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# Casting Truth in an Imaginary World: The Intertwining of Reason and Imagination

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# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VIII**

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Joint Meeting of

The Eighth

FRANCES WHITE EW BANK COLLOQUIUM ON C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

and

THE C.S. LEWIS AND THE INKLINGS SOCIETY CONFERENCE

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## **Casting Truth in an Imaginary World: The Intertwining of Reason and Imagination**

Sharon Kotapish

# Casting Truth in an Imaginary World: The Intertwining of Reason and Imagination

Sharon Kotapish

As you read this paper, please keep the two following questions in mind. Did C. S. Lewis deliberately turn from the world of reason and abandon rational argument when he wrote the *Chronicles of Narnia*? Or did Lewis gravitate toward the world of imaginative fiction because he thought story might be the best way to communicate certain kinds of truth?

First of all, I will discuss several views that people have about why Lewis wrote the imaginative stories in the *Chronicles*. I will also share some insights that Lewis himself has given about why and how he wrote the *Chronicles*.

I will then divert from Lewis and discuss the literary genre of story in general and consider how story is used in the Bible. I will specifically contrast the teaching styles used by Jesus and the Apostle Paul.

Next, I will return to Lewis and give examples of how reason and imagination are intertwined in his nonfiction as well as in his fiction. Finally, I will conclude by presenting passages from Lewis' overtly Christian nonfiction writings followed by passages from the fairy tales of Narnia to show how the themes and ideas in his nonfiction are reflected in the fictional tales of Narnia.

Scholars sometimes speculate that Lewis gave up his interest in apologetics and turned from the world of reason to the world of imagination when he wrote the *Chronicles of Narnia*. In his biography of Lewis, A. N. Wilson suggests that Lewis'

confidence in rational argument was shaken by a debate he had in 1948 with Elizabeth Anscombe, a professor of philosophy. Wilson conjectures that Anscombe's criticism of the third chapter of Lewis' book *Miracles* was so devastating to him that he lost his confidence in rational argument, abandoned apologetics, and turned to writing imaginative stories (1990, pp. 213-215).

Similarly, George Sayer, a personal associate of Lewis, contends that Lewis was severely humiliated by the loss of this debate. Sayer relates that Lewis confided in him that he could never write another apologetic book such as *Miracles* (1988, pp. 186-187)—which, in fact, Lewis never did.

But Lewis did not abandon apologetic argument altogether after the debate. He went on to write several essays on apologetics, and he also revised the third chapter of *Miracles* for a new edition that was published in 1960. The idea that Lewis gave up on Christian apologetics after losing the debate has come to be known as the "Anscombe legend" (Reppert, 2003, p. 16).

Michael Ward, in his book *Planet Narnia*, suggests that the debate may have triggered the writing of the fanciful stories in the *Chronicles*, but he maintains that the stories were a deliberate engagement with Anscombe's critique of Lewis' theology rather than a retreat from it (2008, p. 4).

Lewis does give us some insight into why he wrote the Narnia fairy tales. In a letter written in the mid-fifties, he says that it was the “imaginative man” in him that gave rise to his writing the tales of Narnia for children (Schakel, 1984, p. 158). Lewis tells us that the reason he wrote fairy tales was because the fairy tale seemed to be the ideal form for what he had to say (1982, p. 47). He goes on to relate how he thought that stories could help him get past certain inhibitions that had paralyzed much of his own religion during his childhood and that by casting truth in an imaginary world, Christian beliefs could be revealed for the first time in their real power (1982, p. 47).

Lewis states that he is not sure why in a certain year of his life he felt that he must write a “fairy tale addressed to children . . . or burst” (1982, p. 37), but he does tell us that the *only* legitimate reason he would choose to write a children’s story would be if he believed that a children’s story was the best art form for something he had to say (1982, p. 32). Having said that, Lewis points out that he does not refer to the Narnia stories as “children’s stories;” rather he calls them “fairy tales” (1982, p. 47). He goes on to explain that he wrote the *Chronicles* “for children” only in the sense that he excluded things he thought they would not like or understand, but that he never intended to write “below adult attention” (1982, p. 47).

Lewis also gives some hints as to how he wrote the fairy tales of Narnia. All seven of the Narnia books began with Lewis seeing pictures in his head. The first picture of a faun carrying an umbrella and some packages in a snowy woodland had been in his mind since he was about sixteen. Lewis says that he doesn’t know where the picture came from, but that when he was about forty years old he decided to write a story about it (1982, p. 53).

Later, further pictures emerged: a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion.

Lewis explains that, at first, there was nothing Christian about these pictures and that the accord” (1982, p. 46). Lewis recounts that he did not set out to say certain things about Christianity to children when writing the Narnia stories (1982, p. 46). Rather, he believed that the moral or outward meaning of the stories would rise from whatever spiritual roots he had succeeded in establishing during the course of his life (1982, p. 41).

The fairy tales of Narnia fall into the broader literary genre of story, which can be defined as a true or fictitious narrative. It would seem that Lewis had a very high view of story, as he refers to Christianity as a “story of how the rightful king has landed” (1952, p. 46). He also refers to the story of Christ as a myth like any other myth, “but with this tremendous difference that it *really happened*” (Hooper, Ed., 1979, p. 427). Alan Jacobs contends that story played an important role in Lewis’ conversion to Christianity, which Jacobs describes as “learning to read a story the right way” rather than “through accepting a particular set of arguments” (2005, p. 238).

Stories—both fiction and nonfiction—are a compelling way of expressing truth and offering moments of epiphany to readers. William Barclay contends that “very few people are capable of grasping a purely abstract truth” (1976, p. 95). Stories can often say with conciseness and simplicity what it would take a full-length philosophical treatise to convey. Marilyn Chandler McEntyre goes so far as to claim that “there are certain kinds of understanding that we have no access to except by means of story” (2009, p. 113).

The Bible is a wonderful example of the use of story to help people access understanding. It is full of fascinating nonfiction stories about real people that give historical accounts of their lives. Luci Shaw points out that the “Bible doesn’t teach theology systematically. It tells

stories. It chronicles human failures and triumphs, it voices lament and celebration” (Shaw, 2007, p. 62). The Gospels tell us about the life of Jesus with powerful stories about his birth, death, and resurrection.

But the Bible also contains many stories of fiction, with the Gospels recounting the fictional stories that Jesus told. When discussing the power of stories in his book *God’s Word in Human Words*, Kenton Sparks asserts that “fiction is a perfectly suitable genre for conveying truth about reality” (2008, p. 216). Jesus was a master at using fictional stories, known as parables, to convey truth. Sparks goes so far as to contend that “Jesus’ preferred genre for conveying truth was fiction” (2008, p. 215).

Consider the fictional story of the Parable of the Good Samaritan as told by Jesus in Luke 10. If this story were a factual account, it would tell us about a certain man who was attacked by robbers, about the lack of concern of two particular Jews, and about a better Samaritan. The story would be about one historical incident. But since the story is a parable, it becomes something completely different. It becomes instead a kind of archetype, capturing the essence of all real-life examples about a person being neighbor to someone in need and of people failing to love a neighbor in distress.

Jesus is often thought of as a wonderful storyteller in contrast to the Apostle Paul, who is often thought of as a conceptual theologian who taught by using various rhetorical devices of argumentation. However, Kenneth Bailey sees Jesus as the “major theologian of the New Testament” (1992, p. 22). In his book, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, Bailey calls Jesus a “metaphorical theologian” in that rather than using abstract reasoning, Jesus’ primary method of teaching theology was by using figurative language such as the extended metaphor of the parable (2008, p. 279).

Western discourse usually begins with a concept or an idea, which is often illustrated with an example or a story. But Jesus’ use of parables is typical of Middle Eastern discourse in which meaning is created by using a simile, metaphor, proverb, or parable to refer to something concrete such as a story set in the everyday life of the listener (Bailey, 1992, p. 16).

Bailey maintains that both metaphor and abstract statements of truth are “critical to the task of theology” (2008, p. 280). Both images—such as story, symbol, and narrative—as well as abstract propositions are found in Scripture. For example, many of the metaphorical teachings in the parables of Jesus are paralleled in the conceptual expository teachings of Paul.

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son told by Jesus in Luke 15, the younger son comes home destitute and helpless. He has dishonored his family, and a traditional Middle Eastern father would have been expected to be furious and to have nothing to do with him. But this father humiliates himself in front of the whole village by running to his son, as no Middle Eastern man would ever do (Bailey, 1992, pp. 143-144). He then publicly demonstrates his love to his son by hugging and kissing him *before* the son ever has a chance to say a word.

The father’s demonstration of unexpected love for his undeserving son parallels Paul’s expository teaching in Romans 5:8 where Paul states: “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (NIV). What Jesus says metaphorically, Paul says conceptually (Bailey, 1992, pp. 150-151).

In his book *Word Pictures*, Brian Godawa reiterates that “much of imagination involves words, reason and propositions . . .” and that “words and images . . . are interdependent concepts that can be distinguished but not always separated” (2009, p. 194). Expository

writing is replete with metaphor, and good imaginative writing involves reason and the expression of abstract ideas in concrete ways. Far from abandoning reason, Lewis was a master at intertwining the world of reason and the world of imagination in his writing.

Lewis' nonfiction is rich with metaphor. For example, in an unpublished letter, Lewis utilizes vibrant metaphorical language and tells the reader to think of death as being like "a seed patiently wintering in the earth" (Kilby, 1968, p. 187).

Lewis' imaginative writing is permeated with conceptual meaning. Read the following passage about Uncle Andrew from Chapter 10 of *The Magician's Nephew* and think about what conceptual meaning might be hidden in the story.

And the longer and more beautifully the lion sang, the harder Uncle Andrew tried to make himself believe that he could hear nothing but roaring. Now the trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed. Uncle Andrew did. He soon did hear nothing but roaring in Aslan's song. Soon he couldn't have heard anything else even if he had wanted to.

When reading about Uncle Andrew not being able to hear Aslan's beautiful singing, I was reminded of Jesus quoting a passage from Isaiah 6 that says that people "will be ever hearing but never understanding" because their hearts have "become calloused" (Matthew 13:14a, 15a).

It is significant to note that Lewis is the top-selling religious author in the Czech Republic, one of the most atheistic countries in the world, (Hosek, n.d., p. 1). Pavel Hosek, of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Prague, attributes Lewis' popularity to the distinctiveness of his literary style—that

of using literary genres such as poetic language, symbolism, myth, science fiction, and the novel, which are rarely found in Christian apologetics (n.d., p. 1). Hosek conjectures that "Lewis the apologist is at the same time a poet" employing "intuition, imagination and emotion just as much as reason and logic" (n.d., p. 4). Hosek maintains that by "resymbolising and even remythologising the story of salvation, Lewis penetrated through the protective layers of contemporary readers and allowed the Gospel to be heard in a fresh, unexpected way" (n.d., p. 4).

The following passages from Lewis' writing illustrate how the themes and ideas found in his overtly Christian nonfiction are reflected in the fictional tales of Narnia. Enjoy the passages as you read them—first a passage from one of Lewis' nonfiction works followed by a fictional passage from the *Chronicles*. I hope that your understanding and appreciation of these passages will be deepened by reading them together in this way.

### **Absolute Goodness**

From *Mere Christianity*, Book 1, Chapter 5

God is the only comfort, He is also the supreme terror: the thing we most need and the thing we most want to hide from. . . . Some people talk as if meeting the gaze of absolute goodness would be fun. They need to think again. They are still only playing with religion. Goodness is either the great safety or the great danger—according to the way you react to it.

From *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Chapter 8

"Is—is he a man?" asked Lucy.  
"Aslan a man!" said Mr Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son

of the great Emperor-beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion.”

“Ooh!” said Susan, “I'd thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and no mistake,” said Mrs Beaver, “if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else

just silly.”

“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.”

### The Call of God

From *Mere Christianity*, Book 4, Chapter 3

When you come to knowing God, the initiative lies on His side. If He does not show Himself, nothing you can do will enable you to find Him.

From *The Problem of Pain*, Chapter 3

But to know it (God's love) as a love in which we were primarily the wooers and God the wooed, in which we sought and He was found, in which His conformity to our needs, not ours to His, came first, would be to know it in a form false to the very nature of things. For we are only creatures. . . . Our highest activity must be response, not initiative.

From *The Silver Chair*, Chapter 2

“Speak your thought, Human Child,” said the Lion.

“I was wondering—I mean—could there be some mistake?

Because nobody called me and Scrubb, you know. It was we who asked to come here. Scrubb said we were to call to—to Somebody—it was a name I wouldn't know—and perhaps the Somebody would let us in. And we did, and then we found the door open.”

“You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you,” said the Lion.

### On Being Remade

From *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, Chapter 12

We are to be re-made. All the rabbit in us is to disappear—the worried, conscientious, ethical rabbit as well as the cowardly and sensual rabbit. We shall bleed and squeal as the handfuls of fur come out; and then, surprisingly, we shall find underneath it all a thing we have never yet imagined: a real Man, an ageless god, a son of God, strong, radiant, wise, beautiful, and drenched in joy.

From *Mere Christianity*, Book 4, Chapter 9

If we let him . . . He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, . . . The process will be long and in parts very painful, but that is what we are in for. Nothing less.”

From *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Chapter 7

“Then the lion said, . . . ‘You will have to let me undress you.’ I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate

now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.

“The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt. . .

“Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off—just as I thought I’d done it myself the other three times, only they hadn’t hurt—and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly-looking than the others had been. And there I was as smooth and soft as a peeled switch . . .

“After a bit the lion took me out and dressed me . . . in new clothes—the same I’ve got on now, as a matter of fact.”

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