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

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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
We are struck by the similarity between C. S. Lewis and Plato’s classic “ Allegory of the Cave” in the Republic. In both we have: (1) entrapment; (2) a moment of beginning liberation; (3) a journey to freedom; 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, 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.

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 glister 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...?”

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. 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.

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.

The prisoner would have to be led out by certain guides. 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.

We would like to compare this attitude to Soren 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. 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 purgation. 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. Purgation involves the development of humility, and the knowledge of our ignorance and our lack of power to keep on our chosen path. Purgation for Plato is the beginning of enlightenment. The light would “hurt his eyes” 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.” Our potential philosopher would be “baffled” at the “steep rugged incline” he must ascend. To the pain of humiliating purgation 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. 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. Again he must see the heavenly bodies at nighttime by "finding star and moonlight." 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 all the visible sphere, the cause somehow of all that he used to see." 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.

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?

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." 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 Glaucos the meaning behind the story. The rugged path up and out of the cave is the "soul's ascent to the intelligible..."

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 actrationally for himself or his community." 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."
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 .
est your mistress should ever use you for another
victim."28 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 under­
ground 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 (anamnisis) become cloudy. It is
her first attempt to block "that which a man must see to
act rationally . . ."29 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."30 Puddleglum pointed over­
head. "How?" said the Queen. "Is there a country up
among the stones and mortar of the roof?"31

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."32 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."33 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.34

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?"35 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 just 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.38

It is the way of purgation as preparation for enlightenment.
Here, the testing and trials of the "steep and rugged assent"
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 direc­
tion 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 transcen­
dent. 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 multileveled 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, arche typal) 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, sauvovov) 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 Kierkagard 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.

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Specific References


General Reference

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