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The Wardrobe, the Witch and the Lion

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Cover Page Footnote

Keynote Address

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The Wardrobe, the Witch and the Lion

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

The Wardrobe, the Witch and the Lion

Louis A. Markos

“In these days of wars and rumors of wars—haven’t you ever dreamed of a place where there was peace and security, where living was not a struggle but a lasting delight?” With this question, Frank Capra begins his great epic film, *Lost Horizons*. Based on the novel by James Hilton, Capra’s film transports a group of displaced pilgrims from the war-torn Chinese city of Baskul to the mystical land of Shangri-la. After being kidnapped by a seemingly mad pilot and then crash landing on the snowy summit of an inaccessible mountain in Tibet, our pilgrims trudge their way up a treacherous, frozen path, turn a corner, and . . . gaze down into a green and fertile valley. It is one of the most magical moments in film history.

In the 2005 screen version of C.S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, director Andrew Adamson allows us to experience this same transition from a world of war and madness to a land of wonder and magic. Although Lewis tells us in Chapter One that the four Pevensie children are evacuees from London, the film allows us to witness (in realistic and even harrowing detail) both the bombing of London by Nazi planes and the difficult separation of the four children from their mother. The world these children are fleeing, the film makes clear, is truly one of wars and rumors of wars, a world of struggle that offers neither peace nor security. Even the cynical viewer who would dismiss fantasy as mere “escapism” would have to admit that this is a world to escape from. The starkness of the opening scenes makes the moment when Lucy (and later her siblings) pushes her way through a musty old wardrobe into a snowy Narnian wood all the more enchanting and breathtaking. Here, surely, is a place of rest. Or is it?

Narnia, as it turns out, is going through its own version of World War II, with a totalitarian White Witch who would devour the freedom of Narnia and a noble Lion (a symbol for Christ but also the symbol for England) who will, like Winston Churchill, stand alone if he must against the Witch’s tyranny. It is a vital part of both novel and film that the danger of Narnia becomes apparent quite quickly; neither we nor the children are given the luxury to tiptoe through the tulips of a restored Eden. The children must fight for their Shangri-la with the same dedication and faith as their father back home is fighting for the freedom of England: a point that is latent in the book but is made much more strongly and clearly in the film through the addition of some well written, pointed dialogue.

Narnia is as much worth fighting for as England, and the stakes are just as high. Neither the European nor the Narnian war is a mere matter of trading rights or border disputes; it is about good versus evil, freedom versus slavery, light versus darkness. In Narnia, however, those sides are more distinct, embodied not only in Aslan and the White Witch but in their individual followers. As they did for *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, WETA Workshop has crafted creatures that convey by their outward appearance the virtue or vice of their inner nature. It is thrilling, in a modern age that has increasingly caved in to moral relativism, to see a film that so clearly takes delight in crafting a world of moral certainty. That, of course, is not to say that either novel or film gives us simple, cardboard good guys and bad guys. Novel and film present us with both a collaborator turned patriot (Tumnus) and a good English boy who gives in to envy and despair and turns traitor (Edmund). And the film goes one better than Lewis. Not only is the character of Tumnus skillfully

fleshed out (he is the son of a dead “resistance fighter”); his decision not to turn over Lucy is partly influenced by a brief, powerful encounter he has with Aslan; he ends up in the same dungeon with Edmund but shows himself more loyal), but the film adds a second character, a quick-witted fox who works in the Narnian “underground” and dies a martyr.

In such a world, it will not do for the Pevensie children (even Lucy) to remain innocent of the opposing natures of good and evil. They must understand what is at stake, and they must take sides. They must become heroes and heroines; indeed, they must become kings and queens. (Perhaps influenced by the first Harry Potter novel/film, Adamson, unlike Lewis, has the loyal Narnians immediately begin to treat the Pevensies as though they were kings and queens from the outset.) Adamson’s children (as opposed to Lewis’s) are not only given more chances to display courage, but engage in a fuller dialogue (both external and internal) on the nature of heroism. One of the best bits of “added dialogue” occurs when Peter is about to fight Maugrim the wolf (chief henchman of the Witch’s Gestapo-like secret police). Susan, justifiably afraid that her brother will be killed, cries out to him that just because Father Christmas gave him a sword, that does not make him a hero. Adamson also develops further the strength that the Pevensies take from their unity as a family. He retains Professor Kirke’s “liar/lunatic/lord” argument in the beginning of the film (either Lucy is crazy, lying, or telling the truth about her trip to Narnia), but has Kirke add that Peter and Susan should also trust Lucy because they are family. This focus on family trust and unity is established in the opening scene when Mrs. Pevensie makes Peter promise to protect his three younger siblings (also not in the novel). Peter stays true to this promise, and Adamson even inserts several brief episodes in which Peter tries to make his siblings return to England and safety while he remains behind to fulfil his obligations to Narnia.

All this is to say that the film’s development of Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy is in many ways better than the novel (though the particularly moral and theological dimensions of Edmund’s temptation, sin, and betrayal are muted and even somewhat muddled). We truly experience and believe Peter’s transformation into a knight as we do Susan’s overcoming of her skepticism and fear and Edmund’s sincere repentance and maturation into a brave and selfless warrior. We also sense more powerfully than in the novel the danger that the children are in. And yet, this well-handled development of the children, which marks (along with the excellent portrayal of the Witch and the brilliant realizations of the Narnian landscapes and characters) the film’s greatest strength, is also its greatest weakness.

For the expansion of the children’s characters and roles comes at a very high price: the lessening of the character and role of Aslan. The shift in emphasis

becomes immediately apparent in the dinner scene with the Beavers. Lewis provides us with two prophetic rhymes: one about Aslan (“Wrong will be right / when Aslan comes in sight,” etc.), that is recited first and that is given far more prominence, and one about the children (“When Adam’s flesh and Adam’s bone,” etc.). Adamson eliminates the first altogether and then makes it seem as if the prophecy about the children is the central and most important prophecy: the one that the Narnians have most been longing for. In addition, most of the information that the Beavers share about Aslan is left out (including the vital fact that he is the Son of the Emperor Beyond the Sea). We are not even told that he is a lion (which eliminates Edmund’s true reason for drawing a charcoal mustache on the stone lion he sees in the courtyard of the Witch’s castle)! The messianic hope that surrounds the return of Aslan is transferred almost completely to the children; it is as if Aslan is linked to the prophecy of the children, rather than the children being linked to the prophecy of Aslan.

But the weakness in the film’s portrayal of Aslan’s goes far beyond the trimming down of the scene with the Beavers. It is bad enough that the audience is not properly “warmed up” for the arrival of Aslan; when Aslan does in fact arrive on the scene, he is a shadow of what he is in the novel (and in the hearts of all lovers of the books). The computer animation for Aslan is excellent, and the range of facial expressions (though rarely and not too effectively used) is admirable, but Aslan himself evokes little awe or reverence. Except in the well-shot (and well-lit) scene when we see the newly-risen Lion, Aslan is just not majestic or powerful enough; Liam Neeson’s voicing of Aslan also lacks the necessary depth and resonance. In neither form nor voice does Aslan overwhelm us as he should; he is not even backed up with an appropriate orchestral score that would help engrave his image in our subconscious (compared to the stirring scores that accompany the Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter films, the score for this film is an almost complete disappointment).

One of C.S. Lewis’s key purposes in writing not only *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* but the *Chronicles* as a whole was to provide his child (and adult) readers with something that our age has lost: a sense of the numinous, of the holy, of the sacred. Again and again in the *Chronicles* we are told that when the children meet Aslan, they realize for the first time that something can be *both* beautiful and terrible, both exhilarating and scary. When they first stand before the Lion, they are filled with joy, but their knees go “trembly.” Though Adamson does, thankfully, include Lewis’s key observation that Aslan is not a tame lion, but he is good, he doesn’t include it until Aslan is about to disappear from the screen, and he does not adequately visualize this aspect of Aslan’s nature in the course of the film. He also diminishes Aslan in another way. Though the film retains Aslan’s definition of the Deeper Magic, it leaves out his explanation that the

Witch's knowledge only goes back to the dawn of time, but his (by implication) goes back before the beginning. Likewise, though we are told that Aslan comes and goes (he is not a tame lion), we are not told that he has other countries to attend to. In the place of Lewis's eternal Lion, we are given something like the "historical Aslan."

Most disappointing of all, the film leaves out the richly cinematic episode, directly after his resurrection, when Aslan wrestles with the girls on the grass. "It was," Lewis writes in Chapter XV, "such a romp as no one has ever had except in Narnia; and whether it was more like playing with a thunderstorm or playing with a kitten Lucy could never make up her mind." Perhaps no episode in the book better illustrates Lewis's insistence that Aslan is someone to be loved and caressed but never trifled with. We *are* given the scene which directly follows (when the girls ride on his back to the Witch's castle), but the scene is terribly truncated and another chance to capture on film Aslan's overwhelming power is lost (my son was particularly disappointed that the film left out the thrilling moment in the book when Aslan, with the girls still on his back, leaps in a single bound over the high wall that surrounds the locked castle). The film also allows Aslan to let out his victorious roar, but even this moment lacks force, power, and conviction.

Still, although the film's Aslan is stripped of much of his awe and radiance, he *does* do all of the things that Lewis has him do in the novel. The film works out the full "sacred drama" of Aslan, giving us both his death and resurrection and explaining well the distinction between the Deep Magic and the Deeper Magic; it even includes a clear sense that the Deep Magic (the Law) is something that both defines good and evil and that must at times be appeased by sacrifice. As for the Deeper Magic, Aslan is given a good added line when he says that the Witch did not understand the true nature of sacrifice. The film also provides us with a single, wordless shot that will, I believe, remain indelible in the memories of those who see the film. The moment comes when Edmund has been rescued and is speaking alone with Aslan on a hill; in the posture and lighting of the scene, we sense powerfully the forgiveness that Aslan is extending to Edmund and the way in which that forgiveness is already changing Edmund from within. A similar shot that lingers in the mind is the image of Susan and Lucy curled up together on the Stone Table with the dead body of Aslan. All the grief of the moment, all the loss of hope and the longing for the loved one dead is conveyed in a few seconds of film. Had there been more scenes like these in the film, the fuller dimensions of Aslan that all but embrace us when we read the novels (or listen to the excellent radio play version produced by Focus on the Family) might have made their way more effectively into the film. Indeed, though Lucy *is* handled well in the film, the diminishing of Aslan means that we miss out on one of

the key aspects of her character: her sensitivity to the moods of Aslan and her deep, intimate connection with the Lion. In the absence of a truly mystical Lion, we lose our sense of Lucy as a mystic.

As for the "crucifixion" scene, it is done as well as it possibly could be (though Lewis's altar-like Stone Table is turned into a platform-like stage). The filmmakers should be commended for making a scene that can be viewed by adults and children alike and that will fill both with a sense of dread and fear (the same goes for the well-executed battle scenes). The Witch's gloating speech over Aslan as she is about to kill him is powerfully staged and performed, and is made even more effective by an added touch of cinematic bravura: after she kills Aslan, the Witch's eyes seem to turn black. Again, it must be emphasized that the film is faithful to Lewis's Narnian Gospel story, but that story has far less impact because Aslan is first denied his majestic build up in the conversation at the home of the Beavers, and then is not allowed to exude holiness or provoke awe in the scenes leading up to his death and resurrection.

Why, the viewer (and reviewer) must inevitably ask, is Aslan's character so shorn of its glory and power? One would have to be naïve not to lay the blame for this muting of the fullness of Aslan partly (if not in great part) on the filmmakers' fear of seeming to press the link between Aslan and Christ. This is surely the reason for denying Aslan his eternal nature and his status as the Son of the Emperor. But it may also be due to the director's memory of first reading *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when he was a child (Adamson has stated that he wanted to capture his memory of that experience on film). Perhaps what really drew the young Adamson to the novel in the first place was the land of Narnia itself and the adventures of the four children rather than Aslan *per se*. Adamson certainly lavishes considerable care on Narnia and its various set pieces, and audiences of all ages should be enchanted. He also, as we have seen, does an excellent job with the four children (all of whom are also well cast and acted). Most viewers will fall in love with Narnia, and for that Adamson, WETA, and all the producers deserve praise. But viewers will not leave the theater feeling the way Lucy does at the end of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* when she tells Aslan that it is not Narnia but *him* whom she truly loves.

And that leads us to a third reason for the diminishment of Aslan. Perhaps our modern age and cinema are not capable of fully conceiving and realizing a character like Aslan. Perhaps Lewis was right that we have lost our ability to perceive of something as being both beautiful and terrible, that we have lost (really lost) our sense of the sacred. "When they tried to look at Aslan's face," writes Lewis in Chapter XII, "they just caught a glimpse of the golden mane and the great, royal, solemn, overwhelming eyes; and then they found they couldn't look at him and went all trembly." Does

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there lurk in this sentence a kind of real magic that our modern world, that not even the Hollywood Dream Factory, can capture or understand?

If so, we had better start reading our Lewis again . . . and our Bibles.