

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe: A Sexist Agenda

C.S. Lewis's series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, has been hailed as a milestone of fantasy and a beloved line of children's books. However, like most great works, it has underlying meanings that are studied and, in some cases, criticized. Some so-called "hidden" messages aren't so hidden at all, such as the obvious Christian allegory throughout the series. Focusing on the first novel of the series, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, one of the many less blatant themes is sexism. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* not only has a sexist view of women, but also a negative prospect of feminism.

Lucy and Susan of the four Pevensie children are seen as inferior to their brothers in many cases. The family dynamic is male-centric. When Edmund realizes he is in the wrong, and that Lucy had been telling the truth about Narnia all along, he calls out to her with an apology. When she doesn't answer, he says, "'Just like a girl,' said Edmund to himself, 'sulking somewhere, and won't accept an apology.'" (Lewis, pg. 30) Edmund dismisses his sister's silence as an overemotional response, typical of the feminine according to him. This was after he had treated her so poorly in the past few days. He had openly mocked her about seeing Narnia, even though she had been miserable. Edmund is still somehow surprised that Lucy would be unwilling to accept his apology. This implies that Lucy should simply hide her pain and blindly accept the apology, and not dwell on it "just like a girl." As he and Lucy are about to leave Narnia to tell their siblings about the magical wardrobe, Edmund faces a difficult task. "But Edmund secretly thought that is would not be as good fun for him as for her. He would have to admit that Lucy had been right, before all the others..." (Lewis, pg. 43) Edmund hates the idea of having to submit himself to admitting that his little sister was right all along. Doing so would

have boosted her social status, and Edmund finds this unacceptable. So instead of admitting that Lucy was right, he decided to lie. With "a very superior look" Edmund shatters his sister's trust in him out of selfishness and greed. (Lewis, pg. 45) While her brother Peter does defend against Edmund's verbal assault, he goes on to label her as "going queer in the head" and "turning into a most frightful liar." (Lewis, pg. 45)

Susan is described as someone who is less than her brothers. She is seen in a weaker, more submissive light. When the four discover Mr. Tumnus the faun has been arrested and his house ransacked, she remarks, ""I wonder if there's any point in going on [...] I mean, it doesn't seem particularly safe here and it looks as if it won't be much fun either. And it's getting colder every minute, and we've brought nothing to eat. What about just going home?" (Lewis, pg. 59) However, her attitude is arguably the most practical. Four children with no supplies in a strange, snow-laden land? It would be difficult to imagine wanting nothing more than to return home, to the security of the familiar. She also appears to have the motherly role of the group, taking on a stereotypically female occupation. She is the one who suggests they put on the fur coats in the cold. Susan isn't seen as a warrior, but of a protector. While this is a valuable and noble position, one can't help but be somewhat bothered that a woman is given such a role. On the other hand, her younger sister Lucy is determined to continue, as well as Peter, so she appears unadventurous and cowardly in comparison. Susan is seen as a weaker person when the children are attacked by wolves. She had managed to climb up a tree, yet, "Susan had not been able to get higher than the second big branch. One of her legs hung down so that her foot was only an inch or two above the snapping teeth. Peter wondered why she did not get higher or at least take a better grip; then he realized that she was just going to faint and that if she

fainted she would fall off." However, even Peter admitted that he "did not feel very brave, indeed, he felt he was going to be sick." (Lewis, pg. 131) Yet he managed to fight the wolf anyway. When the wolf is killed and Susan gets out of the tree, Lewis goes on to say, "...I won't say there wasn't kissing and crying on both sides. But in Narnia no one thinks any the worse of you for that." (Lewis, pg. 132) The fact that Lewis clarifies that it is acceptable in Narnia to cry signifies that being emotional (and thus, being stereotypically feminine) is unacceptable elsewhere, perhaps in the real world that the children came from.

Mrs. Beaver, wife to the beaver who helps the children, fits right in the female design. While she is a considerably minor character, she is worthy of mention. She is always seen using her sewing machine or preparing dinner with Susan and Lucy. Meanwhile, her husband is catching fish or repairing the dam with Peter and Edmund. When word gets out that Edmund has betrayed them and that the White Witch was on her way, she is nothing but a nuisance. She takes her time packing food and supplies, which angers Mr. Beaver and the children. While she does show a level of cleverness that her husband did not anticipate, her character is still portrayed as silly and bothersome. "'Course we've got a hope. We can't get there *before* her but we can keep under cover and go by ways she won't expect and perhaps we'll get through." (Lewis, pg. 101) She even suggests taking her sewing machine along, despite how cumbersome and impractical it would be. Perhaps her character is for comic relief and to build up excitement. The Witch is on the way, and Mrs. Beaver is stalling. However, making the entire party wait for her comes off as annoying. It appears that her personality is a mockery of a stereotypical woman, who makes things overly complicated and frustrating in a high-stress situation.

Arguably, the most convincing instance of sexism in the novel is the appearance of Father Christmas. The Witch's spell is failing and Christmas has come again at last, and with it the spirit of gift giving. Mrs. Beaver receives a new sewing machine, which is unsurprising considering she spends nearly all her time in the book doing such "womanly" chores. Peter is given a sword and shield, while Susan is given a bow and a horn to call for help. Instead of giving Susan a sword of her own to defend herself, she is dependent on others for rescue. While Father Christmas gives her the bow and quiver of arrows, he makes sure to mention, "You must use the bow only in great need [...] for I do not mean for you to fight in battle." (Lewis, pg. 108) Lucy had been gifted a diamond bottle, filled with "a cordial made of the juice of one of the fire-flowers that grow in the mountains of the sun. If you or any of your friends is hurt, a few drops of this will restore them." Once again, a female is given the position of protector, rather than warrior. In addition to the bottle, he gifts her a small dagger, to which Father Christmas warns, "And the dagger is to defend yourself at great need. For you also are not to be in the battle." Lucy, being the curious girl she is, asks for an explanation, as she considers herself "brave enough." Father Christmas answers, "But battles are ugly when women fight..." which could imply a number of things. (Lewis, pg. 109) Father Christmas could mean that women are not skilled warriors, or that they belong healing and calling for help, hence the gifts he gives Susan and Lucy. This scene makes it very clear what C.S. Lewis believes, for Susan and Lucy stay in their expected roles.

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe also has an outright negative opinion on feminism. The Queen, also known as Jadis or the White Witch, is the only female character with any sort of power and status, yet is evil and gets killed for her crimes. This is a metaphor for

feminists; a woman should not seek power, and if she does she will be punished for it. She is a typical witch, abusing her power and using her magic for personal gain. She has a very important position in Narnia. "You know that every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey and that for every treachery I have a right to a kill... And so, that human creature is mine. His life is forfeit to me. His blood is my property." (Lewis, pg. 142) The White Witch is basically "the Emperor's Hangman," executing all betrayers. This could be another symbol for women in power; if a woman is given a high-ranking position, she will ultimately seek more power for herself and become corrupt, like the Witch. It is also mentioned that the Queen is the daughter of Adam's first wife, Lilith. Lilith, though not mentioned in the Bible, was cast from the Garden of Eden because she refused to submit to Adam. Lilith has been used as a symbol for feminism. C.S. Lewis's opinion is apparent when Mr. and Mrs. Beaver describe Jadis's origin. "'But she's no Daughter of Eve. She comes of your father Adam's [...] first wife, her they called Lilith. And she was one of the Jinn. That's what she comes from on one side. And on the other she comes of the giants. No, no, there isn't a drop of real human blood in the Witch.' 'That's why she's bad all the way through, Mr. Beaver.'" (Lewis, pg. 81) If the Witch is "bad all the way through," then Lewis must disapprove of the story of Lilith.

The Witch shows a deep hatred for all things that threaten her power. Even at the mention of Aslan, she responds, "If either of you mentions that name again, [...] he shall instantly be killed." (Lewis, pg. 122.) Aslan is her superior, though she speaks of him as if he is below her. This is similar to a woman hating men because of her lower social status. The capture and humiliation of Aslan could be compared to a feminist rebellion against her oppressor, in which she gets revenge for his dominion over her. Jadis shaves his mane, a source

of pride, and ties him up until he's helpless. Her followers taunt and demean him. However, though he is muzzled and unable to defend himself, they continue to bind him. "They began to drag the bound and muzzled Lion to the Stone Table, some pulling and some pushing. He was so huge that even when they got him there it took all their efforts to hoist him onto the surface of it. Then there were more tying and tightening of cords. 'The cowards! The cowards!' sobbed Susan. 'Are they *still* afraid of him, even now?'" (Lewis, pg. 154) Even with this dominance over her enemy, the Queen and her followers are still afraid to be near Aslan. This aversion is warranted, according to C.S. Lewis, since Aslan was such an adversary. This could signify that women should have a level of fear against men, and should be hesitant if not completely unwilling to rebel.

Though the book maintains a rather sexist opinion of women, it is imperative to remember the time frame in which the book was published. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* was first published in 1950. At this point in history, women's liberation was still far off, and old ideas of a woman confined to the kitchen and nursery prevailed. A good story attempts to relate to its readers, so creating a world with a society that mimics reality is common. Lewis can't be blamed for writing what was considered the social norm of the time. It wasn't out of a mere hatred or bias against women, it was the typical mindset.

With progression in civilization comes the progression of literature. Modern fantasy writer Terry Goodkind, author of *The Sword of Truth Series*, demonstrates contemporary views. In his first novel, *Wizard's First Rule*, Goodkind's description of the heroine is vastly different than Lewis's characterization of Lucy and Susan. "Richard approached and stopped three strides away so as not to appear a threat. She stood straight and still, her arms at her side. [...] Her

green eyes came unafraid to his. The connection was so intense that it threatened to drain his sense of self. He felt that he had always known her, that she had always been a part of him, that her needs were his needs. She held him with her gaze as surely as a grip of iron would, searching his eyes as if searching his soul, seeking an answer to something. [...] The intensity of her gaze relaxed, loosening its hold on him. In her eyes he saw something that attracted him more than anything else. Intelligence. He saw it flaring there, burning in her, and through it all he felt an overriding sense of her integrity. Richard felt safe." (Goodkind, pg. 8) This woman is Kahlan Amnell, a very powerful figure in her homeland of the Midlands. The passage begins with Richard worrying over the woman's reaction, as if she'd run away in fear. Yet it is Richard who feels dominated by Kahlan's look alone. She is shown in a heroic light. Kahlan is calm and collected, standing with proper posture. It is stereotypical that a woman would feel secure around a man, but Kahlan exudes a power of protection all her own. Goodkinds portrayal of a strong female character is a reflection of the modern day, just as Lewis's.

Evidently, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* has sexist themes regardless of its childlike style. Lucy and Susan, the book's heroines, are given second-tier positions in this world. Peter and Edmund become more powerful and dominating, despite Edmund's treachery to his siblings. The White Witch is the only female with any sort of power and influence, and is killed for overstepping her boundaries. This can be linked with a discouragement of women's rebellion against men. While this novel is not what readers today would consider "politically correct" or "progressive," it is still a bringer of nostalgia for many people. It's created many young booklovers, unlocking countless enchanting worlds to them. Every book is flawed in a way; what's important is what makes them worthwhile.

