

“Till Death Do Us Part” – or Not? Death as a Unifier in *The Last Battle* by C.S. Lewis

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Although death is usually viewed as a great divider in secular culture, C.S. Lewis challenges this perspective by offering a reverse one. He portrays death as a unifier with one's contemporaries, ancestors and finally with God. This paper analyses Lewis's treatment of death in the last book of The Chronicles of Narnia, The Last Battle (1956), by drawing parallels between his main ideas about the subject and their corresponding scriptural sources of inspiration. The aim of my research is to highlight Lewis's fascinating outlook on death as being only a door to a better life.

Obwohl der Tod in der säkularen Kultur gewöhnlich als ‚großer Trenner‘ betrachtet wird, stellt C.S. Lewis diese Sichtweise in Frage, indem er eine umgekehrte Perspektive anbietet. Er zeichnet den Tod als ein verbindendes Element mit den eigenen Zeitgenossen, Vorfahren und schließlich mit Gott. Dieser Artikel analysiert Lewis' Behandlung des Todes im letzten Buch der Chroniken von Narnia, Der letzte Kampf (1956), indem Parallelen zwischen seinen wichtigsten Ideen zu diesem Thema und ihren entsprechenden biblischen Inspirationsquellen gezogen werden. Das Ziel der Untersuchung ist es, Lewis' faszinierende Sichtweise des Todes als nur einer Tür zu einem besseren Leben herauszustellen.

Introduction

“Till death do us part” must certainly ring a bell for everyone. The popular phrase originated from *The Book of Common Prayer* issued by the Church of England in its days of infancy, being mostly used in Christian weddings in the form of “till death us do part” (310). The meaning behind it is quite straightforward: it was used as a type of contract, stating that spouses cannot be separated unless one of them dies. However, if we were to use this phrase in a wider context, we might be tempted to think that we should enjoy the

company of our loved ones on earth as much as we can because we will not see them again afterwards insofar as death will indeed 'do us part'. We can hug our family, spend quality time together, learn from each other only 'till death do us part', for afterwards a huge chasm of mystery stretches in front of us. Although nobody could say what happens after death with certainty, this topic is certainly a fertile field for literary speculation. This paper challenges the idea of death as a divider in the fascinating realm of literature, adducing C.S. Lewis's famous novel *The Last Battle* (1956), the last book of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. As Lewis was a Christian writer *par excellence*, I will trace the origin of his eschatological ideas down to the very source, the Bible.

Although death is sometimes perceived in secular society as the grim reaper with a scythe and a black hooded robe that comes unexpectedly and unwelcomed to collect human souls,¹ the imagery in Christianity is totally different. Since Christ defeated death by His Resurrection, He is, for instance, represented in Byzantine icons dressed in a white robe with His hands stretched out towards a depiction of the first biblical couple, Adam and Eve.² The difference between mythological or folkloric representations and Christian ones is quite substantial. The aspect that I will focus on is the affective reaction that each of them evokes: the grim reaper is a reason for dread and despair, while the Christian icon is a source of transcendent hope in the afterlife. If we were to represent Lewis's view on death, we would certainly choose the second option, for the British author uses deeply Christian ideas in his writings, as I will prove below. Instead of dividing people, death in his works unites them in a series of supernatural meetings: with contemporaries whom they have loved, their forefathers and ultimately with God Himself. Along with these meetings, I will also refer to some general attributes of death that emerge from the chosen examples.

1 Some examples of this perspective could be found in the books *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* by J.K. Rowling, *The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman or the films *Scream*, *Death Takes a Holiday*, *Reaper*.

2 Since Lewis was a Christian, I kept the traditional way of writing all references to God and the Bible with capital letters.

The book under scrutiny, *The Last Battle*, describes the apocalypse of the imperfect land of Narnia and the beginning of a paradisiacal world to which only the good characters have access. This is indeed quite an unusual ending, especially for a book written for children, as Michael Ward remarks in his work *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C.S. Lewis*: “He dares to do something hardly associated with so-called ‘children’s literature’: he kills off every single character with whom the story opens” (198). In Lewis’s own words in one of his letters to children, the aim of the book is described as representing “the coming of Antichrist (the Ape). The end of the world, and the Last Judgement” in the world of the talking beasts of Narnia (Lewis, *Collected Letters* 1245). This is why he contends that the book is governed by Saturn, the planet of death. My article supports this idea but highlights Lewis’s real intention in talking about death: that of showing the beauty of paradise. Further, through all that which will be discussed below, I will show how Lewis portrayed the defeat of death in his last book of *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Reunion with Contemporaries

After the Ape has turned the enchanted realm of Narnia into a terror-driven territory, the hoax of the false Aslan comes to an end. We meet the heroes of the second book – Peter, Edmund and Lucy, without Susan this time – who describe their odd entry into the magical realm as the New Narnia is gradually revealed to them as a sublime land. When Aslan enters the story, the reader finds out what really happened with the siblings who have entered the lion’s country (the equivalent of paradise) together: they have all died in a railway accident.

Aslan gives the children the news of their death using surprising language: “There *was* a real railway accident [...] all of you are – as you used to call it in the Shadow-lands – dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning” (Lewis, *Battle* 183; original emphasis). The lion talks about death as people normally do about life, as the morning of their existence.

Death is associated with holidays instead of school, which shows a release from responsibility and a period of great leisure. If this life constrains people in different ways, the end of it is seen as the escape from all the oppressive bonds and an entrance into peace.

As contemporaries, the heroes have been in Narnia through many marvellous adventures together, forming a fantastic unity. The underlying meaning here seems to be that one can enter Aslan's country hand in hand with siblings or best friends. They have not suffered loss as they would have if just one of them had died, but in this situation they eternalised their relationship by stepping into the afterlife together. Lewis took one of the greatest fears of humanity, that of losing a loved one, of being separated by the insurmountable chasm of death, and smashed it to pieces by making the three heroes die together. By synchronising the events in such a manner, the main characters continue their close relationship after death as though nothing had happened (actually, they had not even realised that they were dead until Aslan told them). This is, of course, an indication that love conquers death by going on beyond this life.

Considering the fact that Lewis was a devout Christian, very keen on defending the faith in apologetic works such as *Mere Christianity*, *The Problem of Pain*, or *Miracles*, it is only natural to draw some parallels between the last book and the New Testament. The idea that death keeps the feeling of love intact has a biblical equivalent in the words of Christ at the Last Supper, the last dinner He had with His apostles before His Crucifixion: "I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom" (Matt. 26:29). The phrase "with you" implies the promise that Christ will see them again (and therefore they will see each other) in the Kingdom of Heaven. In other words, their relationship of trust, love and friendship will not end after death, it will last beyond it. As a result, death here is certainly a unifier, the means by which the apostles and Christ will be together again. It appears as a promise of a much expected event. This is probably why Saint Paul the Apostle claimed that: "For to me [...] to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). Death as gain is likewise the central idea of *The Last Battle*, not only due to the unity in the afterlife it emphasises, but also with regard to the general atmosphere of something

better, greater and purer that people can have access to at the end of their life.

Union with Ancestors

The second great encounter that Lewis portrays in this work of fiction is that with one's ancestors. After the three children have died in the train crash, they enter Aslan's country, where they meet all their friends from the previous books. What is most astonishing is that even the characters who appear later in *The Chronicles*, such as King Tirian, have the chance to meet their Narnian ancestors, who had died long before they were born and of whom they have only heard in historical tales about ancient Narnia:

Everyone you had ever heard of (if you knew the history of these countries) seemed to be there. There was Glimfeather the Owl and Puddleglum the Marsh-wiggle, and King Rilian the Disenchanted, and his mother the Star's daughter and his great father Caspian himself. And close beside him were the Lord Drinian and the Lord Berne and Trumpkin the Dwarf and Truffle-hunter the good Badger with Glenstorm the Centaur and a hundred other heroes of the great War of Deliverance. (And then from another side came Cor the King of Archenland with King Lune his father and his wife Queen Aravis and the brave Prince Corin Thunder-Fist, his brother, and Bree the Horse and Hwin the Mare. And then – which was a wonder beyond all wonders to Tirian – there came from further away in the past, the two good Beavers and Tumnus the Faun.) And there was greeting and kissing and hand-shaking and old jokes revived. (Lewis, *Battle* 178–79)

This fantastic reunion in the land of the New Narnia (a possible allegory of the New Jerusalem) is instructive for my discussion. Lewis reunites heroes from all seven books of *The Chronicles* in a powerful scene of universal brotherhood and friendship. In Narnian time, thousands of years have passed between the events narrated in the first book, *The Magician's Nephew*, and those that are depicted in the last one, and there were also many years in between the events pre-

sented in the other novels.³ For instance, Tumnus the Faun is a hero in the second book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, while King Rilian is one of the main characters of the sixth book, *The Silver Chair*. They could not have met in their Narnian life, but they do so in the hereafter. King Tirian, Narnia's last king, is flabbergasted when he meets the two Beavers, heroes of the second book of the series, because to him they were almost mythological figures.

Furthermore, it seems that after death, all the unfortunate circumstances of their lives have been mended and compensated, as in the case of King Caspian and his son, Rilian. The latter was abducted and spent many years enchanted in a type of exile, without being able to see his father. When he was finally released, his father died soon after, so they did not have the chance to actually spend much time together. However, after their deaths, they are finally reunited and have infinite time in each other's company.

The powerful idea Lewis expresses here is that time is abolished by death, that this limit of human existence is no longer valid, and that characters of different generations, separated in life sometimes by hundreds of years, can thus stand together and talk. The foregrounded vision is that of humanity as a whole gathered in an otherworldly place. Death is therefore presented as an entrance to a new type of world, with different coordinates: time itself is no longer valid; instead of *fugit irreparabile tempus*, the characters enter a static eternity, a day with no sunset, in which they would never be rushed or worried by the approaching night. Death is the gate through which they all entered eternity, as Lewis wrote in one of his letters: "The only way for us to Aslan's country is through death" (*Letters to Children* 45). By saying this, the British author belittles death, makes it far less menacing than it is generally regarded in secular culture, and even adds a positive and exciting facet to it. It also fulfils what is perhaps one of people's deepest desires: meeting their ancestors, the heroes of their country, the ones they cherished and admired in history. By abolishing time, Lewis brings together the heroes of all of his books in the series in a symphony

3 In this article I use the internal chronology of *The Chronicles* (which starts with *The Magician's Nephew* and ends with *The Last Battle*), not the chronological order of publication.

of joy that works as a strategy of providing a sense of closure for the readers and “a picture of the entire history of Narnia from its creation to its unmaking” (Duriez 141).

The image of death as defying time mirrors some verses from the New Testament, as I have already shown above and will further explain below. The reunion with one’s ancestors is an idea enunciated by Jesus Christ in the Gospel of Matthew on the occasion of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor: “And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 8:11). Here, Christ refers to the fathers of the Old Testament, people who lived thousands of years ago. According to the passage quoted above, their death did not mean their total disappearance, their complete annihilation, but just a relocation to another world. Through death (as a passage), contemporary and ancient people have the chance to come together to share their experiences beyond time. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that only the morally good characters are gathered in this enchanting reunion; only “those who loved the true Aslan inherit the new, resurrected Narnian kingdom for ever” (Jacobs 275). We do not hear of Jadis, the White Witch, who killed Aslan in the second book, or of Shift, the talking Ape in the last book, or of any other antagonists in the series; we know nothing of their eternal whereabouts.

Union with God

The third and most important encounter described in *The Last Battle* is that with God, represented here again by Aslan, the great lion. He is the one who created the enchanted world of Narnia, whose cosmogony is described in the first book of the series, *The Magician’s Nephew*. The paramount scene in *The Last Battle* could be Lucy’s encounter with Aslan in the New Narnia: “And then she forgot everything else, because Aslan himself was coming, leaping down from cliff to cliff like a living cataract of power and beauty” (Lewis 182–83). The meeting with the God of Narnia has a powerful effect on the little girl, which resembles what Rudolph Otto called the

“*fascinans*”, for example “the attracting and alluring moment of the numinous” (145; original emphasis). Aslan is fascinating for her, he has the power of captivating her attention and directing her wishes towards him.

It is worth noting that Lucy is the one who actually discovers the fantastic realm of Narnia and the one who has the most encounters with Aslan, as she is “the most pure-hearted character in the chronicles” (Downing 143). Lewis probably intended to incarnate in her one of the Beatitudes: “Blessed *are* the pure in heart,/ For they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8; original emphasis). The only fundamental difference between Lucy’s previous meetings with the lion and the one in *The Last Battle* is that Aslan does not leave this time. In the past, he only appeared for a while to help the children in their marvellous adventures and then disappeared again. This time, after Lucy’s reply that they are afraid of being sent back again to their world, he explains to them that they cannot return because they died.

Similarly, the encounter with God after death is alluded to in the Gospel of Luke where he reports on the last moments of Jesus’s existence on earth, when He is crucified between two criminals. One of the criminals repents of his sins and asks God to be remembered in His Kingdom. Christ responds in the following way: “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). These words suggest that the reunion will take place in heaven, which is exactly what Lewis depicts in the last book of the series. The event in *The Last Battle* mirrors in some ways the one quoted above. Lucy met Aslan in person before and after her death, as did the criminal while being on the cross next to Christ, and then, not long afterwards, we assume, he found Him in Paradise. The human heroes of the *Narnia* series were always afraid that Aslan would send them back to their world, which is what they expect to happen again when they see him in the scene described above. However, Aslan explains to them that they do not need to fear being forced to leave anymore as they are dead, which means that he can finally stay with them forever. The perspective that unfolds is a sublime one indeed: a reunion of the created with the Creator, without boundaries of time or space. The ending also symbolises a

return to the essential, to the root of everything, as Aslan is the one who begins *The Chronicles* with his creation of Narnia and who ends his own world with the apocalypse described in *The Last Battle*, thus bringing his beloved friends to a flawless new world.

The name attributed to the world from which the heroes came is suggestive, as Aslan calls it “the Shadow-lands” (Lewis, *Battle* 183; also the last chapter of the book is entitled “Farewell to Shadow-lands”). If this life is only a shadow, this means that the next one is the real thing. This image evoked by Lewis is associated with a very popular motif in literature, that of life as a dream, while it is also referred to repeatedly in philosophy. For instance, one can clearly see that Lewis’s metaphor is borrowed from Plato’s myth of the cave, as found in *The Republic*. In Book VII, Socrates tells the story of a young man who has lived all his life in an underground den, forced to look at some shadows projected on a wall. When he finally steps out of his prison, he sees the sun, the true light, and the real objects. Through this retrospective vision, he can comprehend that he lived in a world of shadows before discovering reality itself (Plato 253–57). The same type of realisation is used by Lewis when he talks of “the Shadow-lands” (*The Last Battle* 183): just like the young man in Plato’s myth, the heroes understand in hindsight that their previous life was only a shadow of life; after they die, they realise that there is another life in true light. Besides, associating the actual real life with shadows produces a feeling of defamiliarisation in the readers, because it is commonly used in the reverse way (for example death as a shadow). The effect is that it does not meet the readers’ expectations and it makes them perceive these notions from a fresh perspective. While the motif of death is generally used in a negative way, Lewis explores its positive aspect by suggesting that death is actually an awakening from the dream of life. In this light, the death of the children seems to be “a beginning rather than an end, as the new Narnia is revealed” (Duriez 142).

Conclusion

To put it in a nutshell, in the last book of his *Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis describes the idea of death as a unifier, attempting a major defiance of an event especially dreaded in the secular world. The encounters he portrays, with the heroes' contemporaries, their ancestors and finally with the Narnian God, Aslan, are of an exquisite and marvellous nature. I have drawn some parallels between Lewis's images and the corresponding verses from the New Testament in order to show the many ways in which C.S. Lewis incorporated his religious ideas on death in *The Last Battle*. The aspect that the three types of (re)unions have in common is the incredible intensity of emotion they evoke: the children are glad that they are together even after death, everyone is overjoyed and amazed when they meet their ancestors and old friends, and the heroes delight in the thought that they will never be separated from Aslan again, for he will not send them back to their world this time. It is certainly a different kind of 'happily ever after', not often found in children's literature, as all the characters are dead in the end. Yet, this unusual ending develops a Christian eschatological view which may arouse the curiosity of the readers and give them some powerful ideas to ponder.

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