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Reader and Writer: Lewis and Tolkien "On Fairy-Stories"

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Reader and Writer

Lewis and Tolkien on "Fairy-Stories"

Elizabeth Coon

Although J. R. R. Tolkien's reputation in recent years has benefited immensely from Peter Jackson's film productions of *The Lord of the Rings*, C. S. Lewis still far outreaches him in terms of public awareness and popularity, specifically within the Christian world. Most are surprised to learn that Tolkien played a major role in Lewis' conversion, rather than vice versa, and that their famous friendship did not continue indefinitely, but began to fade with the publication of Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The differences in their philosophies of storytelling unsurprisingly reveals the philosophy of their relationship. In "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien demands that fantasy worlds remain independent and consistent, receiving no interference from the author's own world. Lewis blatantly ignores that rule in *Narnia* by combining all kinds of mythology and sending human children back and forth between England and Aslan's world. Rather than regard these differences as the final breach between the two authors, condemning their stories to suffer literary history with no comparisons or connections made, scholars must instead recognize and utilize them in an understanding of Lewis and Tolkien's relationship as eager participant and proud creator, as reader and writer.

Coon, Elizabeth "Reader and Writer: Lewis and Tolkien on 'Fairy-Stories'."

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Reader and Writer: Lewis and Tolkien “On Fairy-Stories”

Elizabeth Coon, Messiah College

C. S. Lewis’ first meeting with J. R. R. Tolkien ought to have been a great meeting of the minds – the two advocates for imagination coming together as a formidable creative duo – but that certainly was not the case. For Lewis, although he was charmed by Tolkien, there were some serious objections in “the smooth, pale, fluent little chap”.¹ The Oxford English Faculty at that point was a house divided. Literature for its own sake was not considered a challenging academic course of study, and in order to make it worthwhile, scholars must pursue another target either historical or philological. The debate over which focus the undergraduate curriculum should take distributed the dons into opposing groups. “At my first coming into the world I had been (implicitly) warned never to trust a Papist, and at my first coming into the English Faculty (explicitly) never to trust a philologist. Tolkien was both.”² In fact, Lewis credits Tolkien with the dismantling of those prejudices, and their famous friendship produced some of the best works of literature of the twentieth century, among them *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-5) and *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-6).

Tolkien felt that there were clear boundaries between fairy stories, what he most loved, and any other sort of literature which must be observed at all costs; he thoroughly disliked the obviousness and inflexibility of allegory, which played a major role in Lewis’ *Narnia*, and in “On Fairy-Stories” (1938), Tolkien outlines the necessity of coherency and consistency in any attempt at that genre.³ “[He] hated *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. He regarded it as

¹ A. N. Wilson, *C. S. Lewis: a biography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 105.

² C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 252.

³ J. R. R. Tolkien, foreword to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 2nd ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1966), 7.

scrappily put together, and not in his sense a ‘sub-creation’; that is, a coherently made imaginative world.”⁴ No one can deny the correctness of such criticism; characters in all seven books are jumbled together from Greek and Norse mythology, popular culture and out of Lewis’ own head. The Pevensies and their friends meet Father Christmas, Bacchus and huge talking animals. Compared with Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion* (1977) or even *The Hobbit* (1937), Narnia seems a very patchwork story indeed, completely ignoring the distinction between the Primary and Secondary worlds emphasized in “On Fairy-Stories.”⁵ Lewis’ hodgepodge approach to storytelling, involving themes of violence, redemption, magic and sheer silliness, created a world enchanting to readers and annoying to critics; without his flexibility as a writer, the Oxford don would never have become an internationally-known Christian apologist, much less written a science-fiction trilogy or a children’s series. More important than his authorial style or voice, however, is the clear understanding demonstrated in Narnia of what a reader longs to experience in a good story. When examined outside the shadow of Middle Earth, even with the jumbled mythology and allegorical tendencies, Lewis manages to fulfill Tolkien’s strict standards of fairy stories.

Lewis’ status as the premier Christian apologist understandably frustrates any criticism of his work. Literary scholars who also happen to be Christians understand that to criticize Lewis’ theology or way of thinking is to criticize millions of Western Christians who have embraced his canon as the authoritative guidebook for daily life. Anyone facing that sort of entrenched popularity might be intimidated, but especially those viewing Lewis from a non-Christian viewpoint. Writers wishing to engage in a serious, scholarly analysis of Lewis’ work, which has

⁴ Wilson 222.

⁵ J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories” in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), 60.

many merits and many problems of interest, encounter an indignant outcry whenever questions of Lewis' morality, theology or authorial capability are raised. Of course, both Christian and non-Christian authors have undertaken successful critiques, not just accolades, of Lewis, but they are generally outweighed by the popular support coming from mostly American Christians in schools, non-profit organizations, churches and individual families, who all find Lewisian theology at the cornerstone of practical life. This frustration appears particularly in critics of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the reputation of which often means that it is placed on equal standing with fiction much more stylistically consistent and politically correct than itself. A confused devotee might ask, "What's wrong with Narnia?" and receive the simple response, "Its pedestal."

The now legendary Lewis would have been horrified at achieving such a god-like status, particularly because his own spiritual journey connects so intimately the idea of true myth with Christianity. It is true that Lewis was a brash personality who never hesitated to speak his mind and that he expressed his opinions on a range of subjects with confidence and intelligence, but to idolize him as a genius author (which he undoubtedly was) out of whose pen flowed unadulterated perfection, as devotees are wont to do, is to ignore the effort and dedication he poured into his writing, fiction and non-fiction. The stories he imagined deeply mirror the events and emotions of his own life, but not without some craft involved. They were not "slapdash", as Tolkien thought of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, but thoroughly thought through, because any theme in a Lewis story comes directly from the heart and mind of the author.⁶ Thus the experiences of the Pevensie children in Narnia reflect not Lewis the author's instructive intentions but Jack the reader's desire to share the joy of myth, the "pleasure, [the]trouble, ecstasy, astonishment, 'a conflict of sensations without name'" he found in his childhood

⁶ Wilson 225.

imagination, stories and eventually in the true myth of Christianity.⁷ For Lewis, the experiences of his reading life swirled around inside his head and formed themselves into the stories of his authorial life.

Most of Lewis' fellow Oxford dons were horrified at his publication of a children's story. How could he stoop to such an ill-fitted usage of his talents? Today what Lewis and Tolkien would have called fairy tales have split into two genres, fantasy and children's literature, both of which receive a distinct lack of respect as 'literature' from the critics. Fantasy as a 21st century reader knows it did not exist until Tolkien achieved massive success with *The Lord of the Rings*, and until the publication in the nineteenth century of books like Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883), most of the stories associated with children were traditional fairy tales that had been around for centuries. Lewis' colleagues viewed children's literature as a 'soft' option; if children's minds were simpler and less mature than adult ones, surely the books written for children were simpler – and thus less admirable – as well? Both Tolkien and Lewis specifically argue against this belief in “On Fairy-Stories” and “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What Needs to Be Said”, but this attitude continues to appear both within and without the publishing industry:

Almost certainly J. R. R. Tolkien is right when he suggests that fairy tales became the peculiar property of the nursery by historical accident. They were not evolved for telling to children...Nevertheless the accidents that gave these stories to children were happy ones. Children under eleven are eager to know what happens next, and impatient with anything that stops them from getting on with the story...They expect a story to be a good yarn, in which the action is swift and the

⁷ *Surprised by Joy* 86.

characters are clearly and simply defined. And legends and fairy tales are just like that.⁸

How might Lewis or Tolkien respond to such a statement? Lewis would probably declare that he expects a story to be a ‘good yarn’ as much as any child, and is just as eager to learn what happens next. To suggest to Tolkien, the man who spent his lifetime studying the evolution of mythology through language, that legends and fairy tales – the children of myth – are simple and clearly defined seems a little impertinent. It is condescending both to children and to fairy tales. Tolkien clearly demonstrates with his Middle Earth that the latter are neither simple nor easy to define, and the former are entirely capable of processing complex stories and emotions, perhaps with less maturity than an adult reader, but with the added benefit of untainted, sincere enjoyment of a story.

Critics who treat *adult* as a term of approval, instead of as a merely descriptive term, cannot be adult themselves. To be concerned about being grown up, to admire the grown up because it is grown up, to blush at the suspicion of being childish; these things are the marks of childhood and adolescence.⁹

Perhaps the reason *The Chronicles of Narnia* are usually directed towards and most popular with children is their unabashed enjoyment of stories. If it is enjoyable, the child reader does not concern themselves with how many starred reviews the book got or how intelligent the title sounds. This aspect of good readership Lewis shares with Narnia’s main audience; he admires in the fairy story “its brevity, its severe restraints on description, its flexible traditionalism, its

⁸ Elizabeth Cook, *The Ordinary and the Fabulous: an Introduction to Myths, Legends, and Fairytales for Teachers and Storytellers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 6-7.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, “On Three Ways of Writing for Children” in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966), 25.

inflexible hostility to all analysis, digression, reflections and ‘gas’.”¹⁰ It seems that Lewis embraces both the child as reader and the fairy story as form for qualities he utilized in his own reading: lack of pretentiousness and sincerity of enjoyment. His aim as author was not to instruct or inform the reader, but to meet with fellow devotees to story, exclaiming, “What! Have *you* felt that too? I always thought I was the only one.”¹¹

Lewis ultimately identified himself as a reader. It has been said of him that he “read everything, and remembered everything he read.”¹² It was elements from his favorite stories that he poured into the construction of *The Chronicles of Narnia*; he took what he found most charming and imaginative and profound and turned it all into a fairy story commentary on growing up, on the Christian’s relationship with God and on the reader’s experience within a story. Tolkien, the friend and colleague who created his own fairy stories, saw an inconsistent and illogical story which was limited by its allegorical tendencies, and he was perfectly correct. Whether or not those aspects of Narnia truly interfere with the reader’s experience is debatable, but undoubtedly, Tolkien’s Middle Earth, stylistically and artistically, presents a much more pleasing picture than Narnia. It is a wholly enclosed world, perfectly consistent and realistic within its own universe, and the result of a lifetime of labor, but Narnia, along with any other world, flows from Lewis’ pen with the greatest of ease, another aggravation for the painstaking Tolkien.¹³

Middle Earth began in the trenches of the Great War, Tolkien scribbling with a pencil the stories later collected into *The Book of Lost Tales* (1983-4).¹⁴ Early in his education, he

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What Needs to Be Said” in *Of Other Worlds*, 36-7.

¹¹ *Ibid.* ix.

¹² Wilson 161.

¹³ *Ibid.* 222.

¹⁴ Humphrey Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: a biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1977), 80-6.

discovered an affinity for languages, supplemented by an attraction to Norse epics, and he maintained this interest until his death in 1973, sharply contrasting with Lewis, who spent his undergraduate days and early Magdalen years jumping from discipline to discipline with equal fascination.¹⁵ Since Tolkien's death, Christopher Tolkien has gathered together notes ranging over 60 years into a *History of Middle Earth* series, but even that does not approach the completion of a world Tolkien would probably still be creating today if he lived. While *The Hobbit* (1937) evolved from stories he told his own children, its sequel turned into different idea altogether, and it took twelve years to achieve the level of perfection Tolkien demanded.¹⁶ He prized the form of fairy story as beautiful and enchanting, and maintained strict standards, that imposters might not corrupt the genre.

Tolkien addressed St. Andrews University in 1940, in one of a series of lectures honoring Andrew Lang, a turn-of-the-century folklorist and collector, and later expanded that lecture, titled "On Fairy-Stories", for a collection of essays intended to honor the late Charles Williams, friend and member of the Inklings. His definition of fairy stories addresses the tendency to associate the genre with children and the various tricks authors use – including dreams and talking animals, both utilized by Lewis – that disqualify stories from inclusion as a 'true fairy story', but most of the essay focuses what fairy stories themselves ought to provide.¹⁷ On several points it is clear that Narnia provides everything that Tolkien requires of fairy tales – escape to a world with a different reality, recovery from and consolation for the ills the Primary world has inflicted upon the reader.¹⁸ However, in the distinction between Primary and Secondary worlds, the foundation of Tolkien's definition, Lewis technically falls short. Tolkien scoffs at the phrase

¹⁵ Ibid. 34-7.

¹⁶ Wilson 222.

¹⁷ Ibid. 45-6.

¹⁸ Ibid. 74-81.

“willing suspension of disbelief”, so easily used to describe the role of fantasy and fairy stories, as “subterfuge...if they really liked it, for itself, they would not have to suspend disbelief; they would believe”.¹⁹ The author must behave as the creator, totally capable of constructing an entire world independent of the one known by the creator. Any interaction between the Primary (author/reader) world and the Secondary (story) world violates the efforts of the author to write fantasy at all.²⁰

Lewis does not abide by this rule. Each book begins and ends with an exchange between Narnia and the ‘real’ world, raising all sorts of questions about the internal consistency within Narnia. For example, upon rediscovering the lamp and wardrobe after many years of ruling Narnia, the four children reenter England to find themselves at the same moment in time at which they left.²¹ Instead of avoiding interaction between the worlds, Lewis embraces it; indeed, the wood between worlds Digory and Polly encounter in *The Magician’s Nephew* (1955) was established for that very purpose. Narnia does not exist but for the connections it has with other worlds. As Aslan says, the Pevensies and the readers “were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there.”²² The Pevensies do not just mirror the reader’s experience of diving into a fairy story; they are the readers.

Lewis has dramatized his own experience as a reader, thus creating a Secondary world in which turning the pages of a book constitutes action and involvement in the story. Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy are all certainly frightened and insecure at this treacherous point of England’s history. Away from home and family in a strange house, they escape into a mythical world (which happens to be true) and find both consolation for their fears and recovery from their

¹⁹ Ibid. 60-1.

²⁰ Ibid. 66-7.

²¹ *LWW* 206.

²² C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 270.

pains. By conquering the White Witch, they are enabled to return to England refreshed, and even when returned to the ‘real’ world, Narnia provides consolation in times of distress; Edmund and Lucy find themselves at an unpleasant relative’s house, accompanied by their prig of a cousin Eustace, and amuse themselves by imagining a random painting to be of a Narnian ship.²³

While according to the language of “On Fairy-Stories”, Narnia is a blatant violation of the rules, mixing up readers and characters right and left, Lewis still manages to follow the spirit of the law. The Narnian world is the world of the reader, but instead of turning pages, the children stumble out of wardrobes and into paintings and slip rings on and off.²⁴ These devices, rather than facilitating interactions between worlds that were never meant to take place, are the mechanisms upon which Lewis’ Narnian universe – meaning England *and* Narnia and any other glimpse of a world – function. This technicality, as some may call it, defines the difference between Lewis and Tolkien’s philosophy of fairy. Tolkien wrote for the sheer joy of creation: “Fantasy is a natural human activity...we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.”²⁵ For him, the act of creation was a spiritual, intellectual and artistic event; he certainly was gratified that people enjoyed the world he had made, but writing for readers was never his intent. Lewis, however, was first and foremost a reader. His experiences with stories, including the Northern legends and fairy stories like George MacDonald’s *Phantastes* (1858), shaped his existence just as Tolkien’s understanding of language craft – and thus culture and history –informed his story making. This fundamental difference in purpose means that, although Lewis does not in word meet Tolkien’s expectations for a sub-creation’s self-sufficiency, he does so in deed. If it is

²³ Ibid. 4-5.

²⁴ *LWW*, *VDT* and *MN*.

²⁵ “On Fairy-Stories” 72.

required to judge either author based on the other, particularly when their combined work has been so influential in the development of the modern fantasy and children's genres, critics must understand that two very different motivations are at work in Narnia and Middle Earth.

In the twelve years it took to complete *The Lord of the Rings*, having many other academic and personal responsibilities, Tolkien easily tired of the tremendous task of synthesizing the world of *The Hobbit* and the histories and languages he had already developed.

I worked very hard at my chapter – it is very exhausting work; especially as the climax approaches and one has to keep the pitch up...I wrote and tore up and rewrote most of it a good many times; but I was rewarded this morning as both C. S. L. and C. W. thought it an admirable performance and the latest chapters the best so far.”²⁶

Tolkien labored away and Lewis eagerly awaited the next chapter.

²⁶ J. R. R. Tolkien to Christopher Tolkien, May 1944 qtd. in Wilson 196-7.

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