

Good and terrible: The God of Narnia

by [Ralph C. Wood](#) in the [December 27, 2005](#) issue

The seven books of C. S. Lewis's Narnia Chronicle, which sell 6 million copies annually, are being filmed by Walden Media, a subsidiary of Walt Disney Pictures. Disney has spent \$150 million (plus millions more for advertising) on the first episode, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the much-beloved story of the four Pevensie siblings, who are sent out of London during the Blitz to live with a Lewis-resembling professor. Exploring his huge house, they discover that the back of a wardrobe opens into a mystical realm called Narnia, where they encounter all sorts of strange creatures, good and evil, principally an enslaving White Witch and a redeeming Christlike lion named Aslan. The annual cinematic installments of the Narnia Chronicle are likely to ensure its enduring appeal.

Yet the character of this appeal remains uncertain. The advertisements for *The Lion* have focused on the fray at the end. The sight of Aslan and his army slaying hordes of horrible creatures will perhaps make viewers shiver with delight at seeing wickedness spectacularly defeated. A subtler form of wickedness will ensue, however, if this movie—with its obvious triumph of good over evil—is turned into the latest weapon for waging the culture wars.

Lewis abominated religious triumphalism. In *The Four Loves*, for instance, he laments the crimes committed by Christians, summoning us to make “full confession . . . of Christendom's specific contribution to the sum of human cruelty and treachery. Large areas of ‘the World’ will not hear us till we have publicly disowned much of our past. Why should they? We have shouted the name of Christ and enacted the service of Moloch.” Lewis declined Winston Churchill's offer, in 1951, to make him a commander of the British Empire. He feared that such a signal honor bestowed by a Conservative government would confirm the knavish estimate of his work as “covert anti-Leftist propaganda.”

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe offers a radical alternative to all kinds of complacency, whether moral or religious. The battle scene that looms so long and large in the movie lasts but briefly in the book; only two paragraphs are devoted to

it. The heart of the story lies, instead, in Susan's early query of Mr. Beaver whether Aslan is a *safe* lion.

"Course he isn't safe," replies Mr. Beaver. "But he's good." Peter responds appropriately to this news that Aslan is not a nice pet who will coddle them with purring comfort, keeping them out of harm's way: "I'm longing to see [Aslan]," said Peter, "even if I do feel frightened when it comes to the point." For C. S. Lewis as for Rudolf Otto, there is no approaching the Holy except as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

Having learned that Aslan is simultaneously a frightening and benevolent lion, the four children of Narnia are struck silent when they first behold him. It's not that they are horrified so much as that they are humbled by the opposing qualities that Aslan unites. "People who have never been in Narnia," Lewis's narrator declares, "sometimes think that a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time." Far from being alien to his goodness, Aslan's terror is the highest expression of his love. "God is the only comfort," Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*; "He is also the supreme terror: the thing we most need and the thing we most hide from. He is our only possible ally, and we have made ourselves his enemies."

Lewis liked to quote Jeremy Taylor, a 17th-century Anglican divine, on this deepest of Christian paradoxes: "God threatens terrible things," declared Taylor, "if we will not be happy." To be happy is not to wear a blinding smile, to be materially gratified, to be assured that everything will turn out well. Happiness, as the four Pevensie children learn, lies in surrendering oneself to the good and thus to Aslan.

Lucy is outward-turning and other-regarding from the start. She seems to have been schooled in the antique virtues that Lewis extols, in *The Screwtape Letters*, as properly Puritan: the abjuring of worldly vanities, the cultivation of true friendships, the wise use of time, the practice of moderation, the habit of modesty. The happy life is the virtuous life—an outward, visible and communal existence of rightly ordered loves.

As one whose loves are thus ordered—seeking not to seize but to surrender self-aggrandizing power—Lucy can credit the existence of other worlds. She can believe and participate in the enchanted realm of Narnia. Lewis regards other worlds as akin to other people: we enter their mystery by the act of self-giving trust and charity. Lucy can discern the goodness latent in the sad faun named Mr. Tumnus. She

comforts and encourages him, even after learning that the Witch has sent him to capture and enslave children such as herself.

That Lucy's brother Edmund at first denies the reality of Narnia, even after entering it, comes as no surprise. He's peevish and mean-spirited, always sneering and jeering. He's turned in on himself as a sour little solitaire. Hence his susceptibility to the Witch's snares.

As a thoroughgoing Augustinian, Lewis understands that evil always battens on the good, living parasitically off its host, twisting and distorting the good things of the good creation. All loves not ordered to the love of God, therefore, are inevitably corrupting. The Witch tempts Edmund with Turkish Delight, a luscious dessert that she offers him not once but repeatedly. Edmund comes to desire nothing else. The problem lies not with such pleasures as Turkish Delight; rightly moderated, such pleasures can deliver us from suffocating self-interest into momentary happiness. Good things become evil things only when we make them absolutely good. For a child such as Edmund, the false absolute is perhaps something as innocent as a tasty sweet. For adults, it is more likely to be praiseworthy but finite goods such as family values, racial justice and economic democracy.

It's noteworthy that Edmund is not saved without the work of his own will. Though almost entirely trapped in the Witch's delusions, Edmund is still appalled when he beholds the creatures whom she has calcified: the wolves and foxes and bears, the centaurs and dragons and lions, all of them seemingly frozen forever. For the first time, Edmund feels "sorry for someone besides himself. It seemed so pitiful to think of those little stone figures sitting there all the silent days and all the dark nights, year after year, till the moss grew on them and at last even their faces crumbled away." Such is the power of evil. It congeals and freezes. Were the world not warmed by the transcendent Love embodied in Aslan, we would become spiritually gelid and morally sterile.

The ice-veined moralist in the novel is the White Witch. She regards herself as the stern executrix of the law, punishing those who like Edmund have disobeyed it. "For every treachery I have a right to kill." The Witch speaks at least partial truth, since evil must indeed be requited. Yet the Witch wrongly estimates the nature and purpose of the Lawgiver, for she regards the Lord of the universe as a Moloch gorged on the blood exacted by his righteousness. When Aslan volunteers to die in Edmund's stead, therefore, she thinks that this monstrous deity will be appeased.

And assuming that Aslan will remain dead, she believes that Narnia will belong to her forever.

The Witch cannot fathom the God who is good and terrible at the same time: the Holy One who, fiercely insistent that his people be happy, is willing to die and to conquer death in their behalf. Such fearful Love both requires and enables their transformation. Edmund, for example, is restored to the dignity befitting a servant of the Lion, as he puts himself at radical risk during the final battle. Like the other children, he need no longer fear the roar of Aslan's wrath, so long as he and his siblings are happily remade into the Lion's likeness.

If the Disney version of the Narnia stories features such radical conversions of hearts and wills—rather than easy victories of good over evil—then we shall have cause to be thankful indeed.