

# C.S. LEWIS AND PHILIP PULLMAN

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A question for you. 'Which popular fairy-tale adventure begins with a girl hiding in a wardrobe?'

Don't you know? Here's a clue: the girl's name is four letters long and begins with 'L'.

Not got it yet? Another clue: she finds that 'the wardrobe is much bigger than she'd thought'.

Still no idea? Final clue: the book was written chiefly for children, but is enjoyed as much by adults, and its author's home is in Oxford.

Since you haven't given me an answer, I'll tell you. And yes, of course, the story is *The Golden Compass* by Philip Pullman (known as *Northern Lights* in the United Kingdom). If you thought the answer was *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis you could be forgiven, for the similarities are striking, though Pullman himself would probably not encourage you to dwell on them.

Named 'Author of the Year' at the British Book Awards in 2002, Pullman despises the Narnia Chronicles. 'Grotesque', 'disgusting', 'ugly', 'poisonous', 'nauseating' are just some of the adjectives he has applied to the Narnia septet. Given his views on Lewis's classics, it is surprising, to say the least, that Pullman should have started his own story with a character called Lyra who hides in a wardrobe: the echo of Lewis's Lucy is so loud you would think it an act of literary homage.

But no. Pullman does not imitate Lewis in order to flatter him; he flatters his readers with an easy-to-spot allusion that may make them expect a story of the same kind as Narnia. Having thus hooked his audience, Pullman proceeds to tell a tale as different from Lewis's as night is from day.

Whereas Lewis was a champion of traditional Christianity, Pullman is a zealous unbeliever. Whereas Narnia communicates a vision of God-in-Christ reconciling his creatures to himself by means of loving sacrifice, Pullman's imaginary world contains an 'Ancient of Days' who dies 'with a sigh of the most profound and exhausted relief', never to be heard from again. Whereas Lewis presents Aslan as 'the King of the wood' and Aslan's father as 'the Emperor-beyond-the-sea', Pullman ends his story with a campaigning summons to build 'the Republic of Heaven'. Whereas Lewis depicts Aslan's followers as a varied group of humans, animals, even trees, given to colour, dancing, feasting and joy, Pullman draws a church of uniformly malicious and persecuting priests and describes Christianity, through the mouth of an ex-nun, as 'a very powerful and convincing mistake, that's all'. Pullman evidently cannot abide Lewis's religious worldview and is determined to provide the book-buying public with a story which contradicts it in all its essential points.

However, apart from these fundamental religious differences between the two men it is worth pointing out that they have a surprising number of things in common. Both had grandfathers who were clergymen and both were raised as Anglicans. Both read English at Oxford and both later taught the subject in that city at university level. Both have won the prestigious Carnegie Medal for their children's books. Both lost a parent at a young age.

What makes Pullman's distaste for Narnia especially interesting is not that it sits so oddly alongside his allusion to it at the beginning of *Northern Lights*, - far from it: he is a self-confessed 'magpie' and his fiction openly acknowledges its indebtedness to all sorts of different sources (Milton and Blake chief among them). What is so intriguing about his attacks on Lewis is their vehemence: Pullman lays into Narnia with a meat-cleaver, - he calls it 'filthy', 'wicked', 'life-hating', 'detestable', 'drivel', 'exploitative', 'propagandistic'.

One could understand it if these assaults were being launched by a failed writer, someone envious of Lewis's success, but Pullman can have no such motivation. He's made it big and his star is likely to continue in the ascendant for the foreseeable future. He won the £30,000 Whitbread Prize for *The Amber Spyglass*, the first time a so-called 'children's book' has won that award. Film rights for the *His Dark Materials* trilogy (comprised of *The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*) have been snapped up and the first adaptation was released to mostly positive reviews in November 2007. Another of Pullman's tales, *I Was A Rat*, has been successfully adapted as a BBC TV series. Pullman is now an established figure on the literary and cultural scene. We can expect to hear and read a good deal more from him in the coming years.

Including, presumably, further attacks on C.S. Lewis.

Pullman's views on the Chronicles deserve closer inspection. His allegations against the books, made with all the articulacy and passion of a talented writer at the height of his career, are received with credulity by many of those who hear him - people who now discomfitedly wonder whether Narnia is all it's cracked up to be. But in my view Pullman's criticisms are unsustainable. In public debate with him and in my reading of his published articles and interviews, I've been amazed that a man so intelligent and imaginative should have set about another writer's work with such impatience and imprecision.

That Lewis's writings are not perfect I will readily concede, and Pullman is right to lambast those Lewis fanatics who see any criticism of Narnia as a kind of 'blasphemy' and who therefore write off Pullman as not worth listening to. But extremist defences are sometimes provoked by extremist attacks, and it has to be said that Pullman's attacks are not moderate. I aim in what follows to show how Pullman not only over-eggs his arguments but also how his arguments are ill-founded to begin with. Though Pullman is a gifted and powerful writer of fiction, he does not inspire confidence as a literary critic. Indeed, when it comes to his assessments of Narnia, he loses the plot so entirely that one wonders about his motives.

Pullman, as far as I've been able to observe, objects to five main things in the Narnia Chronicles: their alleged sexism and racism, the healing of Digory's mother in *The Magician's Nephew*, the exclusion of Susan from Narnia in *The Last Battle*, and the deaths of all the other human characters at the end of the same book. In no particular order we'll take a look at each of his claims.

## **Racism**

The Narnia Chronicles, Pullman asserts, are 'blatantly racist'. In the Narnian scheme of things, he says, 'light-coloured people are better than dark-coloured people'. He points to the mostly negative depiction of a people called the Calormenes, who are of darker appearance than their Narnian neighbours to the North.

But the depiction of the Calormenes, though largely negative, is not racially fuelled, still less 'blatantly' so. It is not because of their pigmentation or ethnicity, but because of their idolatry, that the Calormenes are generally frowned

upon by the author. Lewis is at pains to point out that dark-skinned characters are perfectly capable of goodness and, conversely, that light-skinned characters are perfectly capable of evil. It is not the colour of your skin that determines your moral standing in Narnia, it is the content of your character. The picture is not nearly as simple as Pullman pretends.

For example, a dark-skinned Calormene character called Emeth (the Hebrew word for 'truth' or 'fidelity') is portrayed entirely favourably and is given a whole chapter to himself in *The Last Battle* (chapter 15) where his nobility and honesty are constantly emphasised. Conversely, a light-skinned character, the White Witch (the name is a bit of a giveaway: Pullman should have noticed it!) is the chief villain in the first and most famous of the Narnia books. 'Her face was white - not merely pale, but white like snow or paper or icing-sugar, except for her very red mouth. It was a beautiful face in other respects, but proud and cold and stern.' Elsewhere Lewis tells us that her appearance was 'deadly white, white as salt'. She has spread her evil whiteness over the whole of Narnia, locking the land in a prison of ice and snow. Nowhere does Lewis make a similar negative use of the colours black or brown.

But Pullman not only fails to enter Emeth and the White Witch into the equation, he calculates on a wrong basis to begin with. It shows a lack of historical empathy to attribute 'racism' to a writer of Lewis's generation, for the term didn't exist in Lewis's day. Yes, racial arrogance and prejudice existed, of course, as they have always done, but a 'racist attitude' as a benchmark of unvirtue and as a popular shibboleth had not yet arisen. The mass immigration which led to the race issue becoming a live one in British politics had not occurred when the Narnia Chronicles were being conceived and composed. It is simply historically unfair to tax Lewis with scruples that belong to a time after he was writing.

But there is a more substantial reason why Pullman's criticism is ill-founded. He is unaware of the symbolic geographical scheme that informs Lewis's creation of Narnia and the surrounding lands. The White Witch's whiteness is no accident: she is white because she comes from 'the North'. The Calormenes' darkness likewise is not unintentional: they are dark because they come from 'the South'. Lewis first used this scheme in his allegorical story, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933). In the allegory, the pilgrim, John, travels a road that runs East (to the mountains of the Landlord) and West (to the island of Sweet Desire). When John strays North of the path or South of it, he runs into trouble, for it is only East and West that joy is to be found. If he goes North he encounters people who are hard, cold, over-cerebral and insufficiently feeling; and if he wanders South he meets characters who are soft, greasy, over-sensual and insufficiently formed.

A colour-scheme accompanies this topography: the further North John goes the more wan the inhabitants of the land become, - the 'three pale men' live there in a land of dust, rock and sterility. And the further South John travels the more dun the dwellers become, - the 'little brown girls' live there and ultimately the land disintegrates into black marsh, fetid and unstoppably fertile. It is between the White North and the Black South - 'which are to me equal and opposite evils', Lewis wrote - that John must tread the path to joy.

In the Narnia Chronicles (published one per year from 1950 to 1956) Lewis repeats this symbolism more loosely and without making it explicit. The Chronicles are not formal allegories, - they aren't to be interpreted by reference to an external scheme but are meant primarily to yield up their meanings from within their own framework. Nevertheless, we can see the influence of the earlier model in the overall arrangement of the points of the Narnian compass. The heart's desire lies East (for Reepicheep in *The Voyage of the 'Dawn Treader'*) and West (for Tirian and company in *The Last Battle*). Narnia itself is a middle, temperate region, moderate in its climate and varied in its geology, whereas to the South we find the baking desert and the sensual, rhetorical and cruel Calormenes with flashing eyes in dark faces who like the taste of garlic and onions; and to the North we find a rocky landscape peopled by stupid giants and a

succession of pale 'Northern witches', some who freeze the land in eternal winter, some who petrify even themselves, some who encase the unwary in the exoskeleton of a suit of armour, and 'who always mean the same thing, but in every age have a different plan for getting it'.

Lewis took his own age to be at risk principally from 'Northern' errors. That's perhaps why three of the Narnia books (*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *The Magician's Nephew* and *The Silver Chair*) depict Northern 'white' evils, while only two (*The Horse and his Boy* and *The Last Battle*) depict Southern 'dark' evils. To conclude from the Southerners' darkness that Lewis was racist is completely to misunderstand a symbolic scheme that Lewis had been working to for nearly twenty years.

As well as being oblivious to this scheme, Pullman also overlooks another dark-skinned Calormene character who is painted very positively by Lewis and is, indeed, the joint protagonist of one of the books, *The Horse and His Boy*. Aravis is a most resourceful, determined, and intelligent character. Not only that: Aravis is female. She ends up marrying her co-protagonist, the white character, Shasta, a most remarkably forward-thinking example of inter-racial marriage on the part of the supposedly 'racist' Lewis.

If Pullman can't make the charges of racism stick, perhaps he will still be able to nail Lewis for sexism?

## Sexism

Another of Pullman's attacks on Narnia centres on their alleged sexism: they are, apparently, 'monumentally disparaging of women' and preach the doctrine that 'boys are better than girls'.

One wonders if Pullman has been reading the books he criticises. Lucy Pevensie is unquestionably the most prominent and morally mature character in the narrator's eyes. (She was named for Lewis's god-daughter, Lucy Barfield, to whom *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is dedicated.) Lucy is the first of the children to get through into Narnia and is described as 'more reliable' and 'more truthful' than her brother Edmund; she is the one who most often sees Aslan, the Christ-figure; she is called upon to lead a group of four older people, three of whom are male, when they get lost in the woods in *Prince Caspian*; she announces in *The Voyage of the 'Dawn Treader'* that boys are all 'swaggering, bullying idiots'; and she has the distinction among the human characters of speaking the final line of dialogue in *The Last Battle*.

Interestingly, Lewis does not make Lucy beautiful, which says something about his view of the importance of female physical appearance, - something with which most feminists would agree; Narnia does not propound 'the beauty myth'. Rather it is Susan who is said to be 'the pretty one of the family', and this, given her subsequent story (discussed below), is additional evidence that Lewis had a highly *unchauvinistic* attitude to feminine appearance. Not for him the stereotypical equation: beauty good, plainness evil. Susan, incidentally, though beautiful, is not reduced to a doll-like, 'eye-candy' role: she is a strong swimmer - as strong as her elder brother, Peter, apparently, - and is easily the best archer in the family.

There are three other main female protagonists in the Chronicles: Polly and Jill and Aravis, all of whom are every bit as honest and capable and approved as their respective male counterparts, Digory and Eustace and Shasta. It is true that these three boys' stories are more centre-stage than the girls', but that does not amount to a 'disparaging of women' any more than Pullman's own greater interest in his heroine Lyra amounts to a disparaging of her male companion, Will.

But the very charge of 'sexism' is anachronistic when used against a writer of Lewis's time. As with 'racism', 'sexism' did not exist as a term when Lewis was composing his stories. (Interestingly, if one consults the Oxford English Dictionary one finds that Lewis's friend and protégé, Sheldon Vanauken, is cited as an early coiner of the word.) Of course, misogyny existed in the 1950s as at all times, but 'sexism' as a popular category of thought did not. It was not then the touchstone that it has since become and to subject Lewis to a litmus test that is the concern of our own generation rather than his is to reveal a historical naïveté that is out of place in literary criticism intended to be taken seriously.

## Susan

But what about Susan? Why is she excluded from the heavenly Narnia at the end of *The Last Battle*? Philip Pullman is particularly outraged by this and has claimed that 'one girl was sent to hell because she was getting interested in clothes and boys'. He objects to what he sees as Lewis's determination to punish Susan for growing up and becoming interested in the opposite sex. 'We could all do with a lot more growing up,' he declares.

Again, Pullman's criticism might be well-targeted if it were actually related to something that Lewis had written. It's not. 'Boys' are not mentioned in *The Last Battle*; rather, Susan is said (by Jill – not by the narrator, still less by Lewis in his own persona) to have become interested in 'nothing except lipstick and nylons and invitations'. I suppose that boys might fairly be understood as the ultimate goal of Susan's preoccupations, but Lewis says nothing about them.

Not that he was averse to his characters growing up and having romances. In *The Voyage of the 'Dawn Treader'*, Ramandu's daughter marries Caspian and becomes 'a great queen and the mother and grandmother of great kings'. In *The Magician's Nephew*, Frank and Helen likewise are destined to become the father and mother of many children and grandchildren. Plenty of healthy sexuality there!

The operative word in Jill's remark is the word 'nothing': Susan is interested in *nothing* except superficialities and ephemera; she has become dismissive of her siblings and disparages Narnia as childish. Lipstick and nylons are condemned not for being lipstick and nylons, but for taking the place of more lasting and rewarding aspects of existence, such as fellowship in the spiritual realm and relationship with the divine, which is what the children's joint experience of Narnia and Aslan signify.

Lewis had a particular concern to rank things in their proper order of importance and believed that if second things were put first, one lost not only the the first things but also, eventually, the second things for whose sake the original sacrifice was made. From that point of view, Jill's comments should be taken as a *defence* of lipstick and nylons (and their quite legitimate role in a girl's calf-loves), not as an attack upon them!

Another thing Pullman has read into *The Last Battle* is the penalising of Susan for simply wanting to be grown-up. Jill remarks of Susan, 'She always was a jolly sight too keen on being grown-up' and Pullman cites this as if it were sure-fire evidence of Lewis's determination to infantilise his characters. But there is a difference between wanting to be grown-up and being 'too keen' on growing up: the former is natural and good, the second a sign of immaturity and insecurity. Pullman does not read the text with sufficient care to heed the distinction.

However, in any case, this is not where Lewis leaves the subject. He has Polly say: 'Grown-up indeed! I wish she would grow up. She wasted all her school time wanting to be the age she is now, and she'll waste all the rest of her life trying to stay that age. Her whole idea is to race on to the silliest time of one's life as quick as she can and then stay

there as long as she can.' And this puts a different complexion on the matter. Susan, if Polly is to be believed, is not someone anxious to mature, but someone who wishes to stop her own development at one particular moment: she is the perpetual adolescent, the devotee of the cult of youth. Lewis, it would seem, actually wants her to grow up, - the very opposite of what Pullman asserts!

But does Susan deserve to be 'sent to hell' for her various failings, as Pullman claims she is? Of course not, and Lewis doesn't send her there. In fact, he sends no one to hell in *The Last Battle* because 'hell' is not mentioned. Certain characters, it is true, disappear into Aslan's 'huge black shadow', but Lewis is careful not to judge them. All he writes about them is, 'The children never saw them again. I don't know what became of them.' So, even within the terms of the story, there is no unambiguous depiction of a hellish region. And in any event, Susan is not among the characters who pass into Aslan's shadow because Susan doesn't even appear in *The Last Battle*. Nor is it related within the book what her ultimate fate is to be. In reply to a reader who wrote asking about Susan's final destiny, Lewis said: 'The books don't tell us what happened to Susan. She is left alive in this world at the end . . . and perhaps she will get to Aslan's country in the end - in her own way.' Pullman's allegation that Susan is veritably damned for liking clothes and boys and wanting to be grown-up is wrong in every single respect. The claim is an error wrapped up in a mistake inside a confusion.

### **The healing of Digory's mother**

Pullman's misunderstandings don't stop with racism, sexism, and Susan. Another thing he objects to about the Narnia Chronicles is the episode dealing with the healing of Digory Kirke's mother in *The Magician's Nephew*. According to Pullman, the whole episode is an example of Lewis 'cheating' as a writer, 'exploiting' the sympathy of his readers and failing to justify it as an integral part of the story.

Mrs Kirke is dying of an unnamed illness (in this world) and Digory (in Narnia) is sent to pluck an apple from the Tree of Life. I'll let Pullman take up the story at this point: 'Digory is told that if his mother were to eat one of the apples she would get better, but he mustn't steal one, because, if he did, she would get better but she wouldn't enjoy getting better, she'd be unhappy. So, as a good boy, he doesn't do this, and as a reward for being a good boy he's given the magic apple and he comes back to the real world and gives the apple to his mother and she gets better and everything's happy.' Pullman goes on, 'Think what the passage is saying! It says that, if your mother is dying, it depends on you whether she gets better or not. If you're a good boy, she'll get better and if you're not a good boy, she won't get better.' He alleges that this is 'cruel', 'utterly wicked', 'so wicked as to be beyond the reach of literary criticism and deserve stern and forthright moral condemnation'.

I would be minded to agree with Pullman if this were an accurate synopsis of *The Magician's Nephew*. However, it isn't. Digory is not sent on a mission to find an apple that will heal his mother. Rather, Aslan commissions him on a quite separate errand. Digory is commanded to pluck an apple from the Tree of Life and then plant its seed so that a Tree of Protection may grow up to guard Narnia, for a period, from further interference by the Witch Jadis.

As he travels off on his mission, Digory ponders 'how he had hoped to get something for his Mother, and how, instead of that, he had been sent on this message.' He himself makes no connection between his dying mother and the task; neither does Aslan; neither does the narrator. *It is the Witch who makes the link*, something Pullman completely misses. It is she who tries to associate the errand with Digory's mother and who tempts Digory to take the apple for his own purposes rather than for the use he had promised to put it to.

Digory resists the temptation and decides to fulfil his commission for Aslan, even though doing so makes him 'very sad and he wasn't even sure all the time that he had done the right thing'. Only later, after he has planted the apple, does he learn that, if he had stolen it as the Witch had wished, his mother would have been healed but not to her joy or his. Aslan tells him: 'The day would have come when both you and she would have looked back and said it would have been better to die in that illness.' It is then that Digory realises that 'there might be things more terrible even than losing someone you love by death'. Tears choke him and he gives up all hope of saving his mother's life. But now Aslan asks him to pluck another apple, this time from the Tree of Protection which he, Digory, has just planted. This second apple, because given, not stolen, will bring joy.

Far from being deserving 'stern and forthright moral condemnation', this episode is one of the most moving and sensitive passages found anywhere in Lewis's fiction. It is a profound reworking of the temptation scene of Genesis 3, something Lewis had considered as a literary critic in his *A Preface to 'Paradise Lost'* and which he also addresses fictionally in *Perelandra*. And it comes across all the more powerfully because of its parallels with Lewis's own life, - his mother died before he was ten.

I dare not be so presumptuous as to think I can explain why Pullman completely misreads the Digory passage and reacts so violently against it, but I have to confess I do wonder whether it is connected in some way with the early death of his own father. Pullman senior was an RAF officer who died in the Mau Mau rising in Kenya when Philip was seven: 'we were told he was killed in combat, but I've never really got to the bottom of what happened'. Is there an unresolved sense of anger or mistaken guilt from Pullman's childhood that prevents him from reading *The Magician's Nephew* as it stands? At the very least I would say that his inability to read the story straight and the depth of his antipathy towards it suggest that it touches on a raw nerve. Astonishingly, he describes the passage as 'one of the filthiest lies in the whole of children's literature'.

## **The train accident**

Finally, we come to Pullman's objection about the killing-off of all the main characters at the end of *The Last Battle*. This, he argues, is 'a libel on life'; it shows that Lewis regards 'death as better than life'; it is 'propaganda in the service of a life-hating ideology'. Pullman contends that it would be 'the Christian thing to allow the children to remain in the world and to do good there'. He cannot understand why Lewis prevents his children from growing up (overlooking the fact that Digory, Polly, and Peter have already grown up). He asks, 'Why not let Peter go on and be a father?'

This is like asking, 'Why not let Hamlet go on and be a king?' And the answer is obvious: 'Because that's not the story the author is telling.' To question a story in the way that Pullman questions Narnia is to betray a fundamental failure of the art of reading. One has to accept stories as they have been written, not demand some different kind of story which fits in better with one's own wishes. Pullman's irritation here is petulant and intolerant; it's the sort of approach to literature which, unchecked, leads to bans or bowdlerisations.

Lewis is writing a story in which certain characters die in a train crash, some of them at a young age. That is the datum. In no place does he imply that train crashes are a good thing or that more children ought to die violently in accidents or that a sudden death is a reward for trusting in God. To extrapolate from the fact that Lewis depicts the death and resurrection of certain pre-adult characters to the conclusion 'Lewis hates life' is pure illogicality.

As for what is 'the Christian thing' for a writer to do, - why would Pullman want Lewis to do it? Pullman doesn't accept Christianity; he regards it (if we equate his own view with that of his ex-nun) as a 'very powerful and convincing

mistake, that's all'. Presumably then, it would please Pullman better if Lewis did *not* do 'the Christian thing'. And since Pullman thinks Lewis has not done the Christian thing, why isn't he satisfied?

The tangle of confusion and self-contradiction in Pullman's literary criticism is disturbing to see. It reveals, I think, that his whole attitude to the Narnia Chronicles is irrationally driven. He doesn't want to critique the books, he wants to damage them. Any weapon that comes to hand he will grab at, regardless of its suitability for the task. The fashionable brickbats about sexism and racism were to be expected. The half-truths about Digory are a cleverer ploy. The absurd claims about Susan are audacious. And as for the complaints about the death of Peter *et al*, it has to be said that here Lewis's train is not the only Pullman to have left the rails.

It is a pity to see an otherwise impressive and perceptive man in the coils of such a hydra and one wonders how Pullman came to this pass. Perhaps we will find some sort of an explanation if we look at what he has said about his first encounter with the Chronicles. Apparently, he 'didn't read them as a child'. Rather, he read them 'at an age when I was beyond being beguiled by them', when 'I was not in a state of mind to be persuaded by them'.

To all intents and purposes then, Pullman has *never* read the Chronicles, for the whole function of reading involves the willing suspension of disbelief. To read a work of fiction is imaginatively to surrender - at least for the duration of the read - to the author's worldview, to allow oneself to be beguiled by it, to be persuaded by the story being told. Since Pullman is, by his own admission, ignorant of this state, it is less of a surprise that he so hates and reviles what generations of other readers have relished and treasured. Ignorance is the father of prejudice.

C.S. Lewis has some memorable characters who likewise refuse to be beguiled. They are the dwarfs at the end of *The Last Battle* who are supplied with a fine feast of 'pies and tongues and pigeons and trifles and ices, and each Dwarf had a goblet of good wine in his right hand'. They begin their banquet, but each dwarf thinks he is eating and drinking only the sort of things you might find in a stable - hay and old turnips, raw cabbage leaves, and dirty water from a trough. Still, they are satisfied. They say to one another, 'At any rate, there's no Humbug here. We haven't let anyone take us in.' And Lewis observes, through the person of Aslan, 'They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out.'

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