

ENG 260

Spring 2021

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Class notes—Week of Mar. 29, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Chapters 10-17

*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is often recommended as a good book choice to read aloud to Middle Elementary students, ages 8-10. While the better readers in this age group will be capable of reading the story for themselves, hearing adults read it aloud should be enjoyable at this age, whether in a classroom setting or alone with a parent. On the website “Narnia.com,” I found a downloadable Classroom Activity Guide that may be helpful for any future educators thinking of using the Narnia books in the classroom.

If you are teaching in a public school, it would probably be best not to stress the religious elements of the novel. Lewis very consciously creates a Christian allegory in the portion of the book that recounts the death and resurrection of Aslan. Aslan, the son of the Emperor-beyond-the-Sea, is Lewis’ representation of Jesus Christ; “Lion” is one of the Biblical titles given to Jesus. Here, the Satan-figure who holds the fallen world in thrall is the Witch. Edmund is the sinner who must be redeemed through Aslan’s sacrifice. Aslan’s explanation on page 163 of the Deeper Magic that makes this possible echoes most orthodox readings of the Crucifixion. Aslan does not die on a cross, but on a Stone Table that represents the Mosaic Law (written on stone tablets) whose purpose is fulfilled in the Crucifixion. The liberating of the statues in the Witch’s castle is Lewis’ representation of what the Middle Ages called the Harrowing of Hell—Jesus releasing the souls of the righteous dead from bondage in hell. Lucy and Susan take on the role of the women who find the empty tomb on Easter morning and bring the news of the resurrection to Jesus’ disciples. All of this seems very obvious to me reading the book as an adult, but as a child, I missed it completely, even though I was raised in a devoutly Christian home. Studies of brain development in children indicate that they are not really capable of symbolical/allegorical thinking until age 12 or so, and it is unlikely, I think, that children below this age will catch the religious resonances of the book on their own.

I will be interested to see further online discussion of the question of sexism in the novel. Several of you have already looked at the presents the children receive from Father Christmas in Chapter 10 from this perspective. On page 109, after telling both girls that they are not supposed to fight in the battle and should only use their weapons for emergency self-defense, Father Christmas explains, “Battles are ugly when women fight.” For years, I have wanted to retort that battles are ugly regardless. Lewis himself had a complicated relationship with women. He did marry, but late in life, and only for four years before his wife died. The colleges of Oxford and Cambridge where he taught did admit women, but Lewis himself refused to take any women as students.

Questions to Answer 2-4 Sentences:

1. Lewis never assigns specific ages to the four children in this story. How old do you picture them as being?
2. Why does Edmund behave so badly toward his brother and sisters?
3. What sort of atmosphere is created by the setting of Narnia?
4. C.S. Lewis’ friend, J.R.R. Tolkien, criticized Lewis’ fantasy world for having too many elements from different mythologies--talking animals, lots of creatures from Greco-Roman mythology, dwarves and giants from Germanic lore, and even Father Christmas (Santa Claus). Do you think Narnia is poorly constructed as a fictional world, or does Lewis make it all fit together somehow?
5. How sexist do you find Lewis’ writing to be in his treatment of female characters?
6. What is your reaction to the Christian allegory that Lewis is using to shape his narrative? Is it too heavy-handed? Will young readers even notice?