

# 06

---

Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek

# **Valentina Markasović**

***The Lion, the Witch, and the  
Wardrobe and The Book of Lost  
Things: Escape into Fantasy as a  
Way of Dealing with War***

# ***The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and *The Book of Lost Things*: Escape into Fantasy as a Way of Dealing with War**

Many children's fantasy novels include scenes in which the protagonists leave the safety of their homes and cross over into unknown fantasy worlds. It could be argued that the whole premise is based on the phenomenon of escapism. In particular, this paper will explore the way in which the war circumstances of the real-world fuel the need of the child protagonists to seek out a new and better world. This will be done through a comparative analysis of two novels that take place in England during the Second World War, and whose protagonists temporarily leave their homes in favour of the novels' respective fantasy worlds: *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis and *The Book of Lost Things* by John Connolly. The comparison will be explicated by following the proposed stages of the plots' development: the introduction and contextualisation of the war circumstances; going over into the fantasy world; the adventure in the fantasy world and how it mirrors the real situation. The final stage encompasses the return to the ordinary world and the exploration of how the protagonists' worldview has changed.

Relevant literary sources will be consulted to support the arguments, and historical sources will be utilised for the contextualisation of the plot and an interdisciplinary overview of the topic.

## KEYWORDS

**fantasy, war, escapism, Lewis, Narnia, Connolly**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Still one of the most widely read children's novels, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* was written by Clive Staples Lewis in 1950, during the aftermath of the Second World War, the consequences of which were still resonating throughout the world. It follows four child protagonists – the Pevensie children: Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy – who, with the help of the seemingly omnipotent Lion, Aslan, face off against the ultimate Evil, the White Witch, who oppresses the good people (and animals) of Narnia.

More than half a century later, in 2006, Irish-born John Connolly wrote *The Book of Lost Things*. This standalone novel is set in 1939 England and features a twelve-year-old protagonist David, who, much like the Pevensie siblings, crosses over into a new, fantastic world and is more or less thrust into an adventure. This paper will juxtapose these two novels and explore how children's novels set in wartime depict the real-life events and allow their main protagonists to indulge in escapism.

Popular fiction, under which the genre of fantasy falls, is often described as being a sort of escapist literature – it provides the audience with a reading time that is free from real-life worries. In a way, such literature is the means of temporary relief from worldly struggles. Escapism, by the definition found in Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), is “a way of avoiding an unpleasant or boring life, especially by thinking, reading, etc. about more exciting but impossible activities”. But luxuriating in fantasy does not have to be restricted only to the readers – the characters themselves can be subjected to the need of escaping the grave circumstances of their own, primary worlds; this is why they look for other, secondary worlds.

## 2. ESTABLISHING THE WAR CIRCUMSTANCES

The dissatisfaction with the original, 'real' world can be observed in both novels this paper deals with. The setting of the novels points the reader to imagine the characters in the context of the Second World War. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the introduction of wartime circumstances is relatively brief: “This story is about something that happened to them (the Pevensies) when they were sent away from London during the war because of the air-raids. They were sent to the house of an old Professor who lived in the heart of the country, ten miles from the nearest railway station and two miles from the nearest post office” (Lewis 2006, 3). For the context of the story, and this paper, it is useful for the reader to know that the Battle of Britain went on from 10 July to 31 October 1940, but the attacks continued as part of the Blitz until 1941;

"from 7 September to 13 November, London was bombed almost every day and every night" (Bourke 2001, 36). Lewis never unequivocally states in what year his novel takes place, but the above description implies the mentioned period from 1940 to 1941.

On the other hand, Connolly develops his setting in greater detail. Early on, the author presents the scenes such as David's father reading newspaper articles about Hitler's armies' movements across Europe ("Of All That Was Found and All That Was Lost"), Spitfires and Hurricanes flying to-and-fro ("Of Jonathan Tulvey and Billy Golding, and Men Who Dwell by Railway Tracks"), the commotions on the streets of London: "There were more policemen on the streets than before, and men in uniform were everywhere. Sandbags were piled against windows, and great lengths of barbed wire lay coiled around like vicious springs" ("Of the New House, the New Child, and the New King"), and so on. In this novel, too, the topic of evacuation is brought up. Historically, the evacuees were mostly transported from what is known as Evacuation Areas (London, outer metropolitan areas, the Medway towns, the cities in the Midlands, Merseyside, Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, the North East, and Scotland) into the Reception Areas (areas in the South, the South West, and the Midlands), main destination being the private houses of denizens (Welshman 2010, 24). This is why the Pevensies are welcomed to a house of a Professor who is a complete stranger to them. Although David himself is not evacuated, he does reflect on the topic: "Their [the evacuees'] absence made the city appear emptier and increased the sense of nervous expectancy that seemed to govern the lives of all who remained" (Connolly 2006, "Of the New House, the New Child, and the New King"). Instead of evacuating, David and his family – his father, stepmother, and newly born younger half-brother – move to a house on an unspecified location, some fifty miles away from the capital. By exposing and detailing the circumstances of living in wartime, the authors hint at (Lewis) and build up (Connolly) the anxious atmosphere that the protagonists and the readers want to escape.

### 3. CROSSING OVER

The next stage in plot development that connects the novels of Lewis and Connolly is the crossing over to a secondary, fantastic world. Already in the first chapter of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Lucy discovers that an old abandoned wardrobe is actually a pathway to a land called Narnia. It takes David of *The Book of Lost Things* six chapters to cross over to a kingdom of twisted fairy tales. The circumstances of his crossing over are particularly interesting. When a German bomber is falling from the skies, David, in an attempt to save himself, scurries away deeper into the hole in the sunken garden of their countryside house:

[The airplane] grew larger and larger, until at last it seemed to fill the sky, dwarfing their house, lighting up the night with red and orange fire. It was heading straight for the sunken garden, flames licking at the German cross on its fuselage, as though something in the heavens above was determined to stop David from moving between realms. The choice had been made for him. David could not hesitate. He forced himself through the gap in the wall and into the darkness just as the world that he had left behind became an inferno. (Connolly 2006, "Of the War, and the Way Between Worlds")

It is obvious from the passage that David's escape from this world was directly launched by the wartime circumstances. On the other hand, the link between the Second World War and the Pevensies' visit to Narnia is not explicitly established.

#### 4. INSIDE THE FANTASY

Once the protagonists cross over into the secondary world, the adventure can start in full. Following the escapist line of argumentation, it can be said that the protagonists, while inside the fantasy, seek refuge from the war and the world as they know it. However, the fantasy worlds they enter are not idyllic. The protagonists do not forget where they come from and the similarities between reality and fantasy are therefore to be found in abundance. This paper concentrates on two parameters of comparison – the food and the antagonists.

##### 4. 1. MEAT AND MEAD

As one of the pillars of comfortable everyday life, food is of immense significance to the protagonists. It is important to note that both Lucy's and Edmund's first acquaintances with Narnia are connected to food. The first person Lucy meets in Narnia is Mister Tumnus, who invites Lucy to have tea with him. The first of Lewis's rich descriptions of food throughout *The Chronicles of Narnia* is as follows: "And really it was a wonderful tea. There was a nice brown egg, lightly boiled, for each of them, and then sardines on toast, and then buttered toast, and then toast with honey, and then a sugar-topped cake" (Lewis 2006, 13). When it is Edmund's turn to step into the snowy wonderland that is Narnia, he is given a rather cold welcome by the White Witch Jadis, until she decides to use her charms and magic to coax him into giving her the information she needs. Then she provides him with a hot drink, "very sweet and foamy and creamy" (Lewis 2006, 27) and several pounds of Turkish delight that is "sweet and light to the very center" (Lewis 2006, 28). No matter how contrasted they themselves are in the

context of character development of the two younger Pevensies, these two instances share a common characteristic: they are both examples of indulging in food – something that was possible in fantasy, but not in the real England of that time. Even the fact that Lucy and Mr. Tumnus get to eat an egg each is immoderate, as England's rationing allowed for only one egg a week (Daniel 2006). This extravagance is continued throughout the book, most notably during the scene in which the Pevensies share a meal with Mr. and Mrs. Beaver: "There was a jug of creamy milk for the children (Mr. Beaver stuck to beer) and a great big lump of deep yellow butter in the middle of the table *from which everyone took as much as he wanted to go with his potatoes*" (Lewis 2006, 55, emphasis mine). Again, the quote highlights the craving for foods that were being rationed in the real world of wartime England. Another scene that supports the argument that the imaginary characters get to enjoy what the contemporary Britons were lacking is the scene in which the White Witch and Edmund come across a group of Narnia animals who are clearly having a Christmas dinner party. The star of the meal is "a plum pudding" (Lewis 2006, 82). It is well known that due to rationing, dried fruit and other proper pudding ingredients were almost impossible to acquire – people used carrots, potatoes, beetroot, parsnip, or turnips as substitutes for the rare ingredients (Burns 2011) and used them to make "valiant but sad fake puddings" (Duane 2010, 77). As part of war tactics, Germans attacked the merchant ships that were bringing food to England (they imported large amounts of food from the Continent); consequentially, to limit the amount of food available, the British government distributed ration books with coupons that could be used each week and had to be turned in after they being used. The coupons did allow for the basic protein, carbohydrate, and vitamin intake (Duane 2010), but extravagant foods such as Edmund's favourite Turkish delight would be inconceivable.

In a crisp contrast to the Narnia abundance, David is allowed a severely lower amount of food, arranged into acutely less elaborate dishes. The rationing is outright mentioned while David is still at home, in England: "Her [Rose's, his stepmother's] attempts to cook meals that he liked for dinner, despite the pressures of rationing, irritated him" (Connolly 2006, "Of Jonathan Tulvey and Billy Golding, and Men Who Dwell by Railway Tracks"). Already David recognizes that one should not indulge when there is not enough food to go around. This mentality translates into the secondary world as well. When he enters the strange land, David is given shelter by the Woodsman, who becomes one of his mentors (until he is replaced by Roland, a knight), and during their first evening together they eat a simple meal of bread and cheese (Connolly 2006, "Of the Loups and How They Came into Being"). In the fantasy world, David does not escape the feeling of hunger: "He had eaten with the dwarfs that morning, but now his stomach was rumbling and aching. There was still food in his pack, and the dwarfs

had added to his supplies a little by giving him some pieces of dried fruit, but he had no idea how far he might have to travel before he reached the castle of the king" (Connolly 2006, "Of the Deer-Girl"). The description of his provisions is evocative of real-world rations that were being distributed by the government. David exhibits rational thinking by not eating all he has at once, but later is not able to restrain himself from succumbing to the temptation of an apple tree (despite having been warned by his dwarf companions to stay on the path): "It had been weeks since he'd eaten an apple, not since a local farmer had quietly slipped Rose a couple 'for the little 'uns.' Those apples had been small and sour, but these were wonderful. The juice trickled down his chin, and the flesh was firm in his mouth" (Connolly 2006, "Of the Deer-Girl"). Even though the apples fade in comparison to the lavish Narnian foods, the fact that David desires and enjoys them so much points to the grave fact that even such common foods were unavailable to the public during the rationing period, which, to a greater or lesser extent, lasted until 1954 (Duane 2010). A peculiar scene including a description of a would-be feast is more of a reproach than an opportunity to indulge: when David enters an enchanted fortress to try to save Roland, he stumbles upon a room with a table laden with food:

Candles were lit along its length, and their light shone upon a great feast: there were roast turkeys and geese and ducks, and a huge pig with an apple in its mouth as the centerpiece. There were platters of fish and cold meats, and vegetables steamed in big pots. It all smelled so wonderful that David was drawn into the room, unable to resist the urgings of his growling stomach. (Connolly 2006, "Of the Enchantress and What Became of Raphael and Roland")

Unfortunately for David's stomach, he discovers carcasses of many insects that have helped themselves to the meal. Realising that all the fare on the table is poisoned, David turns away in disgust. This digression may serve as a reminder of what David already knows – that war is no time to indulge.

#### 4. 2. THE WICKED WITCH & CO

Another point of comparison may be the antagonists of the novels: the White Witch and the Crooked Man in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and *The Book of Lost Things*, respectively. The White Witch, also known as Queen Jadis, is a usurper on the Narnian throne, who has turned Narnia into the snowy land that the Pevensies are introduced to. Along with the common interpretations of her representing the forces of Hell, opposed to Aslan's Heaven, she may be put into the context of World War Two and likened to England's greatest enemy, the leader of

the Nazis. Hence, she becomes “the local Hitler (...) whence all evil flows” (Edwards 2009, 155). The extent of her power is shown through the fear that she induces in her own subjects. She scares the denizens of Narnia into turning over anyone suspicious, anyone who may work to overthrow her regime. This is represented in the example of Mr. Tumnus, whose original intentions are to betray Lucy to the White Witch:

I'm a kidnapper for her, that's what I am. Look at me, Daughter of Eve. Would you believe that I'm the sort of Faun to meet a poor innocent child in the wood, one that had never done me any harm, and pretend to be friendly with it, and invite it home to my cave, all for the sake of lulling it asleep and then handing it over to the White Witch? (Lewis 2006, 16)

A pivotal pillar of the White Witch's power is her Secret Police. At its head is Maugrim, a grey wolf, who does her bidding: “‘Take with you the swiftest of your wolves and go at once to the house of the Beavers,’ said the Witch, ‘and kill whatever you find there. If they are already gone, then make all speed to the Stone Table, but do not be seen’” (Lewis 2006, 81). It is Maugrim and the rest of the wolf Secret Police who efficiently and invisibly hunt down Mr. Tumnus (Lewis 2006) and other Jadis' enemies (except, of course, the Pevensies and the Beavers, who manage to escape their radar). The Secret Police is suggestive of its real-life counterpart, the Geheime Staatspolizei, abbreviated to Gestapo, which consisted of various regional posts, until the process of regional integration was finalized in 1936 and the Gestapo at the whole Reich level was constituted (Browder 1996).

Among other minions of the White Witch are all the creatures conventionally classified as evil in fantasy fiction. Lucy and Susan see them when the White Witch kills Aslan in a night ritual: “Cruels and Hags and Incubuses, Wraiths, Horrors, Efreets, Sprites, Orknies, Wooses, and Ettins. In fact here were all those who were on the Witch's side and whom the Wolf had summoned at her command” (Lewis 2006, 110). In the culmination of the novel, during the battle of the forces of Good and Evil, the creatures again make an appearance: “in the daylight, they looked even stranger and more evil and more deformed. There also seemed to be far more of them” (Lewis 2006, 129). No description of the Witch's subordinates points to them having any possible redeeming characteristic; if anything, closer inspection (during daylight, as opposed to the first impression under the cover of night) casts them in an even more negative light. The enemy, as represented in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, is as Evil as Aslan's forces are Good.

The situation in the world of *The Book of Lost Things* is far more complex. Along with the main Evil being, the Crooked Man, a prominent figure of the evil forces is Leroi, a Loup (a hybrid of man and wolf, or rather,



a wolf gradually evolving into a man). Leroi is the leader of an army which encompasses both Loups and regular wolves. But unlike Maugrim's undying loyalty to the White Witch, the Crooked Man and Leroi, in their pursuit of David, are reluctant allies at best. With the Evil being dispersed into different characters and not having it centred into one figure that needs to be defeated, this novel steps away from the classic Great Evil trope present in Narnia. What is more, David allows himself to question what is good and what is bad; he sees that not everything is black and white and that he may even profit from siding with the Crooked Man, whom he has been warned against: "He [the Crooked Man] couldn't be trusted (...). Yet David also knew that much of what he was saying was true: the wolves were coming, and they would not stop until they found David" (Connolly 2006, "Of the Crooked Man and the Sowing of Doubt"). Not only does David make his decisions based on logic (unlike the Pevensies who simply take it for granted that the White Witch is evil because a Faun and a beaver told them so), but he also sees past the appearance of his enemies:

...without the Loups the wolf packs would scatter, fighting and scavenging their way back to their own territories, but for now the Loups had corrupted the natures of the wolves, just as their own natures had been corrupted. They believed themselves to be greater and more advanced than their brothers and sisters who walked on four legs, but in reality they were much worse. They were impure, mutations that were neither human nor animal. (Connolly 2006, "Of the Crooked Man's Act of Betrayal")

As shown, David does not necessarily blame all the wolves for following the Loups' orders. He is able to differentiate between those with malicious intentions – the Loups, with their twisted ideology of becoming the ruling race and thinking themselves superior to everyone else – and those who are doing what they have been told to do, perhaps only after having been coerced into joining the Loups' ranks. David's mature way of thinking is hence displayed in him being aware that the wolves, the subordinates, are not inherently evil. In a stark contrast to the Narnia's inflexibly imputed characterisation, David does not place collective blame on the opponent army. David's level-headed realisations come as no surprise, due to David's musings earlier in the novel, when he tries to imagine himself in the military forces: "David tried to imagine himself in a bomber – a British one, perhaps a Wellington or a Whitley – flying over a German city, bombs at the ready. Would he be able to release the load? It was a war after all" (Connolly 2006, "Of the New House, the New Child, and the New King"). Unlike the Pevensie children, David is conscious of the fact that any conflict, especially a large-scale one, is more layered than a simple division between Good and Evil. However, the conflicts and battles in both novels represent the fantasy as an escape inasmuch as granting the protagonists an ability they do not

possess in the actual world – affecting the course of war. While powerless to confront the real enemies, they help bring about the desired outcome in the fantasy land, by putting an end to the war and emerging victorious.

## 5. THE RETURN

The final stage of the two novels could be dubbed the return to the real world. This phase takes place after the defeat of the threat in the fantasy world. In a way, the return marks the beginning of a new quest – the trials in the imaginary world prepared the protagonists for confronting the struggles of the real world. This is why the Pevensies, who have all but forgotten their birthplace after spending many prosperous years as the Narnian royalty, see the return to England as a new adventure: “Then in the name of Aslan,’ said Queen Susan, ‘if ye will all have it so, let us go on and take the adventure that shall fall to us” (Lewis 2006, 137). In a similar notion, David, whose aim throughout the book is to return home, is reluctant to leave the fantasy once he has finally reached his goal: “Now that it is time to leave, I’m not sure I want to go,’ said David” (Connolly 2006, “Of Rose”). Now that the antagonists are defeated, the parallels between the fantasy and the reality diverge: the fantasy land is at peace, whereas war still rages in the real world, making the latter less attractive to return to. Nevertheless, the protagonists of both novels brave the new adventure. The adventures of the everyday may not be as thrilling to the Pevensies as the fantastical endeavours and the reader does not get a glimpse into how the children go about their daily evacuee life for the rest of their stay in the countryside. But if the novel’s last sentences are to go by – “And that is the very end of the adventure of the wardrobe. But if the Professor was right it was only the beginning of the adventures of Narnia” (Lewis 2006, 138-139) – it could mean that the Pevensies need still more escaping; whether from war, boredom, or tragedy. The need for escape and further development causes them to return to the fantasy land in several other books from *The Chronicles of Narnia* (*Prince Caspian*, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, *The Last Battle*). On the other hand, Connolly’s novel is, as already mentioned, a standalone, which necessitates the explication of David’s character development and him reaching a closure. He is described as having become “both quieter and more thoughtful of others; more affectionate toward Rose, and more understanding of her own difficulties in trying to find a place for herself in the lives of these two men, David and his father; more responsive to sudden noises and potential dangers” (Connolly 2006, “Of All That Was Lost and All That Was Found”). David does not require any additional escapism, as his stay in the fantasy land has taught him valuable life lessons and offered him a short-term getaway from his own world.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The comparison of two children's fantasy novels that are both set in the United Kingdom during the Second World War, but set apart by their publishing date, is fruitful in concluding how the war, and the dealing with it, is represented in them. Perhaps Lewis did not want to burden his young readers with more outright mentions of the real war that was still fresh in the collective memory. Narnia is a colourful world that allows the protagonists' indulgence unthinkable in their actual world. The influence of wartime, and Britain's involvement in the conflict, is obvious, but Narnia is the be all and end all to the Pevensies: "Children from this world are drawn into it [Narnia], and do things for it, but there is scarcely a glance back at life in our world" (Manlove 2003, 83). Narnia is a true escape from their real-world troubles and in this, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* does comfort to Manlove's (2003, 40) description of children's fantasy of mid-twentieth century: "less a place for learning or growing than a sort of prolonged secondary world where the imagination can feel at home". From Lewis' writing the sequels, it can be inferred that the Pevensies still have some growing-up to do and that they are not ready to face the world as it is. Due to writing his novels promptly after the Second World War, in the time when the society was still deeply immersed into the conflict and its consequences, Lewis allowed his characters to enjoy their stay in the fantasy without burdening them with complex questions of morality and shades of evil, giving them feasts and fame instead.

On the other hand, Connolly is writing from a temporally removed perspective and to generations of audience who are not emotionally involved in the issues of World War Two. It could be argued this is one of the reasons, if not the most important one, why David is far more rational in her perception of war, enemies, and the world in general. Contrary to the Pevensies, who never refer to their world of origin in any significant quantity, David is unequivocal about knowing his world is "a place of pain and suffering and grief" (Connolly 2006, "Of the Battle, and the Fate of Those Who Would Be King"). The real situation in the novel has been established in great detail, with descriptions of the real war's effect on David. The war circumstances are, like in Narnia, translated into David's fantasy land, but due to David being more aware of the real troubles, his world is much bleaker in comparison. Despite the graver tone of Connolly's book, it can be argued that its protagonist profits more from his fantasy escape than the Pevensies profit from their dwelling in Narnia. He escapes, but he also learns and gains a better understanding of life. The Pevensies embark on more journeys to Narnia, which hints at their still-present need to escape.

## REFERENCE LIST

Bourke, Joanna. 2001. *The Second World War: A People's History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Browder, George C. 1996. *Hitler's Enforcers: The Gestapo and the SS Security Service in the Nazi Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Burns, Judith. 2011. "Carrots in the Christmas pud: How wartime cooks made do." BBC News. <http://www.bbc.com/news/education-16246331>. Accessed August 25 2018.

Cambridge Dictionary. n.d. "Escapism." <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/escapism>. Accessed April 27 2018.

Connolly, John. 2006. *The Book of Lost Things*. New York: Atria Books.

Daniel, Carolyn. 2006. *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children's Literature*. New York: Routledge.

Duane, Diane. 2010. "Eating in Narnia: Or, Don't Bother Bringing the Sandwiches." In *Through the Wardrobe: Your Favourite Authors on C.S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia*, edited by Herbie Brennan, 73-87. Dallas: SmartPop.

Edwards, Owen Dudley. 2009. *British Children's Fiction in the Second World War*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Lewis, Clive Staples. 2006. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Manlove, Colin. 2003. *From Alice to Harry Potter: Children's Fantasy in England*. Christchurch: Cybereditions.

Welshman, John. 2010. *Churchill's Children: The Evacuee Experience in Wartime Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.