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What About Susan? Gender in Narnia

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Abstract

Critics of C.S. Lewis argue that his misogyny is present in his portrayal of female characters. While Lewis himself was self-contradictory in his attitudes towards women, his depictions of female characters in *The Chronicles of Narnia* are both realistic and progressive. Both the male and female characters throughout the series demonstrate individual strengths and weaknesses that are not dependent on their gender. The criticism against Lewis focuses on his treatment of Susan, especially regarding her being the only child not to return to Narnia at the end of the series. Unlike what the critics argue, however, Susan is not excluded simply for her sexuality.

Keywords

Narnia, Gender, C.S. Lewis, Susan, Women

Disciplines

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Comments

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What About Susan? Gender in Narnia

C.S Lewis was self-contradictory in his attitudes towards women: he believed that equality has its place but can also have negative consequences when used inappropriately.¹ He desired the company of men while disliking the company of women. Lewis' biographers note that Lewis' assumption that women are uninteresting is not surprising because he had limited access to women in his life. Contrary to this, evidence suggests that Lewis knew women from a "wide cross-section of culture" from college-age students to middle-class matrons to professors' widows and wives.² Despite the rumor that he was unwilling to teach female students, Lewis taught a class of girls at Magdalen, finding "several of them clever and stimulating."³ While he often held dinner parties of mixed gender, he refused on numerous occasions to speak at a Cambridge society of professors' wives.⁴ The women he was in contact with, especially the female academics and lecturers he was acquaintances with, demonstrated their ability to speak about more than "heart and home," however, he still held the assumption that women are "uninteresting, or at least interesting only in an erotic or affectionate way."⁵ So, at the same time that Lewis demonstrated an apparent appreciation for women, he retained his sexism and misogyny.

¹ Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride, *Women Among the Inklings: Gender C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams* (London: Greenwood, 2001), 138.

² Ibid, 95.

³ Ibid, 56.

⁴ Ibid, 94.

⁵ Ibid, 20.

Lewis' literary works retain the innate contradiction of his views. In his earliest novels, women are either "beautiful spiritual entities [or] beautiful physical temptresses."⁶ Well into the 1950s with his Narnia series, women are featured more prominently and more realistically. Even so, critics of Lewis still argue that Narnia is spoiled by its sexism. Philip Pullman claims that the series is "monumentally disparaging of girls and women"⁷ and Cathy McSparran labels Narnia as a "Boy's Own world" with girls present during the adventure but boys always taking the lead.⁸ These claims hold some merit, especially tied with Lewis' own views on women that inevitably seeped into his writing. However, the dismissal of the Narnia series as categorically sexist is a flawed oversimplification.

Dismissive remarks made by the male protagonists towards the females are often reciprocated by the girls. To Peter and Trumpkin, Edmund says, "That's the worst of girls. They never carry a map in their head" and Lucy immediately responds, "That's because our heads have something inside them."⁹ In *The Silver Chair*, Eustace tells Jill, "It's an extraordinary thing about girls that they never know the points of the compass,"¹⁰ but in *The Last Battle* when King Tirian and Eustace lost their bearings, it was Jill who "set them right again" and led the way through the woods as she "knew her Narnian stars perfectly."¹¹ Any sexist remarks made by the protagonists act more as mutual banter or immature remarks than as purposeful denigration of females. Adding to that, sexism is a trait attributed to the male villains. Miraz ridicules Glozelle for talking "like an old

⁶ Ibid, 130.

⁷ Philip Pullman (presentation, Hay Festival, Wales, May 31-June 9, 2002).

⁸ Cathy McSparran, "Daughters of Lilith," in *Revisiting Narnia: Fantasy, Myth and Religion in C.S. Lewis' Chronicles*, ed. Shanna Caughey (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2005), 201.

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian* (New York: HarperCollins, 1951), 10.

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: HarperCollins, 1953), 119.

¹¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: HarperCollins, 1956), 68-69.

woman,”¹² Uncle Andrew, in reply to Digory telling him he will be punished one day, says, “I suppose that is a natural thing for a child to think—brought up among women, as you have been,”¹³ Prince Rabadash, who tries to forcibly marry Susan claims that “women are as changeable as weathercocks,”¹⁴ and part of the reason Jill, Eustace, and Puddleglum are able to tell that Rilian is under the Lady of the Green Kirtle’s enchantment is that he insults Jill by calling her “our little maid.”¹⁵ Sexist remarks by the male protagonists are not treated favorably either. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, when Edmund loses sight of Lucy in his first trip to Narnia, he projects his own moodiness onto her: “Just like a girl... sulking somewhere, and won’t accept an apology.”¹⁶ Edmund’s pride and anger cloud his judgement leading him to betray his siblings after the White Witch promises him kingship. Here, Edmund’s insulting remarks are expressions of human folly.

The female protagonists are no more lacking in strengths and weaknesses than the males: Lucy, Jill, Aravis, Polly, and Susan are all interesting and diverse in their personalities. Lewis’ inclusion of these characters makes them his “first realistic depictions [of female characters] for which he exhibits affection.”¹⁷ Lucy, central to three of the novels, remains steadfast in her convictions, loving, and adventurous. Without her, none of the Pevensies would have made it to Narnia and all of them would have lost their faith in Narnia and Aslan. Father Christmas tells Susan and Lucy that he does not mean for them to fight in battle because “battles are ugly when women fight,”¹⁸ however Lucy fights

¹² C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian* (New York: HarperCollins, 1951), 182.

¹³ C.S. Lewis, *The Magician’s Nephew* (New York: HarperCollins, 1955), 28.

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 116.

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: HarperCollins, 1953), 158.

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperCollins, 1950), 30.

¹⁷ Sam McBride, “Coming of Age in Narnia,” in *Revisiting Narnia: Fantasy, Myth and Religion in C.S. Lewis’ Chronicles*, ed. Shanna Caughey (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2005), 68.

¹⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperCollins, 1950), 109.

alongside Narnians in *The Horse and His Boy* and Jill rages guerilla warfare with Eustace and King Tirian in *The Last Battle*. Jill is stubborn, easy to anger, and confident, but not immune to mistakes. Aravis turns away from palace life in favor of life on the road all while being brave, smart, and sometimes thoughtless, but never made foolish or more helpless than the boys. Polly, a well-rounded female protagonist, is as central to the events in *The Magician's Nephew* as Digory, learns "to ride and swim and milk and bake and climb" with Digory's family, and remains happily unmarried when she returns in *The Last Battle*.¹⁹

Like the other female protagonists, Susan is not lacking in her own complexities, however she still stands out from the others. She is a mother-figure for her siblings in the absence of their parents while also being smart and quick to act. On more than one occasion she proves herself as capable of fighting even when she prefers not to such as against fighting the wolves in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and shooting an arrow at an enemy before Peter could even see him in *Prince Caspian*: "She was very pale but was already fitting a second arrow to the string."²⁰ Unlike the other friends of Narnia, Susan is the only one to not return at the end of *The Last Battle*. Her absence serves as evidence for the central arguments criticizing Lewis' treatment of women in the series. J.K. Rowling comments, "There comes a point where Susan...is lost to Narnia because she becomes interested in lipstick. She's become irreligious basically because she found sex."²¹ Her comment is based off Jill's statement that Susan is not a friend of Narnia anymore because she is interested in "nothing nowadays except nylons, lipstick and invitations."²² However, it is not because Susan has simply become interested in nylons and lipstick, but rather that

¹⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Magician's Nephew* (New York: HarperCollins, 1955), 200.

²⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian* (New York: HarperCollins, 1951), 33.

²¹ J.K. Rowling, interviewed by Lev Grossman, *Time Magazine*, July 17, 2005.

²² C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: HarperCollins, 1956), 154.

she has become interested in nothing except for nylons and lipstick. Susan's transgression isn't growing up or becoming interested in clothes, it's her vanity. In large part, Susan's vanity comes from her desire to grow up too fast.

Simply being interested in clothes or appearances isn't enough to be considered vain in Narnia or to be banned from it. Lucy expresses her joy at seeing all the "nice new things she had got in the Lone Islands—seaboots and buskins and cloaks and jerkins and scarves,"²³ and Jill, rather than getting rid of her fine Narnian clothes, "smuggled [them] home and wore them at a fancy-dress ball next holidays."²⁴ Vanity is not limited to the female characters either. Uncle Andrew is described as being "as vain as a peacock"²⁵ and that vanity and resulting pride ultimately leads him to forget about Narnia and never return. Bree's vanity almost prevents him from entering Narnia when he makes excuses to wait until his tail grows back because of his fear of what the other Narnian horses will think of his imperfection.

The vanity of characters and their encounters with temptation are recurring themes throughout the series. While Susan's absence from Narnia is criticized as suggesting that "women are more prone to temptation, or more resistant to Jesus-Aslan's justification and sanctification, than men,"²⁶ the boys in Narnia succumb to temptation more often than the girls. Edmond betrays his siblings to the White Witch for Turkish delights, Eustace is turned into a dragon after "sleeping on a dragon's hoard with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart," and Digory succumbs to his curiosity and releases Jadis despite Polly's

²³ C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: HarperCollins, 1952), 67.

²⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: HarperCollins, 1953), 243.

²⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Magician's Nephew* (New York: HarperCollins, 1955), 83.

²⁶ Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride, *Women Among the Inklings: Gender C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams* (London: Greenwood, 2001), 149.

protests.²⁷ Edmond and Caspian are also lured by the water that turns items gold into arguing amongst themselves about who the leader of their voyage should be until Lucy distracts them. In *The Last Battle*, Shift the Ape convinces Narnians and Calormenes that Puzzle, a donkey in a lion suit, is Aslan and later that Tash and Aslan are the same deity even though they are opposites. Shift successfully manipulates almost all the Narnians that surrounded the stable and is a factor in the ultimate demise of Narnia. Shift, Miraz, the Green Lady, and the White Witch all attempt to twist the values of Aslan so that people forget or lose faith in him and in Narnia. All the villains manipulate those around them and most of the protagonists confront temptation, including Susan who must resist an internal source of doubt and temptation that follows her even after she leaves Narnia.

Lewis choosing Susan to be the one absent from Aslan's country remains another point of contention. Lewis could have "kept out Edmund or Eustace or even the High King," however, any of these choices would not have fit in with the personalities that Lewis had been building since the beginning.²⁸ Susan has been the one who acted older than her age throughout the series. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Edmund tells Susan to stop "trying to talk like Mother"²⁹ and in *Prince Caspian*, Lucy asks Susan not to "talk like a grown-up."³⁰ Susan travels to America with her parents because she is "old for her age" and "would get far more out of a trip to America than the youngsters."³¹ When Edmond acts in a similar manner giving Lucy "a superior look as if he were far older than Lucy," his

²⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: HarperCollins, 1952), 91.

²⁸ Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride, *Women Among the Inklings: Gender C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams* (London: Greenwood, 2001), 149.

²⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperCollins, 1950), 4.

³⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian* (New York: HarperCollins, 1951), 125.

³¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: HarperCollins, 1952), 5.

immaturity is criticized both by his siblings and later by Aslan.³² Edmund's attempts to act more grown-up than he was and his desire to be superior to his siblings result in him being eager to reject Narnia and susceptible to the White Witch's ruse. Likewise, Susan growing up is not so much the problem as is her desire to appear grown-up. Because she has consistently demonstrated this desire, it is reasonable that once Aslan told Susan and Peter that they were too old to return to Narnia, Susan would be the first of the four children to want to grow-up and forget about their childhood adventures.

Unlike Susan, Edmond and Eustace losing faith in Narnia would not have matched their character growth as they have already experienced the doubt that ultimately keeps Susan away from the reunion in Aslan's country. In *Prince Caspian*, Susan was the last of her siblings to see Aslan while Edmund was the first after Lucy because he had already had a frightening and life-changing event that resulted in his growth towards maturity. Many of the children have experienced trials that resulted in the maturity and steadiness of their belief while Susan has not. Edmund experienced it when his pride resulted in him betraying his family to the White Witch, Eustace experienced it after his greed led to him transforming into a dragon, and Peter experienced it in battle. Susan has not yet had a moment like those. Thus, her doubts about Narnia remained after she left and grew until she no longer wanted to join the other friends of Narnia in their meetings.

Susan did not die in the train crash because she chose not to go with her family to talk about Narnia, and so she was not necessarily barred from Narnia forever. Susan, like the dwarves at the end of *The Last Battle* cannot enter Narnia yet because they have chosen not to believe in it. Lewis late writes that "there is plenty of time for her to mend, and

³² C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperCollins, 1950), 45.

perhaps she will get to Aslan's country in the end—in her own way.”³³ Susan is not punished for her sexuality, rather she was the character that would most realistically have lost faith. She was the best character for Lewis to base his arguments about both the importance of faith and the never-ending journey of faith and therefore is not an expendable character, but rather one integral to the themes of Narnia.

Every female protagonist is vital to the plots and the themes of the novels. Polly was influential in the birth of Narnia and Jill tried to save it from its demise. Lucy personifies unshakeable faith while Susan represents the doubts of those who have lost their way but are not past redemption. None of the female protagonists are defined by their gender nor do they conform to female stereotypes such as the damsel in distress or the tomboy embracing everything masculine. They are never abducted when the boys are free, nor do they “let their courage or their brains, fail them in a crisis, not even to showcase the [boys'] courage.”³⁴ For a man who held conflicting views on women, Lewis' female characters are startlingly progressive with their strengths, weaknesses, vulnerability, and confidence that make for complex and real portrayals of girls. Despite that, a masculine hierarchy within Narnia appears in the role of Aslan as well as the appointment of Peter as the High King. This does not negate the series' characters but rather makes them, like Lewis, a flawed people amongst a flawed species yet no less worthy of salvation.

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³³ C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Children*, ed. Lyle W. Dorsett and Marjorie Lamp Mead (New York: Touchstone, 1985), 67.

³⁴ Sarah Zettel, “Why I Love Narnia: A Liberal, Feminist, Agnostic Tells All,” in *Revisiting Narnia: Fantasy, Myth and Religion in C.S. Lewis' Chronicles*, ed. Shanna Caughey (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2005), 184.

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