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Examining Eustace's Transformation and Its Mythic Antecedents in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*

by Devin Brown

One of the best known and most loved episodes in C.S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia series comes during *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* when the spoiled, egotistical Eustace is transformed first into a dragon and then, after an encounter with Aslan, back into a boy. Eustace is introduced as a pretentious and self-centered child; and until his transformation, the journey to Narnia has done little to improve him. When the Dawn Treader puts in at an unmapped island for repairs and resupply, Eustace quickly makes himself scarce to avoid having to do any of the work. His plan is to stroll inland, to find "a cool, airy place up in the mountains" (78), and to sleep all day while his shipmates labor.

After reaching the ridge, Eustace finds himself not with the spectacular view he had anticipated but wrapped in a fog which Lewis describes as "thick but not cold" (79), conjuring up images of the underworld and hints of the death and rebirth which are to come. Wrapped in the clouds, Eustace lies down and attempts to find "the most comfortable position to enjoy himself" (79). However, we are told that he is unable to take pleasure in his desertion, and here we see that the seeds of his inner transformation have already begun to take hold, as Lewis tells us, "His new life, little as he suspected it, had already done him some good" (79). Feeling lonely for the first time, Eustace attempts to make the descent back to the ship but gets

lost, and ends up in an unknown valley with the sea nowhere in sight.

Lewis is purposeful in his description of the place that Eustace has come to. He tells us that the valley is "narrow and deep," that the sheer walls give it the appearance of "a huge pit or trench" (82). Inside the valley there appears to be nothing living, "not an animal, not a bird, not an insect" (83). The valley gives the impression of a large grave, to which Eustace "apparently . . . by amazing luck," has "found the only possible way" (83). Hearing a noise, Eustace turns to see an ancient, decrepit dragon crawl out of its lair and expire right in front of him. Suddenly a thunderstorm forces the boy to take shelter in the dead dragon's cave where he falls asleep on top of its treasure pile. When he awakes, Eustace has been changed into a dragon.

At first Eustace is confused and does not realize what has taken place. Not until he rushes out to the pool at the cave's entrance and sees his own reflection does he fully understand what has happened. Outwardly he has become a beast who runs on all fours and eats raw meat, a creature who takes what it wants and lives alone, a law unto itself. We are offered this explanation for the change which has occurred: "Sleeping on a dragon's hoard with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart, he had become a dragon himself" (91). Readers familiar with the previous books in the series will see Aslan as the agent behind

Examining Eustace's Transformation • Devin Brown

Lewis's explanation and, as Francis Rossow has suggested (264), will see the transformation as a manifestation of Proverbs 23:7—as a man thinks in his heart so he is. Eustace has long thought in his heart like a dragon and now has finally become one.

This transformation can be viewed as one more step in Eustace's redemption, a process which began with a baptismal like plunge from England through a magical picture into the briny Narnian sea (Schakel 56). The change into a dragon has a brief initial appeal to Eustace who thinks, "There was nothing to be afraid of any more. He was a terror himself now and nothing in the world but a knight (and not all of those) would dare to attack him. He could get even with Caspian and Edmund now" (92). These thoughts, however, are only temporary, and almost immediately the transformation has the intended effect. Lewis continues, "But the moment he thought this he realized that he didn't want to. He wanted to be friends. He wanted to get back among humans and talk and laugh and share things. He realized that he was a monster cut off from the whole human race" (92). Besides the psychological pain of the transformation, Eustace must also endure the physical pain of a golden bracelet, a treasure he had put on before his sleep and a fitting symbol of his greed, which is cutting into his now enlarged dragon arm.

Eustace's transformation to a dragon and his later return to boy form have several mythical antecedents which Lewis, a keen student of myth, was undoubtedly aware of. One which comes to mind is the story of Beauty and the Beast. In some versions of the myth, it is suggested that the Beast, who at some time previous to the story was a handsome prince, has been transformed into a monster as punishment for a beastly inner

condition. His punishment, like that of Eustace, echoes the verse from Proverbs and is intended to be redemptive. Forced by his external alteration to confront his monstrous internal condition, the Beast must undergo an inner transformation in order to reverse the outward change—he must move from a condition of concern only for self to a concern for others, and in doing so win Beauty's love, as demonstrated by her agreeing to marry him. The moment she does, he is changed back to his princely form. In both of these stories there is a two step outer change: from human form to monster and then back again. However the more significant transformation is the one which occurs within, and there is only one of these. In both stories, the real change is the one which takes place in the heart.

A second mythic antecedent can be found in Carlo Collodi's story *Pinocchio* published in Italian in 1883, translated into English in 1892, and popularized by Disney in 1940. While the puppet longs to become a real boy, he desires even more to travel to The Land of the Boobies. Candlewick, described as "the laziest and the naughtiest boy in the school" (164), persuades Pinocchio to go with him to a country where there are "no schools, no masters, and no books" (165), where every day is spent "in play and amusement from morning till night" (166). After several months in this land of endless self-gratification, living more like an animal than a boy, the puppet wakes to find that he has grown the ears he has earned, and before the day is out has been completely transformed into a donkey.

Lewis's use of the reflection pool calls to mind a third mythic predecessor—the myth of Narcissus. Like Eustace, Narcissus is self-absorbed and insensitive to the needs of others. After spurning all those around him, Narcissus falls in love with a reflection of

Examining Eustace's Transformation • Devin Brown

himself that he sees in a clear pool of water. Unable to break away from the image, Narcissus pines away and eventually dies. In his place is the white narcissus flower, a plant typically found bending over water. For Narcissus, there is no redemption; he can never leave the pool of self.

Unless he can undergo a change within, Eustace, like Narcissus, will also be trapped in his new form. But unlike Narcissus, Eustace now sees himself for what he really is and detests the sight of his own reflection (102). In another significant contrast with the Greek tale, Eustace is not abandoned but is offered divine aid in freeing himself from the chains of self-absorption. In dragon form he flies back to the beach where he surprises his shipmates who slowly piece together what has happened to him. They begin to see a different kind of change in him. We are told, "It was, however, clear to everyone that Eustace's character had been rather improved by becoming a dragon" (101). Now rather than avoiding work, he is described as anxious to help and provides food, a new mast, and warmth for his friends. Finally after six days on what they now call Dragon Island, Edmund wakes up to find someone walking along the beach. It is Eustace, now transformed back into a boy, but so changed that at first Edmund mistakes him for Prince Caspian (104). Eustace calls out to him in a low voice, "Is that you Edmund?"

"Yes. Who are you?" Edmund replies.

"Don't you know me?" asks Eustace. "It's me—Eustace."

"By jove," answers Edmund finally recognizing his cousin, "so it is" (105). Edmund's lack of recognition is understandable, and the exchange is full with meaning. Eustace, is not the boy he was, but instead the boy he was meant to be, and so is only now truly Eustace. Gradually he reveals

the details surrounding his return to his original form, or as he says, the story of how he stopped being a dragon (106).

Eustace tells of his meeting with Aslan and their journey to a garden on the top of a high mountain. Aslan shows Eustace a well and tells him that he must undress before bathing in the healing waters. Unlike the dragon pond which gave back only a reflection of self, Aslan's well requires that one leave the old self behind. Like a snake shedding his skin, Eustace peels off a layer of his dragon hide only to find that there is another layer beneath it and another below that. He wonders to himself "how ever many skins have I got to take off?" and is told by Aslan, "You will have to let me undress you" (109).

Eustace describes the painful process to Edmund: "The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt." Soon the dragon skin is lying on the grass but much thicker and darker than the other layers had been, and next to it is Eustace—although in what form Eustace does not say. He merely states: "And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been" (109). Aslan then tosses Eustace into the waters of the well, another baptismal image. The plunge is initially painful but then healing. When Eustace rises swimming and splashing, he discovers that he is a boy once again. The lion then takes Eustace out of the water and dresses him in "new clothes" (110). The golden arm ring, the emblem of Eustace's egoism, now slips off easily. Later Eustace will give it to Caspian who tosses it up into the branches of a tree where it is caught and left behind forever (113). Eustace finishes his story by telling Edmund. "I'd like to apologize. I'm afraid I've been pretty beastly."

Examining Eustace's Transformation • Devin Brown

With echoes of the Pinocchio story, Edmund tells Eustace, "Between ourselves, you haven't been as bad as I was on my first trip to Narnia. You were only an ass, but I was a traitor" (110). Pinocchio's redemption is similar to Eustace's in several elements. After being changed into a donkey, Pinocchio is purchased by a man who, seeing his tough hide, plans to skin Pinocchio to make a drum for the band of his village. The man casts Pinocchio into the sea intending to drown him, but a short time later when hauling in the rope, he finds not a donkey but a puppet. Pinocchio explains: "The good Fairy, as soon as she saw that I was in danger of drowning, sent immediately an immense shoal of fish, who believing me really to be a little dead donkey, began to eat me" (200). After the fish finish eating off his outer layer, Pinocchio finds himself back in his puppet form. Of course there is one further transformation. As the proverb promises, when the puppet begins thinking in his heart with human compassion, particularly for Geppetto, he becomes a real boy. Pinocchio's inner change is both complete and permanent. The novel ends with the boy Pinocchio speaking these words: "How ridiculous I was when I was a puppet! and how glad I am that I have become a well-behaved little boy" (223). The implication here is that once changed, Pinocchio never returns to his old ways. The same could be said of the Beast—we are told that he and Beauty "live happily ever after." The change Eustace makes is less absolute and thus perhaps more lifelike.

Eustace has undergone a symbolic death to his old self and a rebirth to a new life, but Lewis describes this redemption in very realistic terms. We read: "It would be nice, and fairly nearly true, to say that 'from that time forth Eustace was a different boy.' To be strictly accurate, he began to be a different

boy. He had relapses. There were still many days when he could be very tiresome. But most of those I shall not notice. The cure had begun" (112).

In the transformation of Eustace into a dragon and back into a boy, we are given a moving account of salvation. Lewis makes it clear that Eustace has a choice of whether to accept or to reject the redemption Aslan extends. He can say no to Aslan's offer to undress him and can retain his dragon nature; if so, he can expect the same fate as the old dragon he replaced—to live as his own little god, to follow no law beyond his own desires, and to die alone. Lewis provides a powerful portrayal of the unredeemed in *The Great Divorce* not as tortured souls burning in a lake of fire but as beings who live as far from each other as they can in a vast and featureless gray urban expanse. No one in the gray city can stand to be with anyone else as each wants to be the master of his own unimportant little corner of hell. As the great Teacher in that novel concludes: "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done'" (72).

A famous section from *The Problem of Pain* describes in a non-fictional way the way that God uses affliction—the type which Eustace, Pinocchio, and the Beast are faced with—as an instrument in our salvation. Lewis writes:

The human spirit will not even begin to try to surrender self-will as long as all seems to be well with it. Now error and sin both have this property, that the deeper they are the less their victim suspects their existence . . . Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world . . . Now God, who has

Examining Eustace's Transformation • Devin Brown

made us, knows what we are and that our happiness lies in Him. Yet we will not seek it in Him as long as He leaves us any other resort where it can even plausibly be looked for. While what we call "our own life" remains agreeable we will not surrender it to Him. What then can God do in our interests but make "our own life" less agreeable to us . . . ? (82-5)

Any look at Eustace's outer and inner transformations would be incomplete without at least a brief glimpse at his life afterwards. In the very next chapter, we watch as the Dawn Treader is encircled by the great Sea Serpent. Eustace is the first to take action. Instead of worrying how he can take care of himself, he draws his sword and begins to hack away at the monster's coils with all his might (117). Lewis notes, "It is true that he accomplished nothing beyond breaking Caspian's second-best sword into bits, but it was a fine thing for a beginner to have done" (117). Later on the book's last page we are told, "Back in our own world everyone soon started saying how Eustace had improved, and how 'You'd never know him for the same boy'" (248). The improved Eustace will be a central character in the next work in the series, *The Silver Chair*, where he asks Jill, "Wash out last term if you can. I was a different chap then. I was—gosh! what a little tick I was" (5). When Jill wants to know what it was that brought about the change, he will only say that over the holidays "a lot of queer things happened" (6).

In *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis sums up his point with these words: "I am not arguing that pain is not painful. Pain hurts. That is what the word means. I am only trying to show that the old Christian doctrine of being made 'perfect through suffering' is not incredible" (94). Eustace through the pain of being transformed into a dragon is prodded and pushed to accept

the only path that will lead out of his physical and his spiritual misery. Seeing the change that has transpired, we can only conclude with Lewis that if this world of pain "is indeed a 'vale of soul-making' it seems on the whole to be doing its work" (*Problem* 97).

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