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6-3-2018

### Putting Eternity in Reader's Hearts: C.S. Lewis and the Art of Sehnsucht

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“Putting Eternity in Reader’s Hearts: C.S. Lewis and the Art of Sehnsucht”

People have been debating whether or not there is a higher power outside of this world for years and, if there is, how it manifests itself in the realm of humanity. While the Christian view of this argument supports the idea that we can only be fulfilled by the God who created us, Pastor J. Ligon Duncan has an interesting opinion concerning why humans fail to find fulfillment in things outside of God: “that's how God has built us, friends. Our hearts are restless until we find our rest in Him, because the Giver did not make us to be filled up by the gifts but only by the Giver” (Duncan). The gifts of God are able to be seen throughout creation if one chooses to see them. For example, it is not difficult for one to see glimpses of glory in the song of a bird, the laugh of a child, or the love of a parent. So, if glimpses of God can be seen in the world of humans, why are they unable to experience true fulfillment in this creation? The very fact that there is creation suggests that there must be a Creator who is higher than the works of His hands, and C.S. Lewis suggests this ideology in a way that presents God to be further back and higher up than any of His own creation.

As a result of humanity’s inability to fulfill themselves, humans frequently experience a sort of longing for something that is unattainable in this world. As D.G. Kehl further develops, this is a deeper emotion than simply a strong wish for something: “More than simple longing or nostalgia however, and lacking a sufficiently expressive English term, this quality can be characterized by the German term *Sehnsucht* (a. compound of the verb *sehnen*, “to long,” and the noun *sucht*, “addiction”), an intense addiction of and to longing” (Kehl). This intense type of longing could only be given by a power that is greater than all the emotions humanity could possibly devise. Throughout his various works of fiction, such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956), *Till We Have Faces* (1956), and *The Great Divorce* (1945), C.S. Lewis

demonstrates this philosophical approach which he devises in *Mere Christianity* (1952) concerning the sehnsucht for a God who is "farther back and higher up" (43).

In speaking of the various powers present in the world, C.S Lewis establishes the existence of one power that is the root of humanity's longing for something beyond themselves. C.S. Lewis says, "Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world" (*Mere Christianity* 135). This is not merely an idea that Lewis devised; psychologists have spent decades studying what exactly it means to yearn for something outside of yourself. Psychological researcher Olle Holm defines longing as "a need for something—a thing, a state, a relationship—without which one's life does not feel complete" (Holm). This sehnsucht for something beyond this world is easily rationalized by Lewis in the realm of Christianity, "The Christian says, 'Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists'" (*Mere Christianity* 136). Therefore, this begs the question as to what satisfaction exists to fulfill these desires? C.S Lewis answers this by discussing the idea of the powers that are present in this world. When addressing the issue of there being a good or bad power in this world, Lewis says that as soon as one recognizes that there is both a good and an evil power present, "you are putting into the universe a third thing in addition to the two Powers...But since the two powers are judged by this standard...the Being who made this standard, is farther back and higher up than either of them, and He will be the real God" (*Mere Christianity* 43). Having therefore established the idea that there is a highest power in the universe who is characterized by being "farther back and higher up" (*Mere Christianity* 43), Lewis must now grapple with the question as to how to present this sehnsucht in a way that is both tangible and believable. He achieves this through characters who voice their yearning for God, or a God-like function. His characters

grapple with what is consistently referred to as the need to go further and further into or towards something.

There are various instances throughout *The Chronicles of Narnia* where the characters are longing for something that is beyond them. They achieve this God-given longing by going further and further into something. In *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, Lucy discovers Narnia and the God-like function of Aslan. As a result, they experience fulfillment in their longing for some higher power throughout *The Chronicles of Narnia* by going “further in...a step further in...still further in...on a step or two further” (7-8). Lucy’s innate curiosity for something that was beyond her spurred her towards this new world, and it is in Narnia that she discovers Aslan.

Within *The Last Battle*, many characters are spurred to go further towards Aslan. For example, when Emeth is recalling his story he says that Aslan “breathed upon me and took away the trembling from my limbs and caused me to stand upon my feet. After that, he said...I must go further up and further in” (*The Last Battle* 102). Not only does man’s innate *sehnsucht* for God call him to go further up or further in, but as seen in this novel, the archetype for God himself directly relays this message. Aslan calls out to His companions: “Come further in! Come further up!” (98) in order to establish a deeper relationship in a more intimate place with Himself. Not only does this align with Lewis’s theology, but it is biblically supported by James 4:8: “Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you.” While the *sehnsucht* for God is an inbred desire of humanity, Lewis demonstrates how it requires a search as well as the yearning; whenever his characters attempt to draw near to Aslan, they are rewarded with His presence and His fulfillment.

While still requiring an action, not every example of this yearning within *The Chronicles of Narnia* is towards Aslan but in search of Him. In *The Magician's Nephew* Digory urges his cohorts "Could we get on? The Lion's getting further and further way" (134). This still exemplifies the yearning felt by the characters who are longing after their God-like figure, but it also demonstrates the searching one goes through for something higher than themselves. The *sehnsucht* that Digory is feeling allows him to recognize when the object of his fulfillment is distancing Himself from them and the need for a reconciliation of distance and presence. This is a lesson that can be gleaned from *The Chronicles of Narnia* as a whole as well, as Alan Jacob's says, "the Chronicles...with their elaborate complement of images, contribute to an *askesis*, a spiritual exercise. They are a kind of training in how to long, and what and whom to long for" (Jacobs 279). Much like Digory yearning for Aslan, it teaches the reader to yearn for the God who is further and higher than themselves.

The *sehnsucht* felt by the characters always compels them to go *to* something, whether it be to explore a new land, blindly follow Aslan, or go off in search of Him. All of the yearnings presented by the characters are pacified by the action of journeying closer to the representation of God. Karl Popper, a philosopher of science, explains this idea of how action relates to longing:

We can invent myths, stories, theories; because we have a thirst for explanations, an insatiable curiosity, a wish to know. Because we not only invent stories and theories, but try them out and see whether they work and how they work... [for example] by making up a myth about 'invisibles' such as atoms or gravitational forces which explain the visible. (Popper)

Humanity has the ability to recognize this theory of God, of a higher power, but a theory is nothing if it is not tested. The actions that the characters exemplify are the testament and the testing of these theories in order to give them credibility and validity in their own life.

Many scholars have already discussed this sense of *sehnsucht* in relation to *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the way that it captivates readers, but few scholars have reviewed this approach in relation to Lewis's other works and the underlying reason as to why it is so captivating. Toby F. Coley refers to *sehnsucht* in relation to *The Last Battle*: "He [Lewis] calls the object of this desire...so familiar to the contemporary readers of *The Last Battle*. By feigning—or at least explicitly bringing attention to—his 'shyness' of discussion of this desire, Lewis gives the audience the impression of being let in on a secret, and thus revelation works well to draw the audience 'further in'" (Coley). While Coley does accurately depict the relatability of this desire with the reader, he does not apply it beyond a creative trope of writing. The desire that the reader feels is not only because he or she wants to be let in on a secret; it is also because the reader can empathize with the characters: Lewis is depicting a *sehnsucht* common to humanity and not a fictional idea. By limiting this idea simply to *The Chronicles of Narnia* and a rhetorical device, valuable insight into the theology that Lewis presents is overlooked.

Within *Till We Have Faces*, examples of Orual demonstrating *sehnsucht* is clearly seen by her desire to be near the gods and to force them to hear her complaint against them. Referring back to the theology of worldly unfulfillment and supernatural desire represented in *Mere Christianity*, Orual recognizes that there is a higher power controlling her life and she seeks to both understand and be near it. In this novel, the higher power is represented by many false gods, but the yearning for a higher power remains the same. The gods grant Orual's wish, and bring

her “into the dark inwards of the mountain, and then further and further in” (*Till We Have Faces* 136). For the entirety of the novel, Orual is searching and attempting to get near enough to the gods to make her complaint against them, and she has thus satisfied her *sehnsucht* after being brought further up and further in towards them. Lewis presents an interesting juxtaposition when Psyche becomes a god: before Psyche is able to become a god, she must physically face the bindings to her humanity, effectively rebuking ties to people such as the subjects of Glome, the Fox, and Orual. Lewis dictates this by saying that “Psyche went on and on, deeper into the earth, colder, deeper, darker...Psyche, her eyes fixed straight ahead, went further and further on down” (*Till We Have Faces* 141-142). Whenever one of Lewis’s characters is being elevated towards a heavenly and supernatural power, they are said to be going either further up or further in towards the power who is further up and higher in. Because Psyche must go down through humanity before she can be raised, the interesting contrast between the lowness of the earthly beings and the height of the heavenly beings can be seen. This further illustrates Lewis’s idea that the fulfillment is found in human beings vastly differs from fulfillment that is found only in the higher power.

As previously seen, C.S. Lewis disguises the *sehnsucht* for God by replacing God with another object; within *The Chronicles of Narnia* Aslan is the archetype for God, much like the various gods seen in *Till We Have Faces* function as the one God whom Lewis claims that all humanity is longing for. In *The Great Divorce*, the mountains represent God, and the characters consequently feel the urge to strive towards them. This is not Lewis trying to convolute or misconstrue his depiction of God. On the contrary, by using these various depictions he supports his claim that God is the highest power and therefore above His own creation. As Lewis says in *Arthurian Torso*, “Every created thing is, in its degree, an image of God, and the ordinate and

faithful appreciation of that thing is a clue which, truly followed, will lead back to Him” (151). As seen in *The Great Divorce*, the mountains are functioning as a way to bring the characters towards God:

‘Ye will understand that better, perhaps, before ye go...In the meantime, I must tell ye they have come further for the sake of the Ghosts than ye can understand. Every one of us lives only to journey further and further into the mountains. Every one of us has interrupted that journey and retraced immeasurable distances to come down today on the mere chance of saving some Ghosts.’ (*The Great Divorce* 74)

The way that Lewis explains *sehnsucht* in this passage further verifies his assertion that this longing is something that is inbred, thus the Ghost’s inability to truly understand it and yet its continual presence in his life, even after death. This speaks to the credibility of this higher power. It is unable to be understood by humans; it is something to be longed for; and it is something that provides fulfillment. As various characters portray within this novel, longing for God is the sole purpose of life, and the journey of faith towards the higher power is where fulfillment is found.

*Sehnsucht* is a feeling that all of humanity is acquainted with in some form or another. Many people will seek pacification of this yearning in earthly things, but they will ultimately return to their longing unfulfilled and unsettled. The idea that *sehnsucht* can only be truly mollified by the highest of powers is a theology presented by C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, and it is characterized in the rest of his works by likening it to a God who is further back and higher up. Within *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Till We Have Faces*, and *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis demonstrates the characters yearn for God by their movement further and further towards whatever device is functioning as God. By subtly devising his characters to demonstrate an



ideology of his creating, Lewis's thesis of *sehnsucht* for a God who is further up and higher back transcends the boundaries of fiction and is a testament not only to this ideology but to the lives of all who read and delight in the various works he created.

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