

Book Summary



C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950) begins when four siblings—Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy—are sent from wartime London to the countryside. Lucy discovers a wardrobe that opens into Narnia, a land trapped in eternal winter by the White Witch. The children become entwined in a struggle between her tyranny and the return of Aslan, the great lion and true king. Betrayal, forgiveness, and sacrifice shape the story, as Edmund falls into the Witch's grasp but is redeemed through Aslan's self-offering and resurrection. With Aslan's victory, spring returns, and the children are crowned kings and queens of Narnia. Years later they stumble back through the wardrobe, children once more, carrying only the memory of their reign.

“Keep your eyes on it and feel for your hatchet”: Imperialist Messaging in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* By Katarina Dulude

This paper argues for a reexamination of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* as a pro-imperialist text, an aspect that often gets overlooked but is deeply connected to the story's heavy presence of Christian themes. Through its hierarchical worldview, orientalist imagery, racialized othering, and the Pevensie children's role as imperial agents, the novel reinforces colonization ideologies. Drawing on scholars such as Clare Bradford, Rachel Towns, and Kath Firm, the analysis explores how Lewis's portrayal of “good” Britishness and “evil” foreignness reflects imperialist philosophies. By framing conquest and rule in Narnia as noble and redemptive, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* echoes and perpetuates the colonial mindset of its cultural moment.

Though in his letters C.S. Lewis denied that he wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia* as a Christian allegory, instead likening them to a “let us suppose” story, answering the imagined question: “What might Christ become like, if there really were a world like Narnia and he chose to be incarnate and die and rise again in that world as he actually has done in ours?” (Lewis and Hooper 475), allegorical or not, the texts were

heavily influenced by Christianity. Western imperialism and Christianity have long been intertwined, from the original colonization of the Americas being given support by two papal bulls to the centuries-old missionary presence in Africa and Asia that persists to the present day. Thus, the themes of imperialism in Lewis's novel are not far behind those of Christianity. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* functions

as a pro-imperialist text through its emphasis on hierarchies, textual orientalism and nationalism, othering of non-English human-resembling characters, and through the roles played by the Pevensie children—white saviors and scouts for an empire—within the narrative.

Clare Bradford asserts, “To read children’s books of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is to read texts produced within a pattern of imperial culture” (196). Though the British Empire’s territory dominance began to recede from its peak in 1947 (only 3 years before C.S. Lewis published *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, though also years after he is believed to have begun writing the novel), the British Empire still persisted through Lewis’ lifetime (and still arguably persists today due to their ongoing control of overseas territories and political influence over foreign countries). Thus, Lewis spent his entire life submerged in an imperial culture as described by Bradford, and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* demonstrates this. Firstly, Kath Firm observes that Lewis’s writing has a “devotion to hierarchies,” citing Aslan as not only a Christ figure but also a lion, and therefore, the king of beasts in a world where most “good” characters are also animals (26). This is also evidenced by the aristocratic social structure of Narnia, which is governed by monarchs. In this way, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* mimics the hierarchical ideology characteristic of the empire it was created in. Imperial attitudes also manifest via nationalism

and orientalism throughout *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Rachel Towns notes that Lewis uses food to signify goodness versus evil, writing: “The ‘good’ main characters... are always associated with eating ‘good’ traditional British fare,” which is evidenced by Mr. Tumnus and Lucy sharing a meal of eggs on toast with sardines and tea, and Mr. and Mrs. Beaver providing the Pevensies with fish, potatoes, and tea (16). Meanwhile, Towns continues, “antagonists make ‘foreign’ or ‘other’ food choices, correspondingly constructing their characters as ‘other,’” the most infamous example being the Turkish Delight with which the White Witch ensnares Edmund (16). This exotic sweet is enchanted by the White Witch, and Edmund’s decision to eat it leads Edmund to betraying his siblings. This orientalism also extends beyond food. The White Witch, according to Mr. Beaver, is nonhuman because she is of Jinn descent, as well as Giant (Lewis 81). A Jinn is a creature that appears in both pre-Islamic Arabian mythology and the Qur’an. Considered parallels to humans, they are not inherently good or evil. Instead, Jinn and humans both “have the characteristics to think and to reflect” and can be held “accountable for their actions in the same way as humans as they have the freedom to choose between right and wrong and between good and bad” (Rasool 107). However, Lewis disregards this moral ambiguity and their similarity to humans. Mr. Beaver provides the White Witch’s genealogical ancestry to

the Pevensies as proof of her wickedness, and Mrs. Beaver agrees, “That’s why she’s bad all the way through” (Lewis 81). The idea that one’s genes determine their moral character is a typical component of the eugenics movement, which was prevalent in the British Empire during its height. Eugenics attempted to justify imperialism by claiming that empires flourished because their ruling race was “superior,” although the success of an empire in colonizing foreign peoples universally leads to the threat of the imperial race succumbing to “racial degeneration” (Campbell 21). To prevent imperial degradation and collapse, the British Empire encouraged within its British population “marriage and reproduction between those people considered to have desirable qualities” and “preventing those with unwanted hereditary failings from being allowed to pass them on to future generations” (14). Within the context of the White Witch, who the text informs us is racially inferior by Narnian standards, we understand that as “racial degeneration would lead to a loss of [the British Empire’s] imperial status and dominance” (19). Having a ruler without “a drop of real human blood” has likewise led to Narnia’s degradation from the glorious land it once was in accordance with this imperialist mentality (Lewis 81).

Following this exchange about the White Witch, Mr. Beaver tells the children that though she may appear it, the White Witch is not human and warns the Pevensies against trusting anyone

humanoid in Narnia. Mrs. Beaver contests that she has known a few good dwarves, and Mr. Beaver replies that he has too, “but precious few and they were the ones least like men” (Lewis 81). He adds, “Take my advice, when you meet anything that’s going to be human and isn’t yet, or used to be human once and isn’t now, or ought to be human and isn’t, you keep your eyes on it and feel for your hatchet” (81-82). This attitude aligns with colonial ideology in two ways: firstly, by implying that white British children in a foreign land nonetheless have an inherent right to determine who is and who is not human. Secondly, it suggests that the Pevensies should be ready to attack or defend themselves from anyone they perceive to be not truly human and a threat. That the majority of Aslan’s allies, though anthropomorphized, are animals, meanwhile the White Witch’s allies consist largely of dwarves and monstrous creatures with humanoid form such as hags and ogres, reinforces this notion. Even within Aslan’s allies, the only prominent “good” nonhuman humanoid creature (without any animal features like Tumnus) is a giant called Rumblebuffin, who is considered ugly and “not very clever,” and speaks with improper grammar (Lewis 174). By presenting the idea that people who look human may not be, and therefore are probable enemies, or at the least inferior, Lewis promotes an ideology that attempts to justify and validate colonization.

The Pevensies’ unphased reactions to Narnia and everything they encounter there also aligns

with imperial thought. Though Lucy wonders why there is a forest inside the wardrobe, she appears unperturbed by encountering a fantastical being—Mr. Tumnus the faun. She greets him, “Good evening” and exchanges niceties with him after he, much confused by her presence in Narnia, determines she is indeed a human (Lewis 11-12). When the children are told that they are destined to save Narnia, they likewise exhibit little surprise or doubt; this is a perfectly reasonable conclusion, despite the fact it is an entirely foreign land for them. In this way, the Pevensies’ assumptions and ideologies resemble that which is perpetuated by British scout propaganda. Child scouts originated as a method of instructing young boys, and shortly after girls as well, in scouting skills (based on the creator, Robert Baden-Powell’s, own military manual on scouting), and also, crucially, to instill in them loyalty to the British Empire. Baden-Powell wrote in his handbook for young boys, “Every boy should prepare himself...by learning how to shoot and drill, to take his share in defence of the Empire, if it should ever be attacked” (7). This element resembles Father Christmas giving the Pevensies weapons. He tells them, “These are tools, not toys... Bear them well” (Lewis 108). Both in Narnia and in the British Empire, children are taught not to play, but rather, to be prepared to fight against a wicked, foreign “other” that might threaten the empire. In this way, the Pevensies appear to already be instilled with imperial values as evident by their natural acceptance as saviors

of a foreign land and training with weapons for the defense of their territory. Furthermore, their crowning at the end of the book mirrors the system of the British monarchy and further instills the idea that the imperial race is destined to rule over the foreign.

The Pevensies enter Narnia, a land they are not from, and are welcomed by its “good” natives because they are prophesied to save it. That those not originally from a land, particularly Westerners, should go into said land and “save” it is an inherently imperialist notion, and the idea that colonization was a noble task, positive for indigenous people, was very popular in Imperial Britain. Rudyard Kipling, for instance, memorialized this sentiment in his poem “The White Man’s Burden.” In this poem, Kipling urges British citizens to “Take up the White Man’s burden” to colonize and thereby, in their view, civilize British-occupied territories, framing this as serving those that they occupied. The Pevensies going on to rule Narnia demonstrates this savior-like sentiment. Their reign lasts decades and brings about a golden age of peace and prosperity. Lewis also writes, “much of [the Pevensies’] time was spent in seeking out the remnants of the White Witch’s army and destroying them” and that “in the end all that foul brood was stamped out” (183). This element harkens back to the othering of humanoid nonhumans and suggests that killing them is a service. Between this and the unequivocally positive portrayal of the

Pevensies' reign, colonial ideology is reinforced.

In conclusion, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* functions as a pro-imperialist text through its orientalism and dehumanization of those deemed "other," nationalistic messaging, and the role the Pevensies play by saving and ruling Narnia. Particularly given the popularity of the novel, past and present, these colonial elements warrant just as much attention as the religious aspects of the novel, and though Lewis states through technical terms that the *Chronicles* may not function as an allegory for Christianity, the pro-imperialist messaging within *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* may indeed leave room for a case to be made in further research that the text is an unintended imperialist allegory. Likewise, that Lewis was from Ireland, a country long colonized by England, yet spent the majority of his adult life in England, might lend additional insight into reading his work further through the lens of imperialism.

About Katarina Dulude

Katarina Dulude (she/they) is an American writer and photographer based in Glasgow. They graduated with an MLitt in Fantasy Literature from the University of Glasgow in 2023. She has three academic publications and her play, "The Wolf Sickness," was recently workshopped by Tired Horses Theatre. Her research interests include neo-Victorian fantasy, the Gothic, queer and feminist studies, and children's literature.

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