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# Not a Tame Lion: What This Does and Does Not Mean

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# Not a Tame Lion: What This Does and Does Not Mean

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**C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS**

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**Not a Tame Lion:  
What This Does and Does Not Mean**

Raven Richardson

### THIRD PLACE STUDENT ESSAY

## Not a Tame Lion: What This Does and Does Not Mean

Raven Richardson

*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* was written by C.S. Lewis and published in 1950 as the first book in the famous children's series *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* Lewis tells the story of four siblings who find their way into the land of Narnia through a magical wardrobe. The story revolves around the children's interactions with Aslan the lion, the king of Narnia. Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy first learn of Aslan through Mr. and Mrs. Beaver. Lucy assumes Aslan is a man. Upon discovering he is really a lion, the question is asked, "'Then he isn't safe?' said Lucy. 'Safe?' said Mr. Beaver; 'don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King I tell you'" (80). This description of Aslan as a lion that is unsafe and good at the same time provides a simple, yet amazingly complex picture of the nature of Aslan. This somewhat paradoxical statement prepares the reader for the presentation of Aslan as a lion that is not tame, yet still full of goodness. In the concluding chapter of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* the narrator tells the reader,

But amid all these rejoicings Aslan himself quietly slipped away. And when the Kings and Queens noticed that he wasn't there they said nothing about it. For Mr. Beaver had warned them, 'He'll be coming and going' he had said. 'One day you'll see him and another you won't. He doesn't like being tied down—and of course he has other countries to attend to. It's quite all right. He'll often drop in. Only you mustn't press him. He's wild you know. Not like a tame lion (182).

One of the essential implications of the phrase, "He is not a tame lion" (30), is the description of Aslan as

unrestrained and independent of the whims of the individuals around him. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Coriakin expresses this in telling Lucy, "'Gone', said he, 'and you and I quite crestfallen. It's always like that, you can't keep him; it's not as if he were a tame lion.'" (162). In *The Last Battle*, Tirian attempts to explain this concept to the stubborn Dwarfs by saying, "'Do you think I keep him in my wallet, fools?' said Tirian. 'Who am I that I could make Aslan appear at my bidding? He's not a tame lion'" (83). In these examples of the free nature of Aslan, Lewis may have been attempting to say something to society. One of the main ways success is measured in modern society is by the amount of power and control one has over life. If something is uncontrolled and wild, it cannot be beneficial to one's well-being and success. The correct attitude toward the uncontrollable nature of life should be one of humility. When the realization of the finiteness that makes up humanity hits, the proper response should be one of thankfulness that God cannot be tamed or called at personal bidding. If the characters in *The Chronicles of Narnia* had been allowed to control Aslan and have him do all the things they thought best at the time, Narnia might be a very different place.

These examples of the spontaneous nature of Aslan may lead the reader to wonder if there are any restraints at all on Aslan. Can he really do whatever he pleases, whenever he pleases? Before this question can be answered, an important piece of groundwork must be established in regards to the nature and core of Aslan's being. Lewis provides this foundation by emphasizing throughout the books the intrinsic goodness that makes up the character of Aslan. Mr. Beaver initially gives us this insight in the statement referred to earlier, "'Course he isn't safe. But he's good'" (80). The concept of intrinsic goodness is a difficult one to grasp in an age where very few things are perceived as entirely good

and pure. This concept may also appear problematic because it is paired with the characteristic of Aslan as a lion that is not tame. In modern times, when something is referred to as “not tame,” it is assumed that label gives its object freedom to do whatever is desired. Often times, even the inhabitants of Narnia are confused on this aspect of the nature of Aslan. In *The Last Battle* one reads, “‘He is not a *tame* lion,’ said Tirian. ‘How should we know what he would do?’” (30). Maybe if Tirian had understood that goodness is an essential part of who Aslan is, he would have responded more like Prince Rilian in saying, “‘Doubtless this signifies that Aslan will be our good lord, whether he means us to live or die’” (191). The criticality of Aslan’s goodness is expressed most powerfully by Tirian’s statement, “‘Would it not be better to be dead than to have this horrible fear that Aslan has come and is not like the Aslan we have believed in and longed for? It is as if the sun rose one day and were a black sun’” (30). In describing Aslan as good to the very core of his being, Lewis was presenting a beautiful picture of what modern humanity is desperately seeking. Much of the doubt that is experienced in the world today towards simple goodness may be a result of the disappointment that is often found in things that appear to be “good” only on the surface. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis satisfies the readers search for goodness in the character of Aslan.

So then, if Aslan’s very nature is good, is he bound to the moral law? How does Aslan’s characteristic of being an untamed lion play into this issue? In *The Last Battle*, Prince Tirian and Jewel have a difficult time understanding the interplay between the wildness and the goodness that make up the spirit of Aslan. Whenever they discover from the Water Rat that the so-called Aslan is commanding the Dryads to be felled in Lantern Waste, the first response given is one of disbelief that Aslan could be commanding such horrible things. Tirian and Jewel seem to accept this evil behavior as good and they attribute it to the wild, untamed nature of Aslan. This is seen in the comment, “‘I don’t know’, said Jewel miserably. ‘He’s not a *tame* lion’” (25). Tirian and Jewel should have recognized that as an intrinsically good being, Aslan would never wish or command anything that was evil, even though he might have the power to do so. In this sense, the moral law can be seen as an expression and outgrowth of Aslan’s nature. Lewis may have attempted to convey this point to the readers in the episode of Aslan’s sacrificial death for Edmund. When a suggestion was made by Susan to try and find a way to avoid the consequences of the moral law of Narnia, the response given to her was, “‘Work against the Emperor’s Magic?’ said Aslan, turning to her with something like a frown on his face. And nobody ever made that

suggestion to him again” (142). This simple incident suggests that disobeying the moral law was as contrary to Aslan’s nature as acting in an evil and self-serving way. Rather than being bound to the moral law, maybe the moral law is bound to the inherent goodness of Aslan.

Because Aslan is innately good, it can be assumed that he will always act out of this goodness. No matter what the time, place, or situation, Aslan’s motives and actions will always come out of his nature of goodness. While many characters in *The Chronicles of Narnia* may have a difficult time grasping this concept, others handle it excellently. One of these characters is the Marsh-Wiggle, Puddleglum. Because of his somewhat pessimistic personality, his faith in the goodness of Aslan is given a wonderful backdrop to shine against. In *The Silver Chair*, Puddleglum reminds Jill and Eustace that they must obey Aslan’s orders, even though Aslan did not reveal what the outcome of their obedience would be. This incident gives the reader a reminder of Puddleglum’s confidence in Aslan’s nature of goodness.

If Aslan always does what is good and best in every situation, how then can it be said that he is not a tame lion? It may seem to some that these two concepts might be in direct contradiction of each other. Because of Aslan’s constant goodness, it could be assumed that he is somewhat predictable. This fact seems to challenge Aslan’s presentation as a lion that is not tame. Lewis gives the readers a great insight into how these two dynamics, one of unrestrained power and one of unchanging goodness, go hand in hand. Lewis says in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, “‘People who have not been in Narnia sometimes think that a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time’” (126). This is a problem not only in Narnia, which can be seen in Tirian and Jewel’s confusion regarding the evil actions of the fake Aslan, but also in modern society; humanity longs for things to be either-or. Whenever a paradox is presented, the common trend is to dismiss it as too confusing or time-consuming. What the inhabitants of Narnia and many people in our world today need to realize is that the concept of divine goodness they possess may not be a complete picture of what divine goodness really is. Whether in Narnia or on Earth, this discrepancy between what may seem to be divinely good and what really is divinely good can lead to some interesting paradoxes. At times, something that is assumed to be divinely good can actually be, in the eyes of an all-knowing God, not good at all. Also, what may seem to God as the best possible thing that could happen is known as horrible tragedy to others. Does this then mean that one can never really know what is divinely good? The answer to that question is a negative. In *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis points out,

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Divine goodness differs from ours, but it is not sheerly different; it differs from ours not as white from black, but as a perfect circle from a child's first attempt to draw a wheel. But when the child has learned to draw, it will know that the circle it then makes is what it was trying to make from the very beginning (35).

If Tirian and Jewel had understood this simple component regarding the divine goodness of Aslan, then maybe they would have had a better time recognizing the evil actions of the false Aslan for what they were. Aslan is not a tame lion and has the freedom to work and move in many different ways, but there is always the solid assurance that no matter how he comes, in whatever wild and unexpected way he might choose, he will always be good and always be Aslan.

What exactly does the phrase, "He's not a tame lion" (30) mean, and what does it not mean? How does this concept apply to life in a modern society where freedom from all restraints is valued above all else? Lewis may have been trying to explain to his audiences that the root of the desire for the untamed life can only be found in the human embodiment of goodness, Jesus Christ. The untamed life is not a life of unrestrained passions and passing emotions. Through the life of Christ, it can be seen that goodness leads to true freedom. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis gives an inspiring portrayal of that true freedom and goodness in the character of Aslan, the King of Narnia.