The Good Guys and the Bad Guys: Teachable Moments in the Chronicles of Narnia

Louis A. Markos
Houston Baptist University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, History Commons, Philosophy Commons, and the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol5/iss1/33
The Good Guys and the Bad Guys: Teachable Moments in the Chronicles of Narnia

Cover Page Footnote
Keynote Address

This essay is available in Inklings Forever: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol5/iss1/33
KEYNOTE ADDRESS

The Good Guys and the Bad Guys:
Teachable Moments in the Chronicles of Narnia
Louis A. Markos

Though I enjoy, now and then, visiting the local Cineplex with my wife and two children, I really much prefer to screen films in the privacy of our family room. Liberated from the "tyranny of silence" that must (understandably) prevail in a crowded theater, we are left free to intersperse our viewing with an on-going dialogue about the film. As the only teacher in the family (and an English one at that!) I invariably do most of the talking: now guiding the children through the twists and turns of the plot, now highlighting the strengths and flaws of the main characters, now elaborating on the theme or moral of the film. Usually, the kids are eager to join in the dialogue and will often assault me with a barrage of questions. Their questions range from the simple to the complex, the sublime to the ridiculous, but no matter the movie and no matter the mood they are in, there is one question that they always, always ask: "Who are the good guys, and who are the bad guys?"

Now if I were a good modern relativist, I would tell them that words like "good" and "bad" are not fixed terms with a universal, timeless meaning but labels that shift from age to age and culture to culture. If I were a good postmodern multiculturalist, I might add that these labels are not "innocent," but are imposed by powerful, dominant races, classes, and genders, on other races, classes, and genders that they perceive as weaker, less rational, or less civilized. But (thankfully for my children) I am neither. Though I am (as a Christian) well aware that there is no one who liveth and sinneth not and that all men share a propensity for evil, and though I know too that one man's terrorist is often another man's freedom fighter, I am also (as a Christian) convinced that eternal, cross-cultural standards exist by which we can judge certain groups, actions, and motivations as upholding those standards (good) or violating them (bad). True, as fallen creatures living in a fallen world, we must both accept the existence of ambiguity and refrain from judging the hearts of others, but this does not mean that moral certainty is an absolute impossibility. Indeed, I would argue that we are, by nature, ethical animals, endowed not only with the ability to discern right behavior from wrong, but with an innate sense that we ought to embrace the former and shun the latter. (The existence of psychopaths and sociopaths no more invalidates this truth than the existence of paralytics invalidates the fact that our legs were made for walking.) Every child who asks his father to identify for him the good guys and the bad guys is participating, in his own small way, in this in-bred, hard-wired ethical imperative.

If this be so (and I am convinced that it is), then it lies incumbent on all people who interact with the young to so foster and guide them that they will grow to become responsible moral agents: able to distinguish that which is good from that which is evil, that which is virtuous from that which is vicious, that which should (and must) be encouraged if the individual and society are to prosper from that which must be avoided if we and our world are to resist plunging into darkness. If we do not do this (either because we are lazy and apathetic or because we have internalized a modernist/postmodernist agenda), then we abdicate, in part, our roles as parents and educators, as shapers of the hearts, minds, and souls of the young. More than that, we court disaster for ourselves and our nation.

But our task does not end here. It is not enough merely to identify which are the good guys and which the bad. We must teach our children as well why the good guys are good and the bad guys are bad. More than that, we must help them to understand the true nature of goodness and evil. It's easy enough for English-speaking children to see that the words "good" and "God" and the words "evil" and "Devil" are
(accidentally, if serendipitously) closely allied in our language. It is more difficult to define for them either the divine qualities that shine through true goodness and make it live or the satanic nature that empowers evil with its own perverse anti-life.

Still, we must try.

Many theories have been put forward to explain the phenomenal success of *The Lord of the Rings* (both Tolkien’s three-part novel and the trilogy of films by Peter Jackson). Though no single reason can suffice to account fully for this phenomenon, I would suggest that a key element in the success of Tolkien’s epic fantasy is that, in the face of the apparent triumph of relativism, the novels/films present their readers/viewers with a world in which moral certainty is both philosophically possible and practically necessary. Whether between armies and their leaders or within the tempted and tormented souls of the central characters, the battle between good and evil rages with a fury that is as powerful in its dramatic intensity as it is challenging in its ethical clarity. By the end of the novels/films, we feel that we have not only peered deeply into the nature of pure goodness (Sam) and pure evil (Sauron), but that we understand how and why it is that the characters who are pulled in both directions (Saruman, Aragorn, Frodo, Gollum, etc.) follow the paths they do into the darkness or the light.

Yes, *The Lord of the Rings* has proven a godsend for parents who would open their children’s eyes to the precise nature of goodness and evil, virtue and vice. And yet, for all its effectiveness at laying bare the exact qualities that distinguish the good guys from the bad guys, it must (I believe) finally take second place to another series of fantasy novels that explores its moral and ethical terrain with even greater precision and insight. I speak, of course, of the seven novels that make up *The Chronicles of Narnia*, novels written by a man who was not only a life-long friend of Tolkien and a fellow Oxford don, but who shared Tolkien’s faith in a Christian worldview. Like Tolkien, C.S. Lewis affirmed the real existence of God and his angels, both the good ones who chose to remain in God’s presence, and the evil ones (or devils) who rebelled against God’s authority and thereby fell into a state of corruption. He believed as well that man, though created in the image of God and declared by him to be good, has, like the devils, fallen into a state of sin. However, whereas the devils are eternally and irredeemably corrupt, a true and titanic struggle between good and evil, the way of God and the way of Satan, rages in the human breast. Alone we cannot win the battle, but God in Christ has provided for us a way of redemption by which we can be freed from the corruption within and participate in the glorious goodness of God. The struggle defines us, in part, as human beings, and is one of the things that distinguishes us from the lower animals. We are the only earthly creatures who possess the knowledge of good and of evil, the only creatures with the capacity both to strive after (and to recognize) goodness and to succumb to the corrupting and finally dehumanizing influence of evil. In the Chronicles, we meet characters who avail themselves of both capacities, who choose paths that draw them either toward that goodness which is most fully embodied in the person of Aslan, the Lion King of Narnia, or toward the evil that dwells in (and possesses) the perverse soul of Jadis, the White Witch.

Though the geography of these dual paths can be traced through all seven of the Chronicles, I will focus in this essay only on *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Here, in the first written and first published of the Chronicles, Lewis sets in motion the moral and ethical trajectory along which all the later novels will travel. He also initiates the second, Christian meaning that underlies all of the Chronicles by replaying, on a different world that runs in accordance with a different time scheme, the redemption story of the Bible.

The novel begins when the four Pevensie children (Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy) enter into the magical world of Narnia (a land of talking animals, living trees, and mythic beasts) through the back of an old wardrobe. Once there, they discover that Narnia has been ruled for a hundred years by the usurping White Witch, who has made it “always winter and never Christmas.” When they learn that they have, unwittingly, caused the arrest of Mr. Tumnus, a friendly Narnian faun, they set out to find a way to rescue him. They are taken in by Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, who inform them that though the Witch’s power is too great for them to fight alone, the lion Aslan (son of the Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea) has returned to Narnia and is now “on the move.” During dinner with the Beavers, the children learn that their brother Edmund (who, during an earlier visit to Narnia, had been tempted by the Witch’s Turkish Delight) has stolen away into the night to betray them to Jadis. Peter, Susan, and Lucy are taken to meet Aslan, who helps them rescue Edmund from the clutches of the Witch and who seems poised to crush her power completely. But there is a complication. According to the Deep Magic of Narnia, the blood of every traitor belongs to the Witch. In order to save Edmund from the Witch, Aslan agrees to offer his own life in the place of the treacherous Edmund. Aslan meekly surrenders himself to the Witch, who shaves, humiliates, and then kills him on the sacrificial Stone Table. The children along with all Narnia now seem doomed, but on the dawn of the next day, the Table cracks and Aslan is restored to life. Susan and Lucy witness both Aslan’s death and resurrection. When they ask him how it is that he is now alive again, he tells them that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, she
The Good Guys and the Bad Guys • Louis A. Markos

did not know the Deeper Magic: that if an innocent victim were to die in the stead of a traitor, the Stone Table would crack, and death would begin to work backwards! With Susan and Lucy on his back, Aslan races toward the Witch's castle, in the courtyard of which lie the statues of animals that she has turned to stone with her wand. Aslan breathes on each of the statues, restoring them to life, and then leads his "born-again" army into battle with the Witch. Jadis and her army are defeated, and the children rule Narnia as Kings and Queens for many years, until the White Stag leads them back to the Wardrobe, from which they emerge as children again.

Christian parents who read the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe with their children will no doubt wish to begin their family discussion by explaining how Lewis's novel retells the Gospel message. Beware, however, that you do not reduce it to only an allegory of the Christian story. Emphasize that the characters who act and interact in the novel are "real" characters whose lives have their own integrity and meaning within the frame of the story. Let the drama of the tale (and the luminous "person" of Aslan) exert its full impact on your children before you begin to "unpack" its underlying Christian message. You might explain to them that (to paraphrase a comment from Lewis himself) Aslan is not simply an allegory (or representation) of Christ, but that Aslan is what the Son of God (the Second Person of the Trinity) might have been like had he been incarnated on a magical world of talking animals, living trees, and mythic beasts. If you keep this in mind, though, I think it is "safe" to suggest some simple parallels between the novel and the Gospel.

Edmund, like Adam, has committed an act of disobedient treachery against those whom he should love. (As traitor, he also resembles Judas, but I think the link to Adam is finally more fruitful). As a result of his sinful choice, he is cut off from the fellowship of both his family and of Aslan, and becomes the pawn of the White Witch. Just so, we, like Edmund, are separated from God by sin, and our lives are forfeit to Satan (who, like Jadis, is also the ruler of our fallen world). The situation is one which we (like Edmund) cannot remedy on our own. Our salvation from death (and redemption from the just claim of Satan) can only come by God (the Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea) sending his Son (Aslan) to invade our "enemy-occupied" world (Aslan is "on the move") and to take our punishment upon himself by willingly offering up his life on the Cross (the Stone Table). But the story does not end there. Christ (like Aslan) rises again from the dead and thus sets in motion not only our own salvation but that of the whole world.

If the children are still with you, you might try moving on to more sophisticated theological concepts. It is no coincidence that Aslan is killed on a Stone Table which then cracks in two when he rises again. On the simplest level, the cracked Table recalls the stone that rolled away from the tomb at the Resurrection of Christ. On a deeper level, it recalls the Veil in the Temple which miraculously tore in two from top to bottom when Christ was crucified. Historically, the Veil separated the people from the Holy of Holies, that most sacred of places which once had held the Arc of the Covenant and into which the High Priest alone could enter, and on only one day of the year (the Day of Atonement). Since the death of Christ, we no longer need the Veil or the Temple or the High Priest; through the Blood of Christ shed on the Cross, we are all granted direct access to the Holy God. On a yet deeper level, the Stone Table recalls the Tablets of the Law on which God wrote the Ten Commandments. In the Old Testament (before the coming of Christ), the Covenant between God and his people (the Jews) was mediated by the Law of Moses, a law which included the intractable rule that the punishment for sin is death (the Deep Magic). But when Christ died and rose again (the Deeper Magic), the legalistic and condemnatory force of the old law/covenant was broken and grace took its place: a grace which cements the New Covenant (or Testament) between God and the Church.

Finally, if you wish to ratchet it up one more notch, you might discuss how the scene in which Aslan breathes on the statues and restores them to life offers a powerful picture of what it means to have New Life in Christ. Christ (like Aslan) did not simply come back from the dead in the sense of being resuscitated (as Lazarus was); he went through death and came out on the other side. In the New Testament, this is made clear by the fact that Christ now wears a Resurrection Body that can "walk through walls" and appear and disappear at will. In Lewis's novel, this is captured in a single powerful detail. Before Aslan is killed, his hair and mane are shaved off. When he resurrects and appears to Susan and Lucy (as Jesus did to the Marys), his mane is not only restored, but is more rich and golden than before. It is suggested (though not clearly stated) in the novel that before his death/resurrection, Aslan did not have the power to breathe on statues and restore them to life. But now that he has himself conquered death and risen anew, he has the power to share that life with anyone he wishes. Just so, the risen Christ has the power to grant us, here and now, a new and more vital life, and, in the age to come, a Resurrection Body like unto his own.

So far so good. If your children get this much out of the novel, they are doing quite well. But I would strongly urge you not to end your discussion here. The
The Good Guys and the Bad Guys • Louis A. Markos

Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe offers the opportunity not only to identify for your children the ultimate good guy (Aslan, Christ) and bad guy (the White Witch, Satan), but, as I suggested earlier, to delve more deeply into the full and true nature of good and evil. Though one can start such a discussion by focusing first on evil and then moving on to good, I would suggest starting with goodness instead. In our culture (and, alas, in our churches), we too often promote a negative view of goodness; we think of it merely as the absence of evil, of a simple restraint from the temptations of the flesh. The truth, of course, is completely the opposite. It is evil that is the negative thing, the falling away, the perversion of a primal and positive goodness. As Lewis teaches us in his non-fiction, there is no such thing as perfect evil: if evil were ever to succeed in becoming only evil, it would cease to exist. The hole in a shirt is nothing without the shirt; just so, evil (which Augustine defines as the privation of good) can only exist inasmuch as it preys on and defiles and corrupts something good that God made. (If your children are old enough, here is the time to explain to them that sex is not a bad thing that we must utterly resist in the name of a negative purity, but that sexuality/intimacy is a gift of God that we must be careful not to misuse or defile.)

There are few characters in literature who embody positive goodness more powerfully than Aslan. In his presence, the children feel at once a sense of joy and fear, an ecstasy mingled with terror, an intimation of both the actively sublime and the passively beautiful. Aslan is neither a pretty object to be placed on a shelf, nor a tame pet to be domesticated. He is fierce, wild, and unpredictable. The first time the children hear his name, they are taken out of themselves (the literal presence, the children feel at once a sense of joy and serious at the same time. Aslan is that very something, and it was Lewis’s hope that if children learned to feel a sense of the numinous in the presence of Aslan they could later transfer that feeling to its proper object: the Triune God of the Bible. I can attest to the power of the Chronicles to do just that every time my family takes a long driving trip and listens to the excellent radio play versions of the Chronicles produced by Focus on the Family. As we listen, the children (or my wife and I) might start talking or drifting into other thoughts, but when Aslan bounds on to the scene, the interior of the car grows still, and a strange awe resonates in the air. A faint (but real) echo of that ecstatic dread that Isaiah and John felt when they stood before the Throne Room of God falls upon us and draws us out of our mundane concerns.

Those characters in the novel who hearken to the numinous presence of Aslan and allow it to transform them find that they are capable of acts of great courage and mercy. Even the treacherous Edmund, changed from within by the awesome love of Aslan, shows himself willing to sacrifice his own life for his friends and for Narnia in the final battle with the Witch. Too often our modern icons of goodness are too weak, passive, and restrained to appeal to the young. Through Aslan, they can learn (and experience) a richer, divine

But Aslan’s power does not only manifest itself in his triumph over death, winter, and the Witch. When Aslan surrenders himself to Jadis at the Stone Table, he does so not out of weakness (he is no guilt-ridden doormat) but out of a position of compassionate strength. The kinetic energy released at his resurrection is there throughout the novel in potential form, like a coiled spring ever ready to snap. From the very moment that Aslan learns of the treachery of Edmund, he knows what he must do. The tragic knowledge of his own coming sacrifice weighs heavily on Aslan, but he carries it through to the end, as only one who knows his purpose and embraces it can do. When, after the first shock of Aslan’s humiliation passes, and Lucy can bear to look up at him again, she realizes, to her surprise, that “the shorn face of Aslan [now looks] to her braver, and more beautiful, and more patient than ever” (Chapter XIV).

Lewis felt that the children (and adults) of his day had lost what he liked to call (after Rudolph Otto) a sense of the numinous: a sense of awe or dread that mingles terror with beauty and that makes one feel small and insignificant (but not repulsive or suicidal) in the face of a transcendent force. It is the dulling of this sense in Lewis’s day (and our own) that accounts for what many modern writers have called the loss of the sacred. Lewis was truly concerned (as we should all be) that modern children could no longer conceive of something being both wonderful and terrible, fun and serious at the same time. Aslan is that very something, and it was Lewis’s hope that if children learned to feel a sense of the numinous in the presence of Aslan they could later transfer that feeling to its proper object: the Triune God of the Bible. I can attest to the power of the Chronicles to do just that every time my family takes a long driving trip and listens to the excellent radio play versions of the Chronicles produced by Focus on the Family. As we listen, the children (or my wife and I) might start talking or drifting into other thoughts, but when Aslan bounds on to the scene, the interior of the car grows still, and a strange awe resonates in the air. A faint (but real) echo of that ecstatic dread that Isaiah and John felt when they stood before the Throne Room of God falls upon us and draws us out of our mundane concerns.

Those characters in the novel who hearken to the numinous presence of Aslan and allow it to transform them find that they are capable of acts of great courage and mercy. Even the treacherous Edmund, changed from within by the awesome love of Aslan, shows himself willing to sacrifice his own life for his friends and for Narnia in the final battle with the Witch. Too often our modern icons of goodness are too weak, passive, and restrained to appeal to the young. Through Aslan, they can learn (and experience) a richer, divine
goodness that shatters all boundaries and that has the power to restore, renew, and revive.

When set over against the pulsating goodness of Aslan, the evil of the White Witch and her minions seems, finally, a paltry, petty, lifeless thing. In the *Screwtape Letters*, the senior devil Screwtape explains to his nephew Wormwood (a young, naïve tempter) that the ultimate difference between God and Satan is that the latter wants cattle that he can use for food, while the former wants servants that he can turn into sons. In the triangle that forms between Aslan, Edmund, and the White Witch, we see this truth played out. Jadis tempts Edmund to betray his siblings by promising him that he will reign with her as a Prince and that he will eat all the Turkish Delight that he wants. In reality, the Witch transforms Edmund into a slave whom she insults, abuses, and feeds on stale bread and water. Edmund thinks that the Witch will make him wiser, stronger, and better than his siblings; instead, she reduces him to a thing of little value and no purpose. Under her evil influence, he comes to hate not only his siblings and Aslan but himself. Worse yet, his gluttonous desire for the Witch’s Turkish Delight has the effect of ruining for him all other types of joy. As Lewis so simply but profoundly puts it: “there’s nothing that spoils the taste of good ordinary food half so much as the memory of bad magic food” (Chapter IX).

It is a sad fact of humanity that most of us (whatever the age or culture in which we were raised) grow up believing a terrible lie: namely, that whereas Satan wants to set us free to be truly ourselves, Christ wants to crush our personality and make us all the same. Allied to this is an equally false belief that Christ is a cosmic killjoy, a joyless Puritan who hates all forms of merriment, revelry, and indulgence. In a memorable, yet easily overlooked scene in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lewis gives the lie to this satanic propaganda, showing that it is, in fact, the Devil (and not Christ) who is the real killjoy.

Even before his resurrection, Aslan, simply by his presence in Narnia, causes the long winter of the Witch to begin to thaw. In tandem with this breaking of the Witch’s icy grip, Aslan’s appearance also brings into Narnia the jolly figure of Father Christmas. While on her way to overtake Peter, Susan, and Lucy before they can reach Aslan, the Witch comes upon a party of talking animals who are partaking of a feast provided for them by Father Christmas. When she spies them, the Witch is *not* pleased that they are drinking wine and stuffing themselves with food. Indeed, her response to them is identical to what most Christians *think* (wrongly) is God’s default reaction to our earthly pleasures: “What is the meaning of all this gluttony, this waste, this self-indulgence. Where did you get all these things?” (Chapter XI). If the Witch had her way, Narnia would not be a land of gluttony and dipsomania, but a cold, dead world inhabited by automatons whose joy and life and potential for growth have been swallowed up by her devouring envy and pride. And for those who refuse to be so emptied of their vitality, the Witch simply turns them into stone statues: which is exactly what she does to the “party animals” she meets on the road.

Though most evangelical Christians point to John 3:16 as their favorite verse, mine has always come from a later Chapter in John: from his beautiful discourse of the Good Shepherd (10:1-18). In verse 10 of this passage, Christ describes, in the most precise way, what the difference is between his own goodness and the evil of Satan (the thief): “The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” In its depiction not only of Aslan and the White Witch but of those characters who fall under their sway, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* offers a veritable dramatization of this key verse. And, by so doing, it offers as well one of the classic responses to that perennial question: “Who are the good guys, and who are the bad guys?”