

## Issues in Narnia

**Abate, Michelle Ann & Lance Weldy, eds. 2012. *C. S. Lewis: The Chronicles of Narnia*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 210 pp. ISBN 978-0-230-30125-2**

The recently published collection of critical essays in the *New Casebooks* series by Palgrave Macmillan, edited by Michelle Ann Abate and Lance Weldy, focuses on *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis and indicates the importance of combining different theoretical viewpoints when analyzing fiction. The task of revealing and unmasking various elements integrated in the Narnia books has been taken on by eleven authors who have adopted different research methodologies in interpreting the protagonists' adventures in Aslan's homeland.

Often prone to ideological manipulation, children's literature demands detailed and comprehensive research. It has become easier to analyze the subversive relationship between the currents in literary circles of children's literature and the ones outside that circle thanks to modern literary scholarship based on an interdisciplinary approach to literature, and such an approach is offered by the philosophical and theoretical studies collected in Abate and Weldy's book.

The book is divided into four parts: *Text and Contexts*, *Applications and Implications*, *Adaptations and Mediations*, and *Conflicts and Controversy*, comprising either two or three studies each. The book also includes a very useful, well annotated and summarised list of suggestions for further reading and an introduction by Lance Weldy.

Although often categorized as a Christian allegory and high fantasy, Lewis's imaginary anti-world is built to describe other complex levels and meanings as well. The term 'anti-world' was coined by the Croatian scholar Zoran Kravar, who defines secondary worlds of fantasy fiction in the context of anti-modernism in Western culture, resulting from the vitality theory and Christian tradition. In addition to the widely spread Christian allegory theory, the contributors to the Palgrave collection of essays consider new ideological viewpoints and meanings etched into Lewis's series, where *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* receives the greatest attention. Themes and motifs are revealed which are related to nationality, gender, social anthropology, and race, as well as aspects associated with 'modern religions', such as film and video games.

The essay written by Rachel Towns, "'Turkish Delights and Sardines with Tea': Food as a Framework for Exploring Nationalism, Gender and Religion in the *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*", in which she considers the representation of food in the book in question, demonstrates how a single motif can have more than one meaning. Analyzing each detail in the story connected to food, the author develops the idea that food motifs represent an interpretive basis for nationality, gender and religious issues. Even the relationships

between good and evil characters are reflected in and interpreted through their consumption and choice of food. All characters that are good, including those non-human ones, such as Mr. Beaver, Mrs. Beaver and Mr. Tumnus, enjoy traditional British food, while the evil characters, namely Edmund and the White Witch, have an ambivalent attitude towards food or a craving for non-British kinds of food.

According to Towns, their ambivalent attitude towards food and dietary habits reveals the subversive nature of certain characters. Edmund is a case in point. He betrays his brothers and sisters for some Turkish delight, a treat that demonstrates that Edmund connects with the evil characters. The act of his betrayal is manifested through the consumption of a treat that is not British in origin, which, claims Towns, reveals his subversive gender identity. The Turkish delight represents exotic, sweet and romantic food and the craving for it reveals his feminine side. Rejecting what would normally be considered masculine food like meat, he fails to stay true to the masculinity of his own character.

Food consumption is also a key element in forming the characters' national identity. Towns claims that an author creates a form of 'gastro-nationalism' by asserting the origin of food. In Narnia, national identity is connected to the choice of food, and the craving for the unknown and different becomes connected to a shift in a character's moral values, which is also demonstrated through Edmund's character.

Aslan's resurrection in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is generally connected to the story of Jesus Christ, but Melody Green, the author of the essay "Scapegoating and Collective Violence..." connects Aslan's destiny to the story of sacrifice which came from the practice of scapegoating. Green relies on René Girard's insight into scapegoating based on observing endless rituals and social behaviours which serve a community's purpose in terms of violence and control. Seeing the residents of Narnia as a society, Green interprets their behaviour and Aslan's sacrifice through the frame of scapegoating. Noticing that the story of "Deep magic" has characteristics related to Girard's theory, Green explains that Aslan's death as an innocent sacrifice leads to the cognition that violence comes from inside the person rather than from outside influences. Aslan's conscious choice to die is an attempt to stop the aforementioned mechanism and to raise the awareness of the community that being a scapegoat can also be voluntary – someone that intentionally sacrifices himself or herself for the good of others is not just an innocent victim. The presence of the idea of scapegoating in Narnia is extended to the interpretation of the fantasy world as evocative of the social state during WWII. Unmasking the act of conscious sacrifice, Green comes to the conclusion that Lewis's text brings to the fore the collective nature of violence during that time.

Part II comprises papers by Keith Dorwick on "Redeeming education in *The Chronicles of Narnia*", Nanette Norris on "War and liminal space", which focuses on the thematic aspects of trauma and survival in the book of the Narnia series that was written first, and Joseph Michael Sommers on "C. S. Lewis's manifold mythopoeics", which reconsiders eschatological time in the Narnia books.

In a secondary world like Narnia, most things are organized differently compared to the actual primary world – the social order, natural order and the school system (if it exists) are a few structures that come to mind. The school system and education in general as displayed in Narnia are explored by Keith Dorwick. He defines Lewis's attitude as anti-

educational. According to the author, Lewis is an advocate of experimental education based on the process of discovery and development of skills and knowledge. Lewis not only directly criticizes conventional forms of learning, using Aslan as an anti-teacher, but also puts forward his own idea of education. As Dorwick puts it, Lewis's views on education are linked to morality; real learning should be painful so we can feel remorse and make correct moral decisions. Real world schools are different in that they do not offer such a possibility, and, besides, they often smother imagination and the children's spirit.

In her chapter, Norris describes Narnia as a 'healing' world for victims of trauma and betrayal – a place of memory for war survivors whose reality was destroyed by the war and for whom a new border area was built that does not belong anywhere. According to the author, the central issue of Lewis's narrative is the story of trauma framed within two categories – loss and betrayal. Pursuing Lewis's curiosity about how it is possible for children to be able to overcome the horrors of the outside world, Norris defines the aim or goal of *The Chronicles of Narnia* as offering a solution to the problem of connecting with the real world precisely through discussing traumatic experiences.

The horrors of the outside world in Lewis's work found by Norris are related to WWII, which is often the case in interpretations of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Sommers similarly sees the imaginary world of Narnia as a child's escape from the reality of events following WWII. Scrutinizing Narnia through a spatial-temporal complex (*chronotope*), Sommers illustrates the world with an extra dimension absent from the horrors of children's reality. He uses Robert Graves's term "poetic myth" to explain the world Lewis created based on Celtic, Greek and Roman cosmology on the one hand, and Gnostic and Christian mythology on the other. Assuming that Aslan's death is 'greater' than deaths in WWII, Lewis forms a linear mythic timeline, in which Narnia is not only an allegory of Christianity, but also a world based on values different from ours. Sommers points out that Lewis's imaginary world is an alternative to our world, a secondary world in Tolkien's terms – fantastic and incompatible with our world, a world whose fictionality is based on the protorealistic tradition.

The papers in the third part of the book discuss the relationship between new media and literature as a traditional form of communication. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, new media are becoming dominant in the shaping of children's imagery and also of their experiences of literature, by exposing children to the adaptations of literary works before they read the originals. For many classical works, including *The Chronicles of Narnia*, it is not possible to resist this tendency.

Rhonda Brock-Servais and Matthew B. Prickett focus on film and early-reader adaptations of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, while Aaron Clayton writes about a video game based on the same book. The authors arrive at similar conclusions regarding the outcomes of using new media to create new narratives. In an attempt to get closer to the modern child, these adaptations produce new meanings and interpretations, which cannot be found in Lewis's original work. Although the new media retellings are connected to the source text at a certain level, many factors outside the literary context affect their credibility, and often the original story is changed.

In the last part of the book, Gili Bar-Hillel compares *The Chronicles of Narnia* to Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, Jennifer Taylor focuses on the antiracism of the series,

and Susana Rodriguez explores what she names “the gender-paradox” in those books.

The criticism that *The Chronicles of Narnia* are riddled with violence, misogyny and racism served Gill Bar-Hillel as a starting point in examining the similarities between *The Chronicles of Narnia* and Pullman’s trilogy, as well as the possible impact Lewis’s work had on Pullman’s opus. Noticing a whole new line of similarities, Bar-Hillel arrived at the conclusion that these authors concentrate on the same issue, i.e. what happens to our spirit when we die, only they observe it from slightly different angles.

Almost in response to Bar-Hillel’s study, Taylor sets a methodological frame around the racist controversy in Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Copious interpretations point out that Lewis wrote his works at a time when most British colonies were becoming independent. *The Chronicles* were interpreted as Lewis’s adherence to an attitude of the superiority of one race over others and a nostalgic longing for the olden times. Taylor denies these allegations, exposing the intertwining of good and evil in *The Chronicles*. This is especially evident in the transition episode to new Narnia, where most Narnians end up in the shadow. The important thing to Lewis is not race, but the actual amount of love one has for Aslan. Taylor concludes that Lewis deliberately used racist stereotypes to criticize institutions and foundations in which racism came to life, including the criticism of the cultural effects of racism and colonial ideology.

Special attention is given to the gender ideology and feminist interpretations of Narnia. A few essays (those by Rachel Towns, Nanette Norris and R. Brock-Servais and Matthew B. Prickett) emphasize the subject of gender in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The topic is systematically elaborated in the last essay in the book, written by Susan Rodriguez, mainly from the feminist standpoint. As she notices, although most female characters are indeed present during the adventures, they are represented as worldly subjects. Once they pass to Narnia, boys take the lead for the rest of the adventure, thus making the world of Narnia a boy’s world. The author not only describes the subject of gender discrimination in the design of Narnia, but she especially brings our attention to the gender injustice done to Susan. In the last book, everyone who has been present during the adventures reunites, except Susan. Her absence is explained by her unnatural interest for superficial things like make-up and clothes. Rodriguez explains that Susan is excluded from the last book because of her decision to become a grown woman and because of her need to fully establish her sexual identity. Thus, her presence in new Narnia becomes inappropriate, as her adulthood and adult craving carry the possibility of her becoming a witch. Although this is an interesting critique of Lewis’s world, it is also paradoxical because feminist theory often focuses on criticizing superficial views of the female gender. Although Lewis did not form complex female characters, but rather passive ones, Susan’s absence from Narnia does not seem connected to gender issues, but rather to Lewis’s opinion that we should strive for depth in things so we could come closer to Aslan and see as real that which is invisible to rational thought.

In an effort to make the book interesting to a wider academic community, the authors and the editors develop interdisciplinary approaches to the Narnia book, bearing in mind various complex implications of children’s literature. As interpretations of Lewis’s work deepen, ever newer possibilities are created concerning the interpretations not only of The

Chronicles of Narnia, but also of children's literature in general. This edition can be seen as useful reading for a student interested in new approaches in the research of children's literature, also in the context of Croatian children's literature research. Moreover, this book opens new perspectives on the work of C. S. Lewis, which may encourage further scholarly discussion of his series as one of the most popular stories of fantasy fiction for children worldwide.

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