READING WITH THE HEART . . . THE FANTASY LITERATURE OF C.S. LEWIS AND J.R.R. TOLKIEN

The last battle is over. The great door is shut. Old Narnia is no more. Beneath a cloudless sky of eternal blue, through a countryside whose grass and trees and mountaintops are forever green, walk the kings and queens, the noble lords and ladies of Narnia. Above them flies the great eagle Farsight, and beside them trots Jewel the Unicorn.

The company is happy, but bewildered. All have just seen their country, their world, destroyed. And yet, aren't those mountains familiar? Didn't that forest, didn't those hills mark Narnia's southern border? Yes! cries the company, yes! Those are the mountains, that is the forest, those are the hills! But somehow it is not the same; somehow, it is all different. "It seems," says one lord, "more like the *real thing* than old Narnia":

> It is hard to explain how this sunlit land was different from the old Narnia. . .perhaps you will get some idea of it, if you think like this. You may have been in a room in which there was a window that looked out on a lovely bay of the sea or a green valley that wound away among mountains. And in the wall of that room opposite to the window there may have been a looking glass. And as you turned away from the window you suddenly caught sight of that sea or that valley, all over again, in the looking glass. And the sea in the mirror, or the valley in the mirror, were in one sense just the same as the real ones: yet at the same time they were somehow different – deeper, more wonderful, more like places in a story: in a story you have never heard but very much want to know.
>
> The difference between the old Narnia and the new Narnia was like that. The new one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more. I can't describe it better than that: if you get there, you will know what I mean.
>
> It was the Unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right fore-hoof on the ground and neighed and then cried:
>
> "I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this. Come further up, come further in!"[1]

For a little while now, let us journey together "further up and further in" into the fantastical worlds of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. We will examine the ideas which gave form and content to their worlds; we will see what place these worlds have in our classrooms; and we will see how we might lead those in our care to share with us a glimpse,

not of this world, but of a truer country, a deeper land, our real and final home.

Before we begin, I must make one distinction. I distinguish between "high" and "low" fantasy, and the differentiating question to be asked is this: is God present? Some critics want this question to be "Are the gods present?" but this I find unsatisfactory: it makes every possible difference to me whether the story points me to Heaven or to Olympus. Examples of high fantasy are few: some of the works of George Mac Donald, *The Wind in the Willows, The Lord of the Rings, The Chronicles of Narnia,* possibly a few of the works of M. L'Engle, and, a recent addition to the list, *The Book of the Dun Cow* by Walter Wengerin, Jr. To be sure, a fantasy may be "low" and still be an excellent story. Nonetheless, I think the distinction between high and low fantasy is a useful one in helping us choose fantasy literature for our classroom.

I have said that both *The Chronicles* and *The Lord of the Rings* are high fantasy. God is present. The questions then are these: why, for Lewis and Tolkien, is God there, and once there, what is He doing? To answer these questions, we must understand Tolkien's and Lewis' ideas of myth, story, and fantasy.

It is September, 1931. The place is Magdelen College, Oxford. Three men walk in the English twilight. Suddenly, one man speaks:

> "But all myths are lies, and therefore worthless."
>
> "No," replies one of the other men. "They are not lies."
>
> Lewis stares at Tolkien. Tolkien continues, "Man is not ultimately a liar. He may pervert his thought into lies, but he comes from God, and it is from God that he draws his ultimate ideals. Therefore . . . not merely the abstract thought of man but also his *imaginative inventions* must originate with God, and must in consequence reflect something of eternal truth . . . . In making a myth, in practising 'mythopoeia' and peopling the world with elves and dragons and goblins, a story teller, or 'sub-creator'. . . is actually fulfilling God's purpose, and reflecting a splintered fragment of the true light."[2]

The three men — Lewis, Tolkien, and Hugo Dyson, a Christian friend — talk late into the night. Tolkien exhorts Lewis (who deeply loves the great myths) to think of the gospels as myth, but as *true myth,* as myth become fact. Do you have to analyse, to probe with rational argument the old myths in order to enjoy them, to know what they "mean?" No, of course not, says Tolkien. You enjoy them and understand them almost intuitively. Cannot you do the same for the story of Christ as you do for the great mythic stories? God is mythopoeic, says Tolkien, and therefore you must become mythopathic.

Tolkien goes home at 3 A.M. Dyson leaves an hour later. Twelve

days later Lewis writes to a friend, "I have just passed from believing in God to believing in Christ."

Now there it is, the answer to both our questions. Why is God in fantasy stories? Because in writing good fantasy, man is retelling a myth, and God is the source and subject of all great myth. What is God doing in a fantasy story? He is revealing Himself to man, He is leading man to Himself.

An understanding of these ideas is fundamental to any personal or classroom evaluation we make of Lewis' or Tolkien's work. For instance, why did Tolkien spend over ten years writing the over 500,000 words of his trilogy? Why all the maps of Middle Earth? Why the geneologies, the chronologies? Why the one hundred page appendix of the history of Middle Earth? There is even a complete Elvish grammar and alphabet! Why? Because Tolkien was working out his role of "sub-creator." Tolkien believed that he had to make his world so real and convincing that a reader would enter into the imaginary world and give it "primary belief," and in that condition of belief, share the author's creative process and created subject.

And are not the works of both men highly derivative? Did not both men draw heavily from Welsh, Norse, and Greek myth? Of course they did, but this is as it should be, for all myths are just retellings of the Great Story. Lewis goes so far as to say:

> . . . all stories are waiting, somewhere, and are slowly being recovered in fragments by different human minds according to their abilities – and of course being partially spoiled in each writer by the admixture of his own mere individual invention.[3]

According to Lewis and Tolkien, the more original a story is, the worse it is.

Now, the Narnia series is criticized for being just too unrealistic. All those giants and fauns and dryads and marshwiggles and talking animals: it really is too much. But, *no* says Lewis, such creatures are essential: "Giants, dragons, paradises, gods, and the like are themselves the expressions of certain basic elements in man's spiritual experience. . . the words of a language that speaks the else unspeakable."[4]

And it does not matter that the story may not be like real life, for as Lewis says, "It may not be 'like real life' in the superficial sense: but it sets before us an image of what reality may well be like at some more central region."[5]

The Chronicles have also been attacked on the basis of style and structure. For instance, much of the children's dialog is most unchild-like, and throughout the novels there is little character development

and less character analysis. Furthermore, sustained detailed descriptive writing – the kind that consumes page after page in Tolkien's work – is on the whole missing.

But, Lewis would answer, all these criticisms are quite beside the point. First of all, story is not primarily concerned with characters, neither their psychological growth nor their psychological motivations. Story is primarily concerned with *what happens,* with what the characters *do* and with what is *done* to them. Secondly, whatever power story or myth has lies not in the cleverness or stylistic expertise of the author. Lewis contended that a third or fourth rate novelist could be a first-rate fantasist because fantasy, story, and myth work independently of the written form they take. Myth and fantasy work by triggering in man the recollection and appreciation of truth inherent in all men as they are creatures of God.

Therefore, the carefully contrived inner consistency, the attention to detail that marks Tolkien's work is missing from Lewis'. Lewis insisted (to Tolkien's dismay: Tolkien disliked the Narnia stories) that it was the story itself which captivated and inspired, not the manner in which the story was presented:

> Form and content (in poetry) can be separated only by a false abstraction. But in a myth – in a story where the mere pattern of events is all that matters – this is not so. Any means of communication whatever which succeeds in lodging those events in our imagination has, as we say, done the trick.[6]

And this is true of myth because "Myth does not essentially exist in *words* at all. In poetry the words are the body and the 'theme' or 'content' is the soul. But in myth the imagined events are the body and something inexpressible is the soul. . ."[7]

We have seen now the philosophy behind the creation of Narnia, Perelandra, and Middle Earth. It is a very interesting philosophy, and its appeal is evidenced by its widespread acceptance. It is, however, a very wrong philosophy.

Its fundamental error involves a misconception of what the image of God in man includes. Man's imagination and his imaginative inventions are not based in the post-fall remnants of the image of God in man. In perfection, before the fall, that image consisted of man's ability to live in righteousness and holiness before his God. That ability was totally abrogated by the fall. Man's creative abilities and his ability to communicate through words is due to his creation as a rational being, not as an image bearer. Man's rational abilities, though they are greatly impaired since the fall, he still retains; but they are, apart from regenerating grace, completely under the domination of sin.

Man's ability to "subcreate" then does not *per se*, as Tolkien argued, mean that the creative impetus and created object come from God or in any way participate in His Godhead. Far from it; the imaginations of man are evil continually, and Tolkien notwithstanding, the Psalmist still declares that all men are liars.

All men, apart from God, *are* liars. We must have none of this "noble pagan" nonsense, none of this "splintered fragment of the true light." Scripture does not allow it.

The words of Paul are especially helpful here. Paul, who had first-hand, everyday experience with the great myths, never tried to work with them. If Tolkien is right, if pagan myths are never just lies and always contain something of the truth, we should expect that Paul might have used them as a starting point, as common ground, from which to present the unfragmented light of Christ. But this Paul never does. On Mars Hill, surrounded by statues of the great mythic figures, Paul does not say, "See, you already have a belief in some gods. Can't you just transfer that belief to one God?" No, Paul tells his audience that these gods represent no truth, but only the sin-darkened ignorance of their vain imaginations.

Scripture plainly tells us the origin of pagan myth. Far from being "good dreams" sent by God to reveal Himself to men, Romans 1:18-25 tells us

> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves: Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature, more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

Clearly then, pagan myth is a corruption, an idolatry, a lie, whose source is not God but Satan, the father of all lies.

Nevertheless, although the works of Lewis and Tolkien owe much to pagan myth, their work *is not* pagan myth. What is it? We are all aware that there are among God's people those who believe that the fantasy works of these men are blasphemy, and as such have no place in our

homes or schools. It does no good in the kingdom to simply ascribe to such people the intelligence and sensitivity of a potted fern — as we are sometimes tempted to do — and teach the stories anyway. For the sake of all concerned and primarily for the sake of God's own truth we must determine the true nature of these stories, their true value, their true power, what they are and what they are not, what they cannot do, and what they can.

We must first determine whether or not high fantasy is a legitimate field of Christian endeavor. If it is irreverent to picture Christ as a lion, if it is blasphemous to use a hobbit, a demi-man, and a wizard as Christ-figures, then we can stop right here. I do not believe such portrayal to be blasphemous, and therefore I will continue.

God reveals Himself in His word and in His creation. In both, He reveals Himself, His power, His characteristics, His Godhead, through images, concrete images in nature, word images in Scripture. Each winter God covers parts of the world with a white blanket so that He can say to us "I will cover your sins and make them white as snow." At the same time, He causes other parts of the globe to enjoy perpetual summer so that He might say, "I am the eternal changeless One." God builds mountains so that His Son might be the Solid Rock. He gives marriage so that Christ and His church might be bride and groom. He even gives chickens so that the Saviour might gather us under His wings. The images in nature and in Scripture are countless; I am sure each of you has your favorite. The point is this: God communicates to His people in images, through metaphor and simile. And I contend that any image, or series of images, that reveals God to me, or enables me to better appreciate my Lord and His Word is not blasphemous.

Those opposed to high fantasy argue at this point that while it is God's prerogative to thus reveal Himself, it is a violation of the second commandment for man to write stories portraying God in this manner. According to this argument, Lewis and Tolkien, as well as those who enjoy these stories, are involved in the creation and (perhaps) worship of graven images.

This is a curious argument, for then we have a God Who first prohibits His people from talking about Him in images, then through inspiration moves His saints to violate that prohibition. Furthermore, I do not believe that any child of God, however young, has ever been tempted to pray to or in any other means worship a lion because he has read the Narnia series. Indeed, I should think just the opposite.

This is a crucial point, for here we can answer the challenge of image-worship and at the same time reveal the true power and value of

fantasy. Unlike other forms of literature, fantasy never has itself as ultimate object of attention. High fantasy, though it may be enjoyed on the level of a good tale, always points beyond its own fantastic images to "some more central region." For instance, a sanctified, appreciative, reader is never left in Narnia. No one called to Narnia was ever taken there to stay.

At the end of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader,* Aslan tells Edmund that he and his sister will not return to Narnia. Of course the children are saddened, and they despair of ever meeting Aslan again:

> "It isn't Narnia, you know," sobbed Lucy. "It's *you.* We shan't meet *you* there. And how can we live, never meeting you?"
>
> "But you shall meet me, dear one," said Aslan.
>
> "Are – are you there too, Sir?" said Edmund.
>
> "I am," said Aslan. "But there I have another name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there."[8]

And that, I suggest, is the very reason why we bring our children to Narnia and Middle Earth: for is that not the point of covenant education, to know and serve God better? This is the value of high fantasy, that by turning our attention to God, it can lead us to a greater love and appreciation for Him and His Word, and for the events recorded in that Word.

Now at this juncture someone might say that as God's people we need nothing beyond His word, that Scripture is sufficient for us. In answer to this, we should notice two things. First, no one is suggesting that fantasy literature be used as a second scripture. High fantasy literature is, if you will, an aid, a help, a sign pointing to and reminding us of the real power and portent of the events recorded in Scripture. To our shame, we must admit that humanly speaking, we are oftentimes not impressed or excited by the great events of the Bible. We all admit that the stupendous events of Christ's life – His birth, death, resurrection – do indeed make up the most profoundly significant and deeply moving "story" the world will ever know. Yet because of repetition and the hardness of our hearts, "The Greatest Story Ever Told" does not always affect us and mean to us what it should. I believe that fantasy literature, in retelling the events of Scripture, can enable us to see anew the awesome power and earth-moving importance of those events, can send us back to Scripture with a greater understanding and appreciation of its significance. Again, I am not saying that fantasy literature is necessary for an understanding and appreciation of Scripture. I *am* saying that fantasy literature *can* help us to

appreciate the significance of Biblical events. And this leads us to the second point: that as fallen people in a fallen world, we need all the help we can get. Fantasy literature, I believe, can help.

Therefore, we should not be offended that God is in fantasy literature. I think that we should rejoice in it. All natural creation, through images, points to God; all creation, had we but eyes to see and ears to hear, tells HIS story. For centuries, these images have been incorporated into song and psalm, poem and prayer, so that these things too can tell that story. All the myriad ways we are given to praise God, to tell one another about Him, to praise Him, to enjoy Him, are blessings. His goodness to us is overwhelming! If I may use an image, not only do we get our cake, but we may eat it, too. And we may eat it all the time. So then, when we find God in fantasy literature, our reaction should not be an indignant, "What is He doing here?" but a joyful, "Of course. He is here, too!"

That God is in some fantasy stories is the source of those stories' power. It is the only reason, as I see it, that we read these stories again and again. In our secret hearts, we never tire of hearing the Story of which those stories remind us.

And now I must speak very personally. Really, there is no telling you exactly how these stories work within me or what they mean to me. Throughout his Chronicles, Lewis writes again and again, "It was like that. I can't explain it any better. If you don't know now, there is nothing I can do." I once thought this to be just the author's way of writing his way out of a dead end. I know better now. What Lewis in his stories is trying to express is at the core of every believer's attachment to his Lord. Lewis himself admits this is an impossible task, but for me, his images come very close to expressing "the else inexpressible."

Permit me just two examples, both from the Chronicles. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,* when the children first hear that "Aslan is on the move," a strange feeling comes over them — "like the first signs of spring, like good news." I share that feeling. I cannot read those words without thinking of Andrew running to Peter with his good news, *the* good news that God's children had waited millenia to hear: "We have found the Messias!"

And surely one of the most moving scenes in the entire Chronicles is found in the closing paragraphs of *The Last Battle.* Aslan has gathered the children about him and he says to them, "All of you are — as you used to call it in the shadow lands — dead." And then Aslan says to them the words that each of us must yearn to hear:

"The term is over! The holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning."

And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truely say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read; which goes forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before.[9]

Does not every child of God long for that day, for the beginning of that Great Story? Do we all not yearn for the words of Revelation 21 to come to pass?

Thus far, I have been long on philosophy and short on practical advice. How can we best include high fantasy literature in our classrooms?

The first problem is one of exposure. Teachers in the primary and intermediate grades, include a few fantasy tales in your list of stories to read to the class. Primary teachers might have the advantage here, in that perhaps their students are not too old to be put off by the fairy-tale format. Intermediate teachers, do a little pre-reading work to uncover (or create) enthusiasm for the kind of characters and action the story holds.

Talk about the books. Try to "sell" them to the class. A teacher should always be giving book-talks, formal or informal. Include some fantasy literature in your talks.

An indirect or passive means of exposure is simply having the books around. If you have a reading corner, make sure for every Laura Engles Wilder you have a M. L'Engle; for every Hardy Boys, a Hobbit; for every *We Were There at the Battle of the Bulge,* an abridged *Song of Roland* or *Le Morte d'Arthur.*

I know that junior and senior high teachers get little opportunity to cover entire novels in class. If you cannot make time for an entire novel, use a few short stories, or even self-contained portions of novels. There *are* some good fantasy anthologies on the market; if you cannot afford these, put together your own collection. It is worth the effort.

And finally, read the books yourself, and let the class know you are reading them. Be seen reading them; if one of your students should ask what is so interesting, there you have a perfect opportunity to introduce someone to fantasy literature.

The second problem is "how much to make" of the literature, or

in other words, how far do we go in explaining the symbolism? Of course, the stories will be understood differently at different grade levels, and even within the same class there will be different levels of comprehension and appreciation. At all age levels, I think, it is wisest not to overdo it. Do not over-allegorize. In fantasy literature, there is never the one-for-one, tit-for-tat, correlation between "story" and "reality" that characterizes allegory. Over-allegorizing will almost certainly turn students off. Especially with younger children, remember that if the student sees nothing in the story but a good tale, that is fine. High fantasy stories are good tales and they can be enjoyed at that level. Perhaps, in a few years, when the student might read the story again, he will see the Story that works behind the words.

If you are going to discuss the stories more formally, the guidelines for all good classroom discussion apply. Take your cues from the class: base your observations and questions on their response to the story. And always tailor your questions to student level. For instance, asking fourth graders about the difference between "Magic from the beginning of time" and "Magic from *before* the beginning of time" is pointless. A better question would be, "Does Aslan's sacrifice remind you of another sacrifice?" Answers to this question will reveal how well the students have grasped the central image of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.* Following questions should be based on and add to that understanding.

Whatever methods we finally use, let us all decide to make a greater effort to involve our students with fantasy literature. I hope I have shown that fantasy literature is an honorable and profitable endeavor, and that it can, to a much greater degree than other types of literature, increase the student's appreciation of his Creator's Word and world. And that is what our work is all about. Let us use good stories so that our students will know and love the Great Story all the more.

And if you still do not know what I mean by a good story, let me try one more time to tell you. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader,* on the isle of Coriakan the fallen star, Lucy discovers a magician's book. As Lucy pages through the book, she finds a most unique and powerful spell:

> She came to a spell "for the refreshment of the spirit." The pictures were fewer here but more beautiful. And what Lucy found herself reading was more like a story than a spell. It went on for three pages and before she had read to the bottom of the page she had forgotten that she was reading at all. She was living in the story as if it were real, and all the pictures were real, too. When she had got to the third page and come to an end, she said, "That is the loveliest story I've ever read or ever shall read in my

whole life. Oh, I wish I could have gone on reading it for ten years. At least I'll read it again."

But here part of the magic of the Book came into play. You couldn't turn back. The right-handed pages, the ones ahead, could be turned; the left-handed page could not.

"Oh, what a shame!" said Lucy. "I did so want to read it again. Well, at least, I must remember it. Let's see. . .it was about. . .about. . .oh dear, its all fading away again. And even this last page is going blank. This is a very queer book. How can I have forgotten? It was about a cup and a sword and a tree and a green hill, I know that much. But I can't remember and what *shall* I do?[10]

In Narnia, Lucy knows what she must do; she knows who can help her, just as in our world we too know whom to seek:

(To Aslan) "But please," said Lucy.

"Speak on, dear heart."

"Shall I ever be able to read that story again, the one I couldn't remember? Will you tell it to me, Aslan? Oh, do, do, do."

"Indeed, yes, I will tell it to you for years and years."[11]

For years and years and years, world without end. I cannot describe a good story better than that. If your heart hears a good story, you will know what I mean.

Gary VanDer Schaaf*

FOOTNOTES

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1970), pp. 170-171.
2. Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979), p. 43.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
4. C.S. Lewis, *Preface to Paradise Lost* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1942), p. 17.
5. C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966), p. 15.
6. C.S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1947), p. xxvii.
7. *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.
8. C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1970), pp. 215-216.
9. C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, pp. 183-184.
10. C.S. Lewis, *Dawn Treader*, p. 133.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

* "By election, by proscription, and by conquest,"
an honorary citizen of Narnia.