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### ***The Silver Chair* and Plato's Allegory of the Cave: Archetypes of Spiritual Liberation**

#### **Abstract**

Compares *The Silver Chair* and the allegory of the cave in Plato's Republic, identifying eight commonalities. Asserts they have a common motif, "the spiritual quest for existential meaning where the divine and the terrestrial combine."

#### **Additional Keywords**

Lewis, C.S. *The Silver Chair*; Plato. *The Republic*—Allegory of the cave

# The Silver Chair and Plato's Allegory of The Cave: The Archetype of Spiritual Liberation

Courtney Lynn Simmons and Joe Simmons

We are struck by the similarity between *The Silver Chair* by C. S. Lewis and Plato's classic "Allegory of the Cave" in the *Republic*. In both we have: (1) entrapment; (2) philosophic confusion; (3) an instrument of imprisonment; (4) a moment of beginning liberation; (5) a journey to freedom; (6) testing times on the journey that require heart as well as head; (7) redemptive religious overtones; and finally, (8) explicitly in Lewis and implicitly in Plato the concept of remembrance as a key to the successful journey. We will suggest that these two literary works unite in a common motif, the spiritual quest for existential meaning where the divine and the terrestrial combine. It is in this sense that these stories are evocative and powerful reminders of the Western inner spiritual traditions. In Plato's *Republic*,<sup>1</sup> Socrates describes to his friend Glaucon an allegory of how the uneducated or unenlightened gain enlightenment:

Imagine men in a cave-like underground dwelling with a long entrance, as wide as the cave and open to the light. The men have been chained foot and neck since childhood. The chains keep them in place and prevent them from turning their heads so that they only see forward. Light comes to them from a fire.<sup>2</sup>

Socrates goes on to explain what would happen if one of the prisoners could be freed from his chains, "... forced to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up at the fire; all this causes him pain and the glitter blinds him to the things whose shadows he formerly saw — what do you think he would say if someone told him he used to see nonsense and now sees more truly because he is turned to what is more nearly real ... ?"<sup>3</sup>

Socrates says that this freed prisoner would be confused since he had thought the shadows to be more real than the things he would be shown. More importantly, our freed prisoner is freed not to enlightenment, but for the journey to enlightenment. This journey would itself be a learning process of will and spirit. The event (for it is an event, not a doctrine that is so crucial for Plato) will be painful for the prisoner, since he is not used to the ruggedness of the journey near the incredible light of the sun.<sup>4</sup> For the prisoner to make sense of what he sees in the overwhelming light, he would have to be "forcibly dragged" out of the cave.<sup>5</sup>

Apparently Plato believes that the ultimate learning experiences are painful to us and foreign to our nature. His path of the spirit, however it may go, is not to be a "religion" of consolation. Instead, this journey of the spirit is a training of the soul and heart before it is an education of the mind.<sup>6</sup>

The prisoner would have to be led out by certain guides.<sup>7</sup> Strength of will to do and to dare would be qualities of character more important than intelligence, but even here our former prisoner would need this extra help and encouragement. (There is a possible literary comparison, here, to the "hound" that Francis Thompson talks of when he wrote about his experience with God in "The Hound of Heaven." The "hound" that pursues him, in platonic terms, is the unseen help that "forcibly drags" the prisoner to the realm of light.) Our freed prisoner in Plato's *Republic* is at times afraid and unwilling to continue his journey from darkness to light. He wishes, in fact, to "run back" to his chains.<sup>8</sup>

We would like to compare this attitude to Søren Kierkegaard's concept of "dread." The mysterious "thou," who is God, Kierkegaard argues, "wounds us on the widest possible scale." This "dread," he says, is not exactly like fear but more like the excitement of a "leap" towards the unpredictable and the unknown.<sup>9</sup> Our potential cave philosopher feels this dread as he advances toward the light of the unknown mystery. Plato seems to be saying that it is one thing to be freed for the journey toward truth, and it is another thing to have the existential courage to pursue truth on the path to the "outside" and the painful sunlight. This journey from the "inside" of things (enclosure) to the "outside" of things (emancipation) corresponds to the three stages of the mystic path in the Western inner religious traditions. In its classic formulation, the first stage is purification. Here, the initiate is stripped of common vices. The second stage is illumination; the person must see the meaning of things, especially the relationship of things below to the things above. Finally, there is the unification in which the initiate becomes well integrated in union with the divine ground of the universe.<sup>10</sup> Purification involves the development of humility, and the knowledge of our ignorance and our lack of power to keep on our chosen path. Purification for Plato is the beginning of enlightenment. The light would "hurt his eyes"<sup>11</sup> and he would be tempted to "turn away and run back to the things he could see." The supernatural guides who help him, "pain and outrage him."<sup>12</sup> Our potential philosopher would be "baffled"<sup>13</sup> at the "steep rugged incline"<sup>14</sup> he must ascend. To the pain of humiliating purification is added the pain of beginning illumination.

The freed prisoner would go through different and purifying levels of understanding before he would be able

to see the sun.<sup>15</sup> It is this pain of illumination that brings him growth and puts him in touch with things as they are. First, he would see people and things by reflection (in a body of water, for instance), and then the objects themselves.<sup>16</sup> Again he must see the heavenly bodies at nighttime by "finding star and moonlight."<sup>17</sup> And, then in Plato's powerful words, "... Finally ... the sun—not an apparition in water or in some other foreign setting, but himself by himself in his own place — he'll be able to see him and contemplate what he's like." And he will conclude that "this is the giver of the seasons and years, curator of all in the visible sphere, the cause somehow of all that he used to see."<sup>18</sup> This journey then has ended in a mystic vision of divinity, of warm, brilliant light which transforms the prisoner's vision of the universe and gives him unification.<sup>19</sup>

Driven by compassion, he realizes that it is his duty to share his wisdom with his fellow prisoners. This is something that the enlightened one dreads for he knows that there is little or no hope of getting them to believe him. In fact,

they would say he came back from above with ruined eyes and the trip wasn't even worth the attempt. And if they could get their hands on the one who was trying to release them and lead them upward, wouldn't they kill him?<sup>20</sup>

We would like to suggest that the three stages of the mystic way and Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" are paradigm descriptions of religious human experience. The "Socratic experience," his martyrdom in Athens, is a living example of his own writing. (In the *Apology*, Socrates tells the Athenians that he is to teach philosophy and be a "gadfly" at the "command of God."<sup>21</sup> With the historic death of Socrates at the hands of the Athenians, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that, in Plato's mind, the returning cave prisoner and Socrates are the same person.)

The "Allegory of the Cave" then is a paradigm of spiritual meaning and historic experience. It is meant to be a description of ultimate mystical union and of the unification of the individual initiate.

At the end of this story, Socrates tells Glaucon the meaning behind the story. The rugged path up and out of the cave is the "soul's ascent to the intelligible..."<sup>22</sup>

This vision takes place when "... the shape of the good is finally and with difficulty seen in the knowable realm, and when seen it must be reckoned the cause of everything upright and beautiful in all ... the Lord of Light, itself the Lord giver of truth and intelligence in the intelligible world, that which a man must see to act rationally for himself or his community."<sup>23</sup> Here, in a few short words is one of the most powerful descriptions of mystical unification in Western literature.

We would like to suggest that C.S. Lewis' *The Silver Chair* is an expansion of this vision. The main characters in Lewis' novel undergo a similar experience to the prisoner in Plato's *Republic*, both beginning their experience with pain and disillusionment, and finally arriving at liberation from the "underworld."

*The Silver Chair* is a story about a pair of children who have adventures in a strange and beautiful land called Narnia. In this land they are sent on a mission by the great lion Aslan, who is the divine integration of wisdom and power. Aslan is a crystallization of divinity, a divine embodiment, a full representation of Godhood.

In Greek thought, Aslan might correspond to the philosophical concept of the "Logos." For the Greeks, it seemed to be an incarnate principle of reason and order. For the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo, the logos is the first manifestation of the One or God. For St. John the Divine, the Logos is Christ the very "word" of God. It is Aslan who gives order and direction to the children on their earthly journey and the testing times of the "steep rugged incline." Aslan is like Plato's sun, golden, warm, and the source of rationality in the world of chance and danger.

The children are told to find Prince Rilian and free him from the evil and powerful queen of the underworld. After a number of frightening and difficult situations, the children and Puddleglum (well named for his healthy pessimism) fall into a long and narrow tunnel. This tunnel takes them to the underworld, a whole civilization and culture in darkness. Here, Lewis has a double image of the human predicament. The world is a cave and the cave in the world is a picture of the world. Prince Rilian is a perfect picture of the prisoner in spiritual chains. He believes the Witch to be a noble queen. He is the instrument of her tyranny and violence. His moments of sanity he believes to be "fits of madness." When he does have short periods of genuine realization, he finds himself strapped in the "silver chair," chained and unable to act on his realization. It is an evocative and poignant picture of the unliberated existence of the cave.

Ironically, it is during these "fits" that the prince knows what his real identity is. After his fits subsided he could remember nothing of what had happened. For Plato, spiritual memory is central to soteriological knowledge. "Anemnesis," or remembrance of our true nature, is the key in platonic thought for the direction of our life's journey. (The *Republic* ends with admonitions of how to live well on our "upward path and practice of justice" as well as a description of life after death.)<sup>24</sup> Prince Rilian has this experience at times only to be chained in the cave of the underworld at his most insightful moments.<sup>25</sup>

When he knows his true self, he is most tortured with his own helplessness. During this time,

He groaned ... enchantments, enchantments ... the heavy, tangled, cold, clammy web of evil magic. Buried alive ... Oh, have mercy. Let me out, let me go back.<sup>26</sup>

Out of final and complete desperation, the Prince calls on the name of Aslan. "Once and for all ... I adjure you to set me free. By all fears and all loves, by the bright skies of Overland, by the great lion, by Aslan himself..."<sup>27</sup> Since Aslan had instructed them to do anything anyone said to

do in his name, the children fearfully release him. Like the prisoner in the cave, Prince Rilian's liberation begins with the aid of the divine and supernatural as it is manifested through "helpers."

Once free, the prince grabs his sword and smashes the silver chair crying out, "Lie there, vile engine of sorcery ... lest your mistress should ever use you for another victim."<sup>28</sup> Soon after, the queen of the underworld enters. The freedom from chaining instruments, as in the *Republic*, is only the beginning of the journey up the "steep and rugged incline" of life. This initial freedom cannot avoid the testing times.

The queen does several things to disillusion the prince and the intruders in an attempt to bind them to her underground world. First, she shuts and locks the door. Then she throws green powder on the fire, which quickly fills the room with a sweet and drowsy smell. As the smell grows stronger it makes it hard for them to think clearly. Rationality and memory (anemnesis) become cloudy. It is her first attempt to block "that which a man must see to act rationally ..."<sup>29</sup> She also plays a musical instrument with a steady, monotonous strumming that makes it hard for the group to see their growing peril. She will continue this appeal to the senses alone to convince them that this cave is the only world there is.

She began to speak soothingly, saying that there was no place called Narnia. When Puddleglum said that he had lived there all his life, the Witch asked, "Tell me, I pray you, where that country is."<sup>30</sup> Puddleglum pointed overhead. "How?" said the Queen. "Is there a country up among the stones and mortar of the roof?"<sup>31</sup>

Although all of them had come from the Overworld, the incense and music had lulled their minds to a dangerous dullness. They look up and, using their senses alone, cannot see Narnia but only the roof of the cave.

She begins to move closer. When Prince Rilian states he is the King of Narnia, the Witch replies, "Shalt be king of many imagined lands in thy fancies."<sup>32</sup> The doubt about the existence of Narnia became stronger. Soon they begin to agree saying, "... I suppose that other world must be all a dream."<sup>33</sup> By now the magic was in its full strength. Her line of argumentation is a classic defense of sense data (empiricism) as the sole criteria of truth. By focusing their minds on the roof of the cave, she begins to convince them there is no sky, no Overworld. When they speak of the sun, she stumps them by asking what the sun hangs from. If it is like the lamp which hangs from the roof, it must hang from something! When the children answer that it hangs from nothing, it sounds foolish even to them. It is a classic epistemological confusion.<sup>34</sup>

We see this clearly when Puddleglum, who was still fighting the effects of the green powder, began to talk about the Overworld, Narnia and the sun, the queen asks, "What is this sun that you all speak of?"<sup>35</sup> The prince replied,

"You see that lamp. It is round and yellow and gives light to the whole room ... Now that thing which we call the sun is like the lamp, only far greater and brighter. It giveth light to the whole Overworld and hangeth in the sky."

Hangeth from what, my lord?, asked the Witch; and then, while they were all still thinking how to answer her, she added, "... You see? When you try to think out clearly what this sun must be, you cannot tell me ... Your sun is a dream; and there is nothing in that dream that is not copied from the lamp. The lamp is the real thing; the sun is but a tale, a children's story."

For Plato, this is a paradigm of the confusion of shadows for the realities of the things to which shadows must point. It is to miss the essential connection of the things below to the things above.

Only in pain can the children break the spell.

"With his bare foot he stamped on the fire ... the pain itself made Puddleglum's head for a moment perfectly clear and he knew exactly what he really thought. There is nothing like a good shock of pain for dissolving certain kinds of magic."<sup>36</sup>

It is the way of purgation as preparation for enlightenment. Here, the testing and trials of the "steep and rugged ascent" will "dissolve certain kinds of magic" like nothing else.

Puddleglum took this moment to tell the queen what he thought. He said that even if they had really imagined Narnia it was better than her world. And if the underworld was the only world that existed, it was a pretty poor place in which to live. Dialogue must now become action. The queen leaps at the prince. The prince goes for his sword. The story continues, but our comparison ends with Puddleglum's existential leap of faith toward the mysterious, the unintelligible, but the dimly remembered; thought becomes battle.

The Witch's music, incense and soothing words, the silver chair, and her confusing philosophic subtleties are the chains of Plato's *Republic* holding the people in the cave, or Lewis' underworld. The beginning of freedom comes in pain with Puddleglum's foot on the fire, and the dread they all feel when they release the Prince and face the Witch.

Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" seems to be two things at the same time. It is, first of all, a description of human experience and at the same time it is a description of the religious quest opposed by fear and ignorance. The shadows represent the illusions most people live by. The hard journey from the cave represents a change of direction in which divine help must combine with courage. In this journey that seeks truth, goodness and beauty, courage is more important than intelligence. The "Allegory of the Cave" impresses us as very "existential," where our decisions to risk ourselves with divine mystery requires total commitment, discipline and a brave heart, as well as insight and a remembered sense of the transcendent. The wisdom of the cave and all of its supposed accomplishments only deal with shadows. On the other hand, the unchained person's willingness depends on his

decision in Kierkegaard's thought to define himself in opposition to his age and culture. Plato's prisoner, like the prince and the children, have a direction rather than a doctrine as the means of mystical initiation.

In conclusion, the unchained person is Kierkegaard's hero who defines himself on ultimate religious terms. In this sense, Plato's Lord of Light, St. John's Logos, and C.S. Lewis' Aslan would be central to the meaning and significance of human nature and its journey toward spiritual liberation.

### Notes

1. *Republic*, 514 a - 517 b.
2. *Republic*, 514 a-b. Like all multilevel metaphoric writings, the elements of Plato's imagery is suggestive of multiple meanings. The "cave-like underground," "long endurance," "chains," and "light" lend themselves to a philosophy inspired by artistic depth.
3. *Republic*, lines 515 c-d. For Plato, the horses we see are "shadows" or copies of the "archetypal" (Greek, εἰδωτόν) horse. In other words, "things" in our phenomenal experience point to higher realities of which these are lesser images.
4. Here, the sun is represented in the cave by its "shadow," the fire. The cave then is not totally without light. For Plato, though, "no one would consent to have things that seem good; they seek what is good." (*Republic* 505 d) "The sun is not sight, but the cause of sight." (*Republic* 508 b) that is, in Plato's thought, that which attracts us on our quest.
5. *Republic*, 516 a.
6. When asked later to define what the good is, Socrates refuses, saying, "I'd stumble around and look like a fool" (*Republic* 508 e). Here it is boldness and risk which keep the seeker pursuing the rebuff of mystery, rather than specific definitions.
7. *Republic*, 516 a. Socrates himself spoke of his personal spiritual guides (Greek, δαίμονες) who gave him inspiration and direction. Paul Friedlander, *Plato, An Introduction*, p. 36-37, finds this concept suggestive of "real powers," like Dante's "hierarchy of angels." This concept of divine messengers that help the traveler on the way, fits well with the children sent to find Prince Rilian in *The Silver Chair*.
8. *Republic*, 515 e.
9. See Karl Lowith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, pp. 148-49. For Kierkegaard this existential concept of dread calls forth in the individual a courage to seek and to be, to separate from the crowd of irreligious followers who have "an ... extravagant disregard for the individual." The courage of the crowd "hides the real cowardness of the individual." This solitary religious hero is "... powerful in silence and suffering." It is a picture of the freed prisoner of Plato's cave on his solitary journey.
10. See *The Spiritual Life, a Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*, Tanquerly, The Newman Press, Society of St. John the Evangelist. See especially pp. 305-452 for the purgative way in this forgotten spiritual classic.
11. *Republic*, 515 e.
12. *Republic*, 516 a.
13. *Republic*, 515 d.
14. *Republic*, 516 a.
15. See 509 d - 513 e for Plato's differing levels of understanding. Also, look at the description of learning in lines 533 d-3, where the demolished assumption "gently drags the eye of the soul out of the odious ooze in which it lies buried ..." Here, knowledge is used for "turning the soul around."
16. *Republic*, 515 a.
17. *Republic*, 516 b.
18. *Republic*, 516 c.
19. This sun is the "cause and knowledge of truth." It is even superior to "knowledge and truth." It is "fabulous beauty." Even "existence and being" are surpassed by the "dignity and power" of this "divine transcendence." (*Republic* 508 e - 509 c) No mystical language is stronger.

20. *Republic*, 517 a.
21. See *The Works of Plato*, Jowett translator., Ed Irwin Edmond. p. 75.
22. *Republic*, 517 b.
23. *Republic*, 517 c.
24. *Republic*, 621 c. For the description of life after death, see 614 b - 618 b.
25. For Plato only misconceived education, believing that it "can put into the soul Knowledge that was not there before." (*Republic* 518 b) Remembrance of what we once knew (Greek, ἀνάμνησις) is the key to return and, therefore, renewal. It is Plato's path of recollection, or re-collecting our lost knowledge of who we are and, therefore, our divine destiny that allows us the possibilities of integration and freedom.
26. C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, p. 143.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
29. *Republic*, 517 c.
30. C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, p. 152.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
34. True understanding for Plato uses "nothing perceptible at all, but only forms themselves by themselves, ending at forms" (*Republic*, 513 c). Here is the parting of the ways between the empiricist who trusts sense knowledge and the metaphysician who intuits the realities beyond the facade of the phenomenal.
35. C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, p. 154.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

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