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In Defense of the Fairy Tale: C.S. Lewis's Argument for the Value and Importance of the Fairy Tale

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The importance of C.S. Lewis's defense and use of the fairy tale is discovered in the growing popularity of the genre and the continued controversy surrounding its use. One can easily see the continued celebrity of the fairy tale as a genre when looking at current films and popular books. Recent films demonstrating this trend are *Ever After*: A Cinderella Story with Drew Barrymore, a retelling of the classic fairy tale; *Shrek*, a fractured fairy tale incorporating fairy tale stories and characters made familiar by Disney films; the thought provoking *AI* which is centered around the story of Pinocchio; the Oscar nominated *Chocolat* which in its opening identifies itself as a fairy tale; and the recent and highly successful film versions of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* and the *Sorcerer's Stone* and *The Chamber of Secrets*. Any trip to a bookstore will demonstrate the successful sales of both adult and children's literature based on the fairy tale, romance, and fantasy, including science fiction.

The phenomena surrounding the publishing of the Harry Potter series has drawn new attention to C.S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia series and J.R.R. Tolkien's writings and the craft of storytelling and of world-making identified by Tolkien as "secondary worlds" created by the writer and "mythopoeia" as the activity of such "sub-creation" (67, 82-83).

This continued use of the fairy tale has also created controversy over key elements of the genre such as the use of magic and magical creatures, the danger of escapism, the appropriateness of the material for children due to concerns over violence and frightening subject matter, and the question as to whether fairy tales are only for audiences consisting of children. Some concerned educators, librarians, clergy, and parents have called for the banning of the Harry Potter series. C.S. Lewis met the same challenges over his Chronicles of Narnia. He addressed many of the issues raised in essays, particularly in the collection of essays found in *Of Other Worlds*, and in his letters to readers in response to their questions about the series as in *Letters to Children*. An examination of Lewis's writings will provide insight and answers to the questions and challenges over the use of the fairy tale and prove its validity and value as an art form and literary genre.

In Lewis's essay, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's To Be Said," he describes the invention process for the *Chronicles of Narnia* as first coming in mental images, "a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion" (36). Next came the selection of a form in which to tell the story, one absent of a love interest or close psychology. The form excluding these was the fairy tale. Lewis tells us that he fell in love with the form itself, "its brevity, its severe restraints on description, its flexible traditionalism, its inflexible hostility to all analysis, digression, reflections and 'gas'" and the very limitations of the vocabulary (36-37). He concludes, "I wrote fairy tales because the Fairy Tale seemed the ideal Form for the stuff I had to say," not unlike the stone selected by the sculptor or the sonnet by the poet (37). As in any expression of art, the form chosen by the artist must be considered, and whatever boundaries and limitations prescribed by the form must be understood.

So what is this genre form? C. Hugh Holman in his *Handbook to Literature* defines the fairy tale as "a story relating mysterious pranks and adventures of supernatural spirits who manifest themselves in the form of diminutive human beings." These creatures "possess supernatural wisdom and foresight, a mischievous temperament, the power to regulate the affairs of human beings for good or evil, the capacity to change themselves into any shape at any time" (180).

Magic and magical creatures are at the heart of the fairy tale. Fairy tale creatures are expanded more than just the fairy to include witches, mythological creatures, and other magical beings. Fairy tales often begin with "once upon a time," and end with "they lived happily

ever after." There is reasonable expectation that the tale will end with a happy conclusion, although more traditional folk tales can have elements of violence and tragedy.

An important characteristic of the fairy tale is that it often teaches a story or a moral. Lewis found a real advantage of using the fairy tale in order to "steal past those watchful dragons," our inhibitions that paralyze our openness to the Gospel:

> Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to. I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of the stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could. ("Sometimes Fairy Stories" 37)

In his essay Lewis refers to J.R.R. Tolkien's comments on the fairy tale found in Tolkien's "On Fairy Stories" in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, which had a great influence on Lewis's ideas about the genre. Tolkien suggests that the true form of the fairy tale is what he calls the "eucatastrophe," "the true form of the fairy-tale, and its highest function" (81) containing elements of tragedy and loss that lead to a sudden joyous turn. This is what Tolkien refers to as the "Consolation of the Happy Ending" of the fairy tale, an element he maintains must be possessed by all complete fairy tales (81). Tolkien describes it as follows:

> The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially 'escapist,' nor 'fugitive'. In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophy, of sorrow and failure; the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glance of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.
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> It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the 'turn' comes, a catch of breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality. (81)

Tolkien concludes his essay by identifying this eucatastrophe with the Christian Story citing that the Gospels contain a fairy-story that "embraces all the essence of fairy-stories":

> I would venture to say that approaching the Christian Story from this direction, it has long been my feeling (a joyous feeling) that God redeemed the corrupt making-creatures, men, in a way fitting to this aspect, as to others, of their strange nature. The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind, which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: 'mythical' in their perfect, self-contained significance; and at the same time powerfully symbolic and allegorical; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe. The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the 'inner consistency of reality'. There is no tale told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many sceptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. For the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art, that is Creation. To reject it leads either to sadness or wrath. (83-84)

The original folk tales that embodied the earliest fairy tales often had elements of suffering and tragedy that have been erased by the Disney versions of the stories. An example of this is the "Little Mermaid." In the original tale, the Little Mermaid sacrifices her life for her beloved prince, a quite different story than the film version by Disney.

Another criticism of the fairy tale is that it is a form of escapism, giving children a false impression of the world and fails to prepare children for the realities of the world they live in. Lewis argues in his essay, "On

Three Ways of Writing for Children," that children easily understand that the world of the fairy tale is not real, something not so easily understood as the school stories told in school. He states, "All stories in which children have adventures and successes which are possible, but in the sense that they do not break the laws of nature, but almost infinitely improbable, are in more danger than the fairy tales of raising false expectations" (29).

The response to the popular charge of escapism is not so easily answered according to Lewis. The fairy tale does create a longing similar to those aroused with the school book, but the longing for fairy land is for something we know not. "It stirs and troubles . . . with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth" (29).

Lewis in the same essay addresses the charge that the fairy tale as children's literature will frighten them. Lewis makes a distinction that one does not do anything to give children "haunting, disabling, pathological fears against which ordinary courage is helpless: in fact, phobias" but "we must not keep out of his mind the knowledge that he is born into a world of death, violence, wounds, and adventure, heroism and cowardice, good and evil" (31).

He goes on to point out that the second would indeed give children a false impression creating escapism in a bad sense. Stories of brave knights and heroic courage in the fairy tale will provide for the child models in the real world as they face difficulties, concluding with:

> As far as that goes, I side impenitently with the human race against the modern reformer. Let there be wicked kings and beheadings, battles and dungeons, giants and dragons, and let villains be soundly killed at the end of the book. Nothing will persuade me that this causes an ordinary child any kind or degree of fear beyond what it wants, and needs, to feel. For, of course, it wants to be a little frightened. (31)

He concludes that phobias cannot be controlled by literary means. He warns parents that avoiding the fairy tale for "blameless stories of child life in which nothing at all alarming ever happens, you fail to banish the terrors, and would succeed in banishing all that can ennoble them or make them endurable" (31-32). He finishes by saying:

> . . . For in the fairy tales, side by side with the terrible figures, we find the immemorial comforters and protectors, the radiant ones; and the terrible figures are not merely terrible, but sublime. It would be nice if no little boy in bed, hearing, or thinking he hears, a sound, were ever at all frightened. But if he going to be frightened, I think it better that he should think St George, or any bright champion in armour, is a better comfort than the idea of the police.
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> I will even go further. If I could have escaped all my own night-fears at the price of never having known 'faerie', would I now be the gainer by that bargain? I am not speaking carelessly. The fears were very bad. But I think the price would have been too high. (32)

Finally, are there different fairy tales for children than for adults, or is the fairy tale only for children? Anyone who has seen any of the films or read any of the books mentioned at the beginning of this essay will know that both the child and the adult enjoy them. Lewis never refers to his essay on fairy stories as children stories. He points out that they are liked and disliked by both adults and children. He explains that he writes for children only in the sense that he excludes those things he thinks children would not like or understand, not in the sense of writing below adult attention (37-38).

This is an idea developed also in Tolkien's essay on the fairy tale and in George MacDonald's essay on the imagination, "The Fantastic Imagination," important influences on Lewis's ideas. George MacDonald when asked how a parent might respond to a child's inquiry as to what a fairy tale means writes, "But indeed your children are not likely to trouble you about the meaning. They find what they are capable of finding, and more would be too much. For my part, I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five or fifty, or seventy-five (27). MacDonald cautions that in critical analysis we can "spoil countless previous things by intellectual greed. He who will be a man, and will not be a child, must—cannot help himself—become a little man, that is, a dwarf. He will, however, need no consolation, for he is sure to think himself a very large creature indeed (28).

Lewis concludes his essay on fairy stories with the following:

> The Fantastic or Mythical is a Mode available at all ages for some readers; for others, at none. At all ages, if it is well used by the author and meets the right reader, it has the same power: to generalize while remaining concrete, to present in palpable form not concepts or even experiences but the whole classes of experience, and to throw off irrelevancies. But at its best it can do more; it

> can give us experiences we have never had and thus, instead of 'commenting on life', can add to it. I am speaking, of course, about the thing itself, not my own attempts at it. 'Juveniles', indeed! Am I to patronize sleep because children sleep sound? Or honey because children like it? (38)

C.S. Lewis addresses effectively the charges against the modern use of the fairy tale in these essays and in other writings. One need only read his children's literature to see these principles applied. For those who challenge the fairy tale in its various creative applications, a close examination of Lewis's ideas and writings will discover ample evidence for the defense of the fairy tale.

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