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ON

C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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**To Hell and Back Again:
Edmund's Transformation**

Heidi Beutel

To Hell and Back Again: Edmund's Transformation

Heidi Beutel

In C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, Edmund is one of the four children to go through the wardrobe to find adventures in another world. He is depicted in the first half of the first book as the traitor who eventually causes Aslan, the Great Lion-King, to be killed. Aslan, the figure of Jesus in Narnia, makes the sacrifice for Edmund to be free after his great betrayal. Edmund as a character goes through a descent into a dark pit of treachery and selfishness before beginning his journey toward the good. His road to betrayal is a result of a series of choices that often do not seem to be very harmful. As Lewis writes in the *Screwtape Letters* (*SL*), "the safest road to Hell is the gradual one" (56). Edmund makes his descent to Hell with a slow changing of his character. Each choice he makes is slightly worse than the last, so he becomes subtly ensnared, but continues to ignore the depth of his own descent. His journey follows a "gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turning, without milestones, without signposts" (*SL*, 56). The return from Hell is also a process and he continues throughout his later life to be growing into a stronger person.

At the beginning of *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* (*LWWD*), we are introduced to Edmund as he snaps at Susan, saying, "Oh, come off it! Don't go talking like that" (2). In the following pages, Edmund is a character who is condescending toward Lucy and complains about the weather. With these small details the reader is prepared to think that Edmund will not be easy to like. He appears to be annoying, and perhaps a little self-centered, but certainly not an evil character.

When Lucy has her first adventure in the wardrobe, though, suddenly Edmund becomes something worse, something more like an enemy, as he "sneers and jeers" at Lucy (23), disbelieving her story and mocking her.

We learn that Edmund can be "quite spiteful at times" and that he seems to thrive on her discomfort (23). When he also goes through the wardrobe into Narnia, he initially shouts an apology to Lucy for not believing her. However, his actions seem more motivated by fear of the unknown place than of real remorse. Also, when Lucy does not answer, he immediately attributes her silence to her unforgiveness, or petty games. He shows a lack of concern for Lucy who is also alone in this strange country; and he is completely focused on himself and gratifying his own desires. Edmund has now taken a step towards evil, from being merely annoying to being actively spiteful.

The first Narnian Edmund meets is the White Witch, who eventually will lead Edmund into greater evil. She does not appear friendly at the beginning. In fact she is unkind, even rude, and Edmund "felt sure that she was going to do something dreadful" (30). Instead, the Witch subtly appeals to Edmund's greed. He allows her to give him something hot to drink, to warm him. Then she offers him candy to satisfy his hunger. Turkish Delight, while not on the whole a bad thing, becomes for Edmund an object of his desire that overwhelms all others, but his desire is never satisfied. In the *Screwtape Letters*, Lewis writes of the Devil's attack on normal healthy pleasures. He calls it "an ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure" (42). Edmund allows his craving the enchanted Turkish Delight to overwhelm his reason, which would have warned him against the evil Witch and her plans. Because Edmund's craving for Turkish Delight is so strong, the Witch is able to convince him that he could have as much as he wanted, he could even be Prince of Narnia, if he would only bring his brother and sisters to the Witch. As he listens to her promises and considers

betraying his siblings for the sake of his own pleasure, Edmund takes another step toward evil. He ignores the warning signs he has seen and heard, and slips closer to his final treachery.

When Lucy and Edmund meet in Narnia, Lucy warns Edmund of the evil Witch, although she has no idea of his plans to betray his family. Another sign of Edmund's downward progression is his immediate thoughts of how to conceal his meeting with the Witch. He instinctively knows that if the others were to get into Narnia they would "be on the side of the Faun and animals" (39), not the side of the Queen. Again Edmund knows inside that the Witch is evil, but he chooses to view her the way he pleases, as a means of fulfilling his desire and greed.

As readers we can hardly forgive Edmund when he lets Lucy down in front of Susan and Peter, claiming that they were only pretending Narnia was real. Lucy's excitement and joy at finally having someone who would stand up for her was turned to misery and tears. Edmund's lie, his choice to let Lucy down, is a foreshadowing of his final betrayal. At this point, he has chosen to create misery and pain for no other reason than his own comfort. As Edmund slips farther and farther away from integrity, the narrator reports that Edmund is "becoming a nastier person every minute" (41).

Finally, all four children arrive in Narnia and are warned by the Beavers about the White Witch. Edmund first tries to head them in the direction of the White Witch's house and then tries to keep the others from meeting Mr. Beaver. Although he fails, he succeeds in getting information about their travel plans, and where Aslan is going to be. During conversation, Mr. Beaver mentions Aslan, the Great Lion, and each child is filled with a different feeling. For Peter, Susan, and Lucy, this feeling is wonderful. However, Edmund "had a sensation of mysterious horror" (64). This is another sign of how far Edmund has descended. Lewis writes elsewhere, that humans will "hate every idea" that suggests God when it "involves facing and intensifying a whole vague cloud of half-conceived guilt" (*SL*, 54). Edmund is aware somewhere inside that he is slipping away from the good, and for him to hear the name of Aslan only awakes in him truths he does not want to face.

After the Beavers' hospitality, Edmund makes his way to the Witch's house, ready to betray his brother and sisters. He has by this time quite convinced himself that the Witch is not nearly as bad as the others have said. As for what she would do to his siblings and friends, he does not want her to be kind to them, but "he managed to believe, or pretend he believed, that she

wouldn't do anything very bad to them" (85). If Edmund had been honest with himself, he would have seen what she was. He really does know "deep down inside him . . . that the White Witch was bad and cruel" (86). Instead of facing his mistakes, turning around and making up with the others, he puts all uncertain thoughts out of his head. As he walks, he plots what he will do once he is king, and how he will get back at Peter. His mind is focused on himself, and what will gratify his own pleasures. Edmund is coming to the end of his descent. One picture of Hell is a place where one is constantly turning and returning to one's self, with no hope of escape. In the place Edmund is now, every thought is for his own pleasure and for himself. He is in a type of Hell.

When Edmund betrays Peter, Susan, and Lucy, he does it completely. He tells the White Witch every single detail about their location and conversation with the Beavers. Edmund has come to the bottom of his descent. After his betrayal, he sees the witch's real nature appear. No longer does she tempt him with empty promises, but instead treats him like a slave. Instead of a roomful of Turkish Delight and a Princely welcome, he receives a dry bread crust and a mocking laugh. Suddenly, Edmund no longer wishes to be with the White Witch. However, he simply wants to be free of the bad situation; his main concern is still only his own comfort and satisfaction. Even though Edmund has made no steps toward the good, he has ended his descent toward evil. Also, he seems to realize his mistake about the Witch. From his new perspective, everything he had said to make himself believe "that her side was really the right side sounded to him silly now" (110).

Edmund's unconcern for anyone but himself is suddenly challenged when the White Witch picks up her wand to turn a group of happy woodland creatures into stone. Edmund is suddenly aware of their need and shouts to stop the witch. The Narrator comments, "And Edmund, for the first time in this story felt sorry for someone besides himself" (*LWWD*, 113). The beginning of a gradual ascent toward the good has begun.

As the Witch begins sharpening her knife to kill him, Edmund is brought face to face with the Witch's evil and his own deception. No longer can he hide from her true character. Aslan's faithful Narnians are sent to fight the witch and are able to rescue Edmund, but do not succeed in killing the Witch. The day after, Edmund has a long talk with Aslan. The details of this conversation are left to the reader's imagination, but "it was a conversation which Edmund never forgot" (*LWWD*, 135). Although this conversation is certainly a

milestone in Edmund's upward journey, he still has a ways to go. He continues his transformation with his sincere apologies to each one of his brother and sisters. There is a stark contrast between his earlier selfish attitude when confronted with his mistakes: "I'll pay you all back for this, you pack of stuck-up, self-satisfied prigs" (53), and his sincere "I'm sorry" to each of his siblings (136).

The White Witch comes to meet the good Narnians together with Aslan, and has one request. She claims that Edmund belongs to her, because the Deep Magic that Narnia was built on gives her the right to all traitors. Edmund knows she has come to kill him and hears her shout that he is a traitor. However, Edmund has now come to the place where he is beyond thinking about himself. Before, he only sought to please himself, but now he is learning to look beyond himself. Instead of thinking about how he betrayed them, Edmund "just went on looking at Aslan. It didn't seem to matter what the Witch said" (138). Edmund has become truly humble, for the goal of humility is to "turn the man's attention away from self" to God (*SL*, 63). Edmund has passed the point of looking at himself either because of his desires and talents, or because of his failures. He is an example of one who has gotten his "mind off the subject of his own value altogether" (*SL*, 65).

Finally, Edmund must face the Witch in battle. Having allowed himself to be deceived by her, he must now actively confront her as an enemy. Peter describes Edmund's bravery: "He fought his way through . . . to reach her. And when he reached her, he had the sense to bring his sword smashing down on her wand" (176). Although Edmund is wounded terribly, he has taken another step toward the better. He has faced his worst enemy and won. When Aslan and the girls reach him, Lucy gives him a drop of cordial from her bottle. The healing liquid restores him and Lucy sees that he looks better than he has since before he went away to the school where things had first gone wrong. He has "become his real old self again" (177).

After the four children win the battle and are crowned kings and queens of Narnia, they reign for many years. The description of Edmund after he has become king shows how he continues to grow even after this battle. He is described as "graver and quieter than Peter, and great in council and judgement. He was called King Edmund the Just" (181). One example of his wisdom as King is in *The Horse and His Boy* (*HHB*), where Shasta accidentally overhears an important conversation meant for other people. Shasta says to King Edmund, "I was no traitor, really I wasn't" (171). King Edmund believes him, and forgives any wrongdoing on Shasta's part, while at the same time

giving him this advice: "I know now that you were no traitor, boy . . . But if you would not be taken for one, another time try not to hear what's meant for other ears" (171). Edmund has come to the place where he can guide others. He has been through the paths of a traitor, but has come out, and can warn others of the dangers that lie therein.

King Edmund also offers wisdom in the incident with Rabadash, the prince of Calormene who tries to overthrow King Lune at his castle of Anvard. Edmund is fiercely angry with Rabadash for his treacherous act against the city, and is willing to fight him again. But then he remembers his own act of treachery and the forgiveness that has changed his life. When they are discussing what to do with the prince, he makes this comment, "But even a traitor may mend. I have known one that did" (*HHB* 205-206). This comment proves that Edmund has continued to reflect on and grow from his experience. He is aware of the possibility of change in others, and is willing to take a risk with someone else for the sake of redemption.

Edmund as a character changes from a pleasure seeking, self-gratifying boy to a wise and just man. His journey has been long and hard, and it has led him down a subtle path into the treachery and deceit of Hell before he could begin to see the true way. As a character, Edmund seems to be much the better for his hard experiences; like a wise person, he has used those times to change and grow. His final appearances as a character prove that he has gone through a lasting transformation that has continued into his adulthood.

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