

THE *S*anctified *I*magination

A STUDY OF GEORGE MACDONALD
& C.S. LEWIS

by Laura Calderone

ALL through the ages, men have recognized that there is more to existence than simply what fact or reason tell us, and they have expressed this through literature. Humor teaches men to laugh at themselves; tragedy shows us how man is humbled. But perhaps that genre of literature in which this reality is most clearly expressed is the genre of fantasy. Fantasy teaches us to break open the ruts of our perception of this life and glimpse realities beyond the narrow world in which we live. Fantasy has often been an especially popular genre among Christians — not, as Gene Edward Veith says, because our religion is itself fantasy, but because we are by definition a people concerned with truths beyond that which can be seen. He continues,

In today's world of materialism and cynicism, a major obstacle to belief is the difficulty of *imagining* anything that transcends what the senses can perceive. Christianity speaks of mysteries, of absolute goodness locked in a cosmic battle with Satan, of eternal ecstasies — all of which go far beyond the constricted, empty universe of physical objects that our culture assumes is all there is. The problem with many people today is not that they have intellectual objections to Christianity — our age is anti-intellectual to begin with — but that their imaginations are so impoverished that they cannot even begin to conceive of anything spiritual. They have become incapable of recognizing the awe and the wonder of holiness.¹

This paper seeks to explore the lives and writings of two Christians who demonstrated, in experience and in observation, the power of the sanctified

¹ Gene Edward Veith, [Reading Between the Lines](#) (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1990), p. 140

imagination in opening up the greater realities of this awesome and wonderful world of God.

PART 1
The Life of George MacDonald
 1824-1905

AS a boy growing up in Victorian Scotland, George MacDonald was in love with beauty — but, of course, no more than was natural for a sprouting highland lad. He played with the many cousins who lived on the farm-and-bleaching-mill which his father and uncle ran, amusing them with playing “preacher.” He wandered the woods, he tramped along streams, he explored ruined castles, he learned to ride horses, he dreamed of being a sailor. But he could be a very thoughtful boy, too, often going off into the hills by himself to think. His mother died when he was only eight years old, and she was followed by a favorite brother the year after. George was always close to his father, who was described as “a remarkable man — a man hard and tender and humorous all at once, in the old fashion of Scotch Christianity.”² This admiration for his father lasted all his life, and greatly contributed to his understanding of God as Father.

The MacDonald family was strictly Calvinist, especially George’s grandmother, who burned his uncle’s fiddle as well as all the family heirlooms as

² C. S. Lewis, introduction to *Phantastes* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), p. v

“snares of the devil.” As one biographer³ described it, the Scotch Calvinism of the 1800s was a religion based on a belief in Hell even more than in God, out of which everything else flowed. MacDonald’s novels recount the horrors of the Westminster Catechism and schoolmasters’ strict discipline that made schoolboys long for the coveted Saturday afternoon.

Young George could not help but notice the contrast between the world of nature and the joyless religion of his grandmother. God must be more than the catechism, he felt, for had He not made all these other things as well?

There must be truth in the scent of that pine-wood; someone must mean it. There must be a glory in those heavens that depends not upon our imagination: some power greater than they must dwell in them. Some spirit must move in that wind that haunts us with a kind of human sorrow; some soul must look up to us from the eye of that starry flower...

Little did [he] think that such was his need — that his soul was searching after One whose form was constantly presented to him, but as constantly obscured and made unlovely by the words without knowledge spoken in the religious assemblies of the land; that he was longing without knowing it on the Saturday for that from which on the Sunday he would be repelled without knowing it.⁴

When George MacDonald went away to the university at age fifteen, he found his world open up in ways he’d never dreamed — some of them rather unsettling ways. Aberdeen was so *big* compared to the little town of Huntly where he’d grown up! Not everyone was Calvinist here, either. The religious doubts with which he struggled were augmented by the general aura of questioning that existed in university-cities, even in 1840. George spent many hours wandering through the port or pacing along the beach, wrestling with his thoughts.

³ Michael Phillips, George MacDonald: Scotland’s Beloved Storyteller (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publishers, 1987)

⁴ George MacDonald, Robert Falconer, quoted in Phillips, p. 93-94

University tuition was as hard to meet in those days as it is now; some was covered by a scholarship rewarded for Latin mastery, some by George's father, but nevertheless he found himself eventually compelled to take a year off in the middle of his studies to work. It was thus that he found himself, for one influential summer, cataloging the personal library of some great estate-owner in the north of Scotland. He hardly even saw his employer. (George lived and ate in his own separate quarters.) But what he did see was wonderful, overflowing mountains of books!

Now I was in my element... the very outside of a book had a charm to me. It was a kind of a sacrament — an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace; as, indeed, what on God's earth is not? So I set to work amongst the books, and soon became familiar with many titles at least, which had been perfectly unknown to me before. I found a perfect set of our poets... I found... many romances of a very marvelous sort, and plentiful interruption they gave to the formation of the catalogue! I likewise came upon a whole nest of the German classics, which seemed to have kept their places undisturbed, in virtue of their unintelligibility... happening to be a tolerable reader of German, I found in these volumes a mine of wealth inexhaustible.⁵

He read the poetry of George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Novalis, and other Christians of past ages, many of them Catholic mystics. And in them he found spiritual benefits he'd never imagined — not their doctrines, as such, but their encouragement to keep exploring doctrine. The great books of old literature gave him an assurance that he could still hold onto Christianity and answer his questions. They showed him that Christianity was broader than the narrow doctrinal context of his childhood. They showed him that it was stronger than his present cultural situations. They showed him that there *was* a firm foundation in a world of academic questioning. The mystics that he read served to “check the pendulum” by showing him excesses to avoid in his quest for truth. Through his experiences with literature,

⁵ George MacDonald, The Portent, quoted in Phillips, p. 117

his mind was broadened and strengthened to go back into the conflict with assurance that there were indeed answers to be found.

MacDonald graduated from Aberdeen University in 1845 with a degree in chemistry and physical sciences, though his personal ambition had always been to write poetry. The first opportunity the world offered him, it turns out, was as neither scientist nor poet. He got a job as a tutor to a London family with three truly horrid little boys, where he spent his days trying to endure the disdain of their high-and-mighty mother and the squalling of their little sisters. The spirits of the bedraggled schoolmaster were kept up, however, by a growing acquaintance with a family by the name of Powell, to whose many daughters,

He came not a conventional youth, with polite smooth talk, but like a prophet of old... gradually we found he knew about everything and could put any difficulty right, [whether it be] to answer “Is there a God?” or “What is poetry?” or “What about ghosts or fairies?”⁶

In 1851 George was married to Louisa Powell; in that year he also received his first pastorate, having felt a call to the ministry for quite some time. He had already preached several times in different churches, but this was his first long-term appointment. In the meantime, he was still writing poetry on the side.

All this while, MacDonald continued to develop his understanding of God. That year in the library had made a new man out of him, a man who could question without being afraid, confident that “truth does not fear the light.” He wrote in one of his earlier poems,

The man that feareth, Lord, to doubt
In that fear doubteth thee⁷

⁶ Angela Powell, quoted in Phillips, p. 144

⁷ George Mac Donald, “The Disciple,” quoted in Phillips, p. 132

Searching for truth became his life-long passion. He always stressed obedience over intellect, however. The Christian writers had taught him that there were mysteries in the faith, too. As his father wrote to him in a letter, “I see so much of mystery in nature, and so much of it in myself, that it would be a proof to my mind that the Scriptures were not from God were there nothing in them beyond the grasp of my own mind.”⁸ And George himself wrote, “the more perfect a theory about the infinite, the surer it is to be wrong, the more impossible it is to be right.”⁹ What this produced in him was a spirit that could hold his own interpretations of Biblical truth with an open hand. His tendency to overemphasize God’s love did sometimes lead to error, such as his belief that Hell was for the purging, not the punishment, of sinners, and therefore could not be eternal. But he kept a healthy dose of distrust in himself, always recognizing his own fallibility and the Bible’s ultimate authority.

“I know so little,” [says a character in one of his novels], “that I dare hardly say I *think* anything... His will *is*, and that is everything. But there can be no harm, where I do not know His Will, in venturing a *may-be*. I am sure He likes His little ones to tell their fancies in the dimness about the nursery fire. Our souls yearning after light of any sort must be a pleasure to Him to watch.”¹⁰

Although George MacDonald loved pastoring, he soon began to have conflicts with some of his wealthier parishioners over doctrinal matters, and was forced to resign. The next years were “wandering years” for him and the growing MacDonald family, moving from pastorate to pastorate, being dismissed for his views sooner or later. The MacDonalds depended largely on patronage, from the wealthy widow Lady Byron as well as from George’s father, who continued to help them out.

⁸ quoted in Phillips, p. 159

⁹ quoted in Phillips, p. 187

¹⁰ George MacDonald, Paul Faber, Surgeon, quoted in Phillips, p. 210

Louisa's family were often snobbish towards her, assuming they were poor through their own laziness, which was a trial even for so patient a wife as she was proving to be. To make matters worse, George suffered from tuberculosis, which made it necessary for them to travel a great deal — no small feat for a mother of half-a-dozen small children, to be constantly either moving about, or managing the house with her husband away! She managed, but both of them knew they could not keep on this way; something must be done about their monetary situation.

So at last George turned to writing. He had had a few poems and translations published before, but now he began in good earnest, starting with *Phantastes: a Faerie Romance* in 1858, and continuing through a whole long progression of novels. Novel-writing was never his occupation of choice — certainly he preferred preaching and writing poetry — but he discovered that novels opened a way for him to express that which was denied him from the pulpit. Through stories he could communicate all the wonder and the beauty of God as he had so longed to over the years, “touching hearts and stimulating consciences,”¹¹ and touching them with a power that mere preaching could never have.

The money brought in by his book sales came none too quickly, for the MacDonald family was growing rapidly. George and Louisa had eleven children in all. By his children's accounts, their family was a very happy one. George MacDonald once wrote out a list of “rules of discipline” for families, including:

- Never give in to disobedience, and never threaten what you are not prepared to carry out.
- Never lose your temper.

¹¹ Ronald MacDonald, quoted in Phillips, p. 275

- Do not try to work on their feelings... let your feelings, not your efforts on theirs, affect them with a sympathy the more powerful that it is not forced upon them.
- Always let them come to you.
- Instill no religious doctrine apart from its duty
- Allow a great deal of noise — as much as is fairly endurable; but, the moment they seem getting beyond their own control, stop the noise at once.¹²

Much of the family's happiness was directly traceable to the mother. Louisa often bore the brunt of the child-rearing during her husband's illnesses and travel and later during his writing and lecturing ventures. Through it all, she supported and encouraged him. She was tireless in her efforts to make family occasions special, even when there was little money. She directed plays which the family put on for the neighbors — Pilgrim's Progress was always a favorite, with George playing Mr. Greatheart. The MacDonald home was well-known in the neighborhood as a place of refuge and hospitality.

By the 1870s, George MacDonald had become a best-selling novelist; he was being asked to give lecturing tours, including a tour of America in 1873. In his later years, he spent much time in Italy for his health, where the MacDonalds built a large winter house and established themselves among the community just as they had in England. Although his last years were more comfortable financially than the early years had been, there were new sorrows to face, including the deaths of three of his children from tuberculosis. He continued to write, but with less and less frequently, until in 1895 he published the fantasy *Lilith*, his last major work.

Shortly before he moved back to England in 1900, he had a stroke that left him dumb and mostly paralyzed. His wife continued to care for him faithfully until her

¹² quoted in Phillips, p. 252-253

death in 1902. Three years later, in 1905, George MacDonald, writer and preacher, followed her.

PART 2

Works of George MacDonald: The Princess and the Goblin, The Princess and Curdie Phantastes: A Faerie Romance

a. The Princess books

WHEN George MacDonald wrote for children, he did not write novels; he wrote fairy tales. *The Princess & the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie* are masterful fairytales extended to book length, with all the peculiar delights of this genre of fantasy literature.

The style of these books reflects a great deal of the style of the times in which George MacDonald was writing. Generally, he uses fairytale style narration, in which the story is told in simple third-person omniscience with the narrator interposing his own comments every so often. The Victorian in him comes out in a tendency to be verbose, verging on the cumbersome at times. Every here and there, he digresses into good old-fashioned moralizing, as, “a real princess is never rude — even when she does well to be offended.”¹³ Occasionally the moralizing turns into really long philosophical digressions, such as that on the nature of mountains in the first chapter of *Curdie* — a fault to which MacDonald was frequently prone, in his

¹³ George MacDonald, *The Princess and the Goblin* (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1996), [chapter](#) | p. 21

novels as well as fairy tales. Even the titles of his chapters are delightful: “Why the Princess Has a Story About Her,” “The Princess and — We Shall See Who,” “A Short Chapter About Curdie,” and (impeccably), “The Last Chapter.” Throughout, these books are sprinkled with the joy of the traditional, of that style which is quaint and straightforward and makes no attempt to hide it.

In fairytales, the most important element by far is the plot, the “story” part of the tale. C. S. Lewis pointed out in his introduction to *Phantastes* that

... the Myth does not essentially exist in *words* at all. We all agree that the story of Balder is a great myth, a thing of inexhaustible value. But of whose version — of whose *words* are we thinking when we say this?... [Myth is] a story where the mere pattern of events is all that matters.¹⁴

MacDonald’s genius lies in both following the traditional fairytale and deviating from it. The *Princess* books are first and foremost stories, tales from the life of the Princess Irene, suitably located in palaces and mountains and suitably accoutered with goblins, fairies, and magic gifts. Unlike most fairytales, though, the actions take place not on a journey to somewhere “far, far away” but in the princess’s home, adding a new dimension of familiarity to the usual escapism. MacDonald is guided by his form but not ruled by it.

The characters in these stories deserve special note for George MacDonald’s masterful use of “fairytale stereotypes.” The princess, the virtuous peasant boy, the king, knights, goblins, are once again exercises in the “joy of the traditional.” One of the few exceptions is Lootie, Princess Irene’s nurse, a grown-up who fears and thus disbelieves all magical things even when it is the princess telling her about them.

¹⁴ C. S. Lewis, introduction to *Phantastes* by George MacDonald (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), p. ix

One of MacDonald's best is the "fairy godmother" character — here a "great-great-grandmother," or, as Irene calls her, "my very great huge old grandmother," who appears alternately as very old and very young — but, as she says,

It *is* so silly of people to fancy that old age means crookedness and witheredness and feebleness and sticks and spectacles and rheumatism and forgetfulness! It is so silly! Old age has nothing whatever to do with that. The right old age means strength and beauty and mirth and courage and clear eyes and strong painless limbs. I am older than you are able to think.

To which Irene answers, "I wish I were as old as you."¹⁵

Although his characters are mostly traditional, they are not "flat characters." Even the Goblins and palace servants are given different facets to their personalities. They are helped on by MacDonald's own creative additions to folklore, such as his goblins' one weakness being soft feet vulnerable to stomping, and the fact that they abhor rhymes ("I suspect they could not make any themselves, and that was why they disliked it so much"¹⁶). The characters are not particularly dynamic, as fairytales prefer a clear-cut distinction between good and evil to deep characterization. Nevertheless, George MacDonald was a good student of human nature, and he throws in human touches that keep his characters from becoming *too* heroic. Take, for example, the eight-year-old princess on a rainy day, "very miserable as she would say herself, not even knowing what she would like, except it were to go out and get thoroughly wet, and catch a particularly nice cold, and have to go to bed and take gruel."¹⁷ Or, waking up in the middle of the night:

She saw one of the men at arms walking in the garden... She was just going to tap on the window and call him, for she wanted to tell him all about it, when she bethought herself that that might wake Lootie, and she would put

¹⁵ Goblin, p. 121

¹⁶ Goblin, ~~chapter~~-p. 49

¹⁷ Goblin, ~~chapter~~-p. 7

her into her bed again. So she resolved to go to the window of another room, and call him from there.¹⁸

Or, in the thick of the heroic deeds, the description of the twelve-year-old miner-boy Curdie:

“You must take the princess home at once, Curdie,” [says his mother], “or at least go and tell them where she is.”

“Yes, mother. Only I’m dreadfully hungry. Do let me have some breakfast first. They ought to have listened to me, and then they wouldn’t have been taken by surprise as they were.”

“That is true, Curdie; but it is not for you to blame them much. You remember?”

“Yes mother, I do. Only I must really have something to eat.”¹⁹

At last, when all the trouble is over, they come upon the princess in Curdie’s family’s hut, in the middle of a howling thunderstorm:

She was sitting wrapped in blankets on the bed, his mother trying for the hundredth time to light the fire which had been drowned by the rain that came down the chimney. The clay floor was one mass of mud, and the whole place looked wretched. But the faces of the mother and the princess shone as if their troubles only made them the merrier. Curdie burst out laughing at the sight of them.

“I never *had* such fun!” said the princess, her eyes twinkling and her pretty teeth shining. “How nice it must be to live in a cottage on the mountain!”

“It all depends on what kind your inside house is,” said the mother.

“I know what you mean,” said Irene. “That’s the kind of thing my grandmother says.”²⁰

The real value of the fairy tale, though, lies deeper than just the storyline or the characters. Fairy tales are stories of the supernatural, of worlds different from ours but with the same moral sense, with the same right and wrong, only stronger. Throughout all the dangers of these books, there is an underlying assurance that good

¹⁸ Goblin, p. 84

¹⁹ Goblin, ~~chapter~~-p. 222

²⁰ Goblin, ~~chapter~~-p. 226

will win. The goblins may be after Irene, but her grandmother is looking out for her, and she will not ultimately fall into their hands. Corrupt people may hold sway in the city of Gwyntystorm, but in the end good will win out over that, too — even, we realize, if the characters themselves die and the city is destroyed, for the ultimate good runs deeper than that. They have lived well to live for righteousness, no matter what the outcome.

One of the major themes of these books is faith. In *The Princess & the Goblin*, Irene has to trust herself to a ring her grandmother gave her, from which runs an invisible thread that will guide her where she needs to go. In *The Princess & Curdie*, Peter, the old miner, has to entrust his boy Curdie to the great-great-grandmother's care, believing that when the boy is in danger, the emerald she leaves with Peter will tell him so. The great-great-grandmother herself appears in different forms at different times, so that Curdie asks, "But how can I tell what you may look like next?" The old Princess answers,

Ah, that indeed! How can you tell? Or how could I expect you should? But those who know me *well*, know me whatever new dress or shape or name I may be in; and by and by you will have learned to do so too.²¹

There is the repeated idea of trusting in that which can't always be seen with the eyes but is known by the heart.

Along with this is another accompanying theme of sight, and the difference between perceived and actual truth. We meet Lootie, who is inclined to believe anything unusual to be a dream or a lie. We observe the people of Gwyntystorm, to

²¹ George MacDonald, *The Princess and Curdie* (New York: the Macmillan Company, 1954), [chapter](#) p. 55

whom “there is in general no insult like the truth.”²² We see Curdie, when Princess Irene takes him to meet her great-great-grandmother:

He was standing in the middle of the floor, staring and looking strangely bewildered.... “I see a big, bare, garret-room... I see a tub, and a heap of musty straw, and a withered apple, and a ray of sunlight coming through a hole in the middle of the roof, and shining on your head, and making all the place look a curious dusky brown. I think you had better drop it, princess, and go down to the nursery, like a good girl... If you won’t come down, I will go without you. I think that will be better anyhow, for I’m sure nobody who met us would believe a word we said to them... I don’t expect anybody but my own father and mother to believe me. They *know* I wouldn’t tell a story.”

“And yet *you* won’t believe *me*, Curdie?” expostulated the princess, now fairly crying with vexation, and sorrow at the gulf between her and Curdie.

“No. I *can’t*, and I can’t help it,” said Curdie, turning to leave the room.

“What *shall* I do, grandmother?” sobbed the princess, turning her face round upon the lady’s bosom, and shaking with suppressed sobs.

“You must give him time,” said her grandmother; “and you must be content not to be believed for a while. It is very hard to bear; but I have had to bear it, and shall have to bear it many a time yet. I will take care of what Curdie thinks of you in the end. You must let him go now... Curdie is not yet able to believe some things. Seeing is not believing — it is only seeing.”²³

Everyone has experienced the struggle to believe something they cannot see. But what we realize through the fairytale setting — and what we often miss in this world — is that quite possibly it is our eyes that are wrong. In a fairy world, we know that the Princess Irene is telling the truth; we’ve “seen” the things that she’s seen; we’ve heard her grandmother talk to her. “That’s all nonsense,” says Curdie, when Irene tells him about her grandmother’s string; “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Then if you don’t know what I mean, what right have you to call it nonsense?” asked the princess, a little offended.²⁴ — a novel concept, but quite logical. Faith in that which can’t be seen makes much more sense when we consider that *we* might be blind.

²² Curdie, *chapter*-p. 71

²³ *Goblin*, p. 177

²⁴ *Goblin*, p. 165

The second book, *The Princess and Curdie*, is less of a fairy tale than *The Princess and the Goblins*. It is more that sub-genre of fantasy called satire, which George MacDonald uses to poke fun incessantly at modern man. And thus he brings out a recurrent theme in both the books: the distinction between “people” and *real* people, “grownups” and *real* grownups. A person like Lottie, who doesn’t believe in magical things, and the citizens of Gwyntystorm think themselves very “grownup;” they talk about “progress” and “superiority over the past,” moving on from old values — all the things, in fact, that modern society prides itself on. The people of Gwyntystorm especially illustrate MacDonald’s disgust with modern life:

No man pretended to love his neighbor, but every one said he knew that peace and quiet behavior was the best thing for himself, and that, he said, was quite as useful, and a great deal more reasonable. The city was prosperous and rich, and if everybody was not comfortable, everybody else said he ought to be... There were even certain quacks in the city who advertised pills for enabling people to think well of themselves, and some few bought them, but most laughed, and said, with evident truth, that they did not require them. Indeed, the general theme of discourse when they met was, how much wiser they were than their fathers.²⁵

Before coming to the city, Curdie has been given the gift of “feeling hands:” by grasping someone’s hand, he can feel what they really are on the inside. Most of the people of Gwyntystorm, it turns out, are animals: oxen and snakes and vultures and pigs. The fairytale setting shows up the poverty of their views. What would seem quite “grownup” here looks suddenly hollow in Fairy Land. We ourselves have felt and tasted that which they dismiss off-hand. We see clearly how ridiculous they are. And in the unobtrusive manner of fantasy, the question is slipped into our heads: are they any less ridiculous here?

²⁵ Curdie, p. 97-98

Hand in hand with this theme of “true grownups” is the theme of truly growing up. Although the characters remain relatively static within each book, they do change significantly over the course of the whole, especially Curdie. Early in the second book we find that,

He grew at this time faster in body than in mind — with the usual consequence, that he was getting rather stupid — one of the chief signs of which was that he believed less and less in things he had never seen... On his way to and from the mine he took less and less notice of bees and butterflies, moths and dragonflies, the flowers and the brooks and the clouds. He was gradually changing into a commonplace man.

There is this difference between the growth of some human beings and that of others: in the one case it is a continuous dying, in the other a continuous resurrection... one of the former class grows more and more afraid of being taken in, so afraid of it that he takes himself in altogether, and comes at length to believe in nothing but his dinner... There must be something wrong when a mother catches herself sighing over the time when her boy was in petticoats, or a father looks sad when he thinks how he used to carry him on his shoulder... the child is not meant to die, but to be forever freshborn.²⁶

As C. S. Lewis said, “Surely arrested development consists not in refusing to lose old things but in failing to add new things?... A tree grows because it adds rings: a train doesn’t grow by leaving one station behind and puffing on to the next.”²⁷ True growing up, then, is not the refutation of the wonderful that Lottie thinks it is, nor the “progress” that the people of Gwintystorm pride themselves in. Lottie is shown to be wrong when goblins come pouring out of the king’s cellar; Gwintystorm proves at Curdie’s touch to be full of beasts, who are driven away by the vengeance of the grandmother and the king. Instead, we are shown true growing up at its best: Curdie’s father and mother, the king, the grandmother, eventually Curdie and Irene themselves — a growing up that progresses into ever-deeper understanding without

²⁶ Curdie, p. 11-12

²⁷ C. S. Lewis, “On Three Ways of Writing for Children,” in *Of Other Worlds* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1966), p. 25-26

losing the trustfulness of childhood, that knows the difference between sight and truth, that can believe in the unseen, because it knows that the unseen is quite often more real than that which we see every day around us.

There are various symbols of a lesser nature scattered throughout the books: the crowd of grotesque beasts-becoming-humans who help Curdie win back the city, opposite of the people of Gwyntystorm; the Grandmother's fire of roses, in which she burns things to purify them; her great bath that washes away tiredness and bruises as well as dirt. The Grandmother herself is the most obvious symbol, representing God in the tradition of the wisdom literature of Proverbs, where Wisdom is personified as a great woman. George MacDonald's skill at symbolism is on full display in the way he weaves so many attributes of God, both stern and wonderful, into this character. One of the most memorable scenes in the book is when the old Princess instructs Curdie to thrust his hands into the rose-fire in order to give them the softened touch. When the pain has subsided, he looks over at her and sees her face streaked with tears, and realizes that she felt every moment of pain along with him, even though she made him go through it for his own good. G. K. Chesterton points out the peculiar power of having a house as the setting for *The Princess & the Goblin*, expressing well the value of such symbolism:

When I read it as a child, I felt that the whole thing was happening inside a real human house, not essentially unlike the house I was living in, which also had staircases and rooms and cellars... I have always felt a certain insufficiency about the ideal of Progress, even of the best sort which is a Pilgrim's Progress. It hardly suggests how near both the best and the worst things are to us from the first; even, perhaps especially, at the first. And though like every other sane person I value and revere the ordinary fairytale of the miller's third son who set out to seek his fortune (a form which MacDonald himself followed in the sequel called *The Princess and Curdie*), the very suggestion of traveling to a far-off fairyland, which is the soul of it,

prevents it from achieving this particular purpose of making all the ordinary staircases and doors and windows into magical things... There is something not only imaginative but intimately true about the idea of the goblins being below the house and capable of besieging it from the cellars. When the evil things besieging us do appear, they do not appear outside but inside. Anyhow, that simple image... has always remained in my mind as something singularly solid and unanswerable; and was more corroborated than corrected when I came to give a more definite name to the lady watching over us from the turret, and perhaps to take a more practical view of the goblins under the floor. Since I first read that story some five alternative philosophies of the universe have come to our colleges out of Germany, blowing through the world like the east wind. But for me that castle is still standing in the mountains and the light in its tower is not put out.²⁸

Throughout the *Princess* books, George MacDonald weaves together these themes of faith and truth, these symbols of God and of mankind, into a picture of real life that goes far beyond the actual fairytale. The next time someone says that our beliefs are nonsense, we cannot help but think to ourselves, “If you don’t know what I mean, what right have you to call it nonsense?” By appealing to the imagination the fairy tale slips past many of our logical inhibitions to show us the limits of those very logical processes that we love so much. It sends us away with “hearts touched and consciences stirred,” to face the world with a new appreciation of things unseen.

b. *Phantastes*

*P*HANTASTES, George MacDonald’s first novel, was subtitled “A Faerie Romance,” which really only means a fairytale for adults. Of course, an adult fairytale differs from a children’s fairytale in many ways: it involves the same

²⁸ G. K. Chesterton, introduction to *George MacDonald and His Wife* by Greville MacDonald
<<http://home.earthlink.net/~kcarmody1/chestertonintro.html>>

mystical elements, the same appeal to the imagination, the same outward strangeness and inward truth, but it conveys them in different ways.

Phantastes, an episodic story narrated by the main character, reads like an extended dream. It is very much reminiscent of Spenser's The Faerie Queene. This book displays more of George MacDonald's Victorian cumbersomeness than his fairytales do. He uses a rich old vocabulary that can tend to get bogged down in places. The first-person narration helps to mitigate this some, however, in that the awkward style is put down to the character rather than the author. He narrates without protracted emotion, which also helps in a curious way: where no attempt is made to control the reader's "experience" of the mood, the lack of emotion is no distraction. One's imagination does the lion's share of the work instead. It is a very different style from that used today but not altogether bad, once one becomes accustomed to it.

The main character, Anodos, is a dynamic character over the course of the book. His change from a headstrong young man concerned with pleasure and experience, to one concerned with valor, purity, and obedience is what governs the story. He is not a particularly round character, though, mainly as a result of the style of narration. But the other characters are gems of characterization. Because of the episodic style of the story, only a few of them show up more than once, yet to the extent that they are pursued, they are unforgettable: the knight of the rusted armor, the marble lady, the beech tree who shelters Anodos from a storm, the girl whose treasured globe he breaks, the two Giant-killer brothers, the cheerful, paunchy,

agnostic farmer who lives right under the eaves of the fairies' wood and yet does not believe in anything magical. Take, for example, Anodos in the house of the farmer:

...I heard a heavy step approach and enter the house. A jolly voice, whose slight huskiness appeared to proceed from overmuch laughter, called out: "Betsy, the pigs' trough is quite empty, and that is a pity. Let them swill, lass! They're of no use but to get fat. Ha! ha! ha!" The very voice, kind and jovial, seemed to disrobe the room of the strange look which all new places wear... and when, soon after, the dame came and fetched me to partake of their early supper, the grasp of his great hand, and the harvest-moon of his benevolent face, which was needed to light up the rotundity of the globe beneath it, produced such a reaction in me, that, for a moment, I could hardly believe that there was a Fairy Land... But the next moment my eye fell upon a little girl who was sitting in the chimney-corner, with a little book open on her knee, from which she had apparently just looked up to fix great inquiring eyes upon me. I believed in Fairy Land again.²⁹

MacDonald does each one with just a few brush strokes, as it were, yet he makes them round, believable characters throughout.

Phantastes explores many themes of human experience. The foremost among them is what C. S. Lewis called "good death" — dying to one's desires, giving them up for love of someone else. Throughout Anodos' travels, he is confronted with examples of both good and bad love that draw out this contrast between selfishness and selflessness. "I may love him, I may love him; for he is a man and I am only a beech-tree,"³⁰ says the dryad who shelters him from the storm, contrasting with the wicked Alder-woman, who only cares to make men love her futilely and has no thought of loving them in return. In the library of the fairy palace, Anodos reads of other worlds in which the inhabitants' strongest desires lead them to go away and find a place to die rather than to come together, where death is the most beautiful thing of their world. "The sign or cause of coming death is an indescribable longing

²⁹ Phantastes, p. 50

³⁰ Phantastes, p. 29

for something, they know not what, which seizes them, and drives them into solitude, consuming them within, till the body fails.”³¹ In another fairy book, Anodos reads a story-within-a-story about a man Cosmo who owns an enchanted mirror, in which he sees a beautiful woman. Cosmo goes from “loving” the lady so strongly that he pulls her out of the mirror by conjuration, to truly loving her enough to fight a duel to the death in order to break the mirror and set her free from her enchantment. After Anodos has left the fairies, an old woman rescues him when he goes through the door of the Timeless even though she knows it will cost her a years’ confinement under the ocean. A girl, whose greatest treasure Anodos had broken earlier in his travels, rescues him from prison, saying,

“I have something so much better. I do not need the globe to play to me; for I can sing. I could not sing at all before. Now I go about everywhere through Fairy Land, singing till my heart is like to break, just like my globe, for very joy at my own songs. And wherever I go, my songs do good and deliver people. And now I have delivered you, and I am so happy.”³²

The very episodic style of the story underscores the point of giving without thought of return, for most of the characters who help Anodos we never meet with again. But, as the beech-tree sings,

I saw thee ne’er before;
I see thee never more;
But love, and help, and pain, beautiful one,
Has made thee mine, ‘til all my years are done.³³

Eventually Anodos himself is called upon to sacrifice his love, as he sees the Marble Lady, whom he has disenchanting twice, become the wife of the Knight of the Rusted Armor. He joins two brothers in fighting a trio of giants, in which they know they

³¹ Phantastes, p. 81

³² Phantastes, p. 164

³³ Phantastes, p. 31

could all lose their lives; both the others do. At last he becomes a squire to the Rusted Knight, and gives up his own life in a battle with a wolf-creature who has been oppressing a nation and making them worship him as a god. Death is not the end, though: “The very fact that anything can die, implies the existence of something that cannot die.”³⁴ It is only after he dies that he finds himself back in our world. And we are left with a keen feeling of the beauty of selfless love: those who love selflessly find true joy.

Another theme of this book is sanctification, the achievement of holiness. Unlike in most fairytales, Anodos’ main enemy is himself. He spends most of the book atoning for a sin committed at the beginning, through which he got his Shadow — “I believe you call it by a different name in you world,”³⁵ says the ogre in whose house he finds it. The whole remaining journey he is both learning wisdom and attempting to win back his honor by noble deeds: giving up his own desires, driving away giants, becoming squire to another knight. But he also discovers that noble deeds alone do not cleanse. After the battle with the giants, the Shadow is actually darker than it had been before. The only cure that truly works is humility, hence his service to the knight.

Then first I knew the delight of being lowly; of saying to myself, “I am what I am, nothing more.” “I have failed,” I said; “I have lost myself — would that it had been my shadow.” I looked round: the shadow was nowhere to be seen. Ere long, I learned that it was not myself, but only my shadow that I had lost... I learned that he that will be a hero, will barely be a man; that he that will be nothing but a doer of his work, is sure of his manhood... my ideal

³⁴ Phantastes, p. 180

³⁵ Phantastes, p. 57

soon became my life; whereas, formerly, my life had consisted in a vain attempt to behold, if not my ideal in myself, at least myself in my ideal.³⁶

Phantastes also touches on the theme of true sight. The agnostic farmer disbelieves in the magical things that occur under his very windows, so much so that Anodos begins to believe he's dreamed them — and yet when he catches the little daughter's eye, he knows that Fairy Land was not a dream. He discovers that his Shadow's worst effect is obscuring the beauty around him; it kills the flowers it falls on, makes him suspicious of honorable people, and causes wonderful things to look commonplace.

But the most dreadful thing of all was, that I now began to feel something like satisfaction in the presence of my shadow. I began to be rather vain of my attendant, saying to myself, "In a land like this, with so many illusions everywhere, I need his aid to disenchant the things around me. He does away with all appearances, and shows me things in their true color and form. And I am not one to be fooled with the vanities of the common crowd. I will not see beauty where there is none. I will dare to behold things as they are. And if I live in a waste instead of a paradise, I will live knowing where I live."³⁷

We know, however, as we wouldn't in our world, that he's wrong. The Shadow, far from portraying things "as they are," is showing him ugliness where there is none. And yet, how often is the desire to "avoid being taken in" voiced in our world, and believed! Once again, through the fairytale setting, we find ourselves asking, are we really any more right than Anodos?

The abundant creativity and beauty of God's world is a recurrent theme running through the background of Phantastes — for, as Veith points out,³⁸ true fantasy is not a rejection of God's creation, but an imitation, in the sense of the old

³⁶ Phantastes, p. 166

³⁷ Phantastes, p. 61

³⁸ Reading Between the Lines, chapter 8

saying, “the highest form of flattery.” Everywhere he goes, between and in the midst of his larger adventure, Anodos finds delightful little wonders. On his first night in the Fairy Woods he sees dozens of the pixies of the flowers playing at their tricks. At an oasis in the desert, he meets a band of mischievous little goblin-fairies who follow him along “making hideous grimaces at me, and performing the most antic homage, as if they thought I expected reverence, and meant to humor me like a maniac.”³⁹

Although he never actually sees faeries, even in the Fairy Palace, he talks about tantalizing little glimpses which he catches of them, little snatches of music, a faint shadow walking down a corridor. The fairy story in the library goes on for a full page describing the wings of the women in that other world, which are of four different colors according to the season in which they were born;

...but these colors are modified and altered in all varieties, corresponding to the mood of the day and hour, as well as the season of the year; and sometimes I found the various colors so intermingled, that I could not determine even the season... One splendor, in particular, I remember — wings of deep carmine, with an inner down of warm gray, around a form of brilliant whiteness. She had been found as the sun went down through a low sea-fog, casting crimson along a broad sea-path into a little cave on the shore.⁴⁰

We are reminded of the incredibly creative care that God has put into our own world, from human personalities down to the speckling of the smallest gnat. Anodos’ Shadow truly is wrong; the world around him is not less but more wonderful than he can know at his very best moments.

Yet, though all these things are given to him to experience, Anodos comes to learn that, in the long run, obedience always comes over and above experience. In the end, the only things he actually accomplishes in Fairy Land are in the world of men:

³⁹ Phantastes, p. 64

⁴⁰ Phantastes, p. 80

his fight with the giants, and his killing of the wolf-god. When he first gets into Fairy Land, he entertains vague notions of seeing all that the place has to offer; little by little, though, he realizes that his business is with himself, with his own character. What he does and how he grows are, ultimately, the most important things he takes away: “Thus I, who set out to find my Ideal, came back rejoicing that I had lost my Shadow.”⁴¹

Phantastes: A Faerie Romance is more than a children’s fairytale as being an adult is more than being a child: not a different, but a deeper and more thorough expression of the same truth that had been there all along. Through the lessons and wanderings of Anodos, George MacDonald leaves the reader with a deep sense of the beauty of holiness, a sense that lasts after the book is done.

c. Comparison: The Princess books & Phantastes

“WHAT he does best is fantasy,” C. S. Lewis wrote, “fantasy that hovers between the allegorical and the mythopoeic. And this, in my opinion, he does better than any man.”⁴² George MacDonald’s fantasy is the work of a storyteller at his best; it “goes beyond the expression of things we have already felt... arouses in us sensations we have never had before, never anticipated having... It gets under our skin, hits us at a level deeper than our thoughts or even our passions, troubles our

⁴¹ Phantastes, p. 184

⁴² introduction to Phantastes, p. ix

oldest certainties till all questions are reopened, and in general shocks us more fully awake than we are for most of our lives.”⁴³

George MacDonald’s writing differs somewhat between the two sets of books. The fact that *Phantastes* is written for adults and the *Princess* books for children accounts for much of the difference. *Phantastes*, being a novel for older readers, is more cumbersome and flowery in language than the *Princess* books, which have to be simpler of necessity. The vocabulary is a lot lengthier and the descriptions are not so concise. *Phantastes* was also written several years before the others, when MacDonald was not as practiced a writer. The fact that *Phantastes* is a grownup book allowed MacDonald to do more direct allegory, where the *Princess* books are mostly story.

The general message and tone of these books, however, is very similar. Both books demonstrate the clear-cut dichotomy between Good and Evil that is the hallmark of a fairytale. It is done in a more sophisticated fashion in *Phantastes*, where the main character has to face evil within himself as well as without, but it is present in both. Both books use the symbolism of an old woman who looks young and old at the same time to represent God — the great-great-grandmother in the *Princess* books, the old woman in the cottage by the sea in *Phantastes*. Both books deal with the theme of sight, of learning that there is more to the world than simply what our eyes make of it. It is only observed as a fact in the *Princess* books; in *Phantastes* George MacDonald goes further to identify the cause of this fact as sin, the Shadow. People’s actual natures are much closer to the surface in Fairy Land. In *Curdie*, hypocrites’ bestiality can be felt with a touch. In *Phantastes*, agnostics can make

⁴³ introduction to *Phantastes*, p. x-xi

Anodos forget about Fairyland by their simple presence, while those who believe in it remind him just as easily. It is perhaps noteworthy that those whose presence most strongly radiates Fairyland are children — but, as MacDonald says, “the child is not meant to die, but to be forever freshborn.” And again, “He who will be a man, and will not be a child, must — he cannot help himself — become a little man, that is, a dwarf. He will, however, need no consolation, for he is sure to think himself a very large creature indeed.”⁴⁴

Both of these books also share the similarity of conveying a central theme that is much easier to feel than to put into words. George MacDonald himself wrote that

[A fairytale] cannot help having some meaning; if it have proportion and harmony it has vitality, and vitality is truth. The beauty may be plainer in it than the truth, but without the truth the beauty could not be, and the fairytale would give no delight. Everyone, however, who feels the story, will read its meaning after his own nature and development: one man will read one meaning in it, another will read another... Nature is mood-engendering, thought-provoking: such ought the sonata, such ought the fairytale to be.

One difference between God's work and man's is that, while God's work cannot mean more than he meant, man's must mean more than he meant. For in everything that God has made, there is layer upon layer of ascending significance.... It is God's things, his embodied thoughts, which alone a man has to use, modified and adapted to his own purposes, for the expression of his thoughts; therefore he cannot help his words and figures falling into such combinations in the mind of another as he had himself not foreseen... he was dealing all the time with things that came from thoughts beyond his own.⁴⁵

Like all good fairytales, George MacDonald's are stories first, which teach only by example, when they teach at all. The good we take away from them is rather encouragement than instruction, and if there are meanings and themes, they are one unified sense with many facets, not something easily summed up in words. It is this

⁴⁴ George MacDonald, “Fantastic Imagination”

<<http://home.earthlink.net/~kcarmody1/FantasticImagination.html>>

⁴⁵ “Fantastic Imagination”

that makes novels more effective than sermons, an effectiveness which George MacDonald had learned. A piece of fiction can go “touching hearts and stirring consciences” where a sermon would never find entrance. That is the beauty of fiction. That is the beauty, especially, of fantasy.

ONE cold, blustery February day in 1916, a young agnostic stood in a country train station in front of a bookstall, surrounded by the usual bustle of people. It was a bookstall that he passed often; he had seen *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance* lying there many times before. For some reason, though, today he picked it up.

A few hours later I knew that I had crossed a great frontier... *Phantastes* was romantic enough, in all conscience; but there was a difference. Nothing was at that time further from my thoughts than Christianity and I therefore had no notion what this difference really was. I was only aware that if this new world was strange, it was also homely and humble; that if this was a dream, it was a dream in which one at least felt strangely vigilant; that the whole book had about it a sort of cool, morning innocence, and also, quite unmistakably, a certain quality of Death, *good Death*...⁴⁶

The woodland journeyings in that story, the ghostly enemies, the ladies both good and evil, were close enough to my habitual imagery to lure me on without the perception of a change. It is as if I were carried sleeping across the frontier, or as if I had died in the old country and could never remember how I came alive in the new.... I did not yet know (and I was long in learning) the name of the new quality, the bright shadow, that rested on the travels of Anodos. I do now. It was Holiness... That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized; the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer. I had not the faintest notion what I had let myself in for by buying *Phantastes*.⁴⁷

The young man was C. S. Lewis

⁴⁶ introduction to *Phantastes*, p. xi

⁴⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, quoted in *Reading Between the Lines*, p. 139

PART 3
The Life of C. S. Lewis
 1898-1963

CLIVE Staples Lewis often found himself, as a boy, overcome with “a longing for he knew not what,” a longing that would come over him while looking at a particularly beautiful view or remembering something lovely from long before, or reading poetry. He described it as “an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy... it might almost equally well be called a particular kind of unhappiness or grief. But then it is a kind we want.”⁴⁸

During most of “Jack’s” growing-up years (he couldn’t stand the name Clive), his family lived in a big old house in northern Ireland. He said later, “I am a product of long corridors, empty sunlit rooms, upstairs indoor silences, attics explored in solitude... and the noise of the wind under the tiles. And of endless books.”⁴⁹ He read, imagined, and wrote from a young age. He and his big brother Warren (“Warnie”) made up an entire world called Boxen, which Jack catalogued in a library of neatly-written volumes, complete with illustrations, subtitles, tables of contents, and book jackets with publishers’ insignia in the corners. Boxen was a joint concession between Jack’s “Animal Land,” peopled with chivalrous frogs and bears and mice, and Warnie’s imaginary land which bore the vague name of “India.” Jack also betrayed signs of a logical mind very early on; the story is told of a time when the Lewis family was busy getting ready for a vacation in France:

⁴⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, quoted in Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: Companion & Guide* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), p. 5

⁴⁹ quoted in “C. S. Lewis and the World of Narnia,” Scholastic Book Club magazine, January 1995

Entering the study, where my father was poring over his account books, Jack flung himself into a chair and observed, "I have a prejudice against the French." My father, interrupted in a long addition sum, said irritably, "Why?" Jack, crossing his legs and putting his finger tips together, replied, "If I knew *why*, it wouldn't be a prejudice."⁵⁰

Jack was nine when his mother died of cancer; he had never been close to his father, and soon was sent to boarding school along with his older brother. The school was terrible, as was the next school his father moved him to. So it was that the teenage Jack Lewis found himself eventually under the tutelage of William Kirkpatrick, a retired schoolmaster with a fiercely logical mind. "If ever a man came near to being a purely logical entity," Lewis said later, "that man was Kirk."⁵¹

Kirk was an atheist; though Lewis loved the three years he spent under his teaching, they sounded the death-knell to his childhood Christianity. He had already been wavering in his faith, but now he gave it up entirely, writing to a friend that,

There is absolutely no proof for any [religion], and from a philosophical standpoint Christianity is not even the best. All religions, that is, all mythologies to give them their proper name, are merely man's own invention.⁵²

But before he left Kirk's tutelage to go to war in 1917, he had already read *Phantastes*. Seeds of a very different kind from logical reasoning were being sown. As he said, he had no idea what he was in for.

Lewis fought in the infantry, was wounded, and came home. After finishing college, he became a professor and tutor at Oxford, where he carried on the Kirkian tradition of living by logic and expecting everyone else to do the same. He made

⁵⁰ Warren Lewis, quoted in Companion, p. 4

⁵¹ quoted in Companion, p. 8

⁵² letter to Arthur Greeves, quoted in Companion, p. 9

many enemies and a few friends, among them J. R. R. Tolkien, a young Catholic philologist, Owen Barfield, a lawyer, and Hugo Dyson.

Lewis was a professor of philosophy and literature, particularly old English literature. It was in this context that he began to explore further the idea of Myth. Ever since his teenage years, he had loved what he called “Northernness” — Norse myths, Wagner’s operas — a crystallization of that sense of longing he had known as a child. Now a man, and an English professor, he had broadened this love to include myths in general. Arguments with Barfield were convincing him that this “joy” did actually bring something to bear on logical thought, too. “ ‘Joy was not a deception,’ he now decided. ‘Its visitations were rather the moments of clearest consciousness we had.’”⁵³ The die-hard atheist in him was loosening, bit by bit, into agnosticism, and even Theism, but still he did not feel he could accept Christianity.

And then one evening, he invited Tolkien and Dyson over for dinner. In the course of conversation, they fell to talking of myth, and its relation to truth.

What Dyson and Tolkien showed me was this: that if I met the idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story I didn’t mind it at all: again, that if I met the idea of a god sacrificing himself to himself... I liked it very much and was mysteriously moved by it: again, that the idea of a dying and reviving god (Balder, Adonis, Bacchus) similarly moved me provided I met it anywhere *except* in the gospels. The reason was that in Pagan stories I was prepared to feel the myth as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond my grasp even though I could not say in cold prose ‘what it meant.’ Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*: and one must be content to accept it in the same way, remembering that it is God’s myth where the others are men’s myths: i.e. the Pagan stories are God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using such images as He found there, while Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call “real things.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Humphrey Carpenter, The Inklings (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979), p. 40

⁵⁴ letter to Arthur Greeves, quoted in Companion, p. 582

Within two weeks, after fifteen long years of rational struggles, Lewis gave his life fully to the Lord.

Students and others who knew Lewis remembered him as a very good-natured person, kind without flattery, gracious with a gruff graciousness. He had no tolerance for “dilettanti” (especially students who didn’t take their studies seriously), but with those who were in earnest he was incredibly patient. “No one knew better how to nourish a pupil with encouragement and how to press just criticism when it was needed, without causing resentment.”⁵⁵ He never cared much about his appearance, always appearing in shabby, drab clothing and shapeless hats. His rooms in the College were kept in a similar state of comfortable disarray. Lewis was a man who was very fond of the simple things of life: good food, good drink, good humor. A confirmed old bachelor, he greatly enjoyed the company of other men (“There’s no sound I like better than adult male laughter,”⁵⁶ he once said), particularly an informal literary group called the Inklings.

This group, consisting of Lewis, Tolkien, and their friends, met every Tuesday morning and Thursday evening to read their works aloud to each other or discuss topics of general interest. All the members shared a love of words, language, and mythology. Barfield always held that the conversation was the best part, Tolkien enjoyed readings, and generally a good mixture of both prevailed. Many future great works were first read aloud to the Inklings, including *The Lord of the Rings*, Williams’s novels, *Screwtape Letters*, and many of C. S. Lewis’s other works, including the *Space Trilogy* between 1938 and 1945. It was from these books that he first observed that

⁵⁵ Harry Blamires, quoted in Companion, p. 19

⁵⁶ Companion, p. 16

“Any amount of theology can be smuggled into people’s minds under cover of romance without their knowing it.”⁵⁷

Lewis was now finding an outlet for his lifelong love of writing. His first books of apologetics came out during World War II; many of them, including his famous *Mere Christianity*, were first broadcast as radio talks. He put his logical mind to the task of defending his chosen faith with wonderful effect, arguing for the validity of Christianity in ways that common people could understand, demonstrating that we could indeed know it to be true while still freely admitting to mysteries of the faith.

If our religion is something objective, then we must never avert our eyes from those elements in it which seem puzzling or repellent; for it will be precisely the puzzling or the repellent which conceals what we do not yet know and need to know... Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.⁵⁸

Another result of the war was the evacuation of London schoolchildren, some of whom were sent to live at the Lewis brothers’ home, the Kilns. Lewis had never really had much exposure to children since he himself had been one. The story is told of one little girl asking him if she could play in an old empty wardrobe in a spare room of the house, an event which combined with other imaginative “pictures” evolving in his mind (Lewis’s favorite mode of inspiration) to become some of his best-loved books. The *Chronicles of Narnia* were published over the years 1948 to 1956.

Many of his Oxford colleagues resented Lewis’s fame on a popular level. A man who wrote volumes of literature analysis was not supposed to write popular

⁵⁷ Companion, p. 20

⁵⁸ Companion, p. 27

apologetics and fiction! Lewis himself was not much concerned with fame. Although he had an almost photographic memory (if given a line from any book picked at random off his shelves, he could continue with the next) somehow he found it very easy to forget his own works, so that he was often surprised by others showing him a bibliography of his writings. He always threw away the original manuscript copies of his books, and any later copies given him, if he could get away with it. As Barfield said,

... at a certain stage in his life he deliberately ceased to take any interest in himself... and I suggest that what began as deliberate choice became at length (as he had no doubt always intended it should) an ingrained and effortless habit of soul. Self-knowledge, for him, had come to mean recognition of his own weaknesses and shortcomings and nothing more... At best, there was so much else, in letters and in life, that he found much *more* interesting!⁵⁹

He himself wrote in a letter,

The pleasure of pride is like the pleasure of scratching. If there is an itch one does want to scratch; but it is much nicer to have *neither* the itch nor the scratch. As long as we have the itch of self-regard we shall want the pleasure of self-approval; but the happiest moments are those when we forget our precious selves and have neither but have everything else (God, our fellow humans, animals, the garden and the sky) instead.⁶⁰

C. S. Lewis himself had become rather mellowed in his old age, “ a country squire... plump and tweedy, with a round ruddy face, a pipe, balding dark hair and two bright, twinkling, mirthful eyes. Those eyes... they glinted with joy, Christian joy looking out confidently at the created world, knowing that, in spite of old Screwtape and the ‘Great Divorce,’ it is still ‘good’...”⁶¹

⁵⁹ *Companion*, p. xi

⁶⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed., W. H. Lewis, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1966), p. 256.

⁶¹ Peter J. Elliott, “A Child’s Memories of C. S. Lewis,” *In Review: Living Books Past and Present*, I, 3 (Summer 1994), pp. 33-36

All his friends were very surprised when, in his sixties, the confirmed bachelor at last got married. His wife, a short, outspoken American-Jewish authoress, had been Mrs. Joy Gresham before a divorce. Lewis was rather daunted by the energy of her two sons, who came with her. Nevertheless, he and the boys got along capitally. One of the Narnia books is dedicated to them.

The Lewises' three years of marriage were not perfect bliss. Joy had been diagnosed with cancer even before they were married. She enjoyed a miraculous recovery for a couple years, which enabled them to remodel the Kilns and take a trip to Greece (one of her lifelong desires) before Joy died in late 1960.

Her death was very hard on Lewis. He had now to put into practice many of the things that he had written about for so many years. His book from this period, *A Grief Observed*, was published under a pseudonym because the publishers thought it was too bold in its frankness. As a result, several friends sent copies to Lewis, telling him they hoped he would find it helpful in his grief! Though he describes questioning God, the conclusion he comes to in the end is a resounding belief in God's faithfulness.

Lewis spent his last few years living in relative seclusion at the Kilns with his brother Warnie. He died quietly in bed one November afternoon in 1963.

PART 4
Works of C. S. Lewis:
The Chronicles of Narnia
The Space Trilogy

a. The *Chronicles of Narnia*

ALL my seven Narnian books... began with seeing pictures in my head. At first they were not a story, just pictures. The *Lion* all began with a picture of a Faun carrying an umbrella and parcels in a snowy wood. This picture had been in my mind since I was about sixteen. Then one day, when I was about forty, I said to myself: "Let's try to make a story about it."

At first I had very little idea how the story would go. But then suddenly Aslan came bounding into it. I think I had been having a good many dreams of lions about that time. Apart from that, I don't know where the Lion came from or why He came. But once He was there He pulled the whole story together, and soon He pulled the six other Narnian stories after Him.⁶²

The Narnian stories were the kind that Lewis himself loved to read as a child, as evidenced by Boxen and its medieval world of talking animals. These books are stories, first and foremost, enjoyable for their characters, their plots, their adventures, their marvelous settings. But they are also sprinkled throughout with a wisdom that makes them truly good children's stories by Lewis's own test: "No book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally (and often far more) worth reading at the age of fifty."⁶³

The Narnia books may be "fairy stories," strictly speaking, but there are many elements in them that go beyond the traditional, straight-forward fairytale. They are perhaps better classified as simply "Children's Stories." Lewis's writing style is much more modern than that of George MacDonald in that it not only attempts to relate events but also to give the reader a feeling for what it would be like to take part in

⁶² C. S. Lewis, "It All Began with a Picture," *Of Other Worlds*, p. 42

⁶³ C. S. Lewis, "Of Stories," in *Of Other Worlds*, p. 15

them. Thus the Narnia books are longer than most fairy tales. The characters are explored as people, not just figures or stereotypes. They are much more realistic than the traditional fairy tale, told rather by a narrator than by a storyteller, though every now and then he breaks in with a good, old-fashioned narrator's comment, such as, "Jill suddenly flew into a temper (which is quite a likely thing to happen if you have been interrupted in a cry)"⁶⁴ or "(When I was at school one would have said, 'I swear by the Bible.' But Bibles were not encouraged at Experiment House.)"⁶⁵ Most of the "fairy tale" element in these books is their magical nature: the strange Narnian peoples, the mythological events and creatures. Lewis's use of the fairytale form allows him to write about wonderful, magical, other-worldly things, and his realistic style brings the reader into it, employing the "flexible traditionalism" of fairytales to its fullest effect.

Being fairytales, as opposed to novels, the main emphasis in the Narnia books is on *story* — the plot and setting — rather than a detailed observation of human nature and interaction. His plots themselves are well varied: an oppressed kingdom being freed, a band of exiles overthrowing a usurper, a young king traveling on a quest, two children searching for a lost prince, a kidnapped orphan uncovering a treachery plot while escaping from captivity. He uses many traditional forms without repeating any of them. Throughout, though, what C. S. Lewis does most brilliantly is convey a sense of "place." The courts of Calormen, the Narnian woods in winter, the "castle of Cair Paravel by the sea," the Lone Isles, the northern wastelands, the Garden in the Western Mountains, are vividly done. He writes well

⁶⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1995), p. 4

⁶⁵ *Silver Chair*, p. 7

in the little details as well as the large ones, even down to his descriptions of meals. The foods he chooses are simple, but they fit the nature of the hosts serving them. Thus a lunch among centaurs is “cakes of oaten meal, and apples, and herbs, and wine, and cheese,” a king’s informal lunch consists of “cold birds and cold game pie,” and a dwarfs’ breakfast is bacon and eggs and mushrooms, coffee, and porridge, in generous portions. A dinner among common beavers is fish and potatoes, while a dinner among the opulent, comical, (and invisible) Duffelpuds has “mushroom soup and boiled chickens and hot boiled ham and gooseberries, redcurrants, curds, cream, milk, and mead.”⁶⁶ C. S. Lewis has mastered the trick of the “revealing detail,” that one (often obscure) little detail that makes a scene “click” for the reader, such as “...everyone became perfectly still in the end, so that you noticed even small sounds like a bumble-bee flying past, or the birds in the forest down below them.”⁶⁷ In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, he describes a picture that has come to life:

Down went the prow of the ship into the wave and up went a great shock of spray... At the same moment an exercise book which had been lying beside Edmund on the bed flapped, rose and sailed through the air to the wall behind him, and Lucy felt all her hair whipping round her face as it does on a windy day. And this was a windy day; but the wind was blowing out of the picture toward them. And suddenly with the wind came the noises — the swishing of waves and the slap of water against the ships sides and the creaking and the over-all high steady roar of air and water. But it was the smell, the wild, briny smell, which really convinced Lucy that she was not dreaming.⁶⁸

Lewis often wrote how the value of *stories*, as opposed to novels, lies not so much in the actual events as in the feeling they convey of other places and other worlds, the sense of “abiding strangeness.” This is the value of his books. “[A child] does not

⁶⁶ *Caspian*, p. 79; *Horse*, p. 213 & 173; *Lion*, p. 74; *Dawn Treader*, p. 146

⁶⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1995), p. 143

⁶⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1995), p. 9

despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods: the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted.”⁶⁹

The Pevensie children, the main characters in Narnia, are all very normal children. Though they are satisfactorily-developed, they are not particularly well-developed. Each of the children have a few distinctive details of personality, such as Lucy’s commitment to telling the truth, Peter’s sense of responsibility, or Susan’s longing to be grown-up. Though they do change and grow up over the course of the series, they are not usually dynamic within each book (Edmund and Eustace being the notable exceptions). But,

... the more unusual the scenes and events of a story are, the slighter, the more ordinary, the more typical the persons should be.... To tell how odd things struck odd people is to have an oddity too much: he who is to see strange sights... ought to be as nearly as possible Everyman or Anyman. Of course, we must not confuse slight or typical characterization with impossible or unconvincing characterization. Falsification of character will always spoil a story. But character can apparently be reduced, simplified, to almost any extent with wholly satisfactory results.⁷⁰

Lewis does the native Narnians brilliantly, such characters as Trumppkin the dwarf (with his propensity for agnosticism and creative ejaculations); Puddleglum the marsh-wiggle, the incorrigible pessimist with a great heart (modeled after the Lewises’ gardener Paxford); Glimfeather the owl; Tumnus the Faun; the dimwitted Duffelpuds who spend their entire lives agreeing with everybody except the magician set to rule them. Take Reepicheep, the valiant Talking Mouse: “ ‘Am I to understand,’ said Reepicheep to Lucy after a long stare at Eustace, ‘that this singularly discourteous person is under your Majesty’s protection?... To the convenience of a

⁶⁹ “Three Ways,” p. 30

⁷⁰ C. S. Lewis, “On Science Fiction,” in *Of Other Worlds*, p. 64-65

lady... even a question of honor must give way — at least for the moment.”⁷¹ And there is the introduction of Puddleglum:

As they drew nearer, the figure turned its head and showed them a long thin face with rather sunken cheeks, a tightly shut mouth, a sharp nose, and no beard. He was wearing a high, pointed hat like a steeple, with an enormously wide flat brim.... His expression was solemn, his complexion muddy, and you could see at once that he took a serious view of life.

“Good morning, Guests,” he said. “Though when I say *good* I don’t mean it won’t probably turn to rain or it might be snow, or fog, or thunder. You didn’t get any sleep, I dare say.”

“Yes we did, though,” said Jill. “We had a lovely night.”

“Ah,” said the Marsh-wiggle, shaking his head. “I see you’re making the best of a bad job. That’s right. You’ve been well brought up, you have. You’ve learned to put a good face on things.”

“Please, we don’t know your name,” said Scrubb.

“Puddleglum’s my name. But it doesn’t matter if you forget it. I can always tell you again.”⁷²

Many of his best *kinds* of characters (giants and dwarfs and fauns and centaurs) are taken from mythology. What he does well with these is create a sort of “personality” of these creatures as a group. Thus all centaurs are noble prophets and star-gazers; all fauns are quaint, nimble, and homey; giants, though they come in good and bad varieties, are always hopelessly dim-witted. It is, of course, another outworking of the Fairy-Tale distinction between good and evil, where such things are closer to the surface than in our world. Of these creatures, “beings other than human which yet behave, in varying degrees, humanly,” Lewis says:

I believe these to be at least (for they may have many other sources of power) an admirable hieroglyphic which conveys... types of character more briefly than novelistic presentation and to readers whom novelistic presentation could not yet reach. Consider Mr. Badger in *The Wind and the Willows* — that extraordinary amalgam of high rank, coarse manners, gruffness, shyness, and goodness. The child who has once met Mr. Badger has

⁷¹ Dawn Treader, p. 16-17

⁷² Silver Chair, p. 69

ever afterwards, in its bones, a knowledge of humanity and of English social history which it could not get in any other way...⁷³

... Can a man write a story on Atlantis — or is it better to leave the word to work on its own?⁷⁴

With the delightful presumption of fantasy, he often throws in generalizations about his mythical creatures as if they were part of mundane daily life, such as: “This was bad grammar of course, but that is how beavers talk when they are excited,”⁷⁵ or, “Talking horses always sound more horsey in accent when they are angry,”⁷⁶ or, “Giants of any sort are now so rare in England and so few giants are good-tempered that ten to one you have never seen a giant when his face is beaming. It’s a sight well worth looking at.”⁷⁷

The crowning glory of Narnia is C. S. Lewis’s depiction of the character Aslan the Great Lion, Son of the Emperor-Over-the-Sea. He is the “Christ-figure,” in literary terms, but he is ever so much more than that. What C. S. Lewis has managed to do is to convey in real concrete terms what our many doctrines of God — holiness, love, goodness, wrath — might look like embodied in another world. What are sometimes a confused jumble of theological terms by themselves become, with the power of fantasy, a single, tangible, believable Person whom we see wholeheartedly to be Good... more than that, whom we are drawn to love. In Aslan, C. S. Lewis conveys the fullness of a God who commands both respect and confidence, worship, love, fealty, adoration, fear, and joy; who roars, growls, laughs, and even purrs sometimes; who rebukes but also encourages and strengthens; who will become visible

⁷³ “Three Ways,” p. 27

⁷⁴ “Of Stories,” p. 19

⁷⁵ *The Lion*, p. 106

⁷⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy* (New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1995), p. 13

⁷⁷ *The Lion*, p. 170

in obedience to his own laws of magic; whom the children find ever bigger every year as they grow older.

“Oh, children,” said the Lion, “I feel my strength coming back to me. Oh, children, catch me if you can!” He stood for a second, his eyes very bright, his limbs quivering lashing himself with his tail. Then he made a leap high over their heads and landed on the other side of the Table. Laughing, though she didn’t know why, Lucy scrambled over it to reach him. Aslan leaped again. A mad chase began. Round and round the hilltop he led them, now hopelessly out of their reach, now letting them almost catch his tail, now diving between them, now tossing them in the air with his huge and beautifully velvety paws and catching them again, and now stopping unexpectedly so that all three of them rolled over together in a happy laughing heap of fur and arms and legs. It was 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. And the funny thing was that when all three finally lay together panting in the sun the girls no longer felt in the least tired or hungry or thirsty.⁷⁸

“Hail, Aslan!” came [Reepicheep’s] shrill voice. “I have the honor—” But then he suddenly stopped. The fact was that he still had no tail...

“I am confounded,” said Reepicheep to Aslan. “I am completely out of countenance. I must crave your indulgence for appearing in this unseemly fashion.”

“It becomes you very well, Small One,” said Aslan... “What do you want with a tail?”

“Sir,” said the Mouse, “I can eat and sleep and die for my King without one. But a tail is the honor and glory of a Mouse.”

“I have sometimes wondered, friend,” said Aslan, “whether you do not think too much about your honor.”

“Highest of all High Kings,” said Reepicheep, “permit me to remind you that a very small size has been bestowed on us Mice, and if we did not guard our dignity, some (who weigh worth by inches) would allow themselves very unsuitable pleasantries at our expense. That is why I have been at some pains to make it known that no one who does not wish to feel this sword as near his heart as I can reach shall talk in my presence about Traps or Toasted Cheese or Candles: no, Sir — not the tallest fool in Narnia!” Here he glared very fiercely up at Wimbleweather, but the Giant, who was always a stage behind everyone else, had not yet discovered what was being talked about down at his feet, and so missed the point.

“Why have your followers all drawn *their* swords, may I ask?” said Aslan.

⁷⁸ The Lion, p. 163-164

“May it please your High Majesty,” said the second Mouse, whose name was Peepiceek, “we are all waiting to cut off our own tails if our Chief must go without his. We will not bear the shame of wearing an honor which is denied to the High Mouse.”

“Ah!” roared Aslan. “You have conquered me. You have great hearts. Not for the sake of your dignity, Reepicheep, but for the love that is between you and your people, and still more for the kindness your people showed me long ago when you ate away the cords that bound me on the Stone Table... you shall have your tail again”⁷⁹

“Who *are* you?” asked Shasta.

“Myself,” said the Voice, very deep and low so that the earth shook: and again, “Myself,” loud and clear and gay: and then the third time “Myself,” whispered so softly you could hardly hear it, and yet it seemed to come from all round you as if the leaves rustled with it.

Shasta was no longer afraid that the Voice belonged to something that would eat him, nor that it was the voice of a ghost. But a new and different sort of trembling came over him. Yet he felt glad too...

A golden light fell on them from the left. He thought it was the sun.

He turned and saw, pacing beside him, taller than the horse, a Lion... Of course he knew none of the true stories about Aslan, the great Lion, the son of the Emperor-over-the-sea, the King above all High Kings in Narnia. But after one glance at the lion’s face he slipped out of the saddle and fell at its feet....

The High King above all kings stooped toward him. Its mane, and some strange and solemn perfume that hung about the mane, was all round him. It touched his forehead with its tongue. He lifted his face and their eyes met. Then instantly the pale brightness of the mist and the fiery brightness of the Lion rolled themselves together into a swirling glory and gathered themselves up and disappeared. He was alone with the horse on a grassy hillside under a blue sky. And there were birds singing.⁸⁰

“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...”

⁷⁹ C. S. Lewis, Prince Caspian (New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1995), p. 207-209

⁸⁰ The Horse, p. 165-166

“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.”⁸¹

This portrayal of God and goodness in turn lends power to all the rest of the world of Narnia. C. S. Lewis said that he did not intend to create an “allegory,” in which one thing stands directly for another, but rather to envision what it might be like if Jesus Christ chose to redeem another world as he had redeemed ours.⁸² The result is a world that is not “Christian” as in parallel to us but “Christian” as in based on the same worldview, the same biblical truths, the same basic assumptions about life. The stories are stories rather than sermons, and where there is a message, that message is more revealed in themes than in strict allegorical “lessons.”

One recurrent pattern, interestingly enough, is the same mockery of “modern” and “grownup” people that was found in George MacDonald’s fairytales. C. S. Lewis makes fun of all kinds of modern thought through an abundance of different characters. The black dwarf Nikabrik is a bitter opportunist willing to call on any spiritual power if it will benefit him. The Telmarines teach indoctrinated history, “duller than the truest history you ever read and less true than the most exciting adventure story.”⁸³ The Duffelpuds happily agree with any and everybody, even when told conflicting statements: “Nothing like an opposite; keep it up, both of you.”⁸⁴ The dwarves of *The Last Battle* are so afraid of being taken in that when they are thrown into Paradise they will not believe their eyes, and insist on thinking themselves in a noisome stable. What comes out here, as before, is the essential

⁸¹ *The Lion*, p. 79-80

⁸² see *Companion*, p. 425

⁸³ *Caspian*, p. 199

⁸⁴ *Dawn Treader*, p. 171

poverty of the modern way of thinking. Eustace Clarence Scrubb might have thought himself advanced and modern for reading only “the wrong sorts of books:” “books of information [with] pictures of grain elevators or of fat foreign children doing exercises in model schools,” books that “had a lot to say about exports and imports and governments and drains, but... were weak on dragons.”⁸⁵ What he never bargained for was that someday he might be in a place where he would meet dragons... and yet here he is. One of the most powerful displays of modern error is when Bree, the talking-horse held captive among men since his youth, is “explaining away” Aslan’s beasthood, the equivalent in that world of the Incarnation:

“No doubt,” continued Bree, “when they speak of him as a Lion they only mean he’s as strong as a lion or (to our enemies, of course) as fierce as a lion. Or something of that kind. Even a little girl like you, Aravis, must see that it would be quite absurd to suppose he is a *real* lion. Indeed it would be disrespectful. If he was a lion he’d have to be a Beast just like the rest of us. Why!” (and here Bree began to laugh) “If he was a lion he’d have four paws, and a tail, and *Whiskers!*... Aie, ooh, hoo-hoo! Help!”

For just as he said the word *Whiskers*, one of Aslan’s had actually tickled his ear. Bree shot away like an arrow to the other side of the enclosure... There was about a second of intense silence...

... “Bree,” Aslan said, “you poor, proud, frightened Horse, draw near. Nearer still, my son. Do not dare not to dare. Touch me. Smell me. Here are my paws, here is my tail, these are my whiskers. I am a true Beast.”

“Aslan,” said Bree in a shaken voice, “I’m afraid I must be rather a fool.”

“Happy the Horse who knows that while he is still young. Or the Human either.”⁸⁶

Not only the error, but also the spiritual and artistic poverty of modern life are shown up by comparison with good old-fashioned pomp and pageantry. The slovenly administration of Governor Gumpas of the Lone Islands (spouting phrases about appointments and council meetings and finances much like any governor’s office in

⁸⁵ Dawn Treader, p. 3 & 87

⁸⁶ Horse & His Boy, p. 200-201

our world) looks pitifully absurd when King Caspian comes to make a reckoning and stop the slave trade. When Gumpas protests on the grounds of Progress and Development, Caspian answers, “I have seen them both in an egg.”⁸⁷ Eustace’s fine democratic talk rings hollow in a world of chivalry, honor, and adventure. Even among the Telmarines, who suppress the wild and magical creatures of Narnia, there can still be found youngsters (and not-so-youngsters) who long for the Old Days. When compared with the simple beauty of good, old-fashioned myth, the “factual,” “scientific” world of grown-ups suddenly doesn’t seem to be as all-sufficient as it claims to be.

Symbolism does not run thick in these books, except it be the generally-parallel kind of symbolism that permeates all of them. Aslan is the only real symbol that runs through the whole series, but there are other symbols explored in specific books. The Stone Table in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, inscribed with the laws and penalties of Narnia, is broken in two when Aslan takes the traitor’s punishment, a powerful representation of Christ’s canceling the written code against us. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lewis explores sanctification through the adventures of Eustace, who, through thinking dragonish thoughts, becomes in real fact a dragon. He tries to shed his skin himself, but in the end he must let Aslan peel it off, because only Aslan can tear deep enough to restore him. In *The Last Battle*, Shift the Ape sets up, with the help of the unwitting donkey Puzzle, the Antichrist of the end of the age. In *The Magician’s Nephew*, Lewis pictures creation as Aslan not speaking but *singing* the world into being, a different song for each thing created. In

⁸⁷ Caspian, p. 59

the end of *The Silver Chair*, in one of Lewis's best symbolisms, Aslan restores the dead King Caspian by having Eustace drive a thorn into his paw, and letting the blood fall on the dead king, a vivid picture of salvation.

What emerges most powerfully out of the Narnia books is a strong impression of the attractiveness of Goodness. These books could possibly be called "didactic," but only in the sense of impressing one with truths that go beyond the story, truths that one can carry away. They teach by motivation and inspiration, not command. As with *Phantastes*, the reader goes away with a new taste for holiness. That was C. S. Lewis's intention.

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralyzed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to... The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.⁸⁸

b. The *Space Trilogy*

"SCIENCE fiction... carries on the imaginative pleasures of fantasy in a more modern key to an audience that thinks it has outgrown fairy tales," writes Gene Edward Veith. "Lewis directed his Narnia chronicles to children; he wrote his science fiction trilogy to achieve the same effect for adults."⁸⁹

⁸⁸ C. S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories," in *Of Other Worlds*, p. 37

⁸⁹ *Reading Between the Lines*, p. 147

In the sense that it is set in this world, under quasi-plausible circumstances, Lewis's *Space Trilogy* is not really a fantasy, but neither is it "science fiction" in the usual sense. It might perhaps be called a "romance" in the sense that *Phantastes* is a romance, or that ancient medieval fantasy-stories were romances. Lewis himself gives us the best categorization for the *Space Trilogy*. In his essay "On Science Fiction,"⁹⁰ he describes science fiction as coming in many types, the last of which uses "science" only as an excuse to explore the "abiding strangeness" of other worlds:

In this kind of story the pseudo-scientific apparatus is to be taken simply as a "machine" in the sense which that word bore for the Neo-Classical critics. The most superficial appearance of plausibility — the merest sop to our critical intellect — will do... Nor need the strange worlds, when we get there, be at all strictly tied to scientific probabilities. It is their wonder, or beauty, or suggestiveness that matter.⁹¹

The main glory of these stories is Lewis's portrayal of the supernatural, the world of Deep Heaven, and Earth's place in it. Though the three stories are very much separated in plot, taken together they weave one continuous epic about Deep Heaven at last breaking into Thulcandra, "The Silent Planet" (Earth), as the time to undo its evil is at last drawing near. Lewis has been described as creating a "new mythology," a Christian mythology,⁹² taking elements from many old ones and "conquering for my own (Christian) point of view what has always hitherto been used by the opposite side."⁹³ The resultant depiction of the universe, the spiritual depth of the world as he paints it, is breathtaking.

The *Space Trilogy*, which chronicles the interplanetary adventures of philologist Elwin Ransom, is told in a simple narrative style from the perspective of

⁹⁰ "On Science Fiction," in *Of Other Worlds*, p. 59-73

⁹¹ "On Science Fiction," p. 68-69

⁹² see *Companion*, p. 207-208

⁹³ *Companion*, p. 208

the main character. Ransom fits very well as Lewis's "Everyman" for experiencing unusual places, at least in the beginning. (By the last book, which is told from the perspective of Mark and Jane Studdock, he has become more remote, a towering character in his own right.) C. S. Lewis works a great deal of philosophy into his style, both through Ransom's thoughts and through the conversations of his characters; this comes out especially in the inhabitants of the unfallen planets, such as Mars and Venus. Lewis merges the real and the fantastic in his treatment of the supernatural in a way that can sometimes be confusing, and even eerie. He occasionally puts in first-person bits with himself as a character, which adds to this sense of the blurring of the line. It makes one think — how much of this is, after all, really impossible in our world? As the retired star Ramandu tells Eustace, who objects that stars are balls of flaming gas, "Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is, but only what it is made of."⁹⁴

In contrast to most fantasies, the plot of these books is really of secondary importance. With the exception of *That Hideous Strength*, they are driven entirely by the nature of the other planets and their inhabitants when we discover them. Even *Perelandra*, though it has a more distinct plotline than *Out of the Silent Planet*, never loses the emphasis on the place and the people. The conflict that exists is character conflict between evil and good, people of Earth responding to the people of other places and vice versa.

Thus the characters become the most important element of these stories. The characterization is much deeper in these books than in C. S. Lewis's other books. In

⁹⁴ Dawn Treader, p. 209

That Hideous Strength, especially, he shows a deep perception of the nature of people in the characters of Mark and Jane Studdock. Mark is driven by a vague, life-long desire to be accepted into “The In-Group,” and thus falls easy prey to the N.I.C.E. (National Institute of Coordinated Experiments), where no one ever does anything but try to be “in” with the right people on this mysterious — and increasingly evil — scheme. His wife Jane, feeling lonely and misunderstood, is trying to reconcile her disillusionment with marriage with the ideal of femininity and masculinity that Ransom and the Christians talk about. This sets up a beautiful side plot, along with Ransom’s attempts to foil the N.I.C.E.’s plans, as Jane learns what Christian love means.

Lewis’s evil characters are memorable caricatures: Weston, the ruthless, self-important scientist; the cruel Miss “Fairy” Hardcastle, head of the N.I.C.E.’s secret police; the languid, smooth Dick Devine, Lord Feverstone. One of his best is John Wither, the “Deputy Director” of the N.I.C.E., who has the truly remarkable gift of communicating absolutely nothing in half a dozen pages of monologue, even in Latin. One reviewer described him as “talking as a crab walks.”⁹⁵

“Well, Mr. Stone, I am, on the whole, and with certain inevitable reservations, moderately satisfied with your conduct of this affair. I believe that I may be able to present it in a favourable light to those of my colleagues whose good will you have, unfortunately, not been able to retain. If you can bring it to a successful conclusion you would very much strengthen your position. If not... it is inexpressibly painful to me that there should be these tensions and mutual recriminations among us. But you quite understand me, my dear boy. If only I could persuade — say Miss Hardcastle and Mr. Studdock — to share my appreciation of your very real qualities, you would need to have no apprehensions about your career or — ah — your security.”

“But what do you want me to *do*, Sir?”

“My dear young friend, the golden rule is very simple. There are only two errors which would be fatal to one placed in the peculiar situation which certain parts of your previous conduct have unfortunately created for you.

⁹⁵ quoted in *Companion*, p. 239

One the one hand, anything like a lack of initiative or enterprise would be disastrous. On the other, the slightest approach to unauthorized action — anything which suggested that you were assuming a liberty of decision which, in all the circumstances, is not really yours — might have consequences from which even I could not protect you. But as long as you keep quite clear of these two extremes, there is no reason (speaking unofficially) why you should not be perfectly safe.”⁹⁶

As well-done as the evil characters are, though, more impressive are the numerous truly *good* characters: perfect characters, representing sinless worlds, one of the hardest challenges a writer ever faces. “I may have embarked on the impossible,” Lewis wrote to a friend while working on Tinidril, the Eve-figure of Perelandra. “This woman has got to combine characteristics which the Fall has put poles apart — she’s got to be in some ways like a Pagan goddess and in other ways like the Blessed Virgin. But if one can get even a fraction of it into words it is worth doing.”⁹⁷ Yet from the comfortable old college professor Dimble to the Oyeresu, Lewis’s archangels and rulers of worlds, he *does* make them convincing. There is a beauty in them, a beauty of great variety from the simplest to the greatest of them, giving the lie to the common misconception that the totally good must inevitably be boring. One of the best scenes in the books is Ransom’s first encounter with an alien rational being:

Unconsciously he raised himself on his elbow and stared at the black beast... The huge bullet head swung round and lustrous amber eyes fixed him. There was no wind on the lake or in the wood. Minute after minute in utter silence the representatives of two so far-divided species stared each into the other’s face.

Ransom rose to his knees. The creature leaped back, watching him intently, and they became motionless again. Then it came a pace nearer, and Ransom jumped up and retreated, but not far; curiosity held him... He could see the muscles tightened under its sleek pelt, ready for sudden movement... Neither dared let the other approach, yet each repeatedly felt the impulse to do so himself, and yielded to it. It was foolish, frightening, ecstatic and

⁹⁶ C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 252-253

⁹⁷ letter to Sister Penelope of Nov. 9, 1941, quoted in *Companion*, p. 224

unbearable all in one moment. It was more than curiosity. It was like a courtship — like the meeting of the first man and the first woman in the world; it was like something beyond that; so natural is the contact of the sexes, so limited the strangeness, so shallow the reticence, so mild the repugnance to be overcome, compared with the first tingling intercourse of two different, but rational, species...

It had not gone more than twenty yards away when Ransom saw it stoop down and pick something up. It returned. In its hand (he was already thinking of its webbed forepaw as a hand) it was carrying what appeared to be a shell... Supporting the shell in its two arms, it extended them towards Ransom. The intention was unmistakable. Hesitantly, almost shyly, he advanced and took the cup. His finger-tips touched the webbed membrane of the creature's paws and an indescribable thrill of mingled attraction and repulsion ran through him; then he drank.

"Thank you," he said in English. "Thank you very much."⁹⁸

Lewis has a hard job in these books to make the descriptions of his interplanetary worlds livable to his readers. By definition, what one might expect to find there would be irreconcilably *different* from things here. Thus the reader has no mental hooks, no previous associations to draw upon. In a supposed letter from Ransom to the author at the end of *Out of the Silent Planet*, Ransom complains,

"How can one 'get across' the Malacandrian *smells*? Nothing comes back to me more vividly in my dreams... especially the early morning smell in those purple woods, where the very mention of 'early morning' and 'woods' is misleading because it must set you thinking of earth and moss and cobwebs and the smell of our planet, but I'm thinking of something totally different. More 'aromatic'... yes, but then it is not hot or luxurious or exotic as that word suggests. Something aromatic, spicy, yet very cold, very thin, tingling at the back of the nose — something that did to the sense of smell what high, sharp violin notes do to the ear. And mixed with that I always hear the sound of singing — great hollow hound-like music from enormous throats, deeper than Chaliapin, a 'warm, dark noise.' I am homesick for my old Malacandrian valley when I think of it; yet God knows when I heard it there I was homesick enough for the Earth."⁹⁹

The descriptions of Malacandra are often awkward and surreal, especially due to the fact that Lewis had to describe a world with weaker gravity, making things

⁹⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 55-57

⁹⁹ *Silent Planet*, p. 155

necessarily longer and slenderer than anything we are used to. They are certainly nothing like the masterful, one-touch descriptions of Narnia. Nevertheless, even here he succeeds in leaving us with an image, if not a perfect picture, of what this other world is like. Ransom's reminiscences, again in the letter, of watching Jupiter rise over the landscape provide a good example:

"I see myself bathing with Hyoui in the warm lake. He laughs at my clumsy swimming; accustomed to a heavier world, I can hardly get enough of me under the water to make any headway. And then I see the night sky. The greater part of it is very like ours, though the depths are blacker and the stars brighter; but something that no terrestrial analogy will enable you fully to picture is happening in the west. Imagine the Milky Way magnified... not painted across the zenith, but rising like a constellation behind the mountain-tops — a dazzling necklace of lights brilliant as planets, slowly heaving itself up till it fills a fifth of the sky... There is a glow like moonrise on the *harandra Ahihra!* cries Hyoui, and other baying voices answer him from the darkness all about us. And now the true king of the night is set up... I turn my eyes away, for the little disk is far brighter than the Moon in her greatest splendour. The whole *handramit* is bathed in colourless light; I could count the stems of the forest on the far side of the lake; I see that my fingernails are broken and dirty. And now I guess what it is that I have seen — Jupiter, rising beyond the Asteroids and forty million miles nearer than he has even been to earthly eyes..."¹⁰⁰

Perelandra, written five years later, is even better done. There his landscapes (or seascapes, that world being mostly ocean) are believable almost from the beginning.

The sky was pure, flat gold like the background of a medieval picture. It looked very distant... The ocean was gold, too, in the offing, flecked with innumerable shadows. The nearer waves, though golden where their summits caught the light, were green on their slopes: first emerald, and lower down a lustrous bottle green, deepening to blue where they passed beneath the shadow of other waves... he saw the golden roof of that world quivering with a rapid variation of paler lights as a ceiling quivers at the reflected sunlight from the bath-water when you step into your bath on a summer morning. He guessed that this was the reflection of the waves wherein he swam...

... his eyes were stabbed by an unendurable light. A grading, blue-to-violet illumination made the golden sky seem dark by comparison... Then the rich twilight rushed back (now seeming almost darkness) and he heard

¹⁰⁰ *Silent Planet*, p. 159-60

thunder. But it has a different *timbre* from terrestrial thunder, more resonance, and even, when distant, a kind of tinkling. It is the laugh, rather than the roar of heaven...¹⁰¹

In both cases, C. S. Lewis does an admirable job of conveying that “abiding strangeness,” that sense of *otherness* which, to his mind, was the main thing that interplanetary stories were good for.

The central theme brought out in Lewis’s “Christian mythology” is the ultimate strength and beauty of the holy, compared to which evil is shown to be pitifully absurd. This he brings out by a masterful use of juxtaposition. In the midst of a breathtaking paradise, where, Ransom says, “There was an exuberance or prodigality of sweetness about the mere act of living which our race finds it difficult not to associate with forbidden and extravagant actions”¹⁰² — into this setting an absurd little space ship plops out of the sky bearing none other than Weston of interplanetary-imperialism fame, spouting new philosophical rubbish that “the forward movement of Life — the growing spirituality — is everything.”¹⁰³ Into the simple and beautiful logic of Perelandra’s first woman, Tinidril, comes the philosophical babblings of Weston, which soon become far more deadly as his new “spiritualism” allows the “Bent Oyarsa” of Earth to invade Perelandra through him. And our first reaction is disgust. What seems so profound, so intellectual on Earth suddenly loses its ring when held up against the straightforward faith of Lewis’s sinless worlds. We rather feel like pitying than revering it. In one of the most humorous scenes of *Out of the Silent Planet*, Weston is explaining his motive

¹⁰¹ C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 35 & 37

¹⁰² *Perelandra*, p. 37

¹⁰³ *Perelandra*, p. 91

philosophy to the Oyarsa, with Ransom translating, since Weston doesn't speak the language:

... "I may fall," said Weston. "But while I live I will not, with such a key in my hand, consent to close the gates of the future on my race. What lies in that future, beyond our present ken, passes imagination to conceive: it is enough for me that there is a Beyond."

"He is saying," Ransom translated, "that he will not stop trying to do all this unless you kill him. And he says that though he doesn't know what will happen to the creatures sprung from us, he wants it to happen very much."¹⁰⁴

In *The Hideous Strength*, set in a little town in England rather than in other planets, Lewis brings out this theme through the use of two main characters, Mark and Jane, whose respective stories center in two different locations: the N.I.C.E. and Ransom's group's establishment, St. Anne's. The one is a sordid, sleazy, back-biting world of parties and hatred, the other an old mansion on a hill with a huge garden and a conglomeration of delightfully wise "old-fashioned" people (along with a few tame animals to liven things up). Even the names bring out the contrast between a heartless scientific organization with a "nice" false front and the Christian house on the hill. Lewis switches freely between these two, sometimes in the middle of conversations, which allows him to place the ideas of each side-by-side for comparison, as well as the lifestyles to which the respective worldviews lead.

The most interesting — almost eerie — thing to note is that, for all their "Science," Weston and the N.I.C.E. end up with their own version ("scientific," of course) of belief in *eldila*, Lewis's supernatural beings roughly corresponding to angels. The "enlightened" Weston spouts mystical ideas of Life as the driving force behind everything. The people of the N.I.C.E., when Mark finally gets into the Inner Ring

¹⁰⁴ Silent Planet, p. 137

of inner rings, divulge as their proudest secret that they have made communication with “macrobes,” beings as high above us as microbes are below. These “discoveries” are, of course, no more than one would expect if what the Christians say is true. By their own admission these worshippers of Science are in the self-same world. That knowledge of which they’re so proud the Christians could have told them long ago. And the Christians can tell them more: not only are there “macrobes,” but they are either good and bad. The “Force” from which Weston has gotten his “calling” in *Perelandra*, is *not* the same as that which called Ransom to the planet Venus, but the opposite. That which is “guiding” Weston is the direct enemy of Maleldil, who guides the Lady Tinidril. And the N.I.C.E. has not the slightest idea what they are in for. In a keen irony, the Macrobes lead them to the very blind, subjective, abject submission to the Unknown that they had scorned (by the Macrobes’ own lies) in the interest of Science, claiming that there is no such thing beyond reality. The Macrobes knew better than that all along.

Another theme which is explored in the last two books is the Biblical view of male and female, as contrasted with the modern view which attempts to merge them into one. This is especially explored through Jane’s struggles with her marriage. She had expected that, once she was away from Mark, she would find someone who “understood” her, who didn’t just think of her as a thing to be owned, and yet,

... the suspicion dawned upon her that there might be differences and contrast [between male and female] all the way up, richer, sharper, even fiercer at every rung of the ascent. How if this invasion of her own being in marriage from which she had recoiled, often in the very teeth of instinct, were not, as she had supposed, merely a relic of animal life or patriarchal barbarism, but rather the lowest, the first, and the easiest form of some shocking contact with reality which would have to be repeated... on the highest level of all?... Supposing one were a *thing* after all — a thing designed and invented by

Someone Else and valued for qualities quite different from what one had decided to regard as one's true self?¹⁰⁵

There is also an element, throughout, of truly appreciating the created world as only Christianity can. It stands in contrast to Weston's interplanetary imperialism that would wipe out all other species to make room for man. It also goes against the N.I.C.E.'s fixation with eventually dispensing with all things organic in favor of the artificial. One of the scientists (appropriately named Frost) expounds all sorts of theories about "friendship" and "hatred" being only organic, physical reactions that the Macrobes are above, and yet the Macrobes themselves know better, as Ransom says: "In fighting those who serve devils, one always has this on one's side: their Masters hate them as much as they hate us. The moment we disable the human pawns enough to make them useless to Hell, their own Masters finish the work for us."¹⁰⁶ In sharp relief to the scientists' dull, colorless world of mechanization, metallic artificial trees, and supposed disembodied "immortality" stands the vividness and beauty of the worlds as seen through Ransom's eyes. Jane muses, after a conversation with him,

The vision of the universe which she had begun to see in the last few minutes had a curiously stormy quality about it. It was bright, darting, and overpowering. Old Testament imagery of eyes and wheels for the first time in her life took on some possibility of meaning. And mixed with this was the sense that she had been maneuvered into a false position. It ought to have been she who was saying these things to the Christians. Hers ought to have been the vivid, perilous world brought against their grey and formalized one; hers the quick, vital movements and their the stained glass attitudes. That was the antithesis she was used to. This time, in a sudden flash of purple and crimson, she remembered what stained glass was really like.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Hideous Strength, p. 315 & 318

¹⁰⁶ Hideous Strength, p. 317

¹⁰⁷ Hideous Strength, p. 316

The greatest value of the *Space Trilogy* lies in the way it projects the Christian faith into the common world in which we live. Without changing or twisting it, simply by working out to their logical conclusions the things we profess to believe every day, it shows us a breathtaking picture of what the universe is like: what God would be like in a sinless world, what the existence of angels and devils means if we really think about it. Lewis follows perfectly the tenets of science fiction: to make a few basic scientific assumptions such as the existence of life on other worlds, and work from there within the confines of the actual world. His “Christian mythology” is “dizzily successful”¹⁰⁸ indeed.

c. Comparison: *Chronicles of Narnia* & *Space Trilogy*

GOOD writers, it is said, point out not the profound but the blatantly obvious, things which we skip over everyday by “seeing” without really looking at what we see. Thus when we read their observations, we are moved not because they are different from what we know but because something within us says, “Yes, of course! Why didn’t I see that before?” By this test C. S. Lewis is not just a good writer, but a great one.

The *Narnia* books and the *Space Trilogy* have little in common stylistically. *Narnia*, written for children, is much more “homely” compared to the sophistication of the *Space Trilogy*. The *Space Trilogy* is able to go much deeper into philosophy and explicit theology, since it is technically set in the same universe. Where the *Space*

¹⁰⁸ see Companion, p. 438

Trilogy discusses these things outright, Narnia deals with the same themes in a more subtle fashion. These two series do have several themes in common, such as challenging the view that the “modern,” “scientific life is everything — indeed, when compared with beliefs and insights from the past, it turns out to be rather pitiful. They also have in common the subtle wisdom of their author. Compare Prince Rillian’s observations on his enchantment — “Now that I am myself I can remember that enchanted life, though while I was enchanted I could not remember my true self”¹⁰⁹ — with the following comment by King Tor of Perelandra:

“We have learned of evil, though not as the Evil One wished us to learn. We have learned better than that, and know it more, for it is waking that understands sleep, and not sleep that understands waking.”¹¹⁰

Both are very telling observations about the nature of sin.

The greatest beauty of both these series is Lewis’s portrayal of God — again, a case not of the profound so much as of the obvious that we fail to see. What C. S. Lewis does in Aslan of Narnia and Maleldil of *Space Trilogy* is bring to life those things about God which we know but often do not really understand, or at least do not live in the consequences of them. He appeals to our imaginations. Though we know that God is omnipresent, that knowledge rarely hits us in the same way as when, in *Perelandra*,

“Maleldil is telling me,” answered the woman. And as she spoke the landscape had become different, though with a difference none of the senses would identify. The light was dim, the air gentle, and all Ransom’s body was bathed in bliss, but the garden world where he stood seemed to be packed quite full, and as if an unendurable pressure had been laid upon his shoulders, his legs failed him and he half sank, half fell, into a sitting position.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ *Silver Chair*, p. 169

¹¹⁰ *Perelandra*, p. 209

¹¹¹ *Perelandra*, p. 61

Though we know Christ is our King, who is to inspire our love and worship, somehow it never seems so obvious and *right* as when we see Him pictured as the Lion Aslan, gentle and stern and incredibly wise all at the same time. In the story we are *drawn* to love him, with a power that mere intellectual theories can never have. Lewis wrote to a mother who feared her son loved Aslan more than Jesus,

Laurence can't *really* love Aslan more than Jesus, even if he feels that's what he is doing. For the things he loves Aslan for doing or saying are simply the things Jesus really did and said. So that when Laurence thinks he is loving Aslan, he is really loving Jesus: and perhaps loving Him more than he ever did before.¹¹²

A direct corollary of this presentation of God is a clearer presentation of His world from the Christian perspective. Lewis portrays in a new and striking way what it means to believe in a God, and what it means to live what we believe. He shows us that He permeates the world, that our faith brings something to bear on every part of life, not as a separate mental category but as that which underpins everything, a truth as much a part of life as breathing, or seeing, or even the process of thought at all. He depicts our faith rather as a lens for seeing than as an object to be seen. Jane observes at St. Anne's,

It occurred to her that the Director never talked about Religion; nor did the Dimbles nor Camilla. They talked about God. They had no picture in their minds of some mist steaming upward: rather of strong, skilful hands thrust down to make, to mend, perhaps even to destroy.¹¹³

Being a philosopher, as well as a writer and a Christian, C. S. Lewis gives form to those things about God and the world that we affirm everyday. He shows us what it means to live in a world where "The heavens declare the glory of God," where the incredible diversity and creativity of what has been made reflect praise back to the

¹¹² quoted in Companion, p. 438

¹¹³ Hideous Strength, p. 318

Creator. As Tinidril marvels, “He can think of all, and all different... How has He made me so separate from Himself? How did it enter His mind to conceive such a thing?”¹¹⁴ Lewis gives us a taste, a glimpse as it were, of what is meant by the words, “more than we ask or imagine” (Eph. 4:20 NIV).

In both his series, there is also the shared element of mythology, which was so important in C. S. Lewis’s own life. He makes free use of it. His fiction blends Norse, Roman, and Greek myths, as well as Arthurian legend and references to the worlds of his friend Tolkien. Throughout, there is the sense of reclaiming that which is good in the old pagan myths, in the stories of Narnia, or of interplanetary travel fiction, in the *Space Trilogy*. The presence of the Christian God sanctifies what otherwise is tinged with pride, or drunken orgies, or immorality, or selfishness, and allows that which is truly good and noble, that which is the real appeal, the element of the “good dreams” of pagan men, to be truly enjoyed. As Ransom says of Mother Dimble’s view of marriage and Venus, “She has not rejected it, but she has baptized it.”¹¹⁵

In *Prince Caspian*, in the scene where Aslan first returns to Narnia, there is a wonderful early-morning revelry, at which all sorts of strange and delightful people seem to show up out of nowhere.

At that moment the sun was just rising and Lucy remembered something and whispered to Susan,
 “I say, Su, I know who they are.”
 “Who?”
 “The boy with the wild face is Bacchus and the old one on the donkey is Silenus. Don’t you remember Mr. Tumnus telling us about them long ago?”
 “Yes, of course. But I say, Lu —”

¹¹⁴ Perelandra, p. 61 & 70

¹¹⁵ Hideous Strength, p. 314

“What?”

“I wouldn’t have felt safe with Bacchus and all his wild girls if we’d met them without Aslan.”

“I should think not,” said Lucy.¹¹⁶

PART 5

COMPARISON:

*George MacDonald, C. S. Lewis, and
the Power of Fantasy*

“CHRISTIANS have always been drawn to fantasy,” writes Veith. “The great pioneers of fantasy — Spenser, Bunyan, Swift, MacDonald, Tolkien, Lewis — were all devout Christians.... Even the critics of fantasy can hardly deny that in the hands of a John Bunyan or a C. S. Lewis, fantasy has been a way of exploring and proclaiming the Christian faith.” George MacDonald and C. S. Lewis knew this power of fantasy, both by experience in their own lives, and by observation in the lives of others. Their works represent four different “subspecies” within the fantasy genre: the Fairy Tale, the Romance, the Children’s Story, and the Science Fiction Story, each with its own merits and all with the same message and appeal.

Although they grew up many miles and decades apart, MacDonald and Lewis both knew from boyhood a sense of longing for the unknown, and a love of beauty in the created world. Both boys knew the tragedy of losing their mothers before they were ten years old. Both knew what it meant to wrestle with difficult and perplexing doubts. The home in which MacDonald was raised was more overtly Christian than

¹¹⁶ Caspian, p. 160

the Lewis home, and thus MacDonald never fully relinquished the Christian faith as Lewis did for a time. Nevertheless, both of them went through serious struggles to maintain their faith, with the result that they believed what they believed in later life purposefully and actively, having come through many battles to the conviction that it was true. Both of them were significantly helped in this struggle by good literature. MacDonald was reassured of the strength of the Christian foundation by the Christian poets and mystics he read in his summer in the northern library.

C. S. Lewis was first set on the return path to faith by *Phantastes* “baptizing” his imagination. He was finally convinced of the truth of Christianity by seeing how all the best-loved myths, the “good dreams” of pagan man, pointed to something which was fulfilled in Christ. And in their later years, both of them found writing to be a way for them to communicate in turn that which was so central to them — to go “touching hearts and stirring consciences,” as George MacDonald said, since, as C. S. Lewis observed, “any amount of theology can be smuggled into people’s minds under cover of romance without their knowing it.” Both the thoughtful preacher and the skeptical professor came to attest the power of the sanctified imagination to “address the dreams and longings that lie deep within the human soul, unveiling the compelling beauty and mystery of the Christian faith.”¹¹⁷

Both George MacDonald and C. S. Lewis wrote “fairy stories” (emphasizing the joy of the traditional) for children, and “romances” (the joy of the sophisticated) for adults. In both cases, Christianity was broad enough to encompass both. There are stylistic differences that arise chiefly out of the times in which they were writing.

¹¹⁷ Reading Between the Lines, p. 140

MacDonald's Victorian children's books are more didactic, where C. S. Lewis's modern style is realistic. MacDonald lived during the Romantic period, and so the emphasis in his adult book is on personal odysseys and feelings; C. S. Lewis lived in our modern age of Science, and thus he turned to science-fiction as that which would appeal to the audience he desired to reach. Realism came into vogue between the 1860s and the 1940s, and thus Lewis's books are much more in line with the modern style, which attempts to communicate emotions and mood, as well as facts, to the reader.

The children-characters in their fairytales reflect MacDonald and Lewis's differing experiences. George MacDonald was married in his twenties and raised eleven children. His depictions of children are done in a fatherly manner, as one who knows not only what children are like, but how they grow up and the struggles they go through. He hints at some of the difficulties inherent in raising them, too. It is also noteworthy that his books include father and mother figures, where the Narnia tales do not. C. S. Lewis never had any children and was not even married until he was fifty-nine. His knowledge of children came from memories of his own childhood as well as observing the few children with whom he came in contact. His child-characters are styled accordingly. He points out this difference between a father's and an author's perspective in his essay, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children:"

Once in a hotel dining-room I said, rather too loudly, "I loathe prunes." "So do I," came an unexpected six-year-old voice from another table. Sympathy was instantaneous. Neither of us thought it funny. We both knew that prunes are far too nasty to be funny. That is the proper meeting between man and child as independent personalities. Of the far higher and more difficult relations between child and parent or child and teacher, I say nothing.

An author, as a mere author, is outside all that. He is not even an uncle. He is a freeman and an equal, like the postman, the butcher, and the dog next door.¹¹⁸

C. S. Lewis and George MacDonald also drew on mythology differently in their works. MacDonald made use mainly of English folklore, the goblins and pixies and spirits of trees, as compared to C. S. Lewis who drew on sources from all over Europe. This is partly due to their respective times and occupations (MacDonald was not a professor of ancient literature) and partly it is due to the nature of their stories. The fairytale style, though not set strictly within this world, does not make the clear-cut differentiation of universe that Narnia does. In a self-contained world, the author has more leisure to bring in elements from many mythologies, not just that associated with his particular type of story. In general, C. S. Lewis developed his worlds more thoroughly, but that is due to the differences in style between the works as much as anything else. Each book accomplishes its own aims quite satisfactorily, albeit in different manners.

The characters in both men's works for grown-up are well-done, but with different emphases. MacDonald creates colorful stereotypes, such as the beech-tree, the Rusted Knight, and the young children who help Anodos on his way. They are C. S. Lewis's "hieroglyphics" that convey in a few master-touches all the depth of one kind of personality without great elaboration. Lewis himself does his adult fantasies much more like novels, especially *That Hideous Strength*, which involves much deeper investigation into the hearts and motives of a few people. Even on the other planets, he employs much more conversation, much more every-day interaction, than Anodos encounters in his stiffly-narrated journey through Fairy Land. George MacDonald is

¹¹⁸ "Writing for Children," p. 34

able to bring out his themes directly, through having Anodos state them. C. S. Lewis develops them through character interaction. Anodos' travels read like a dream, a collection of disconnected-but-related images. Ransom's travels read with the sharp and often humorous precision of daily life.

The main highlight, though, in both these writers' works is their presentation of God, and thus it is instructive to compare the two. What becomes apparent is that both writers included in their God-figures that part of the truth that was especially important to them. George MacDonald's great quest in life was to discover how God's love fit in with the image of holiness and wrath which he had been taught as a child. Thus he emphasizes love. His most profound observations about the Old Princess concern her compassion, evident even when she has to make people pass through the fire to purify or equip or heal them. Every pain they feel she feels as well, and this is a powerful reality. C. S. Lewis, on the other hand, struggled to accept *all* of the Christian faith, with the result that when he wrote about it later in life, he wrote a much more rounded picture of what God and Christianity mean. Aslan can punish as well as praise, roar as well as laugh. He is not only loving, but kingly — and neither overshadows the other. Maleldil represents a goodness that is alarming in its completeness, as Jane realizes how much different He is from her and how complete His claims are on her. And when Ransom sees the expression on the faces of the *eldila*, he describes it as a purely intellectual charity so unadulterated that it could well be mistaken for ferocity. What these writers prized, what they had struggled most to grasp, is what comes out in their portrayals of truth. George MacDonald writes about an omnipotent Grandmother; C. S. Lewis writes about a Lion.

A major theme that all four works share is the theme of true sight, the fact that there is more to the world than what our eyes and our experiments and our Modern, Grown-up viewpoint would have us believe, forgetting that “even in your world, that is not what a star *is*, but only what it is made of.” *Narnia* and the *Princess* books hint times without number that life is more than what we see. *Phantastes* tells us that it is sin that clouds our sight and blinds us to these things, as the Shadow makes beautiful things commonplace and radiant things dull, and tricks Anodos into priding himself on not being taken in! And the *Space Trilogy* shows that it is ultimately the Christian worldview that restores true sight, as the dull and sophisticated world of man is held up against the vibrant beauty of the sinless worlds and found wanting, as Jane remembers “what stained glass is really like.”

As we look deeper, though, we see that this is, indeed, a theme of all fantasy, and one of fantasy’s greatest goods. The main value that we take away from these works is not even so much the conscious lessons as a string of images: Anodos in the fairy library, Princess Irene and Curdie tracing their way out of the depths of the mountains by the Grandmother’s invisible thread, the glades of Narnia by moonlight, the Dawn Treader in the Silver Sea, the thunderstorms of Perelandra, Jupiter-rise over the Malacandrian *handramit*, the descent of the gods on St. Anne’s, the waterfall at the end of the world. They hit us with a beauty that goes beyond words, that “indescribable longing” that Jack Lewis felt as a boy in the old house in Belfast and that Georgie MacDonald knew while lying out on the Scottish moors. They awaken our hearts to the Something-More that haunts this world of ours.

A child does not long for fairy land as a boy longs to be the hero of the first eleven. Does anyone suppose that he really and prosaically longs for all

the dangers and discomforts of a fairy tale? — really wants dragons in contemporary England? It is not so. It would be much truer to say that fairy land arouses a longing for he knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his life-long enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth. He does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods: the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted. This is a special kind of longing... the boy reading the fairy tale desires and is happy in the very fact of desiring. For his mind has not been concentrated on himself, as it often is in the more realistic story.¹¹⁹

Somehow, in the face of this “otherness” in the world, our little troubles suddenly seem less significant:

If we were all on board ship and there was trouble among the stewards, I can just conceive their chief spokesman looking with disfavor on anyone who stole away from the fierce debates in the saloon or pantry to take a breather on deck. For up there, he would taste the salt, he would see the vastness of the water, he would remember that the ship had a whither and a whence. He would remember things like fog, storms, and ice. What had seemed, in the hot, lighted rooms down below to be merely the scene for a political crisis, would appear once more as a tiny egg-shell moving rapidly through an immense darkness over an element in which man cannot live. It would not necessarily change his convictions about the rights and wrongs of the dispute down below, but it would probably show them in a new light. It could hardly fail to remind him that the stewards were taking for granted hopes more momentous than that of a rise in pay, and the passengers forgetting dangers more serious than that of having to cook and serve their own meals.¹²⁰

“Logic!” complains Professor Kirk in *The Lion*. “Why don’t they teach them logic at these schools?” Lewis and MacDonald recognized a simple but profound logic in fantasy’s appeal to Christians. We believe in an omnipotent God who is good, who is the Source and Creator of this world. Thus, all things that are good in this world must be derivatively so, only faint reflections of the Good that is in God. Every beauty we see, every longing we feel, *must* be perfectly satisfied in a God who “fills

¹¹⁹ “Writing for Children,” p. 29-30

¹²⁰ “Science Fiction,” p. 66-67

everything in every way” (Eph. 1:23 NIV). Tolkien observes that man at his best is only a “sub-creator,” as does George MacDonald: “It is God's things, His embodied thoughts, which alone a man has to use, modified and adapted to his own purposes, for the expression of his thoughts.”¹²¹ The settings of the stories are different, but the truths are the same, the longings are the same, the sense of Beauty and Nobility is the same true sense. That which man has at his disposal to work with comes from a true source.

Used wrongly and deceptively, fantasy can, of course, misrepresent truth and cause harm rather than good. But then “If he be not a true man, he will draw evil out of the best; we need not mind how he treats any work of art!”¹²² As Tinidril says, “That would be like a fruit with no taste.” Used correctly, though, fantasy has the effect of broadening our minds to the possibilities of God’s world. By exploring the farthest limits that our imaginations can reach, we get a greater appreciation for the infinity of God’s imagination, out of which he has made the world. We climb out of our ruts and see the vastness of creation. We roam around the mountain on all sides, and appreciate to a deeper extent its majesty. Christianity tells us that God fills “all in all;” fantasy shows us in new ways how big “all” can be.”

All fantasy, if the writer writes truthfully (i.e. within the truth-set of reality), can have this effect of broadening our imaginations, but specifically Christian fantasy goes further still. Among Christians, fantasy is not an end in itself, but a means to point us to something greater. As Lucy says, when told that she and Edmund will not be coming back to Narnia,

¹²¹ “Fantastic Imagination”

¹²² “Fantastic Imagination”

“It isn’t Narnia, you know,” sobbed Lucy. “It’s *you*. We shan’t meet *you* there. And how can we live, never meeting you?”

“But you shall meet me, dear one,” said Aslan.

“Are — are you there too, Sir?” said Edmund.

“I am,” said Aslan. “But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason you were brought into Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there.”¹²³

God is all the things for which we love Him in the stories, only more — more than we will ever be able to imagine in this life. MacDonald and Lewis, being Christians, are free to let imagination run to its utmost, knowing, as only Christians can know, that all things good and keen and beautiful reflect back on Him who made it all.

“There *was* a real railway accident,” said Aslan softly. “Your father and mother and all of you are — as you used to call it in the Shadowlands — dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning.”

And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.¹²⁴

Christianity is the only religion that teaches that goodness beyond our wildest dreams is not only possible, not even only probable, but promised. All the good and best things in this world, from the color of a leaf to that wild ache of longing for the unknown, are only a shadow, a tenth part of the beauty found in God: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him” (I Cor. 2:9 NIV) This is the power of the sanctified imagination, which

¹²³ Dawn Treader, p. 247

¹²⁴ C. S. Lewis, The Last Battle (New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1956), p. 210-211

sees that the world is more, and not less, than the best we can dream in our most fantastic moments.

In closing, two quotes suffice to say all that need be said, one from George MacDonald and the other from C. S. Lewis. From the end of *Phantastes*, when Anodos has returned once again to this world:

When the thought of the blessedness I experienced, after my death in Fairy Land, is too high for me to lay hold upon it and hope in it, I often think of the wise woman in the cottage, and of her solemn assurance that she knew something too good to be told. When I am oppressed by any sorrow or real perplexity, I often feel as if I had only left her cottage for a time, and would soon return out of the vision into it again. Sometimes, on such occasions, I find myself, unconsciously almost, looking about for the mystic mark of red, with the vague hope of entering her door, and being comforted by her wise tenderness. I then console myself by saying: "I have come through the door of Dismay, and the way back from the world into which that has led me is through my tomb. Upon that the red sign lies, and I shall find it one day, and be glad."¹²⁵

And from C. S. Lewis' introduction to *Phantastes*:

The quality which had enchanted me in his imaginative worlds turned out to be the quality of the real universe, the divine, magical, terrifying, ecstatic reality in which we all live. I should have been shocked in my teens if anyone had told me that what I learned to love in *Phantastes* was goodness. But now that I know, I see there was no deception. The deception is all the other way round — in that prosaic moralism which confines goodness to the region of Law and Duty, which never lets us feel in our face the sweet air blowing from the "land of righteousness," never reveals that elusive Form which if once seen must inevitably be desired with all but sensuous desire — the thing (in Sappho's phrase) "more gold than gold."¹²⁶

D eo Omnia G loria

¹²⁵ *Phantastes*, p. 184

¹²⁶ introduction to *Phantastes*, p. xii

“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”

(James 1:17)

*“Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones,
ascribe to the LORD beauty and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due His name;
worship him in the splendor of His holiness.*

(Psalm 29: 1-4)

Bibliography

- Carpenter, Humphrey. The Inklings. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979
- Chesterton, G. K. "Introduction to 'George MacDonald and His Wife.'" Fairy Tales of George MacDonald. November 5, 1999. December 14, 2001.
<<http://home.earthlink.net/~kcarmody1/chestertonintro.html>>
- Green, Roger Lancelyn, and Walter Hooper. C. S. Lewis: a Biography. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974
- Hooper, Walter. C. S. Lewis: Companion & Guide. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996
- Lewis, C. S. The Horse and His Boy. New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1995
- The Last Battle. New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1995
- The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1995
- The Magician's Nephew. New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1995
- Of Other Worlds. New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1966
- Out of the Silent Planet. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996
- Perelandra. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996
- Prince Caspian. New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1995
- The Silver Chair. New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1995
- That Hideous Strength. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996
- The Voyage of the Dawn Treader. New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1995
- MacDonald, George. "The Fantastic Imagination." Fairy Tales of George MacDonald. November 5, 1999. December 14, 2001.
<<http://home.earthlink.net/~kcarmody1/FantasticImagination.html>>
- Phantastes. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981
- The Princess and the Goblin. New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1996
- The Princess and Curdie. New York: the Macmillan Company, 1954

Phillips, Michael R. George MacDonald: Scotland's Beloved Storyteller.
Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publishers, 1987

Veith, Gene Edward. Reading Between the Lines: a Christian Guide to Literature.
Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1990

Check Live Events! Bridge for Peace- Sanctified Imagination. at Calverton Meadow Club House | Sat Nov 02. Location. Join us to discover the power of the Holy spirit as Annette Eckart shares how God can sanctify your imagination. Continental breakfast at Calverton Meadows Clubhouse for more information contact Bridge for Peace at 631-730-3982. Advertise With Us. Craig Kinsley: "Sanctifying the Imagination". What do you think of when you hear the word "imagination"? Most of us think of our childhood. Maybe you had an imaginary friend, or you might remember imagining situations while playing. My wife, for instance, can tell me about detailed imaginary instances she remembers from her childhood. Although children love the whole realm of the imagination, and they are easily engaged there, I want us to begin to appreciate that imagination isn't just for children.