

“Unless a Grain of Wheat Falls into the Earth...”: Death and Rebirth in *The Chronicles of Narnia*

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*C.S. Lewis was deeply inspired by the Biblical metaphor of the dying seed. He mentions it in almost all his works, including The Chronicles of Narnia (1950–1956). He sees an ethical dimension in it, as he considers the necessity of agreeing to lose before gaining. He also associates it with the Christian concept of *felix culpa*, which implies that what comes after is better than what was before. Moreover, Lewis views this metaphor as a universal principle, a downward and upward movement present in nature, as well as in human systems of thought and in the Biblical narrative.*

*C.S. Lewis war von der biblischen Metapher des sterbenden Korns zutiefst inspiriert. Er erwähnt sie in fast allen seinen Werken, auch in den Chroniken von Narnia (1950-1956). Er sieht darin eine ethische Dimension, da er die Notwendigkeit erkennt, erst zu verlieren und dann zu gewinnen. Er bringt diese Notwendigkeit auch mit dem christlichen Konzept der *felix culpa* in Verbindung, das besagt, dass das, was noch kommen wird, besser ist als das, was vorher war. Darüber hinaus betrachtet Lewis diese Metapher als ein universelles Prinzip, eine Abwärts- und Aufwärtsbewegung, die sowohl in der Natur als auch in menschlichen Denksystemen und in der biblischen Erzählung vorkommt.*

Introduction

Long before becoming a Christian, C.S. Lewis was fascinated by the “myth of the dying god” which draws inspiration from the natural process of a seed being put into the earth and reappearing in the form of a plant. He loved the stories of gods like Balder, Adonis, and Osiris dying and being re-born in Norse, Greek, and Egyptian mythology. Eventually, his friend Tolkien convinced Lewis that Christianity was actually myth become fact (Green and Hooper 116), in that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were the

historical events foreshadowed in the world's mythologies ("Myth" 141; *Joy* 189). From that moment on, Lewis never ceased to be inspired by the agricultural metaphor of the dying seed referred to by Jesus in the Gospel of John: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Lewis mentions this metaphor in one form or another in almost all his works, his essays ("The Grand Miracle"; "Is Theology Poetry?"; "Myth Became Fact"; "First and Second Things"; "The Inner Ring"), his books on apologetics (*The Problem of Pain; Miracles*) and his fiction (*The Pilgrim's Regress; The Great Divorce; The Screwtape Letters; The Space Trilogy; Till We Have Faces*), including *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

The metaphor of the dying seed has multiple meanings for Lewis. He sees an ethical dimension in it, as it makes him reflect on the dangers of clinging to something that one does not want to give up. Moreover, he associates the fact that the plant which germinates is much more accomplished than the seed from which it originated with the Christian concept of *felix culpa*, which largely inspires his fiction. He also sees it as a "key principle" (*Miracles* 116), a downward and upward movement present in nature, but also in human systems of thought and in the Biblical narrative.

An Ethical Dimension: To Give up Before Receiving

The first word of the Biblical verse, "unless", suggests the necessity of dying before living again, of losing before gaining, of giving up before receiving. Jesus Christ alludes to this in the Gospel of Luke when he claims: "Give, and it will be given to you. [...] For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you" (Luke 6:38). In the Old Testament, the author of the Book of Proverbs refers to a similar idea: "One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want. Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered" (Prov. 11:24–25).

The same principle is illustrated in John's version of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, a miracle of multiplying fish and bread which Jesus performed to feed a hungry crowd. Although this miracle is mentioned in all four gospels, John is the only one who indicates where the five loaves of bread and two fishes used by Jesus come from. The evangelist alludes to a little boy who provides them, thus highlighting a personal sacrifice which leads to a multitude of people being fed in abundance.

Lewis refers to the principle of giving up before receiving in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Edmund, one of the protagonists of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, enters Narnia through a magical wardrobe and meets the White Witch, who has usurped the rule of the land. She knows about an old prophecy predicting that two daughters of Eve and two sons of Adam will rule Narnia and is therefore desperate to learn more about this human child and his three siblings. In order to get information out of him, she feeds Edmund enchanted and addictive Turkish Delight, so that he craves it more and more without realising it will eventually kill him. Moreover, he loses all caution and delivers the information the Witch wants. It makes him a traitor to his brother and sisters, as well as to the Faun who failed to report his sister Lucy's previous visit to Narnia. Edmund also listens to the Witch's promises of making him a king and ruling over his siblings. Thus, he prioritises the satisfaction of his bodily desires, his "pride" and his "rebellious instinct" (Downing 93).¹ This leads Edmund to be careless and to endanger the lives of several people, including his own. Much later, once he has undergone a profound change and once he has risked his life to fight on Aslan's side, he indeed reigns over Narnia with his brother and sisters. However, he does so as a legitimate king rather than as the White Witch's adopted son.

Edmund's sister, Lucy, also goes through the temptation of keeping rather than sharing in the same story. She was given a cordial of which just one drop magically heals people. After the battle against the White Witch, she tends to her brother Edmund, who

1 Several critics have suggested that the Turkish Delight represents more than food. Some have seen a veiled reference to sex in it, or more generally to Orientalism with the connotations of unruliness and sensuality it had in Lewis' time (Gordon).

has been mortally wounded. She then wants to stay with him to see if the cordial will work. When Aslan reminds her that there are other people who are wounded, she tells him crossly to wait a minute. However, as soon as Aslan asks her if more people must die because of her brother, she regrets her harsh words and follows the Lion to help others on the battlefield. When she is able to come back to Edmund later, she realises that her brother has been healed, not only physically but also spiritually.²

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lucy undergoes a more personal temptation. While reading a spell book, she comes across an incantation which would make her the most beautiful girl in the world. She has always thought “herself inferior to her sister, especially in physical beauty” (Ford 277), and despite foreseeing how kings would go to war to fight for her favour, she almost utters the words. She only stops because Aslan appears to her on the page of the book and growls at her. When she finally does what she came for, that is, read a spell to make hidden things visible again according to the wish of the islanders who asked her for this favour, she suddenly sees the real Aslan in the room with her. She is so delighted that her face lights up, and “for a moment (but of course she didn’t know it), she looked almost as beautiful as that other Lucy in the picture” (*Voyage* 122). In this instant, she gains the beauty she has previously desired and has given up. Yet she does so without the negative consequences the beauty spell would have entailed, like the craving of men, the jealousy of other women, and her own vanity.

Throughout his writings, Lewis claims the need to give up before receiving. He sees it as a way to purify one’s motives and to consider one’s priorities. He went through this experience in his own life. He wrote in a letter that, when he was young, he “would have given almost *anything* [...] to be a successful writer” and even added “I shudder to think what I would have given if I had been allowed” (*Collected Letters* 1 927; original emphasis), maybe hinting at a sort of Faustian pact. After converting to Christianity, he gave up that ambition. Later, he became famous all over the world thanks

2 “He had become his real old self again and could look you in the face” (*Lion* 163).

to *The Chronicles of Narnia*. By then, his motives had completely altered, and he did neither expect nor seek the fame he achieved.

The Notion of *Felix Culpa* Applied to Literature

The seed metaphor inspired Lewis with another idea, which stems from the last part of the verse: “it bears much fruit”. In nature, a seed has to die but its very death allows for rebirth into something much better. The seed was just the potential, the fully grown plant is the completion. The mature plant will in turn carry lots of seeds which will allow it to multiply even more.

As far as Christianity is concerned, the idea that what comes next is better than what was before is present in the concept of *felix culpa*, which means “happy fault” in Latin. Liturgies and theologians like Ambrose, Augustine, or Thomas Aquinas have asserted that Jesus Christ came to earth and gave his life because of Adam and Eve’s sin, and that the good which resulted from it was greater than the original evil. Without naming it specifically, Lewis refers to the notion of *felix culpa* in *Miracles*:

The sin, both of men and of angels, was rendered possible by the fact that God gave them free will: thus surrendering a portion of His omnipotence (it is again a deathlike or descending movement) because He saw that from a world of free creatures, even though they fell, He could work out (and this is the re-ascent) a deeper happiness and a fuller splendour than any world of automata would admit. [...] Redeemed humanity is to be something more glorious than unfallen humanity would have been [...] The greater the sin is, the greater the mercy: the deeper the death the brighter the rebirth. (125–27)

From a narrative point of view, this concept is inherent in every *Bildungsroman*, in every coming-of-age story, in every fairy-tale, and in most adventure stories. According to Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, meeting trials and ordeals is part of the necessary stages of a hero’s journey in the archetypal structure of most mythological narratives (81). It is especially present in literature intended for children, since the readers themselves have to

go through a similar process in real life. The protagonists are, in Nathalie Prince's words, "inchoative individuals" (25),³ and so they have to make mistakes in order to learn, they have to go through difficult times in order to grow, to mature, to gain wisdom, to become adults.⁴

The seven *Narnia* chronicles can be seen as coming-of-age stories. Each of them contains characters who learn from their mistakes or misadventures and some good always comes out of what was at first perceived as being completely negative. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the entire adventure starts because of a rainy day. In *The Horse and His Boy*, Shasta is pursued by a lion at night and has to flee for dear life but as a consequence, he meets Aravis, who is also escaping from her situation and travelling to Narnia, and they are able to help each other along the way. In *Inside Prince Caspian*, Devin Brown mentions several examples of an evil turning good in Narnia, but to him, "[p]erhaps the best illustration of this unconventional kind of blessing in disguise will be Eustace's transformation into a dragon in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, a painful ordeal but the only way he will be able to achieve his much-needed character transformation" (83).

As the critic Doris T. Myers has shown in her book *C.S. Lewis in Context*, the seven chronicles as a whole can also be regarded as a life journey, from youth to old age, each book concentrating on a specific aspect of the experience of maturing. She considers them in the order in which they were written rather than in the chronological order of the narratives and she shows that the first three chronicles deal with childhood issues. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the protagonists are treated like infants who have to be fed and directed, whereas in *Prince Caspian*, they are more proactive, as older children would be. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* tackles the beginnings of church life, with a scene of baptism and communion. *The Silver Chair* and *The Horse and His Boy* refer to problems facing young adults – education and marriage. *The Magician's Nephew*

3 "[L]e lecteur de cette littérature se conçoit toujours, de près ou de loin, comme un individu inchoatif, en progression, en apprentissage" (Prince 25).

4 According to Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James, "adulthood to grow into" is a necessary ingredient in all "quest fantasies" (123).

deals with middle age and its temptations, and *The Last Battle* with old age, decline, and death (125–81).

So, the initiatory aspect of the tales can be found in the general narrative as well as in each individual story. Beyond these aspects, the dying seed metaphor has a universal dimension for Lewis. He refers to the downward-upward movement as “a thing written all over the world” (*Miracles* 116). To him, this pattern is not only present in nature, in vegetable as well as animal life, but also in mythology, philosophy, and religion.

A U-shaped Pattern

To Lewis, the descent and re-ascent pattern is familiar because it is “the pattern of all vegetable life. It must belittle itself into something hard, small, and death-like, it must fall into the ground: thence the new life re-ascends” (*Miracles* 116). He also claims that the doctrine of Incarnation, that is to say, the fact that God came down from heaven and took on a human body, “puts this principle even more emphatically at the centre. The pattern is there in Nature because it was first there in God” (*Miracles* 116).

Lewis asserts that the concept of necessary death is present in Hinduism, in Greek philosophy, in Romantic poetry, and even in the writings of Aldous Huxley:

The Indian ascetic, mortifying his body on a bed of spikes, preaches the same lesson; the Greek philosopher tells us that a life of wisdom is “a practice of death”. The sensitive and noble heathen of modern times makes his imagined gods “die into life”. Mr. Huxley expounds “non-attachment”. (*Problem* 91)

Lewis calls the concept of necessary death an “eternal gospel”, “revealed to men wherever men have sought” (*Problem* 91).

In an essay entitled “Is Theology Poetry?”, Lewis compares this world view with what he calls “universal evolutionism” or “popular scientific cosmology” (16). This belief was prevalent in his time and took an opposite view of the world’s story, with an upwards movement followed by a downward one, just like in a tragedy. In this

understanding, humanity started from nothing, progressed through evolution, became stronger and stronger but will one day die when the sun goes cold. The aesthetic quality of this pattern appealed to Lewis, but, as a Christian, he believed in the opposite movement, that of comedy rather than tragedy. He calls it “the very plot of the whole cosmic story – the theme of incarnation, death and rebirth” (16). This idea is also touched upon by his friend Tolkien in his famous essay “On Fairy Stories” in which he exposes the concept of “eucatastrophe”: “The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy” (156).

In *The Great Code, the Bible and Literature*, the Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye describes the Bible as having an enormous formative influence on the mythological framework of our culture. He writes about the Bible as having a

narrative structure that is roughly U-shaped, the apostasy being followed by a descent into disaster and bondage, which in turn is followed by repentance, then by a rise through deliverance to a point more or less on the level from which the descent began. [...] The entire Bible, viewed as “a divine comedy”, is contained within a U-shaped story of this sort, one in which man, as explained, loses the tree and water of life at the beginning of Genesis and gets them back at the end of Revelation. (169)

He likewise mentions that Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection are an echo of the main pattern (174). Frye claims that the Biblical narrative structure has the shape of a comedy. It is also a pattern which is very present in children’s literature, in fairy tales, and in fantasy.

The Chronicles of Narnia are intended for children, they belong to the fantasy genre, and they are modelled on the Bible. It is therefore no surprise that the downward and upward movement should appear very clearly in their narrative structure, when one considers the story from beginning to end, that is to say, when one follows the chronological order rather than the order in which the books were published.⁵ Indeed, *The Chronicles of Narnia* start with *The Magician’s*

5 Several critics, such as Daigle-Williamson, have noted how Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is reflected in *Narnia* and in Lewis’ novels in general.

Nephen, in which Aslan creates a perfect world, soon spoilt by the arrival of Jadis, who is no other than the creature who will later become the White Witch and who plays the role of the serpent in the garden of Eden. Just like Jesus Christ, Aslan gives up his life voluntarily to save the traitor Edmund and, by submitting to death, triumphs over it and rises again. The seventh volume, *The Last Battle*, ends with an upwards movement, when, after the destruction of Narnia, the protagonists join Aslan's country and travel with him, following his rallying cry "further up and further in" (157).

Apart from the general movement applying to the whole series of chronicles, there are also plenty of micro-versions of the same pattern. Indeed, in each chronicle, at least one of the characters goes through an experience which can be associated with a symbolic death, followed by a rebirth. The most obvious one is the passage through the dark wardrobe which leads the four Pevensie children to the new, unknown world of Narnia in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (53).⁶ In *Prince Caspian*, it is the eponymous prince who is knocked from his horse by a branch in the forest and who regains consciousness in the cave of a talking badger. Although Caspian has lived in Narnia all his life, he does not know the real Narnia since all the talking animals and other creatures have had to go into hiding. So, waking up to the true Narnia is also a sort of rebirth for Caspian. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the Pevensies' insufferable cousin, Eustace, has to go through the experience of death and rebirth by becoming a dragon and then being transformed into a boy again by Aslan. The same pattern can be found in each of the seven chronicles. It always starts with an experience of darkness, either because it is night-time or because the character is unconscious or prevented by obstacles from seeing. At that moment, he or she is blinded but can often use other senses instead: touch or hearing, for example. Then comes light and vision. Very often, just

6 Some critics have noticed the possibility of interpreting the wardrobe as a womb (Brown, *Inside Narnia* 39), sometimes with negative undertones as for example in David Holbrook's *The Skeleton in the Wardrobe* (quoted in Sayer 1288). For an answer to Holbrook's argument, refer to Christopher (9).

like after a baby is born, the character is then fed or given a drink.⁷ All the main characters have to go through this experience of symbolic death followed by new life. It is not seen as an option, but rather as an essential experience.

The death-rebirth pattern not only concerns the inhabitants of Narnia; it is inscribed in the land itself. The world Lewis created is almost entirely technology-free; it is a land of mountains, forests and lakes where nature plays a very important role. During the reign of the White Witch, it was always winter and nature was asleep, but when Aslan comes back, he brings spring with him: the snow melts and gives way to bubbling springs, the birds start to chirp and the flowers grow. Death is defeated and life prevails. The fact that this process is so present in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, both in the land itself and in the experiences of the creatures living in it, indicates how significant it was in the eyes of Lewis.

Conclusion

As well as loving everything to do with nature, Lewis was enthralled by mythologies involving death and rebirth, which he thought “poetic, mysterious and quickening” (“Miracle” 5). When he read the New Testament, John 12:24 is one of two passages which struck him as referring to the “myth of the dying god” (“Miracle” 6). This theme later became one of the main ones in his writings and inspired him in many ways, as this article sought to demonstrate.

The Chronicles of Narnia are intended for children, but they are more than just entertaining reading. As the number of critics who have written and continue to write volumes about them attests,

7 In *The Silver Chair*, Jill encounters Aslan in the woods and at first, she cannot see him very clearly and thinks he is a statue. He becomes real when she hears his voice and he invites her to drink (*Chair* 23). In *The Horse and His Boy*, Shasta meets Aslan at night. He feels his breath and hears his voice before seeing him when the day dawns (*Horse* 128–29). As for Bree, the horse, he feels Aslan’s whiskers tickling his ear when first meeting him (*Horse* 158). In *The Magician’s Nephew*, the whole group go through the experience of discovering a new world after having been plunged into darkness (*Nephew* 94). In *The Last Battle*, the epiphany takes place when they come out of the stable into Aslan’s Country (*Battle* 126). Ransom also goes through this birth experience when arriving on Mars (*Planet* 41) and then Venus (*Perelandra* 31). For more details, refer to Mochel-Caballero (159–68).

they are complex and contain all of Lewis's favourite ideas and reflections. This is true of the death-rebirth motif, which is explored through the notion of renouncement, the concept of *felix culpa*, and the symbolism of the downward-upward movement. Indeed, it could be argued that these leitmotifs are more visible in *The Chronicles of Narnia* than in many of Lewis's other books. This may have to do with the literary genre of mythopoeia, in which Lewis classifies *The Chronicles of Narnia* as well as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and which he perceives as a genre that is able to disclose concealed realities. Commenting on his friend's masterpiece in an article, Lewis actually argues that the myth in it allows readers to "restore to [all the things they know] the rich significance which has been hidden by 'the veil of familiarity'" ("Tolkien's 'The Lord of the Rings'" 116). His advice is: "If you are tired of the real landscape, look at it in a mirror. [...] By dipping [things] in myth, we see them more clearly" (116).

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