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The Lion, the Witch, and the War

How C. S. Lewis's classic tale speaks to a world in conflict

Sometimes I like to imagine what it must have been like to be a member of the Inklings gatherings at Oxford, or just to sit quietly in the corner and listen while J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis talked about the issues of the day and read each other's rough drafts of the Lord of the Rings or the Chronicles of Narnia.

Long after their deaths, the film industry and computer animation have advanced sufficiently to bring their most famous works to the screen. First came Tolkien's epic Lord of the Rings. Now this month the film version of Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the first of the Chronicles of Narnia, comes to life.

In all the publicity surrounding these films, something central to both works, however, is often overlooked: they were written in the context of war.

Tolkien completed the Lord of the Rings during the period following World War II (1948-1954), and the writing of it and *The Hobbit* was a long process, beginning well before the war commenced. A world at war is the context for the story—seemingly unimportant beings are called out of the quiet of their gardens to become part of a great struggle they neither sought nor initially understood, and in that context their souls are stretched as well.

While Lewis completed the Chronicles of Narnia from 1950 to 1956, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* has World War II as its setting. Of Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy, the book's main characters, Lewis writes, "This story is about what happened to them when they were sent away from London during the war because of the air-raids."

The context of Narnia might be best understood by looking at an essay found in *The Weight of Glory*, a group of Lewis's sermons and essays collected immediately in book form following World War II. The essay is titled "Learning in War-Time," and in it Lewis argues for the need to pursue education during even the darkest hours. He writes:

"At first sight, this [commitment to learning] seems to be an odd thing to do during a great war. What is the use of beginning a task we have so little chance of finishing?…Why should we…continue to take an interest in these placid occupations when the lives of our friends and the liberties of Europe are in the balance? Is it not like fiddling while Rome burns?

"…But to a Christian the true tragedy of Nero must not be that he fiddled while the city was on fire but that he fiddled on the brink of hell.…Every Christian who comes to a university must at all times face a question compared with which the questions raised by the war are relatively unimportant. …To admit that we can retain our interest in learning under the shadow of these eternal issues but not under the shadow of a European war would be to admit that our ears are closed to the voice of reason and very wide open to the voice of our nerves and our mass emotions."

As Tolkien's characters are drawn into a fearful war to become more than they are, so Lewis's children are sent away from the terror of war to the professor's country house, so that they can learn of a war between two eternal worlds. For Lewis, World War II is important, but it is only symptomatic of an entire world of players fiddling on the brink of hell.

If Lewis were alive today in this age of terror, where foreign wars, domestic threats, and natural disasters so dominate our nightly news, he might advise us to turn off our televisions, give our nerves a rest, and look to the condition of our souls—to suspend time for

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a moment, and come away with him through the wardrobe to Narnia.

Two great themes are present in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Neither has much to do directly with the open war Peter fights, nor with the most likable characters of the book, so it will be interesting to see how the new film attempts to address them. In fact, Lewis attaches both themes to the book's least likable character, Edmund.

The first theme is found throughout Lewis's fiction and essays, but is articulated best again in *The Weight of Glory*—this time in an essay called "The Inner Ring." There, in a university commencement address, Lewis tells graduates that the greatest temptation they are about to encounter is not sex or money. It is simple acceptance—the desire to be on the inside of a group, and what they will do and who they will betray to get there. For Lewis, the desire for acceptance cannot be satiated; it eventually develops into the desire for power. The Greek playwrights of old called this hubris: a rather ordinary person is elevated to a place of importance and, after a while, the person comes to believe that he or she is the center of the universe, and that moral law applies to everyone else but not to him or her.

When the White Witch brings Edmund into her circle, after playing to his needs for being praised and made important, Edmund begins to obsess on the idea himself as king of Narnia; all others, especially his siblings, become objects in the way of that goal. This results first only in petty meanness to his little sister. It grows, however, into his betrayal of all his siblings and all of the innocent characters of Narnia.

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Lewis symbolizes this endless, myopic hunger for power through the device of the magical Turkish delight the witch offers Edmund at their first meeting: "…for [the witch] knew, though Edmund did not, that this was enchanted Turkish delight and that anyone who had once tasted it would want more and more of it, and would even, if they were allowed, go on eating it until they killed themselves."

Edmund's error leads to the second great theme of the book. I think that to many viewers of the film, depending on how openly the theme is included and how directly Edmund's treachery is portrayed, this theme will be the most difficult to understand. It runs throughout Lewis's prose, but is summarized best in a single line from the essay, "The World's Last Night":

"Christ died for men precisely because men are not worth dying for; to make them worth it."

The turn of the plot in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is when Edmund is rescued from his servitude to the witch and brought into Aslan's camp. Aslan and Edmund then have a conversation "which Edmund never forgot," as Aslan explains to him that he will sacrifice himself in order to release Edmund from the witch's claim on his life and soul. It was Edmund's hubris and his resultant treachery that sentenced him to death; it is Aslan's decision to give himself in the boy's place that changes Edmund's heart and makes him worth dying for.

All of this is difficult material for a film to convey to an audience. But perhaps the whole message doesn't need to be understood by all in attendance. Paul describes the spreading of the gospel as a staged process of planting, watering, and harvesting. Lewis, in the moments when he stepped away from his more directly stated theological arguments and trusted in his fiction to express the gospel, used a similar metaphor:

"Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become." ❑