

From Shadow-Lands to Elsewhere and Beyond:
Religious Imagery and Adult Attempts to Colonize Childhood

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In his essay on adult colonization of childhood, children's literature specialist Perry Nodelman theorizes that authors tend to write stories which will instill their personal values in young readers (30) and which perpetuate the authors' worldview (32). Such are the charges often leveled at C.S. Lewis and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, based primarily on the final volume of the series, *The Last Battle*, in which the biblical imagery surrounding Lewis's depiction of death and the afterlife is viewed by critics as exclusionary, offensive, and essentially colonialist. Although Lewis is regularly accused of Christian colonization in current literary criticism, his imagery does not exclude other

belief systems; as Amanda Rogers Jones notes, the presence of his personal religious beliefs in the Narnia stories creates conflict, especially for literary critics whose job it is to explicate those works (45). The Chronicles, however, are comprised of elements drawn from many belief systems and the presence of Christian beliefs among them does not mean that Lewis was attempting to colonize, or proselytize, young readers. The presence of an author's known personal beliefs in children's stories is nevertheless problematic, and to avoid such conflict in an age which embraces multiculturalism, and contrary to Nodelman's colonialist theories, many writers of children's literature often strive to keep their work from showing religious bias. A prime example is Lois Lowry's Newbery Award-winning fantasy, *The Giver*. Lowry claims that her religious imagery has a universal appeal and that she employs it in a concentrated effort to be inclusive of her young readers' religious diversity, yet the imagery in the resolution of *The Giver* bears some striking similarities to Lewis's in *The Last Battle*. Herein lies a fascinating paradox which begs to be explored: Despite the impassioned accusations of critics, at the end of *The Last Battle* Lewis leaves readers with an image of an afterlife that is actually quite inclusive, and, despite Lowry's contradictory protests, *The Giver* concludes with images that invoke an inherently Christian interpretation.

At first glance, the two novels seem to have little in common, but likenesses abound throughout, not just in the resolutions. Both *The Last Battle* and *The Giver* concern civilizations which were intended to be good but have gone hopelessly awry. Whether the story concerns Lewis's enchanted land of Narnia where disgraced animals can lose the ability to talk, or Lowry's dystopian society where animals have been eradicated and people have no recollection of them, there is a profound sense of loss

in each novel over what used to be. Both fantasies have the main characters escaping tyrannical governments and rejoicing upon reaching desired destinations. Interpretations of these destinations constitute the crux of the controversy with Lewis as well as the cause of confusion with Lowry, and before either author can be denounced for colonizing child readers, some examination and comparison of their religious imagery, and the attendant criticism, is in order.

Beginning with the end of Narnia: Lewis does convey the belief that death is but the beginning of a higher form of existence. After centuries of rulers, usurpers, and infiltrators growing increasingly despotic in Narnia, in *The Last Battle*, the lion deity Aslan escorts his remaining loyal subjects to a dazzling new world as Narnia is destroyed by war. When his followers find this bright place oddly familiar, Aslan explains that the old Narnia, like England and all other countries in all other worlds, is only a “Shadow-Land,” an imitation of the real thing. The human children, who have desperately longed to stay in Narnia throughout the series, still fear they will be sent back to England again as they always have been before. Lewis writes that “Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them” as Aslan gently tells the humans that this time, they will stay: ““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”” (183). All those who truly love Narnia have come home at last to the Real Narnia, never to leave again. All of the honorable, best-loved Narnian characters from the beginning of that world and from the six preceding volumes in the series are now reunited, retelling jokes that they told each other five or six hundred years before (179).

The demise of Narnia, the deaths of the characters, and the ensuing celebratory afterlife all give rise to heated objections by literary critics. In an article entitled “The Abuses of Enchantment: Why Some Children’s Classics Give Parents the Creeps,” writer Wendy Smith accuses Lewis of “manhandling” his readers by throwing Christianity in their faces (131); contemporary authors, she says, are more respectful of children and can get the point across without such manipulation. Smith refers to the religious imagery of the Narnia series as “increasingly overbearing . . . and positively offensive in the final volume,” and she expresses outrage at the “gratuitous finale” of *The Last Battle*. Smith’s sentiments echo those of other Lewis critics, most notably Philip Pullman, author of the award-winning fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials*. Pullman’s hatred of the Narnia series has been widely documented; he calls it “one of the most ugly and poisonous things I’ve ever read” (6). Pullman asserts that Lewis is solving a narrative problem by killing off all his characters, and he so despises the Shadow-Lands passage that he dubs it “one of the most vile moments in all of children’s literature” (6). The image of the afterlife is especially appalling to Pullman, whose trilogy is based on the premise that the human soul dies with the body; yet, for all his impassioned diatribe against the deaths of the primary characters in *The Last Battle*, Pullman himself “celebrates death far less convincingly” in the *His Dark Materials* books, according to Rhodes College professor Michael Nelson, by having his characters “rejoice at the prospect of decomposing into particles in order to return, stripped of all consciousness and identity, to nature” (15).

From a strict *prima facie* perspective, the annihilation of Narnia in *The Last Battle* does smack of regurgitated eschatology. Did Lewis recreate a “gratuitous” rendering of the Biblical apocalypse, replete with images of Christ ushering his followers into Heaven

at the end of time, as a means of subversively proselytizing his young audience? Not quite: First, the imagery is not exclusively Christian, and second, Lewis, an Oxford scholar, don, and literary expert before he became a famous Christian apologist, did not need to stoop to peddling Christianity in disguise like an old crone bearing a lovely but poisonous apple for children to unwittingly ingest. While Lewis's renown as a theologian invariably makes a strong case for this type of interpretation, his imagery has no such sinister basis; the story of Narnia is, from beginning to end, a rich and fascinating tapestry interwoven with threads pulled from many traditions that Lewis loved. Lewis was creating high fantasy and having a high time of it in the process. Nelson writes of Lewis's "enormous regard for pagan myths," especially "deeply moving ancient myths in which a god dies and is reborn to save his people" (14); he contends that with Narnia Lewis was writing a myth of his own that incorporated all the excitement and truth of other myths, including the Christian one (14). Unlike Pullman, however, Lewis does not discard the Christian "myth." If Pullman was, as fantasy expert David Gooderham asserts, "radically reinterpreting or demythologizing" Christian tenets (156), then Lewis was radically mythologizing them in the Narnia fantasy. As author and professor Robert Bell notes:

Christian doctrine is one of several resources from which Lewis draws ... The books' characters include Father Christmas [and] characters inspired by Lewis's vast reading of classical mythology, Norse epics, medieval bestiaries, fairy tales, more or less all Western literature from Homer to Spencer's Faerie Queen. (12)

Narnia's losing battle closely parallels *Ragnarök*, alternately known as the *Götterdämmerung* and "The Twilight of the Gods," the final battle in which the world is destroyed according to Norse mythology (Ford 266). Lewis's Real Narnia may be a representation of the Christian Heaven, and Aslan a poignant portrait of Christ, but the story also reflects Norse mythology's "second coming" where the world is destroyed then gloriously reborn, and where the slain god Balder the Beautiful lives again.

As Lewis himself states in "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," writers need to write stories they like themselves and not what they think children need to hear (41). In *The Chronicles* Lewis incorporated everything he found enchanting: Christ, Balder, Platonic philosophy, parallel universes, "northernness," chivalry, legend, fairy stories, magic – the list is extensive – into a given place, "Narnia and the North," and the character of Aslan. The Christian element is undeniable in the stories, but one must remember that to Lewis, Christianity did not negate or discredit other belief systems or the old pagan myths; in fact, he saw all religions as reaching their fulfillment in Christianity. For Lewis, Christianity was a "summing up of all truths," where myth became fact (*Surprised by Joy* 235-36). Rather than colonizing children with a narrow personal worldview, as his critics assert, à la Nodelman, Lewis simply "Narnia-izes" readers by blending diverse traditions and philosophies into an archetypal fantasy designed for pure pleasure. Nelson touches on Narnia's diversity and Lewis's pleasure in creating it: "One of the chief delights of writing *The Chronicles* was to imagine a happily inclusive world in which rational beings of widely varying kinds could live together, work together, and when necessary, fight side by side for good" (15). And, at story's end,

Lewis's heterogeneous group of characters is willing to die together, united in the common cause of defending Narnia.

On a final note regarding Lewis's presumed religious exclusivity, two significant characters cannot be overlooked in *The Last Battle*: Emeth, who makes it into Aslan's afterworld, and Susan, who does not. Emeth is a young man who has spent his life devotedly serving another god that is the antithesis of Aslan, yet he finds himself lovingly welcomed by Aslan in the Real Narnia. This is a major departure from traditional Christian doctrine, as Emeth, a "non-believer," would not be given access to Heaven. Incidentally, Emeth is of a different race from the Narnians, which makes Lewis not only culturally but racially inclusive and rather progressive for the 1950s when the series was written, although he consistently draws much heated criticism to the contrary. Susan is another character regularly hailed as proof of Lewis's narrow-mindedness. One of the human heroines who has been present throughout the series, Susan is conspicuously absent in *The Last Battle*, which has caused an outcry from Lewis detractors as well as some discomfort among his supporters. Pullman, Rowling, and other children's authors and critics have attributed Lewis's omission of Susan in the Real Narnia to her discovering sex (Pullman 6; Grossman 2). The basis of this argument is her brother Peter's statement that Susan is "no longer a friend of Narnia" since she has become more interested in lipstick, nylons, and parties (*The Last Battle* 134-35). Susan, however, simply represents free will: Although she has lived the Narnian adventures right along with the other children, she chooses to lightly dismiss it all as a childhood game (135). In other words, Susan has outgrown her childhood love of Narnia, and, as readers are never told what becomes of her, she is presumably still enjoying her existence in the world of

her choosing; Lewis does not condemn her. Paradoxically, contenders are angered that Lewis paints a picture of Heaven and are angered again when Susan isn't in it, but the point is that Susan is free to choose as she pleases. Pullman, of all people, should appreciate this, as he admittedly wrote *His Dark Materials* to provide children with a means of breaking away from traditional Christian beliefs in order to replace them with secular humanism (Gooderham 156).

Freedom is likewise a major theme of Lowry's in *The Giver*. As in *The Last Battle*, the characters in *The Giver* are oppressed by their leaders. The unnamed, futuristic society of *The Giver* is micromanaged in every way by a government that wishes to protect its citizens from all pain and unpleasantness by regulating "sameness" and stark practicality to the extent of mandating contraceptives and creating climate control so that the weather never changes; the people never see the sun. Genetic scientists have even engineered a means of removing people's ability to see color; the population sees only shades of gray (95). As the brainwashed citizens have no memory of things ever having been different, the community's rules are universally accepted and dogmatically followed. The protagonist, a twelve-year-old boy named Jonas, soon realizes that his community is not perfect; the citizens do not feel any pain but neither do they know any pleasure. Jonas quickly ascertains that pain and pleasure are both essential to human life. He eventually makes a daring escape from his community, taking with him a baby, Gabriel, whom he has come to love like a brother.

Jonas's destination is Elsewhere, a nearly magical place which lies somewhere far beyond the periphery of the world he knows: he has seen it only in the memories The Giver has transmitted to him. Elsewhere has snow, sleds, colored lights that twinkle on

trees inside of houses, and family – even the youngest reader will instantly recognize the symbols of Christmas, although Lowry never mentions the word. Lowry happens to have given Jonas’s adoptive brother Gabriel the same name as the angel who announced the coming of Christ, but she seeks to capture the warm feeling and significance of family at Christmas rather than focusing on the original meaning of the holiday itself. This is in sharp contrast to Lewis, who has Lucy reverently making the overtly Christian reference regarding the stable door that leads from the dying Narnia to the Real one: “In our world too, a Stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world” (140). Even so, the parallels here between *The Giver* and *The Last Battle* are unmistakable: Jonas and the Narnians have left worlds that are pale imitations, or shadows, of real and glorious worlds that are radiant and brimming over with the promise of everything good, and where they find themselves at last surrounded by friends and loved ones who have been awaiting their arrival. Lewis likens entering the Real Narnia to the idea that “the holidays have begun,” and Lowry has Jonas and Gabriel arriving in Elsewhere at Christmastime; both stories evoke the holiday essence of wonder, excitement, coming home, and belonging.

The most intriguing question about *The Giver* is whether Jonas and Gabriel die in order to reach Elsewhere like the Narnian characters do on entering the Real Narnia. Elsewhere is linked with death throughout the entire novel. Jonas is horrified when he discovers that his community is euthanasiac — babies that do not grow and develop within a given time frame are systematically murdered by lethal injection as are the elderly and people who exhibit even the slightest bit of aberrant behavior. From the outset of the novel this means of selective execution has been camouflaged by the benign

phrase “being released,” and Jonas understands that people who are “released” are sent Elsewhere, never to return (43). The Giver tells Jonas: ““I love you, Jonas...but I have another place to go. When my work here is finished, I want to be with my daughter”” (162). The Giver’s daughter is dead. Combined with the story’s previous connections between death and Elsewhere, the reader might easily infer that The Giver is suggesting an afterlife where loved ones reunite and that Elsewhere is this other place. Note that at the novel’s close Jonas and the baby are succumbing to starvation and Jonas is losing consciousness as the sled takes its final downhill slide into Elsewhere; just then, for the first time, Jonas hears music and people singing, which can easily be construed as that of the heavenly host, given Lowry’s use of Christmas symbolism to describe Elsewhere.

Is Elsewhere, then, a representation of Heaven like Lewis’s Real Narnia? Not according to the author. In an online message at Random House’s website, Lowry discloses that children have written to complain about the ambiguous ending of *The Giver*. Lowry resists explaining religious connotations: “*The Giver* is many things to many different people. People bring to it their own complicated sense of beliefs and hopes and dreams and fears and all of that. So I don't want to put my own feelings into it, my own beliefs, and ruin that for people who create their own endings in their minds.” Note, however, that children are asking what the ending of *The Giver* means. Lowry expresses disappointment that her readers think Jonas and Gabriel just die, but she still prefers to let the readers decide for themselves what becomes of the boys: “What form their new life takes is something I like people to figure out for themselves. And each person will give it a different ending.” After she deliberately left the door open for individual interpretation, Lowry should not be surprised by the death and afterlife

perception. Just as Lewis's Narnian characters go on living after death in a glittering, colorful world beyond the Shadow-Lands, the case can be made that Jonas and Gabriel are in Heaven, as suggested by the music, loved ones awaiting them, and shades of gray giving way to color at last.

Furthermore, Jonas can be viewed as a Christ figure. Like young Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:49), Jonas begins to recognize his true life's mission at the age of twelve. He is willing to leave his community for Elsewhere, knowing that there is no return. His reasons are not selfish; not only is he saving Gabriel from being euthanized, if Jonas successfully escapes, then all of the memories he carries with him will be given back to the people in his community. In other words, Jonas is willing to endure pain and personal sacrifice in order to provide his people with real life, something he alone can do. The name Jonas is of Biblical derivation; in some versions of the Bible the name Jonas is interchangeable with the name Jonah, the reluctant Old Testament prophet whom God sent with a message of salvation to the people of Ninevah. Like Jonah, Jonas is initially reluctant to accept the role assigned to him; Jonas did not choose to be Receiver any more than Jonah chose to go to Ninevah and preach repentance. Both Jonah and Jonas are individual catalysts of change for the greater good of a community, only Lowry's Jonas comes to accept and value the mission he's been given. In this regard, Jonas is once again reminiscent of Jesus, who compares his own life and mission of salvation to Jonah's (Matthew 12:39-41; 16:4; Luke 11:29-32). Jonas is Hebrew for "dove," the biblical symbol of peace, and Jesus is referred to as the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). It is interesting to note that Lowry, who so adamantly claims to avoid religious bias, employs overtly Biblical names for major male figures in *The Giver*. Conversely, Lewis, the

supposed overbearing Christian, predominantly uses secular, mythological, and invented names for his host of characters. Even though the name Peter is biblical, and though Peter Pevensie's siblings have names which can be linked to saints, the names of Lewis's characters are not as conspicuous as the appearance of Asher, Gabriel, and certainly Jonas, without surnames, which understandably lends a strong Judeo-Christian aura to *The Giver*.

Whether or not Lowry's protagonist was based on Jonah or Jesus, however, the case for Elsewhere being Heaven evaporates in light of Lowry's subsequent, unplanned writing of two companion novels to *The Giver*. In a 2004 interview Lowry reveals why she wrote *The Messenger*:

I had said, often and in public, that I was not going to 'explain' what had happened to Jonas at the end of *The Giver*. But the reading audience was dissatisfied with that. People didn't like the ambiguity of *The Giver's* conclusion. And they let me know it, in hundreds — probably thousands, by now — of letters and e-mails . . . Readers' reactions affected me, I think, in that it made me want to sort out things for myself. I did it first, in *Gathering Blue* with a brief reference to Jonas. But then I was left with a second ambiguous ending . . . so I simply decided to portray Jonas, Gabe, and Kira in the places they had made for themselves.

Despite the possibility that Jonas might be alive and well in *Gathering Blue* and that he and Gabriel resurface in *The Messenger*, on its individual merit and with its Christian imagery, *The Giver* will continue to lead more than a few readers to speculate that Jonas and Gabriel die and that Elsewhere represents the afterlife. Lowry's resistance to having

the imagery pigeonholed actually enables the Christian interpretation that she prefers to downplay.

When readers question her use of Christian imagery, Lowry staunchly denies her symbolism's specificity. In an interview for Teenreads.com, she states: "There is a universality to theology, I think, certain primal symbols, so a story need not be exclusive to one faith. When readers ask me, I tell them that whatever they find in the book is what is there." Like *The Giver*, *The Last Battle* and indeed the whole of *The Chronicles of Narnia* can have a number of theological interpretations; belief in the afterlife is, after all, inherent to many religions, and Narnia is literally overflowing with "certain primal symbols" drawn from myriad sources. Although Lowry has, in a sense, taken great pains not to colonize children with particular religious beliefs by encouraging them to "read in" whatever meaning they choose, her ambiguous endings do not lend any credibility to Smith's earlier assertion that contemporary authors get the point of the story across better than classic authors do. Leaving the conclusion of *The Giver* open for personal interpretation certainly reflects today's respect for multiculturalism and diversity, but Lowry's indirectness ultimately spawns uncertainty and confusion for readers who want to know what the story means. In contrast, Lewis preferred a direct approach: "If our words are ambiguous," he asserts in *God in the Dock*, "our meaning will escape him [the reader]. I sometimes think that writing is like driving sheep down a road. If there is any gate open to the left or right the readers will certainly go into it" (263). There is a marked difference between being direct so that a story's meaning is clear and manipulating one's audience, as Lewis is so often accused of doing. Ironically, throughout the *The Giver*

Jonas strives to use precise language, unlike his intentionally vague creator, who felt compelled to write two more books to discourage the notion that he and Gabriel die.

More importantly, whatever the interpretations of Elsewhere and the Real Narnia are, both leave a valuable image of hope and joy with young readers. Sarah Smedman writes: “It is the nature of our spirit ... to long for something beyond, to yearn nostalgically, search restlessly, and chase wildly after self-transcendence ... the spirit does triumph in certain children’s books... to prevail, to rise to the heights, the spirit must go through the depths” (182-83). Both *The Giver* and *The Last Battle* impart the message that no matter how dark those depths may be, somehow, in some way, all will be well. As to those who find Lewis’s hopeful image of the afterlife distasteful, they would do well to heed Nodelman’s parting admonishment to authors and critics alike: In order to avoid colonization, one must first recognize one’s own imperialist tendencies (34). Otherwise, society is destined for a dangerous “sameness” where diversity is suppressed until it is eventually extinguished. Young Jonas, from the safety of his new vantage point in Elsewhere, wherever that may be, would surely be the first to agree.

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