

CHAPTER 1

Lewis, the Chronicles, Allusions, and Allegory



During the year 2000 *Christianity Today* planned an issue on the one hundred major Christian books written in English during the twentieth century. But the issue never took place as planned. The problem: As their survey results began to come in, the editors noticed that almost all the books near the top of the list were by C. S. Lewis. In fact, had they stuck by their original plan of covering the one hundred most important Christian books of the past century, the list would have looked like C. S. Lewis and the Seven Dwarfs! So they wisely allotted Lewis the top position and moved on from there. (If you would like a refresher course on the life and writings of Lewis, turn to Appendix A for a brief overview.)

Mere Christianity may be Lewis's most important religious work, at least according to surveys, but his children's fantasy series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, (hereafter *Chronicles*), are surely his best loved. Lewis began writing the books in the late 1940s. They were published annually from 1950 to 1956 as follows, with the abbreviated names used in this book in parentheses:

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (*Lion*) (1950)

Prince Caspian (*Caspian*) (1951)

The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader" (*Treader*) (1952)

The Silver Chair (*Chair*) (1953)

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The Horse and His Boy (*Horse*) (1954)

The Magician's Nephew (*Nephew*) (1955)

The Last Battle (*Battle*) (1956)

Although for four decades the books were numbered in publication order, in 1994 HarperCollins, taking over the standard paperback edition from Macmillan, numbered the series in chronological order. Arguments can be made for reading the series either way; this book uses the traditional numbering.

Lewis began writing *Lion* about 1948 after an abortive attempt nearly a decade earlier. Some writers have suggested that a difficult philosophical debate at the Socratic Club with Oxford philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe may have moved him away from apologetics and toward fantasy. According to his friend George Sayer, after the debate Lewis said to him about apologetic works, "I can never write another book of that sort" (308—source references are at the end of the book in the "Works Cited" section). Biographer A. N. Wilson claims *Lion* "grew out of Lewis's . . . defeat at the hands of Elizabeth Anscombe at the Socratic Club" (220). Or it may be that, having written *The Problem of Pain*, *Mere Christianity*, and *Miracles* within the past decade, Lewis simply felt he had carried philosophical apologetics as far as he needed to, or possibly even as far as was good for him. In an August 2, 1946, letter to Dorothy Sayers, he remarked that apologetic writing was "dangerous to one's own faith" (*Letters* 382). Whatever the reason for returning, when Lewis began the Narnia books in earnest, he finished the entire series within six years.

As of 1993 Colin Manlove estimated that well over twenty million people had read the Chronicles (20). With the surging interest since then in children's fantasy (*Harry Potter*) and the Tolkien/Lewis circle (*Lord of the Rings*), the past several years have undoubtedly increased that number by millions more. Certainly a key reason for the popularity of the series is its spiritual content; many Christian parents buy the Chronicles for their children and read the books aloud to them as quality family time. Numerous American schoolteachers, particularly in the first few elementary

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years, read the books aloud to their students for the same reasons that Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series is frequently read: the books involve children as characters, involve a noncontemporary setting, are morally wholesome, and are part of a series, which solves the "what to read next" problem. With the increasing attention in many school districts to character education, or "teaching the virtues," the Chronicles are likely to remain a staple of classroom reading for many years to come.

Like most great children's books, such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *Huckleberry Finn*, the Chronicles operate on two levels, with a secondary, sophisticated layer available only to adults—and even then only to adults with a certain level of background knowledge. The books are permeated with subtle references to literature, Christianity, linguistics, mythology, and other areas. These references, whether in Lewis or other writers, are given various names in the study of literature: allusions, parallels, analogues, allegorical elements, etc. Lewis scholars disagree about how allegorical the Chronicles are and whether it's important to try to determine the sources Lewis used and what he did with them. For a fuller study of these issues, see Appendix B.

Whether one finds tracing allusions to be a useful tool in understanding the Chronicles, one thing remains clear to almost any adult reader: C. S. Lewis was a remarkably allusive writer, especially in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, where he borrows from other sources in virtually every chapter. What makes his books so allusive? Why was this such a natural format for Lewis? Two key reasons are these: Lewis read and remembered far more than other writers, and he believed and followed the medieval/Renaissance tradition of telling the old stories rather than producing something entirely new.

To say Lewis read and remembered more than other writers is understatement. In the memoir collection *In Search of C. S. Lewis*, contributors repeatedly provide stunning examples of Lewis's prodigious memory. One of the most astounding comes from a Lewis student of the 1950s (later a *London Observer* drama critic), Kenneth Tynan, who said Lewis had "the most astonishing memory of any

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man I have ever known” (Schofield 6). As evidence, Tynan cited a “game” he and Lewis played in which Tynan would pick a book, page, and line from Lewis’s shelves at random, and Lewis would “always” identify the book and “was usually able to quote the rest of the page” (Schofield 7).

It is hard not to greet an episode like this with skepticism. But Lewis lore is filled with similar incidents. Stephen Schofield recalls a similar incident from the 1950s, a conversation between Rhodes scholar Richard Selig and Lewis in which Lewis claimed to

“remember everything I’ve ever read and bits pop up uninvited.”

“Surely not everything you’ve ever read, Mr. Lewis?”

“Yes everything, Selig, even the most boring texts.”

Unable to let this pass, Selig went to the college library, found an obscure poem, brought it back to the group, and read a bit. Lewis then recited the next ten lines. As Schofield puts it, “Conversation was slow to resume at that end of the table.” (164)

One cannot help wondering whether years and reputation have inflated the accounts. (When your grandparents tell how hard their lives were, how they had to walk miles and miles to school in bad weather, doesn’t it seem like it used to rain four days a week back then, with uphill roads both ways?) Inflated or not, however, the stories clearly indicate a man with astonishing powers of recall—even, according to E. L. Edmonds, for student essays written years earlier (Schofield 41). Lewis sometimes forgot details of his own novels, but the writings of others became a part of him.

And these writings were not few. The extent of Lewis’s reading was prodigious and, to those hardy souls who have attempted to follow in his footsteps, awe-inspiring. Numerous scholars have been tempted, in a laudable effort to understand Lewis better, to read as much as possible of what he read. One begins with a good will, soon feels daunted, then overwhelmed, and finally defeated. To understand the herculean nature of such a task, let us imagine an attempt simply to gain familiarity with all of Lewis’s literary allusions on the

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first ten pages of one typical piece of nonfiction: his essay “On Science Fiction” (*On Stories* 59). These few pages contain references to all of the following literary works:

<i>The Time Machine</i>	<i>The First Men in the Moon</i>
<i>Tom’s A-Cold</i>	<i>Brave New World</i>
<i>1984</i>	<i>The Waves</i>
<i>20,000 Leagues under the Sea</i>	<i>The Land Ironclads</i>
<i>Prelude to Space</i>	“The Battle of Maldon”
<i>Arcadia</i>	“Lepanto”
<i>Inferno</i>	<i>Iter Extaticum Celeste</i>
<i>Gulliver’s Travels</i>	<i>Alice in Wonderland</i>
<i>Everyman</i>	<i>The Ancient Mariner</i>
“Essay on Man”	<i>The Odyssey</i>
<i>Last and First Men</i>	<i>When the Sleeper Awakes</i>
<i>The End of the World</i>	Possible Worlds
<i>Childhood’s End</i>	<i>Many Dimensions</i>
Marchen	<i>Beowulf</i>
She	<i>King Solomon’s Mines</i>
The Brass Bottle	<i>Flatland</i>

All these works are specifically referred to in just ten pages! It’s an impressive list. The last one-third of the essay refers to another twenty-four works, and this list does not include authors mentioned without specific works. Altogether, approximately sixty authors and works are commented upon in this one medium-length essay (not written for publication, I should add, but merely presented as a talk to an English club and published after Lewis’s death).

The list makes clear the breadth not only of Lewis’s reading but of his retention as well, which is perhaps even more impressive. Like a full bucket under a streaming tap, Lewis was continually replenished with images and phrases that spilled over into his own writing. When we further recognize that Lewis used not only literary references in his writing, but theological, linguistic, biographical, autographical, mythological, historical, and biblical ones as well, it is clear that for anyone studying Lewis’s use of allusions, the cup runs over.

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Lewis's other notable characteristic as a joint critic/theologian/novelist was his appreciation of tradition. It could almost be called veneration, although Lewis did write and enjoy science fiction, a relatively modern genre. But at any given point in his career, if asked whether he preferred the present way of doing things or the way it had been done forty years ago, he would probably have preferred the past, whether the choices involved transportation (he didn't drive), communication (he didn't type), or poetry (he didn't write free verse).

This attitude carried over into his novels, where more often than not Lewis followed the method generally favored by authors until the start of this century: to tell stories that had already been told. To many contemporary readers, this desire to build on someone else's foundation seems less praiseworthy than erecting a building from scratch. But to most medieval and Renaissance writers, originality was less important than the quality of the final product. Surely the odds were better of finding a good story among the old "auctores" (authors) than of being able to create one independently. Isaac Newton's comment about being able to see farther because he stood on the shoulders of giants was seen as true not only of science, where the building process was evident, but of literature as well.

C. S. Lewis was perhaps more a product of medieval and Renaissance thinking than any other twentieth-century writer. Significantly, he was named to the chair of medieval and Renaissance poetry at Cambridge during the publication of the *Chronicles*, showing how his literary and fictional interests flourished simultaneously. Like the medieval and Renaissance writers on whom he lectured, Lewis respected traditional associations. A noteworthy early example from the *Chronicles* appears in the sixth chapter of *Lion*, where the children are being led to an unknown destination by a robin. Edmund suggests the robin may be an evildoer, luring them into a trap. Peter reflects on the possibility, then decides against it by remarking significantly, "Still—a robin you know. They're good birds in all the stories I've ever read. I'm sure a robin wouldn't be on the wrong side" (59).

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Lewis's allegiance to established symbolism comes from his view that most symbols become established because they resonate certain values. In his "personal heresy" controversy with E. M. W. Tillyard, Lewis observes: "A poetic symbol—like the rose, for Love, in Guillaume de Lorris—comes trailing clouds of glory from the real world, clouds whose shape and colour largely determine and explain its poetic use. In an equation, x and y will do as well as a and b; but the *Romance of the Rose* could not, without loss, be re-written as the *Romance of the Onion*, and if a man did not see why, we could only send him back to the real world to study roses, onions, and love" (*Heresy* 97).

And like a good medieval author, Lewis used the "kitchen sink" approach to his materials. In an article on "Imagination and Thought in the Middle Ages," Lewis offers a penetrating insight into the medieval scholar's mind: "It was apparently difficult to believe that anything in the books—so costly, fetched from so far, so old, often so lovely to the eye and hand, was just plumb wrong. No; if Seneca and St. Paul disagreed with one another, and both with Cicero, and all these with Boethius, there must be some explanation which would harmonize them" (*Studies* 45).

C. S. Lewis read everything, remembered everything, and used everything. That statement may be hyperbolic, but it's probably less hyperbolic for Lewis than for any other twentieth-century author. Thus his works are filled with allusions, parallels, and analogues. While source studies are of value with any author, this is particularly true of Lewis, who borrowed from so many different places, in a manner that has sometimes led to confusion and sometimes (as in the case of Tolkien) to irritation. Some people enjoy the multiple layers, some do not, but in either case we appreciate Lewis's writing skill more if we can first try to determine as fully as possible what he was doing.

Finally, before we begin, I want to invite you to be amazed. I think Christians need to cultivate the ability to be filled with wonder—at linden trees, at cataract surgery, at Beethoven piano sonatas, even at diet cola! And so I encourage you, during the next

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seven chapters, to enjoy seeing what inventiveness focused on glorifying God can do. Book by book we will proceed through the pages, looking at the wonderful variety of images Lewis worked into his writing.