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Separation from the King: Tinidril and Susan's Temptation in the Desert

by Kat D. Coffin

Kat D. Coffin is an independent scholar. Her main concentration is in English Literature, with a specialized focus on C.S. Lewis and gender theory. In summer 2016, she attended the Inklings Week in Oxford and pursued specialized research at the Bodleian library. Her research centers on Lewis's female characters and how his correspondence with female writers shaped his writings and his worldview.

Ransom perceived that the affair of the robes and the mirror had been only superficially concerned with what is commonly called female vanity. The image of her beautiful body had been offered to her only as a means to awake the far more perilous image of her great soul. The external and, as it were, dramatic conception of the self was the enemy's true aim. He was making her mind a theatre in which that phantom self should hold the stage. He had already written the play.

— C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra*

In the fourth chapter of Luke and Matthew, Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. For forty days He is tempted by the devil to turn from God and worship him. The devil tempts Him in a variety of ways, challenging His authority over the earth, quoting Scripture to test his knowledge. The climax occurs when the devil takes him to a high place and offers Jesus dominion over the earth, telling Him that He will be given the world if He forsakes God and worships him.

Jesus refuses. "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.'" (Matt. 4:10) The devil disappears, and angels attend to Jesus. This story is remembered during the 40 days of Lent, where Christians across the world sacrifice a "vice" in their lives, in remembrance of Jesus fasting in the wilderness, being tempted by the Enemy.

Christian temptation pervades much of C.S. Lewis's works, especially for his female characters. The temptations are often dismissed by critics as evidence of shallow sexism on the part of Lewis—the White Witch being a sexist caricature of a woman in power, Susan's omission from the final Chronicle due to Lewis's alleged fear of female sexuality. My previous work reexamined Susan's redemption

in the context of Orual's, suggesting an alternate interpretation. In this study, I would like to consider Christian temptation—specifically the temptation undergone by the much maligned and misunderstood character, Susan Pevensie. I would like to once again consider Susan in relation to another queen who underwent a similar temptation—Tinidril, the Green Lady, from the second book in Lewis's Cosmic Trilogy, *Perelandra*.

Lewis does not spend much time detailing what happened to Susan. This is part of why there is a 'problem of Susan'—a beloved character disappears without warning from the final book. Jill remarks with disgust that all Susan cared about was “nylons and lipstick and invitations” and that she was “a jolly sight too keen on growing up” (*The Last Battle* 741). Polly elaborates on this, wishing that Susan *would* grow up—expressing the idea “acting grown up” and “being grown up,” two concepts Lewis distinguishes sharply (*The Last Battle* 741).

There are two popular critical interpretations of what happened to Susan. The first is that Susan became interested in sex, and that Lewis is “punishing her” for her sexuality. The other is that Lewis hated traditional femininity, and Susan's interest in “lipstick and nylons” represented a type of female vanity he despised. Both interpretations lead to the conclusion that Lewis was a misogynist.

But these interpretations are shallow, and disregard the myriad of other complex female characters who appear throughout Lewis's prolific work: Particularly another queen who faced a similar worldly temptation—the Green Lady Tinidril in *Perelandra*.

Perelandra is a retelling of the Eden story—or a “supposal,” as Lewis coined the term. Lewis disliked the idea that the Narnian chronicles were Scriptural allegories; he preferred to think of them as “supposals”—suppose God created a different universe with talking animals that fell into sin, suppose God had to sacrifice Himself for their redemption, suppose God created a new world on Venus with its own Adam and Eve, etc. Lewis's main character, Elwin Ransom, travels to Venus to stop their own version of the Fall from happening. His rival Weston, possessed by Satan, attempts to persuade Tinidril to disobey God. Tinidril may sleep on any of the floating islands of Venus, or Perelandra, but she may not sleep on the “fixed land,” a continent with a firm foundation.

Tinidril is the beginning of innocence. She is a remnant of Eve, a reminder to the Christian reader of the purity we lost in the Fall. She is also the Queen of Perelandra, separated from her King, wandering

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the golden waves of Venus until she comes upon Ransom and Weston. It is in her separation that she is vulnerable to temptation.

Interestingly, when Tinidril acquires new knowledge, she calls it “growing older”:

“I was young yesterday,’ she said. “When I laughed at you. Now I know that the people in your world do not like to be laughed at.”

“You say you were young?”

“Yes.”

“Are you not young today also?”

She appeared to be thinking for a few moments, so intently that the flowers dropped, unregarded, from her hand.

“I see it now,” she said presently. “It is very strange to say one is young at the moment one is speaking. But tomorrow I shall be older. And then I shall say I was young today. You are quite right. This is great wisdom you are bringing, O Piebald Man.”
(*Perelandra* 52)

Tinidril continually remarks throughout the text that she has “grown older,” especially during various conversations between her and Ransom and her and Weston. Growing older is often synonymous with wisdom in popular culture—we revere those with worldly and mature views and sneer at those who seem childish. There is something to this idea: As most people age, they acquire new knowledge and ideally, become wiser. However, for Lewis, it’s not growing older that’s the problem, it’s the *desire* to grow older.

A loose interpretation of Susan’s fate simplifies her desire as sex or to be traditionally feminine. But I would posit that Susan’s desire isn’t quite as simple as sex or traditional femininity—it’s actually a desire that Lewis struggled with himself. The desire to be grown-up, to be more mature and worldly than the next person. Susan’s struggle mirrors Lewis’s struggle.

Lewis talks about this desire as an intellectual and moral problem in his essay, “Three Ways of Writing for Children”:

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. And in childhood and adolescence they are, in

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moderation, healthy symptoms. Young things ought to want to grow. But to carry on into middle life or even into early manhood this concern about being adult is a mark of really arrested development. When I was ten, I read fairy tales in secret and would have been ashamed if I had been found doing so. Now that I am fifty I read them openly. When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up. (*Of Other Worlds* 27)

Tinidril exhibits the “healthy symptoms” of the desire to be grown up. As Lewis wrote, young things ought to want to grow. But Susan’s “healthy symptoms” evolved into something that led her astray. She fell for a temptation to be worldly and mature, to put these material objects in place of her family. Relegating her entire character arc into “she liked sex” simplifies a complex arc into oblivion.

On the other hand, equating sex with maturity and wisdom is something Lewis explores in *Perelandra*. Weston darkly questions the nature of Ransom’s relationship with Tinidril, disbelieving that he could spend time with her without seducing her:

“Allow me to tell you that I consider the seduction of a native girl as an almost equally unfortunate way of introducing civilization to a new planet.

“Seduction?” said Ransom. “Oh, I see. You thought I was making love to her.”

“When I find a naked civilized man embracing a naked savage woman in a solitary place, that is the name I give to it.”

“I wasn’t embracing her,” said Ransom dully, for the whole business of defending himself on this score seemed at that moment a mere weariness of the spirit. “And no one wears clothes here. But what does it matter? Get on with the job that brings you to *Perelandra*.”

“You ask me to believe that you have been living here with that woman under these conditions in a state of sexless innocence?” (*Perelandra* 75)

Weston refers to Tinidril as a savage, someone that Ransom could only be taking advantage of. For Weston, the idea of “remaining in a state of sexless innocence” is ludicrous. Ransom was alone with Tinidril on an alien planet, therefore he could only be trying to seduce her. He makes the same leaps of logic critics do when they claim that Susan’s interest in “lipsticks and nylons” represent an interest in sex.

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Susan is an adult woman, therefore she must desire sex, therefore her arc must only be about Lewis's disapproval of sexual awakening.

But let us move forward to the second interpretation—Lewis's supposed hatred of traditional femininity and his denouncement of Susan's "female vanity."

In the few lines given that detail Susan's absence from the final chronicle, a few throwaway details are given. Jill claims that all Susan is interested in are "nylons and lipsticks and invitations." All of these objects have a distinctly feminine tone, as most men of the 1940's wore neither lipstick or nylons. Polly opines, "I wish she would grow up. She wasted all her school time wanting to be the age she is now, and she'll waste all the rest of her life trying to stay that age. Her whole idea is to race on to the silliest time of one's life as quick as she can and then stop there as long as she can" (*The Last Battle* 741).

Seemingly, this is an example of female vanity, but it goes much deeper than shallow materialism. Susan becomes more concerned with herself than with others. She laughs at her siblings when they try to talk to her about Narnia. She pretends it was all a game. She has walked out of Aslan's will to pursue her own. Susan's fall mirrors humanity's fall—the terrible history of choosing something other than God to make her happy, to paraphrase Lewis.

This danger is readily apparent in *Perelandra*. Weston—or "the Un-man," as he eventually becomes—attempts to try and convince Tinidril that her own self-interest is more important than following God. But at first, Tinidril does not even understand the concept of disobedience:

"How can I step out of His will into something that cannot be wished? Shall I start trying not to love Him—or the King—or the beasts? It would be like trying to walk on water or swim through islands. Shall I try not to sleep or to drink or to laugh? I thought your words had a meaning. But now it seems they have none. To walk out of His will is to walk into nowhere."
(*Perelandra* 100)

There is no enjoyment, there is no true joy without God. Anything else—to "walk out of His will" as Susan does—leads to nowhere. The more focused she is on herself, the less focused she is on God.

There is a poignant scene in *Perelandra* where the Un-man gives Tinidril a mirror, awakening her self-awareness of her own body. At first, Ransom is relieved: "Thank Heaven,' thought Ransom, 'he is only teaching her vanity'; for he had feared something worse" (*Perelandra*

115). But it becomes clear that shallow vanity is not the final result. This is the awakening of her awareness of self, an encouragement to form personal desires apart from God. Up until this point, her desires were God's desires. But the mirror offered an image to her that was outside of God, that created a false independence.

"A man can love himself, and be together with himself. That is what it means to be a man or a woman—to walk alongside oneself as if one were a second person and to delight in one's own beauty. Mirrors were made to teach this art" (*Perelandra* 117). The Un-man gives a seemingly harmless explanation for the mirror—no mention of sin, no mention of selfishness, an innocuous delight in oneself. As innocent as lipstick and nylons.

But Ransom realizes the trap. It isn't a temptation for physical vanity, it is a temptation to believe one is greater than he or she is. It is a deeper desire to be "grown up," a desire to be plunged into hubris. This is why the Un-man regales Tinidril with tales of great queens and women who came to tragic and awful ends, because the noble tragedy of their circumstances is deeply alluring. Our image of ourselves can become an idol and, as another demon of Lewis's points out elsewhere, "All mortals tend to turn into the thing they pretend to be."

We run the risk of falling into this trap with Susan. Recent criticism has brought forward the idea that perhaps Susan Pevensie is actually a feminist hero for rejecting her fantasy world and King—that her separation from the King is a noble act; that it makes a 'high and lonely destiny,' to quote Jadis in *The Magician's Nephew*. A popular blogpost that went viral in a few years ago reimagines Susan as a feminist radical, fighting against oppression, proudly turning her back on Aslan and her former kingdom. This is a tempting interpretation, especially to readers who were hurt by Susan's absence in the final Chronicle. But it's the very trap the Un-man tempted Tinidril with in *Perelandra*—the desire to separate yourself from God, to inflate yourself with self-importance, and believe your life does not need God. That was Jesus' temptation. That was Susan's temptation. And that was Tinidril's temptation, though through Ransom's sacrifice and God's guidance, she did not fall.

In the final chapter, Tinidril explains to Ransom:

"It was to reject the wave—to draw my hands out of Maleldil's, to say to Him, 'Not thus, but thus'—to put in our own power what times should roll towards us . . . as if you gathered fruits together today for tomorrow's eating instead of taking what came. That would have been cold love and feeble trust. And out of it how could we ever have climbed back into love and trust again?" (*Perelandra* 179)

The "problem of Susan" is complex and at times unanswerable. It may feel unfair and sexist, but I do not believe Lewis intended it this way. Her

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temptation is only superficially gendered, in fact, her desire to be “very grown-up” mirrors Lewis’s own faults and struggles with this desire. While looking through Tinidril’s temptation, we understand Susan’s temptation and eventual fall better.

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