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Abstract
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Additional Keywords
Eternity in the Chronicles of Narnia; Father Christmas; Father Time; Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia; Time in the Chronicles of Narnia—Symbolism

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Always Winter and Never Christmas
Symbols of Time in Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia

Nancy-Lou Patterson

Time, both cyclical and linear, and eternity, both durational and simultaneous, are symbolized in the Narnian Chronicles by figures of Good — Father Christmas and Father Time — and evil — Jadis the White Witch. The origins, parallels, and developments of these symbols in Western culture, and their theological implications in the Narnian Chronicles, are the subject of this paper. Its thesis is that despite Clyde S. Kilby’s opinion that the “appearance of Father Christmas in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe” is “incongruous,” this figure holds the key to Lewis’ understanding of the theological significance of Time.

A number of writers have discussed the element of Time in the Narnian Chronicles. In these seven books, Lewis describes parallel times which are so disparate in duration that what occupies a lifetime on Earth is the entire history of Creation of Narnia. The action of The Magician’s Nephew, which although not first written or published, is chronologically first in terms of the human timeline of the Chronicles, describes the origins of Narnia, while the final book, The Last Battle, not only describes the end of Narnia, but sets the entire duration of Narnian time into the context of the lives of Digory Kirke, Polly Plummer, and the other child visitors to Narnia. The history of a world from beginning to end is a figure for a human lifetime, and the myths of origin and doom, found in so many religions, can be seen as metaphors for the human experience of life, which comes from mystery and goes to mystery.

The central salvational event is, in the Christian idea of time, singular, and it operates both forward and backwards: Jesus is born, dies, descends to hell/death, rises, and ascends to heaven, and in so doing, determines the ultimate outcome of the lives of all people of both past and future. This infinitely efficacious sequence, enacted in the single human/divine lifetime of Jesus, presents the grand salvific programme as a dialectic process, thus: Thesis: Earth is made; Antithesis: Earth is marred; Synthesis: Earth is remade and/or renewed. In each of the Narnian Chronicles the same pattern appears, and each book ends with the restoration or renewal of good elements from the past. Lewis set forth this pattern first and most powerfully in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, with the story of the death and resurrection of Aslan, and in that book Lewis uses a set of very potent images of time, exactly described in the phrase, “Always Winter and Never Christmas,” which I have chosen as the title of my paper. Father Christmas, whose coming heralds the arrival of the saviour Aslan, is Lewis’ first symbol of Time in the Narnian Chronicles.

A peculiarity of the books is that they can be read in two orders: either as they appeared in order of publication, with The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe first, or as they are ordered in accordance with the internal sequence of events, with The Magician’s Nephew first. As Lewis wrote the novels, Paul Ford perceptively says, he sets forth “the redemption story” first. After telling a series of these stories, “he was able to tell the story not only of Narnia’s beginnings but also of its consummation.” A key image of this consummation, and Lewis’ second symbol of Time is found in The Silver Chair, in the figure of Father Time, who makes a reappearance in The Last Battle. My essay will discuss these twin symbols of Time as representing in Father Christmas both the individual salvational event and the cyclical element of Time, and in Father Time both the general creation-to-consumption sequence, and the linear element of Time.

In the book Lewis based on his World War II BBC broadcasts, Mere Christianity, he discusses Time as a phenomenon. “Almost certainly God is not in Time,” he said, implying that Time is an aspect of Creation rather than of Creator. He compares Time with a written narrative possessing its own internal time, set against the time of an author: “I could think about Mary... for as long as I pleased, and the hours spent... would not appear in Mary’s time... at all.” Thus, Lewis concludes, “If you picture Time as a straight line along which we have to travel, then you must picture God as the whole page on which the line is drawn.” (Ibid. p. 132.) Note that Time is specifically defined here as a linear process or sequence.

Very late in his apologetic career, in Letters to Malcolm, Lewis returned to the theme of Time, introducing some emendations. “I certainly believe that to be God is to enjoy an infinite present, where nothing has yet passed away and nothing is still to come.” This corresponds to his earlier image of God as “the whole page.” But Lewis continues, “The dead might experience a time which is not quite so linear as ours — it might, so to speak, have thickness as well as length.” Indeed, he adds, “I feel... that to make the life of the blessed dead strictly timeless is inconsistent with the resurrection of the body.” (Ibid.)

The relationship of Time and Eternity for Christians is given a malign expression in Alan W. Watts’ study, Myth and Ritual in Christianity. At first, Watts seems to agree with
Lewis: “the life of the soul-in-body in Heaven will be at once eternal ... and everlasting.” He explains, “the soul will see time as God sees it — all at once, past, present, and future,” (Ibid., p. 226.) but “It will contemplate the ‘moment’ of eternity for an everlasting time.” For Watts, “Taken literally, the state of the blessed in Heaven is actually no less frightful than that of the damned in Hell.” (Ibid., p. 225.) This, he tells us, is because the blessed will suffer “the terrible monotony of everlasting pleasure.” (Ibid., p. 227.) A frozen Hell is no more terrible than an infinitely extended Heaven. This is precisely the dilemma that Lewis’ fantasy series addresses.

When Lucy enters Narnia in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, her first physical sensation is of “something soft and powdery and extremely cold,” in a word, snow. “A moment later she found that she was standing in the middle of a wood at night-time with snow under her feet and snowflakes falling through the air.” On the next page, the idea of Christmas is introduced, as Lucy sees her first Narnian: “What with the parcels and the snow it looked just as if he had been doing his Christmas shopping. He was a faun.” (Ibid., p. 6.) Thus, Winter (snow) and Christmas (parcels) are central elements encountered by Lucy as by the reader in Lewis’ first book about Narnia. Note that the concepts — Winter, Christmas — are presented in physical form — snow and parcels — from the outset.

When Lucy joins the Faun in his cozy cave to share a wonderful tea, the Faun confesses that he is a kidnapper, working under the orders of “The Witch Witch.” (Ibid., p. 14.) In answer to Lucy’s question, he explains, “Why, it is she who has got all Narnia under her thumb. It’s she that makes it always winter. Always winter and never Christmas; think of that?” Lucy immediately replies, “How awful!” (Ibid.) in response to this terrible state of affairs.

With the five words “always winter and never Christmas,” Lewis presents a fundamental structure in which every word is significant. “Always” here means continuously, in the sense of duration, or an on-running, linear state of being, which takes place in Time. “Winter” means a time of severe cold, heavy snow, frozen streams, and long nights. “And” connects or relates two sets of paired terms. “Never” means that within this endlessly continuing winter, there is no moment when the possibility of spring is anticipated, when the nights begin to shorten and the light begins to return. “Christmas” means that the central focus of human history, the moment when the Creator enters His own Creation, to which the cycling years return again and again, is kept outside of Narnian time, and does not bring its yearly gifts of renewal, its (to use that untranslatable Greek term employed in theological discourse) anamnesis. Anamnesis means not only to recall in the sense of remembering, but to recall in the sense of calling back, bringing something from the past into the present.

Narnia is a frozen world. Its “always” implies a “never.” In this symbolism, winter is used as a negative image, embodied not only in the landscape and season but in an evil personage, the White Witch. This personage, who appears in the book’s title, appears first not to Lucy, but to Edmund, the potential traitor; her coming is announced by the distant sound of sleighbells, and “at last there swept into sight a sledge drawn by two reindeer.” (Ibid., p. 23) Riding “in the middle of the sledge” (Ibid., p. 24) is a great lady, who is “covered in white fur up to her throat.” Moreover, “Her face was white — not merely pale, but white like snow,” a face not only “beautiful ... but proud and cold and stern.” Like the Snow Queen in Hans Christian Anderson’s fairy tale, upon which she is modelled, the White Witch is as white and as cold as snow. And like the Snow Queen with her Kay, the White Witch carries a boy, Edmund, away on her sledge to a castle. It is significant that in the Snow Queen’s castle, “in the middle of that bare, unending snow hall there was a frozen sea.” One thinks immediately of the frozen sea in which Satan is plunged forever in Dante’s Inferno. Here, Gerda at last finds Kay, “quite blue with cold,” desperately trying to solve the “Ice Puzzle of Reason” by assembling fragments of ice: “He arranged whole figures that made up a written word, but he could never figure out how to arrange the very word he wanted: the word ‘eternity’.” (Ibid.)

The frozen sea in “the Snow Queen” is not, then, a symbol of eternity, but of some terrible opposite. The Snow Queen has told Kay that “if you can arrange that pattern for me, then you shall be your own master, and I shall make you a present of the whole world and a pair of new skates.” (Ibid.) Whatever the whole world may mean, skates change winter’s frozen rivers into speedy roads, and frozen lakes or seas into vast vistas of freedom. Narnia’s winter lacks the Christmas gift of freedom, or to put it another way, the perspective of eternity.

Snow is a true symbol, in the Jungian sense that it is ambivalent, capable of expressing both evil and good. The Snow Queen, unlike the White Witch, is not evil. Like the North Wind in George MacDonald’s At the Back of the North Wind, she is about her Father’s business even when she beings snow. “Now I’m rushing off to the warm countries!” she tells Kay, as she flies off to visit Etna and Vesuvius; “I’m going to whiten them a bit; that’s customary; it does good above lemons and wine grapes!” (Ibid.) In the same way, snow reappears in The Silver Chair when Jill and Eustace return with the rescued Prince Rilian from Narnia’s Underworld. Jill’s experience echoes Lucy’s: “The air seemed to be deadly cold, and the light was pale and blue,” and there were “a lot of white objects flying about in the air.” It comes to her that “the pale, blue light was really moonlight, and the white stuff on the ground was really snow.” And the white flying objects are snowballs, thrown in the complex movements of “the Great Snow Dance ... done every year in Narnia on the first moonlight night when there is snow on the ground.” (Ibid.) This figure of the dance is Lewis’ favorite, derived from Medieval and Renaissance thought, and it
symbolizes the dance of all creation in its orderly round.

The White Witch is evil not because she brings cold and snow, but because she will not relinquish her power and allow the stately rotation of the year to proceed. Like Satan, she would rather reign in a frozen Hell, than serve in a fertile Heaven. She does not want to take her place in the stately dance of creation. She is like the Green Witch of the Underworld in The Silver Chair, who urges her captives to choose illusion — over reality — the unseen sun.

Lewis returned to the Witch in The Magicians Nephew, describing how, in a previous existence in the world-city of Charn, she has been Queen Jadis, and has chosen to pronounce the Deplorable Word (which undoubtedly is not "Eternity") rather than allow her own sister to occupy the throne. Lewis describes her "white, beautiful hand" and her "large cold finger and thumb," (Ibid., p. 61.) reiterated of snow and freezing, both used to grasp and control. Polly and Digory, the children who, through a quarrel, have released her from her long self-chosen oblivion. At the climax of the book, Aslan creates Narnia, and the Witch Jadis takes up residence in this perfect creation through Digory's fault. Aslan sends Digory and Polly to get an apple in order to plant a tree in a garden "that she will not dare to approach," (Ibid., p. 127.) but when the children arrive, Jadis is there ahead of them.

Digory enters the gate of this holy place, and, with Aslan's permission, picks an apple. And "There, only a few yards away from him stood the Witch," (Ibid., p. 142.) and "her face was deadly white, white as salt," (Ibid., p. 144) white, that is, as Lot's wife, who became a pillar of salt through disobedience. She tempts Digory to join her in her disobedience, to steal an apple for his own use (to heal his dying mother) rather than take it to Aslan as he has been told to do. With a terrible effort, and putting right what he had previously put wrong, Digory resists. The apple is eventually planted, the protective tree of Narnia grows and bears yet more fruit. Digory is bidden by Aslan to pluck an new apple, and with this, his mother is indeed healed. What is more, its apple core, planted in England, grows to a great tree from which wood is taken to make the Wardrobe which forms the door "That was the beginning of going between Narnia and our world." (Ibid., p. 160.) Obedience brings joy and freedom, disobedience brings sorrow and enslavement, to the worst of all masters and mistresses, one's self.

Turning people to stone is the White Witch's forte, and stone, like ice, is a state of being frozen. The freeing of the Witch-enchanted persons (animals, giants, and longavii) by Aslan is a major event in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. The intention of the Witch to thwart the onrunning movement of the year is most poignanty expressed when she turns to stone a charming little party of Narnians who have begun to celebrate Christmas with an outdoor feast.

The White Witch, Jadis, and the Green Witch are associated with a cold duration, a sterile fixity, and a lightless illusion. These figures of Hell, death, and evil, in the context of Time, are countered in the Narnian Chronicles by two images of Time as good. These are Father Christmas and Father Time. Before discussing these figures, a little analysis of their historic origins and development will be given, based upon the study of "the gods and patriarchs who are or who have been personifications of time in the Western World," by Samuel L. Macey. He calls Father Time and Father Christmas the "two 'sons'" of Saturn-Cronus. (Ibid.) Father Time "took over the sickle of Saturn-Cronus" and Father Christmas "took over his Saturnian aspects" as "a jovial gift-giving patriarch." (Ibid., p. 172.)

The character of Saturn-Cronus is "influenced ... by the gods of the Indo-Iranian pantheons and in particular by their several twin gods, who represent benevolent infinite time and malevolent finite time." (Ibid., p. xi.) Saturn-Cronus "represents concurrently the Saturnalian values of past golden days but also the sickle of Time, the future destroyer." (Ibid., p. xii.) These are the twin roles played by Father Time in the Narnian Chronicles, where the giant Time is a king who sleeps after a long rule, only to awake at the end of the world, and, borrowing a symbol from Gabriel's tool for announcing the Last Judgement, blows his horn to announce the end of Narnia.

Like Father Time, Father Christmas is concerned with the annual cycle of time. But his iconography tallies the ongoing years "for a whole family or people:" (Ibid., p. 135.) ... it is Father Christmas ... who helps us to celebrate the regeneration of life and the continuation not only of the sun itself but more immediately of our family and our people." (Ibid., p. 139.)

Macey speaks of "the English Father Christmas of the seventeenth century who is simultaneously lauded by Anglicans and damned by Puritans," (Ibid., p. 140) presumably the Father Christmas intended by the Anglican Lewis. This gift-bearing figure originally appeared as a precursor, harbinger, or herald of Christmas, still preserved in the Continental Saint Nicholas, who is "involved in the dualism of being both judge and benefactor" (Ibid.) and whose feat occurs early in December.

The English Father Christmas is essentially a "Rewarder" (Ibid.) and is "not concentrated on the feat of Saint Nicholas but rather derived from his role in the Mummers' Play, in which, in several versions, "In comes I, Father Christmas", is the opening sentence." (Ibid., p. 145.) The Mummers' Play is a depiction of "the annual death of the year ... and its annual resurrection in spring," (Ibid.) and this resurrection them, central to The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, in which Aslan's arrival breaks the Witch's artificial winter with a sudden spring, makes the presence in that book of Father Christmas absolutely appropriate.

In announcing Aslan, Father Christmas is a kind of Elijah who heralds the return of the Creator to His own world. I said above that "parcels" are used as a figure for Christmas when Lewis first represents the Narnian situa-
tion. Father Christmas, the gift-bearer, arrives like the Witch on a sledge drawn by belled reindeer. True to his complex mythological sources, he makes the children and beavers feel “very glad, but also solemn.” (Lewis, 1950, p. 86.) His first gift is an announcement about the Witch: “She has kept me out for a long time, but I have got in at last. Aslan is on the move. The Witch’s magic is weakening.” (Ibid., p. 87.) This passage makes Father Christmas’s role as an announcer perfectly explicit. His gifts are all practical — “tools not toys” — a sewing machine for Mrs. Beaver, a finished dam for Mr. Beaver, a shield and sword for Peter, a bow, quiver of arrows, and ivory horn for Susan, and for Lucy a bottle of healing cordial and “a small dagg­er,” (Ibid., p. 88.) and, as a climax, “a large tray containing five cups and saucers, a bowl of lump sugar, a jug of cream, and a giant big teapot all sizzling and piping hot.” (Ibid.)

This jovial, practical figure of Father Christmas, whose arrival makes the recovery of cyclical time in Narnia, is joined in The Silver Chair by Father Time, whose role embodies the more absolute cycle of creation from beginning to end. In a cave “about the shape and size of a cathedral ... filling almost the whole length of it, lay an enormous man fast asleep.” Although he is large, “his face was not like a giant’s, but noble and beautiful. His breast rose and fell gently under the snowy beard which covered him to the waist. A pure, silver light ... rested upon him.” When Puddleglum enquires about his name, the Warden (a gnome) replies, “This is old Father Time, who was once a gnome.” Puddleglum enquires about his name, the Warden (a gnome) replies, “This is old Father Time, who was once a gnome.”

Katherine Briggs points out that “The throne of a sleeping champion in a cave under a hill is common through Europe” and she mentions Charlemagne, Barbarossa, Halgar the Dane, and King Arthur, among others, as examples of the type/motif “King Asleep in Mountain.” Readers of Lewis will of course think of the sleeping Merlin, roused in That Hideous Strength to help put right an England gone wrong. The point is the return to the present of a good sleeper from the past, reawakened and renewed. True to his special role, it is Father Time who comes not to restore but to complete the world by heralding its “consum­mation.”

the chapter of The Last Battle appropriately entitled “Night Falls on Narnia,” this return is described. “Out on their left they saw ... the shape of a man, the hugest of all giants.” His position in the Narnian landscape causes Jill and Eustace to remember

how once long ago, in the deep caves beneath those moors, they had seen a large giant asleep and been told that his name was Father Time, and that he would wake on the day the world ended. (Ibid., pp. 141-42.)

Aslan expresses their thoughts: “while he lay dreaming his name was Time. Now that he is awake he will have a new one.” Perhaps, in this new role, his name is to be Eternity! Father Time blows his horn, and the end of Narnia begins, in a long panoply of last things. Finally, Aslan commands him to “make an end” and the giant, casting his horn into the sea, reaches out to the Sun and crushed it in his immortal hand.

The end of Narnia does not, however, signal an end to everything. The dead Narnia is replaced by a new, everlasting Narnia where “morning freshness was in the air.” (Ibid., p. 159.) Aslan’s country is perceived to include not only this “real” (Ibid., p. 160.) Narnia, but the England within England, (Ibid., p. 172.) another idea repeated from That Hideous Strength, as well. The book concludes as the children and all their restored companions from their various visits to Narnia begin “Chapter One of the Great Story ... which goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than the one before,” (Ibid., p. 179.) that story which all readers of the Narnian Chronicles would most like to read.

The combination of repeated cycles and the single cycle of beginning to end is found in myths because it is found, first, in the physical world. In his study of Time, Time’s Arrow, Time’s Cycle, Stephen Jay Gould surveys the Western understanding of Time: “Something deep in our tradition required, for intelligibility itself, both the arrow of historical uniqueness and the cycle of timeless immanence — and nature says yes to both.” These two elements — cycle and arrow — he characterizes thus:

The metaphor of Time’s cycle captures those aspects of nature that are either stable or else cycle in a simple repeating (or oscillating) series because they are direct products of nature’s timeless laws, (Ibid., p. 197.) and “The essence of time’s arrow lies in the irreversibility of history, and the unrepeatable uniqueness of each step of a sequence of events.” (Ibid., p. 144.)

The majestic and interlocking phenomena of the natural world, movements within the cosmos in general and the solar system in particular, create Time in both cycle and arrow. These phenomena, especially lunar and solar cycles, were observed and recorded by humankind as early as the Upper Paleolithic, and even in that early era served not only a notational but a symbolic role. In this paper we are concerned with Time as a figure for the divine order of Creation and as a metaphor for the human experience of life (which includes, in Christian thought, birth, death, and resurrection). The dialectic structure of birth, death, and resurrection is celebrated in the twin cycles of the Christian year — Advent, Christmas, Lent Easter, Ascension, Pentecost — and the Christian week, which begins with a celebration of the Resurrection on Sundays; and in the paired linearities of Christian life — birth/death/resurrection — and Christian Eschatology — Creation/Christ/Consummation.

It is in this context that the word anamnesis forms the interpretive key of my argument. E.L. Mascall in A Dictionary of Christian Theology says, “the Hebrew notion behind the Greek term signifies the bringing in the present of a chronologically past act with all its original efficacy.” The anamnesis is “a literal ‘re-calling’ in the sense of
'calling back.' We see this in the recovery of cyclicity by Narnian time as Father Christmas arrives to herald the return to Narnia of its Creator, Aslan. The same motif in its more absolute or linear sense is expressed in the figure of Father Time, who at Aslan's command comes back to bring an end to Narnia, whereupon Aslan reveals that the real Narnia is now available.

In its specific Christian application, the Anamnesis is that segment of the Eucharist in which is recited the command of Jesus to "Do this in remembrance of me," with the word "remembrance" an inadequate rendering in English of the Greek (and Hebrew) meaning defined above. The Eucharist is for Christians — it was for Lewis — the foretaste of the Resurrection in the present. Its central feature, in sacramental theologies, is the making present again and again of what has been done once for all, by the One who says, "Behold, I make all things new." (Revelation 21:5)

If our present life is, as Lewis in his Platonic way called it, a Shadowlands, what is foreshadowed in the Eucharist, which is repeated in the cycles of the week and year? Exactly this: eternal renewal. Eternity is not, in this symbolic structure, an endless duration, but neither is it an infinite moment. Rather, it is an eternal renewal, an everlasting arrival at a place or time which is ever fresher, newer, more central, and more complete, not through novelty but through renewal of what is and always has been best. A profound understanding of Time (as both cycle and arrow) and Eternity (as neither infinite stasis nor utter timelessness but as eternal renewal) is vividly expressed in the Narnian Chronicles, as Lewis weaves together his symbols of time.

Notes

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At the last Council of Stewards meeting it was decided that publications of the Mythopoeic Society would no longer accept paid advertising. To continue to do so would make it liable to pay a newly instituted tax of about 8.5% on publications in the State of California. This makes income for Mythlore even tighter than before, and increases the importance of dedicated and appreciative readers to support it by making a supporting donations as Benefactors.