## SONG, SWORD, AND SIGN:

# THE POWER OF BEAUTY IN C.S. LEWIS'S CHRONICLES OF NARNIA

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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## ABSTRACT

Song, Sword, and Sign: the Power of Beauty in C.S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia. (May 2015)

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The work of British writer C.S. Lewis occupies a unique position at the cross-section of fantasy, philosophy, and literary scholarship. Whether science fiction, apologetics, or children's literature, Lewis's books are all united by an underlying theme: transcendent beauty. This thesis will explore the idea of Beauty as it is conveyed in Lewis's best-known works, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. It will examine two possible methods of the manifestation of beauty in literature – form and substance – and how Lewis fulfills them through philosophy, linguistics, and literary technique. What makes his work ring with the beauty of a world beyond? How does Lewis craft literature that contains more than, as he wrote in *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, mere "ebullient patches of delight" while still encapsulating what Plato described as the power of the True taking refuge in the Beautiful?

The results will elucidate the story behind the latent power of Beauty in Lewis's writing, indicate his proposed response to the encounter with beauty, and demand that contemporary scholarship continues to recognize the power of language to convey truth through fictional literature.

## **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

From 1933 until his death in 1963, British writer C.S. Lewis bestowed upon the literary world such varied works as science fiction, children's fantasy, Christian theology, autobiography, correspondence, poetry, mythology, and literary criticism. The theme that unites his work and undeniably resounds throughout each of his writings is the clear timbre of beauty: either by lens (forthright discussion) or by mirror (elegant and simple applicability), Lewis both encapsulated and pointed to a transcendent beauty in all he wrote.

As a reader, I have been fascinated by his skill for as long as I can remember: the memory of first reading Lewis's series The Chronicles of Narnia as an eleven-year-old still has the strength of an unfaded photograph in my mind. Held captive by the simple poetry of the stories and filled with longing to enter the world inhabited by the characters, I was fascinated by the work and have remained so through many re-readings in years since.

Through my study of literature and history as an undergraduate, I have grown intrigued by the structure, form, and power of language as a whole and have been drawn by the alluring beauty of words. Never is this more evident to me than when studying the writings of C.S. Lewis. In his works, meaning develops with time and is made richer in the re-reading, adding layers of understanding to the wonder and longing that remain from the first encounter. As a student of English, I am interesting in discovering what lies at the cross-section of literature and linguistics,

and Lewis – as a writer, philosopher, academic, literary critic, and no stranger to philology – is a most excellent author to examine in light of both fields.

In my research, I seek to answer the following questions: What is the harmony of philosophy, linguistics, and literature that forms the Beautiful in the work of C.S. Lewis? How does his concept of an eternal, transcendent, ordered beauty shape his writing? What does Lewis propose is the appropriate response to an encounter with beauty? How does beauty manifest itself in his works – linguistically, conceptually, and concretely? The thesis will seek to explore language in Lewis's writings as both a lens and a mirror of communicating a higher reality. It will also examine his theory of language and let this knowledge further illuminate his works of fiction and the works of writers whom he influenced, gradually weaving a rich tapestry of scholarship and linguistic and aesthetic understanding.

Overall, this thesis seeks to call attention to the sublime power of beauty present in the writings of C.S. Lewis and the way he communicates universal longing and truth. As a result, it will invite readers to consider his works of fiction, fantasy, and even children's literature to be primary communicators of truth through the masterful use of language.

#### CHAPTER II

## SONG, SWORD, AND SIGN

In C.S. Lewis's 1941 address "The Weight of Glory", the British author describes an intense longing in reaction to an almost unnamable experience which he says is common to every person. "[We] call it beauty, and behave as if that had settled the matter" (*TWG*, 30). Lewis's series *The Chronicles of Narnia* can be read in light of this beauty, an underlying theme that unites all seven books in the series. Because of Lewis' belief in the power of transcendent beauty, beauty emerges within the stories as a song, a sword, and a sign: it allures and calls to those who encounter it; tests the moral identity of each person, dividing good from evil; and points beyond itself to the source of all goodness and truth, to what Lewis offers as the most beautiful reality in both the Narnian cosmos and our own.

#### Song: the allure and longing of beauty

Clive Staples Lewis was born in Belfast, Ireland in 1898. As a child, he was notably affected by certain objects of beauty: in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, he describes a miniature garden which his older brother made out of moss and flowers and twigs in a biscuit-tin lid. "That was the first beauty I ever knew," he says. "I do not think the impression was very important at the moment, but it soon became important in memory. As long as I live my imagination of Paradise will retain something of my brother's toy garden" (*SBJ*, 6). This experience and the memory of gazing at the Green Hills beyond his window taught him *Sehnsucht*, or an almost incurably romantic longing for beauty. Beauty remained in his mind as a memory, an echo, a call both strengthened and muddled by time.

Lewis transfers this childlike awe for beauty to two characters in *The Magician's Nephew*, a book in *The Chronicles of Narnia* series (sixth by publication order; first by Narnian chronology). Digory Kirke and Polly Plummer are two schoolchildren who become caught up in the experimentation of Digory's Uncle Andrew, an eccentric and ego-centric man who dabbles in magic deeper than his understanding and fancies himself a great scientist because of it. The three find themselves in another reality when an experiment with magic rings transports them out of London. Together they stumble into a dark, quiet newborn world – which will become Narnia. Presently a voice begins to sing in the darkness, and the companions sense that the world is coming into being in tune with the song. The song is a thing of great beauty: "Sometimes it seemed to come from all directions at once….Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the earth herself. There were no words. There was hardly even a tune. But it was, beyond comparison, the most beautiful noise [Digory] had ever heard" (*TMN*, 106). Digory and Polly stand enraptured: "the two children had open mouths and shining eyes; they were drinking in the sound, and they looked as if it reminded them of something" (*TMN*, 108).

The fact that the beauty *looked as if it reminded them of something* is a core idea for Lewis. In "The Weight of Glory," Lewis posits that a deep desire for the final beauty of heaven is imprinted upon each soul, manifesting itself in the form of memory and longing in response to beauty. This was the effect of the hills and the toy garden for him, along with certain experiences of reading Longfellow's Norse mythology and Beatrix Potter's *Squirrel Nutkin*. For Lewis, these things of beauty inspired what he calls Joy: "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction...it might equally as well be called a particular kind of unhappiness or grief" (*SBJ*, 11). "The Weight of Glory" picks up the thread, adjuring that though we *experience* longing through beautiful things, they do not *contain* this quality, cannot possess it. "If [one] had gone back to those moments in the past, he would not have found the thing itself, but only the reminder of it, what he remembered would turn out to be itself a remembering. The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, but *through* them, and what came through them was longing" (*TWOG*, 30).

Thus in *The Magician's Nephew*, song is the first language, the first beauty. The original moment of creation inspires recognition; it resides somewhere in the memory of the created, imprinted upon Digory's and Polly's minds without the clarity of experience, but also without the impersonality of simply having been told. Lewis assigns a true encounter with beauty the status of experiential knowledge – his characters (and, he infers, his readers) have seen its fullness before, and long to return and rest in it.

One of the final scenes of the third Narnia book, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, mirrors the beauty of creation's song. The book tells the tale of the journey of Caspian X of Narnia and his companions, across unexplored seas unto the end of the world. The companions reach the island of Ramandu, a star who has left the sky to recover his strength and taken human form. At the dawn of a new day, Ramandu and his daughter take up the song of a new creation: "I wish I could write down the song, but no one who was present could remember it. Lucy said afterward that it was high, almost shrill, but very beautiful...as they sang, the east began to turn red and at last, unclouded, the sun came up out of the sea. ...Presently the air became full of voices – voices which took up the same song that the Lady and her Father were singing, but in far wilder

tones and a language which no one knew" (*VDT*, 204-05). Thousands of Narnian years after creation, the language of the heavens is, again, song. Though in this case only the song of dawn and not of the formation of the world, the song is still so beautiful that it is impossible to transcribe into written language, and must dwell only in memory. And according to Edmund, one of the travelers, "Though lots of things happened on that trip which *sound* more exciting, that moment was really the most exciting" (*VDT*, 205).

#### Sword: dividing and identifying

The power to call and inspire longing is the first characteristic of beauty in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The second is the power to identify: by Beauty's nature as one of the three divine transcendents (along with Goodness and Truth), it has the power to reveal the moral identity of characters by their response to an encounter of beauty, dividing good from evil. When retelling the scene in *The Magician's Nephew* above, I only described Digory and Polly's reactions to the Song. There were three more human characters present at the creation of Narnia: Frank, a goodnatured London cabby who also becomes part of the adventure by accident, and Jadis, the cruel erstwhile Empress of the annihilated kingdom of Charn join Uncle Andrew, Digory, and Polly. Frank's response to the Song is fascinating. Upon first hearing the Lion's song of creation, he exclaims: "Glory be! I'd ha' been a better man all my life if I'd known there were things like this" (*TMN*, 107). Frank immediately couples this intense aesthetic encounter with a moral quality, demonstrating the fundamental bond of goodness and beauty.

While Frank and the children stand openmouthed, "Uncle Andrew's mouth was open too, but not with joy...he was not liking the Voice" (*TMN*, 108). As the song continues, the characters realize

the Singer is a huge Lion, and his song is creating everything from the stars to the trees to the animals. This bothers Uncle Andrew: according to his egocentric mind, such a thing is impossible. Unfortunately, it is possible to make oneself numb to *sehnsucht* and deaf to the language of beauty. This is just what Uncle Andrew does. Lewis explains,

When the Lion had first begun singing, long ago when it was still quite dark, [Uncle Andrew] had realized that the noise was a song. And he had disliked the song very much. It made him think and feel things he did not want to think and feel. Then, when the sun rose and he saw that the singer was a lion ("only a lion," as he said to himself) he tried his hardest to make believe that it wasn't singing and never had been singing—only roaring as any lion might in a zoo in our world. "Of course it can't really have been singing," he thought, "I must have imagined it. I've been letting my nerves get out of order. Who ever heard of a lion singing?" And the longer and more beautiful the Lion sang, the harder Uncle Andrew tried to make himself believe that he could hear nothing but roaring. Now the trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed. Uncle Andrew did. He soon did hear nothing but roaring in Aslan's song. Soon he couldn't have heard anything else even if he had wanted to. And when at last the Lion spoke and said, "Narnia, awake," he didn't hear any words: he heard only a snarl (*TMN*, 136).

Uncle Andrew begins plotting to destroy the new-created forests, chop down trees for lumber, mine iron, and turn the whole newborn world into a health resort. Where the children and the cabby see unspeakable – almost sacred and liturgical – beauty, Uncle Andrew renders himself capable only of seeing unclaimed land and raw materials to exploit for profit. Instead of the awe of the 'good' characters, he trains himself in the mindset of use. Turned from goodness, he deafens himself to the penetrating call of beauty.

In a similar vein, Jadis rejects the beauty she sees and hears – but instead of merely making herself deaf to it, she vows to destroy it completely. "Ever since the song began, [Jadis] felt that

this whole world was filled with a Magic different than hers, and stronger. She hated it. She would have smashed that whole world, or all worlds, to pieces, if it would only stop the singing" (*TMN*, 109). She cannot co-exist with such pure, whole beauty. The unity of goodness and truth in the beauty of the song throws into relief the incongruence of her own beauty, which lacks the company of the other divine transcendents. This realization of her own contradiction causes a violent reaction within her, and she vows to destroy this newfound beauty, which unlike hers is without shadow. But how can Jadis be beautiful at all? If beauty is not fully itself without the presence of goodness and truth, how can an evil person be beautiful?

To understand this, we must go back to Lewis's treatise on beauty and longing in "The Weight of Glory". He states that things we call beautiful are not exactly that, strictly speaking. "It is not the physical objects that I am speaking of [which are beautiful], but that indescribable something of which they become for a moment the messengers" (*TWG*, 40). In other words, things to which we assign the title "beautiful" *are* not beauty but merely *contain* or *reflect* beauty.

Frank's response to the creation of Narnia demonstrated the unity of truth, goodness, and beauty in one simple but profound statement: since the beauty he was encountering was in fact true, it demanded goodness from him. Aslan noticed this goodness within him, and because of it crowned Frank the first king of Narnia (*TMN*, 151). But Narnia's villains show the effects of beauty divided from goodness. Jadis, the White Witch of *The Magician's Nephew* and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, has an unsatiable Machiavellian lust for power: she destroyed all life in the world of Charn in order to become the queen of it, and she certainly is not moved by goodness. Yet, she is ravishingly beautiful. Upon first seeing her, Digory is immediately moved

by her beauty: "Years afterward when he was an old man, [he] said he had never in all his life known a woman so beautiful" (*TMN*, 53). Hundreds of Narnian years later, when Digory *is* an old man in England, another young boy discovers Narnia, meets the Witch, and has the same reaction – that she is "a great lady, taller than any woman Edmund had ever seen, [and]...beautiful" (*LWW*, 31). Edmund, the young boy in the text, is drawn to Jadis by her appearance, her seeming generosity, and by the attention which she lavishes upon him. After one single conversation, he becomes an ally of the Witch so devoted that betrays his own three siblings for a chance at her approval and power in her kingdom.

One scene with Edmund and his siblings Peter, Susan, and Lucy shows that the power of beauty can be communicated not only through music and visual experience, but through language. It need not be complicated: sometimes beauty can even be contained with great potency within a single word, retaining all power of the sword to identify and divide. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the reactions of the four Pevensie children to hearing the word *Aslan* for the first time are indicative of the moral state of their character. The children discover the world of Narnia through a wardrobe, and find themselves suddenly caught up in plans to fight the long-reigning Jadis and prepare for the return of Aslan the great lion. At this point in the story, Edmund has already met the Witch and agreed to betray his siblings to her, lying to his brother and sisters to cover up his tracks. The other three are turned toward goodness and beauty, however. Upon hearing the name of Aslan, Peter, the eldest, feel "suddenly brave and adventurous," Susan "as if some delicious smell or some delightful strain of music had just floated by her," and Lucy "got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realize that it is the beginning of the holidays." On the other hand, Edmund, the traitor, "felt a

sensation of mysterious horror" (LWW, 68). Mirroring Uncle Andrew in *The Magician's Nephew*, the reaction of a soul turned from goodness is to be abhorred and perhaps even frightened by an encounter with beauty.

Just as both moral and immoral men can wield a sword, so can beauty be used by both the good and the evil. *The Silver Chair* is the story of a mission to rescue Prince Rilian, the heir to the throne of Narnia, from ten years' captivity underground by the serpentine Lady of the Green Kirtle. In human form, The Lady is beautiful in both sound and appearance: her voice is "sweet as the sweetest bird's song", and her laugh "the richest, most musical laugh you can imagine" (*TSC*, 88). In the climactic scene, wherein heroes Eustace Scrubb, Jill Pole, and Puddleglum the Marshwiggle attempt to lift the physical and mental enchantments laid upon the prince, the Witch uses beauty as a weapon, manipulating multiple senses of her opponents to an experience of her own creation. First, she throws a sweet-smelling powder onto the fire, filling the lungs of all with a strong scent. Next, she begins to strum a small mandolin, creating a constant repetitive music. Third, she weaves an enchantment through her musical laugh and beautiful words, trying to convince her prisoners that the place to which they wish to escape does not exist – there is no Narnia, she says, no sun, and certainly no Aslan (*TSC*, 176-80). This passage shows that even when divided from goodness, beauty retains its vocative power.

In addition to the problem of the division of goodness from beauty, there is the question of the beauty of language and its connection with truth. In *The Magician's Nephew*, both the Witch and Uncle Andrew readily define goodness as a virtue binding only to the weak and the common, not grand and brilliant people such as themselves: "Ours is a high and lonely destiny," they both

explain to Digory on separate occasions (TMN, 21 and 68). The repetition of this phrase is an opportunity for Lewis to explore the effect of the physical beauty of a speaker upon the listener's readiness to believe their words. "They sounded much grander when Queen Jadis said them; perhaps because Uncle Andrew was not seven feet tall and dazzlingly beautiful," Digory muses (TMN, 68). To Digory, beauty of both the physical and verbal kind automatically embeds truth in the speaker's words. Every encounter with true beauty demands a response of truth and goodness.

#### Sign: it is not merely beauty that we seek

To return to the passage from "The Weight of Glory":

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing. These things – the beauty, the memory of your own past are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never visited. (*TWG*, 30-31)

Beauty, then, according to Lewis, is not an absolute. One of its essential characteristics is that it is a sign – it points beyond itself to something greater. Peter Kreeft notes on Lewis's articles "First Things" and "Meditations in a Toolshed", "Beauty withers when we worship it...if you put first things first and second things second, both flourish. If you put second things first and first things second, not only do you lose the first things but also the second." Beauty is a Second Thing, and must not be sought for its own sake. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the youngest Pevensie sibling, Lucy, finds a magician's book of spells in her mission to make the inhabitants of an island visible. Turning the pages of the book, she comes across a most tantalizing enchantment: "*An infallible spell to make beautiful her that uttereth it beyond the lot of mortals*" (*VDT*, 153). It is accompanied by pictures of Lucy herself transforming into a ravishing young woman, and the consequences thereof: suitors from foreign lands flocking to seek her hand or even her gaze; the reaction of her older sister Susan, whose beauty has always overshadowed Lucy's. After a vindictive struggle, at the last moment Lucy decides not to say the spell, her mind changed by the sight of a great growling golden lion painted upon the next page. Several minutes later, Aslan the great Lion himself enters the room. "Then her face lit up till, for a moment (but of course she didn't know it), she looked almost as beautiful as that other Lucy in the picture, and she ran forward with a cry of delight" (*VDT*, 158). The truth whispered by Lucy's conscience coupled with the realization of the goodness of Aslan gave her the strength to triumph over beauty as an idol.

Lewis himself knew well the struggle of the division of goodness, truth, and beauty, even within his own life. Describing his mentality as an Oxford student and an atheist, he writes, "The two hemispheres of my mind were in the sharpest conflict. On the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and show 'rationalism'. Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless" (*SBJ*, 95). In the introduction to *C.S. Lewis as Philosopher*, Jerry Walls explains: "What this passage represents is the despairing view that the truth is not beautiful, and that the beautiful is not true" (*CSLP*, 18). The disunity of the divine transcendents caused a despair in Lewis, which he accepted as the grim reality of the world.

In *Prince Caspian*, the second-published Narnia book, the title character grows up in a Narnia ruled by Telmarines, a usurping dynasty that denies the myth of the original Narnia. But Caspian is raised by Doctor Cornelius, a half-dwarf, and learns the stories of talking animals the courageous kings and queens of old. His story mirrors Lewis's: growing up, he did not dare believe the stories to be true, and the disunity of beauty and truth was a cause of sadness. The source of Caspian's joy, then, was to enter into a time of tumultuous Telmarine reign, calling the Kings and Queens (the four Pevensie children) back into Narnia, discovering the truth of their existence, and taking his own place within the story of Narnia, becoming who he was born to be.

Just as Caspian discovered the truth of the myth of the creation and rule of Narnia, *Surprised by Joy* continues to follow the path of Lewis's conversion. Essential to this was the realization that beauty is not an end, not something to be sought for its own sake, but a hand pointing toward something greater:

I knew now that [memories of beauty] were merely the mental track left by the passage of Joy – not the wave but the wave's imprint on the sand. The inherent dialectic of desire itself had in a way already shown me this; for all images and sensations, if idolatrously mistaken for Joy itself, soon honestly confessed themselves inadequate. All said, in the last resort, "It is not I. I am only a reminder. Look! Look! What do I remind you of?" (*SBJ*, 121)

Lewis found the answer he sought in the person of Christ. His conversion to Christianity in 1931 was the recognition that myth (beauty) could be one with history (truth), and that this was a great good. "Here and here only in all time the myth must have become fact; the Word, flesh; God, Man. This is not 'a religion' or 'a philosophy'. It is the summing up and actuality of them all"

(*SBJ*, 129). To desire beauty is to desire that greatest thing, the beauty of God and of heaven, of communion with Beauty himself.

In the last, most beautiful scenes of the final book of *The Chronicles of Narnia* (the apocalyptic *The Last Battle*) every character who has followed the call of beauty, fought for the truth, and pursued goodness finds him or herself removed from where they were – the horror of battle for some, a fatal train wreck for others – and standing in a new Narnia.

What [Tirian, the young king] saw then set his heart beating as it had never before in any fight. Seven Kings and Queens stood before him, all with crowns on their heads and all in glittering clothes...he was about to speak when the youngest of the Queens laughed. He stared hard at her face, and then gasped for amazement, for he knew her. It was Jill: but not Jill as he had just seen her...she looked cool and fresh, as fresh as if she had just come from bathing. And at first he thought she looked older, but then didn't, and could never make up his mind on that point. And then he say that the youngest of the Kings was Eustace: but he also was changed as Jill was changed. (*TLB*, 152)

Entrance into the final heaven of Narnia transforms each person aesthetically – the true goodness of Narnia makes everything in it beautiful, recognizable yet surprising. Tirian's reaction to seeing Jill is not unlike that of Mary Magdalene and the eleven apostles in the Gospels upon first seeing Christ's resurrected body – a physical transformation has taken place, rather than just the transformation of sight. The very land is fuller, more beautiful, truer, more *Narnian* than even the one they knew so well before. "[The mountains] have more colors on them and they look further away than I remembered and they're more...oh, I don't know...' 'More like the real thing,' said the Lord Digory softly" (*TLB*, 193). And the greatest joy is to be with Aslan, running toward Aslan's country, leaving the Shadowlands behind. In the words of Jewel the Unicorn, summing up what each character longed to express: "'I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I

never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this. Come further up, come further in!'" (*TLB*, 196).

In heaven, the true Narnia, beauty is found to its fullest. All beauty on earth and in the first Narnia only served to point toward the final beauty of heaven, and to call each person there. As a sword, beauty offers a choice: hear the song, be awed and ennobled, and grasp the sword to follow the call and seek the final beauty. Otherwise, spend your time blocking it out and trying to destroy it, perhaps using the weapon of beauty divided from truth and goodness to further your attempts. But should you choose to pursue it, Lewis says, it will point you to Joy never-ending, to the satisfaction of the longing spoken of in "The Weight of Glory", to the final communion of goodness, truth, and beauty. "It is no accident that Lewis writes stories instead of a Summa," says Gilbert Meilaender in Word and Story in C.S. Lewis. "The story is, on his account, the form most true to our experience. Its form makes clear that we grasp after what is not fully given" (WSCSL, 154). Lewis writes about beauty in The Chronicles of Narnia, children's fiction, and in doing so teaches us about the nature of beauty itself. His stories not only depict characters' journeys *further up and further in*, but drawn his readers unto the same joy. His writing is beautiful, reflects the glorious truth of myth, and points the reader onward to the beauty of heaven and joy never-ending.

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