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### Mrs. Moore as the Queen Of Underland

#### **Abstract**

Suggests that the character of the Queen of Underland in *The Silver Chair* was unconsciously based on C.S. Lewis's companion Mrs. Janie Moore.

#### **Additional Keywords**

Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Lady of the Green Kirtle; Lewis, C.S. *The Silver Chair*; Moore, Janie

# MRS. MOORE AS THE QUEEN OF UNDERLAND

MICHAEL C. KOTZIN

In their biography of C.S. Lewis, Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper cite the Marsh-wiggle Puddleglum as the only character in the Chronicles of Narnia with a personal original (*C.S. Lewis: A Biography* [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1974], p. 254). I would like to speculate on the possibility that another character had one too, though in this case the derivation would most likely have been an unconscious one on Lewis' part; I suggest that the Queen of Underland, for whom some literary originals have already been put forth, might also have been based in part on Mrs. Jane King Moore.

Mrs. Moore, the divorced mother of a comrade in arms of Lewis', entered his life during World War I. Lewis' friend was killed in the war, and after it, perhaps to keep a promise to him, Lewis, whose own mother had died when he was nine and whose father failed to provide him with sufficient parental love and interest, "embarked," as his brother puts it, "upon a relationship with Mrs. Moore which was almost that of son and mother; and as soon as his first year as an undergraduate was over, instead of moving from college into lodgings, he set up a joint menage with her and her daughter Maureen. Having once embarked on this relationship with Mrs Moore, it was not in Jack's nature later to abandon her, and the menage in fact continued in existence until her death in 1951" (W.H. Lewis, "A Memoir of C.S. Lewis," in *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. W.H. Lewis [London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966], p. 12).

It was not a happy move on the part of C.S. (known as Jack) Lewis. Here is more of what his brother says on the subject: "She was a woman of very limited mind, and notably domineering and possessive by temperament. She cut down to a minimum his visits to his father, interfered constantly with his work, and imposed upon him a heavy burden of minor domestic tasks... I dwell on this rather unhappy business with some regret, but it was one of the central and determining circumstances in Jack's life" (*Ibid.*, pp. 12-13). Lewis himself has a 1924 journal entry which gives a further taste of what the relationship was like for him. He says: "It was unfortunate that my first spring flood of *Dymer* should coincide with a burst of marmalade-making and spring-cleaning on Mrs. Moore's part, which led without intermission into packing. I managed to get through a good deal of writing in the intervals of jobbing in the kitchen and doing messages in Headington... As an alternative to the work one is longing to do and able to do [at that time and heaven knows when again] ['domestic drudgery'] is maddening" (in *Ibid.*, p. 92).

As the years went by the situation became worse and worse, as W.H. Lewis continues to bear witness. "At Oxford, for more than three decades, Jack continued to live under the autocracy of Mrs Moore--an autocracy that developed into stifling tyranny, as I experienced myself during the years of my inclusion within this incomprehensible menage... Jack's servitude was made more burdensome, as the years passed, by Mrs Moore's senility and invalidism: it was only broken by her admission to a nursing home in April 1950 and her death there nine months later" ("Memoir," *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22).

Like Mrs Moore, the Queen of Underland in *The Silver Chair* gains control of a motherless young man (in the story she herself has killed the mother), separating him from his father. She brings him into her home, Underland, where she is absolutely "domineering and possessive." Her victim,

Prince Rilian, like C.S. Lewis, lives under "stifling tyranny," in "servitude," as his actions are controlled and limited by the exploitive queen. Of course the queen is an actual witch, and she uses supernatural powers to maintain her control over her victim, who is not at all free to escape from her until two children and the Marsh-wiggle help him to get free from her enchantment. Lewis, in contrast, technically could have left Mrs Moore at any time; but apparently he felt incapable of doing that for moral reasons or was incapable for psychological ones. In any event, he may have felt as trapped as the victim of an enchantress, frustrated by having to do her jobs and not being able to do his own work. But then came his release as Mrs Moore finally moved into the nursing home to await her death.

She moved, as we have heard, in April, 1950, and died in January, 1951. According to Roger Lancelyn Green, Lewis had nearly completed *The Silver Chair* by the fall of 1950 (*C.S. Lewis* [London: The Bodley Head, 1963], p. 37), and so he apparently was writing it at the same time as Mrs Moore was dying in the nursing home. Thus, he was writing about Rilian's release at the same time as he was celebrating his own (and released he was, even if, as Green and Hooper claim, he was visiting her in the nursing home every day; *A Biography*, pp. 229-230). Rilian's freedom was insured when he killed the queen, who had taken the form of a snake, and by having Rilian kill that snake, Lewis was perhaps expressing his own wish to be totally free of Mrs Moore--a wish which was to be fulfilled shortly thereafter.

C.S. Lewis the critic would have frowned upon this sort of criticism; but the practice of projecting one's self into a character in one's literary fairy tale is conventional among writers in that genre and is performed notably, for example, by one of its earliest and most distinguished creators, Hans Christian Andersen. Lewis certainly had good reason to make Rilian in his own image and to make the witch Queen of Underland in the image of Mrs Moore, and the possibility that he did so is worth considering if we are curious about all of the possible sources of a literary work.

NOTE: Green and Hooper claim that "In the summer of 1948 Mrs Moore had to retire permanently into a nursing home," contradicting W.H. Lewis' dating of that event (*A Biography*, p. 229). They support their claim with a purported quotation from a letter from C.S. Lewis to Sister Penelope dated 31 August 1948. However, a copy of a letter of that date from Lewis to Sister Penelope which is in the Wade Collection at Wheaton College says nothing at all about Mrs Moore. Based on the evidence which I have seen, I therefore must accept the claims of Major Lewis (whose diary, also in the Wade Collection, cites 29 April 1950 as the date when she entered the nursing home). Green and Hooper themselves seem to lean toward the later date when they subsequently say that "after some months [which sounds more like nine months than like 29] in hospital Mrs Moore... finally died on 17 January 1951" (*A Biography*, p. 257)--and this later reference also gives the correct date of death, whereas the earlier one (on p. 230) gave 12 January 1951. Even if Green and Hooper are correct, the fact remains that when Lewis was writing *The Silver Chair* Mrs Moore was ill and near death in a nursing home; but it would be more significant in reference to the subject at hand if she had permanently entered the home only a short time before Lewis wrote the book, as was the case if W.H. Lewis is correct.