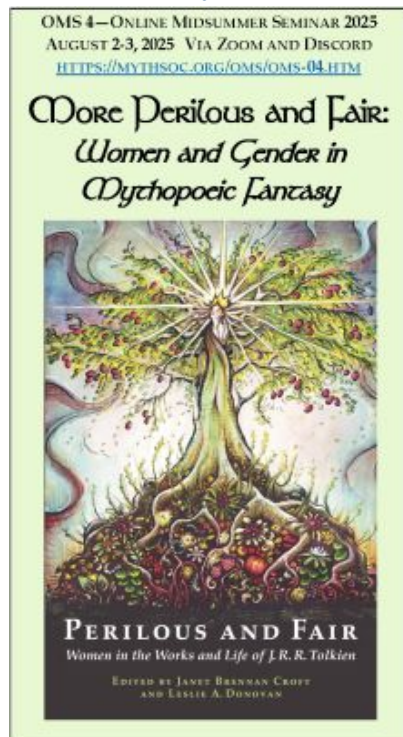
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Girls in Narnia: Hindered or Human?

Abstract

Asks if five heroines in the Chronicles of Narnia: remain “characters worthy of imitation” by girls or are “rendered obsolete and impotent by cultural stereotyping.” Despite occasional sexist references, the female characters are not stereotyped.

Additional Keywords

Girls in fantasy; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Aravis; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Jill Pole; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Lucy Pevensie; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Polly Plummer; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Susan Pevensie; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Women; Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia

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Girls in Narnia: Hindered or Human?

Karla Faust Jones

"That's all you know," said Digory. "It's because you're a girl. Girls never want to know anything but gossip and rot about people getting engaged." [1]

Are girls human [2] in Narnia or are they 'girls,' limited by cultural stereotypes carried in from the Primary World like their clothes? Does Digory's assault against his companion Polly in The Magician's Nephew represent an underlying prejudice against females which pervades C.S. Lewis' The Chronicles of Narnia and severely hinders the relevance of his heroines? The importance of these questions should not be overlooked in any form of children's literature; however, the popularity of the Narnia books targets them for particular concern.

Few Christian books for children merit the international recognition given to the Narnian Chronicles: The Last Battle fully deserved the Carnegie Medal it received. The Narnian books deal with the significant issue of sin and redemption, of the need for valour in the struggle against evil, and of the difficulty in combatting hypocrisy. Therefore, it matters that young girls see Mrs. Beaver in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe commended for her prissy domesticity, while the leadership roles are given to the Pevensie boys. [3]

Lewis presents five female heroines in The Chronicles: Lucy, Susan, Aravis, Jill, and Polly. Although other non-human female characters appear (Mrs. Beaver, the Witches), it is the girls readers readily identify with and whose stereotyping would be most damaging. Do these young heroines, conceived by Lewis between 1939 and 1954 [4], remain in the 1980s as characters worthy of imitation or have they been rendered obsolete and impotent by cultural stereotyping? In the following sections, each of these characters is individually examined in an attempt to answer this question.

LUCY PEVENSIE

Lucy is the central character in The Chronicles and, according to Ford (p. 192), is the best developed of all, appearing in four of the seven books, alternately as a child, an adolescent, and a woman. She is introduced in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe as an 8-year-old, the youngest of four siblings, and is last encountered in The Last Battle at the age of 17. During her adventures in Narnia, where chronology does not parallel that of England, she reaches the age of 22. (Lewis originally intended to showcase Peter, Lucy's oldest brother, as the main character in The Chronicles. Perhaps his contact with several little girls from London evacuated to his home during World War II favorably turned his thinking toward girls and led to the substitution of Lucy for Peter.) [5]

Lewis' intention in the Narnian stories is to reveal the character of Christ through the activities of the lion Christ of Narnia, Aslan. Lucy's primary importance in the books is well established, since

she is the medium through which Aslan is best known. She becomes his dearest and the one closest to his heart. Lucy's love and obedience to Aslan grow and are strengthened throughout The Chronicles, demonstrated in words and actions. She is the only one of the children to detect Aslan's sadness following his initial resolve to die for Edmund [6]. She remains faithful to him through his torture and after his death. Her faithfulness is tested, however, in Prince Caspian, when she alone sees Aslan and fails to convince the other children to follow him. Moreover, she herself succumbs to peer pressure and does not follow. Aslan reprimands her for her weakness, but brings her to a turning point where he reestablishes her as a spiritual power, "Now you are a lioness," said Aslan. "And Now all Narnia will be renewed." [7]

The others realize Lucy's place near Aslan's heart. In The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, Edmund describes Aslan to Eustace and adds, "We've all seen him. Lucy sees him most often." [8] When the Dawn Treader founders near the Dark Island, it is Lucy's prayer which brings Aslan to the ship's aid. Repeatedly, Aslan refers to Lucy as "dear heart" and "dearest." It is fitting that in The Last Battle it is Lucy who openly reveals Aslan's true identity and is the last to speak to him [9].

Lucy's spiritual growth is paralleled by her physical and emotional maturity. Early in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, she is the baby of the family, crying and sulking when her stories about the wardrobe are disbelieved. Once in Narnia, however, she increases in bravery and independence. She takes charge of the others and proves a good leader (TLWW, p. 54). She exerts herself on behalf of her captured friend, Mr. Tumnus, and convinces the children to embark on a potentially dangerous rescue. No longer the crybaby, she is respected and trusted for her wisdom and good judgment.

Lucy's ability to be brave and strong is challenged by Father Christmas, who provides her with special gifts, a glass bottle containing a healing cordial and a small dagger. He cautions her that the dagger is strictly for defense, and she is not to fight in the upcoming battle. "Why, Sir... I think—I don't know—but I think I could be brave enough," she argues with him, in an attempt to exert her equality. "That is not the point," he said. "But battles are ugly when women fight" (TLWW, p. 105). This sexist remark is disturbing; however, Lewis could be likening Father Christmas to the secularization of Christianity, which, like the shopping-mall culture in which it occurs, places limitations on women which are not ordained by God. For later, when Lucy rides on Aslan's back to the battle in question, Aslan places no restriction on her and, in fact, rides her into the thick of the fighting, where "Horrible things were happening wherever she looked" (TLWW, p. 174).

As a Queen of Narnia, Lucy is known as The Valiant for her acts of bravery. Lewis gives a glimpse of her valor in The Horse and His Boy, where she is described as riding into battle with the archers, attired in a helmet and mail shirt [10]. In giving



Lucy

her this title, Lewis flouts the traditional connection between men and valor, demonstrated by Webster's definition: "strength of mind or spirit that enables a man to encounter danger with firmness." [11]

SUSAN PEVENSTIE

Susan, Lucy's older sister, is unique among Narnia's heroines in that she is the only one Lewis excludes from Aslan's Country (heaven) at the end of The Chronicles. In The Last Battle, the reason given is that she's no longer interested in Narnia because, as an adult (22 by English time), she's too keen on being grown up and is only interested in nylons, lipstick, and invitations (TLB, p. 135). From the beginning of The Chronicles, when Susan is introduced at the age of 12, however, there are harbingers of her future rift with Narnia. She is presented as sensible and practical, the older sister with a tendency to talk like a grown-up. She is noticeably concerned with comfort, complaining of hunger and cold (TLWW, p. 62) and is the only one of the children who, once in Narnia, repeatedly expresses the desire to go home (TLWW, pp. 56, 61, 79). She is concerned about appearances in the real world and is embarrassed to carry away any part of Narnia to it. "Nice fools we'd look on the platform of an English station in these," she says as the children prepare to leave Narnia in their Narnian clothes (PC, p. 214).

Susan does express genuine affection for Aslan early in The Chronicles, yet she is prevented from a deep relationship with him by her fear--she worries that he will leave the children to the mercy of his enemy, the White Witch, and is afraid to turn around when the stone table cracks (Ford, p. 279). In Prince Caspian, when Lucy tries to convince the others that she has seen Aslan and they need to follow him, it is Susan who gives the most resistance and threatens to prevent the others from following. When Aslan becomes visible, she admits that, deep down, she really did suspect he was there but wouldn't let herself believe. In fact, when the children meet Aslan for the first time, Susan is afraid to meet him and shames Peter into going first.

Susan's character as an active adventurer is not inhibited by her fears or her femaleness. She is given a bow and arrows by Father Christmas and emerges as an athlete in Prince Caspian. She is described as a prize-winning swimmer. In a shooting contest between her and Trumpinkin the Dwarf, "a famous bowman among his people" (PC, p. 101), Susan is the victor and earlier saves him from his would-be executioners through her skill as an archer.

Susan is last presented in The Chronicles in The Horse and His Boy as a 26-year-old woman of great beauty. Although, like Lucy, her options have remained open and she is free to pursue the adventurous life, she has chosen to deny her talents and adopt a more sedentary life. "Queen Susan is more like an ordinary grown-up lady. She doesn't ride to the wars, though she is an excellent archer" (THHB, p. 176). This reference to an ordinary grown-up lady, which at first appears sexist, is perhaps a simple observation of fact. Although women were permitted to fight in battle, it was not common for ordinary (as opposed to noble) women to do so. There are hints that Susan has turned her interests inward, and her vanity has led her to toy with the affections of the Calormene prince, Rabadash, the consequences of which endanger her life as well as the lives of all Narnians. Susan admits it was her folly to have shown Rabadash "so much favour" (THHB, p. 61).

In Susan, Lewis presents a self-limiting character. One with potential and freedom to develop, but whose limited vision has prevented her from enjoying the fullness of life Aslan intends for her. Her inability to relinquish the claims of the Primary World divide her attention in Narnia and diffuse the energy she needs to discover its deeper secrets. She never develops the attachment to Narnia and Aslan the others do and cannot sustain her devotion to the end. The reference to Susan's preoccupation with lipstick and nylons is not an attempt to identify her with female frivolity, but to represent attractions of the real world which are grossly incongruous with Narnian life. Instead of making a general statement about women, Lewis is using Susan to demonstrate the "hesi-

Susan



tant convert," lured away from Christianity by worldly conventions of the time. Her defection is a question of loyalty, irrespective of age or sex, reminiscent of the rich young ruler of The New Testament (Matthew 19), who, although acquainted with Christ and interested in his kingdom, was too concerned with wealth to make the final commitment.

ARAVIS

Aravis, a girl in her early teens, is the most unconventional of Lewis' young heroines, for she exists in a totally different culture and does not enter Narnia from the Primary World. She has grown up the only daughter of a noble family of Calormen, the rival kingdom of Narnia, which resembles the land of the Arabian Nights. She is introduced in the story as a fugitive, fleeing to Narnia to avoid a forced marriage with an older man she despises. She is mail-clad, carrying a sword, and riding expertly. Aravis joins up with young Shasta, a boy roughly her age, who is also traveling to Narnia to escape the cruelty of his adopted Calormene father. Their relationship is one of forced tolerance--Shasta regards girls with disdain, and Aravis considers him low class.

Lewis uses the relationship between Aravis and Shasta to demonstrate the negative effects of cultural stereotyping on perception. Aravis and Shasta first meet enroute from Calormen, but Aravis is disguised. Shasta assumes she is a Tarkaan, a Calormene great lord, and is reluctant for an encounter. When she speaks, however, Shasta exclaims, "Why its only a girl" (THHB, p. 28). The fierce, sword-wielding rider he initially feared is instantly rendered powerless by his discovery she's a girl--not because of anything she's done, but simply because Shasta is bound by the culture in which he was raised and is unable to judge Aravis objectively.

As they leave Calormen, where women are forced to marry against their will and are compensated with luxuries and leisure, and approach Narnia, where false restrictions based on sex are scorned and women are free to behave as they please, however, the rela-

Aravis



Jill

tionship between Shasta and Aravis evolves into one of mutual respect. By the time they reach Narnia, Shasta grudgingly admits admiration for Aravis' efficiency, loyalty, bravery, and superb riding. Aravis, however, has to be shown the folly of her superior attitude toward Shasta by Aslan, who anonymously attacks her while she is on horseback and rips her back with his claws. Shasta bravely faces the lion and "scares" it away, thereby rescuing Aravis and humbling her into admitting her arrogance. Separated following this event, both children meet Aslan individually, learn to love him, and confess their faults. When they are reunited, Shasta and Aravis meet as equal citizens of Narnia, free of their Calormene prejudices.

Lewis' admiration for Aravis is magnified when he contrasts her with Lasaraleen, a silly, pampered, childhood friend, who embodies the female stereotype of Calormen. Lasaraleen's preoccupation with clothes, parties, and gossip nearly drives Aravis mad and strengthens her resolve to go to Narnia, where she would rather be a nobody, just like Shasta (THHB, p. 99). Aravis has seen the life Calormene women are forced to accept, but she refuses to yield. It may be fine for Lasaraleen, but not for her. By contrasting Aravis and Lasaraleen thus, Lewis makes a definitive statement in support of a woman's right to develop according to her talents and desires instead of along culturally defined pathways.

One glaring inconsistency in Lewis' portrayal of Aravis, however, appears when she meets Lucy near the end of the story. They form an immediate liking for one another and "soon went away together to talk about Aravis's bedroom and Aravis's boudoir and about getting clothes for her, and all the sort of things girls talk about on such an occasion" (THHB, p. 205). Lewis succumbs to stereotypic images here, betraying the character of Aravis, who earlier rejected just such conversation with Lasaraleen. This portrayal of Aravis is so incongruous with her total character development that it can be considered inconsequential.

JILL POLE

Jill appears in two of The Chronicles: in The Silver Chair as a 9-year-old, and in The Last Battle as a 16-year-old. In both she is paired with Eustace Scrubb and is the only female heroine given a male companion of her own age. She is the scrappiest of the girls, vying openly with Eustace from the beginning of their adventures together. As products of the same "progressive" education, Jill and Eustace are evenly matched. He calls her Pole, and she calls him Scrubb. Their conversations resemble sparring matches, replete with "Oh shut up" and "Oh dry up," dealt by both in equal measure.

In The Silver Chair, Jill is appointed by Aslan as the leader, tasked with seeking the lost Prince Rilian and entrusted with the clues to his whereabouts. Throughout the story, Jill shows great resolve, persevering with her mission despite fear and failure. Although Jill is prone to fear, Lewis carefully balances her fears with those of Eustace. When Jill and Eustace prepare to enter the land of the giants, Jill is afraid but is consoled by the sight of Eustace's green face. "He's in a worse funk than I am." [12] Lewis thereby avoids any association between fear and females.

In The Last Battle, where Jill, Eustace, and Prince Tirian engage in physical combat to save Narnia, Jill emerges as a truly courageous character. Equipped with a bow, which she has learned to shoot with skill, she fights beside the males and kills several of the enemy. No other Narnian heroine kills in battle. Facing death, Jill heroically declares, "I'd rather be killed fighting for Narnia than grow old and stupid at home and perhaps go about in a bathchair and then die in the end just the same" (TLB, p. 96).

Another of Jill's talents which is revealed in The Silver Chair and developed in The Last Battle is that of guide. Eustace makes a shoddy remark early in The Silver Chair about girls never knowing the points of a compass (TSC, p. 7), but Lewis falsifies this remark through Jill's subsequent actions. "As soon as Tirian saw that she was the best pathfinder of the three of them, he put her in front" (TLB, p. 59). Jill finds her way alone in the dark and kidnaps an Aslan impersonator, and act of bravery which earns Tirian's further praise, "Jill," said Tirian, "you are the bravest and most woodwise of all my subjects..." (TLB, p. 65).

Throughout her experiences in Narnia, Jill seems aware of a stereotype she must combat. When Eustace and Rilian are chopping at the serpent in The Silver Chair, Jill is off to the side thinking, "I hope I don't faint or blub or do anything idiotic" (TSC, p. 161). It is as though she realizes she can be whatever her capabilities allow her to be and doesn't want her behavior to deny these capabilities and confirm unjust stereotyping.

POLLY PLUMMER

Polly is the least developed of Lewis' female heroines. She appears in The Magician's Nephew as a girl of 11 and briefly in The Last Battle as an older woman of 60. Her character is less forceful than Lewis' other heroines, yet she demonstrates undeniable strength. It seems logical to assume that, as a resident of a city, Polly has not had the opportunities to develop athletically like the other girls.



Polly

She appears to have an active imagination instead, building a smuggler's cave in her parent's attic and inventing and writing stories. As Ford notes, she is "not the conventional turn-of-the-century girl" (p. 260). She is curious and sensible. When she and her companion Digory encounter a mysterious room in their attic explorations, it is Polly who boldly enters first. Later, when Polly and Digory mysteriously arrive in another world while wearing magic rings, Polly demonstrates scientific logic by encouraging them to experiment with the rings before using them again to ensure the proper results.

In a classic battle of the sexes, Polly and Digory exchange insults with one another in the world of Charn. When they find a bell labelled with a warning of danger if it is rung, Polly feels strongly they should leave it alone, but Digory wants to ignore the warning and sound the bell. Unable to persuade Polly to his way of thinking, Digory resorts to broad insults about girls. Polly retorts in kind. In frustration, Digory becomes violent with Polly and strikes the bell. In so doing, he summons Jadis, the witch, and indirectly introduces evil into Narnia. The link between mindless stereotyping and irrational behavior seems evident. When the children refuse to deal rationally with one another as equals, the penalties are extreme.

Lewis reveals the moral discernment characteristic of Polly through her feisty opposition to Jadis. Digory remains blind to the witch's evil for some time, dazzled by her beauty, but Polly realizes the danger immediately. She attempts to leave Jadis behind when they return to their own world and bravely reprimands the witch for her past wickedness. Likewise, Polly instantly recognizes the goodness of Aslan when she and Digory enter Narnia during its creation. She is not frightened by Aslan, although he is totally unfamiliar and an imposing figure of great power.

Although Polly receives secondary treatment in The Magician's Nephew, for it is Digory's story Lewis is telling, she is fairly portrayed, winning Aslan's

approval with her faithful, forgiving, and loyal nature. At the end of The Magician's Nephew, Lewis reveals that Polly and Digory remain friends for life and that she eventually learns to ride and swim and milk and bake and climb—a blend of traditional male and female pursuits.

These then are the female heroes presented by Lewis in The Chronicles of Narnia, none of whom conforms to a familiar female stereotype. As athletes, leaders, soldiers, and adventurers, they are free to develop their individual talents unbound by social convention and unhindered by being "girls." Although Lewis is guilty of occasional sexist remarks when referring to the girls, these are neutralized by the girls' actions. The sympathy with which Lewis portrays the girls and the freedom with which they share danger and adventure with the boys betrays not an underlying prejudice, but rather a basic sensitivity to females as people. Lucy, Susan, Aravis, Jill, and Polly are indeed human, with successes and failures common to both sexes, and remain as relevant in 1986 as they were in 1956.



NOTES

- [1] C.S. Lewis, The Magician's Nephew (New York: Collier Books, 1974), p. 50.
- [2] Reference to Dorothy L. Sayers, Are Women Human? (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), who contends that men and women are most notably human beings and, as such, should be measured according to standards appropriate for their race, not against culturally defined sexual stereotypes.
- [3] Margaret Hannay, "'Surprised by Joy': C.S. Lewis' Changing Attitude Toward Women," Mythlore, 4 (Sept., 1976), pp. 15-20.
- [4] Paul F. Ford, Companion to Narnia (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), Appendix One, p. 314.
- [5] Walter Hooper, Past Watchful Dragons: The Narnian Chronicles of C.S. Lewis (New York: Collier Books, 1979), pp. 29-30. Ages given throughout the text for characters are based on Lewis' MS 51 reported by Hooper (pp. 41-44) and itemized by Ford (Appendix Two, p. 315).
- [6] C.S. Lewis, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (New York: Collier Books, 1974), p. 124. Subsequent page references will be cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation TLWW.
- [7] C.S. Lewis, Prince Caspian (New York: Collier Books, 1974) P. 138. Subsequent page references will be cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation PC.
- [8] C.S. Lewis, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader (New York: Collier Books, 1974), p. 92
- [9] C.S. Lewis, The Last Battle (New York: Collier Books, 1974), pp. 180-183. Subsequent page references will be cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation TLB.
- [10] C.S. Lewis, The Horse and His Boy (New York: Collier Books, 1974), p. 170. Subsequent page references will be cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation THHB.
- [11] Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield; G. & C. Merriam Co., 1972), p. 980.
- [12] C.S. Lewis, The Silver Chair (New York; Collier Books, 1974), p. 63. Subsequent page references will be cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation TSC.

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Over the years Mythlore has published a large amount of highly praised fantasy artwork. Few people are inclined to cut up their issues of Mythlore in order to frame these pieces for their walls. Therefore Mythlore has begun a series of portfolios reproducing various pieces on quality paper suitable for framing. A limited number of portfolios are now being offered containing copies signed and numbered by the artists. The first portfolio was released at the time of the Mythopoeic Conference in August, 1986.

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- (2) Submissions done on a word-processor must be in columns exactly 4 1/2" wide with both right and left hand margins justified, elite type-face, single spaced, with double spacing between paragraphs or indented quotations. Footnotes, bibliographies, and works cited sections must be single spaced.

Submissions should be done on a daisy wheel printer or dot matrix printer with letter quality reproduction. The original rather than a xerox copy must be sent.

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