

Imperial Echoes in C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*

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Abstract:

It was in the beginning of the 16th century that the first seeds of British imperialist ideologies were sown. Queen Elizabeth I played an important role in the British Empire setting its eyes on lands far off and unknown. This was done with the intention of spreading the wings of British rule far and wide. The British troops sailed off to many lands hitherto unknown to them. Eventually, it was only a matter of time before the British claimed many foreign lands as their own and wielded their imperial power over them. C. S. Lewis (29 November 1898 – 22 November 1963) was a British writer famed for his children's fiction. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* tells the tale of the journey of a king and his companions into unknown lands. As they enter new territories, they exercise their enormous power leaving an indelible imprint of their authority over these lands. Lewis fought alongside the British troops during World War I and thus was part of espousing the ambitious ideologies of British imperialism. This propagandist attitude can often be seen displayed in his works. This paper is an attempt to show how predilection for imperialist ambition and power clearly manifests itself in C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

Keywords: imperial, British, power, unknown, claim, propaganda

Imperialism is the unfair practice of a tyrant or powerful nation gaining control over other countries and its people, through colonization or economical and political control. The word *imperialism* comes from the Latin word *imperium*, which means the right “to rule” or have dominion over other states (*An Elementary Latin Dictionary*, 1890). According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, imperialism is “the fact of a powerful country increasing its influence over other countries through business, culture, etc” (778). Across time, imperialism has left a bloody trail. History has demonstrated time and again that the imperialist ambitions to assert authority over weaker territories has consistently resulted in widespread chaos and instability.

Britain's imperialistic ambitions can be traced way back to the 16th century. Over the course of three centuries, the British Empire expanded into a global network of colonies and territories. This led to the emergence of the British Commonwealth in the 20th century, which were territories which recognized the sovereignty of the powerful British Empire (“British Empire”). During its imperial era the British Empire amassed significant amounts of wealth, particularly through the exploitation of its colonies.

Both the World Wars gradually weakened Britain's position as a dominant global power. Once the largest and richest empire in the history of the world, multiple factors led to its ultimate fall and decline. The fading dominance of the British Empire changed the face of the geopolitical landscape. There was a massive shift in global order and redefined power structures evolved around the globe ("The End Of The British Empire After The Second World War").

After World War I ended the dominions signed the peace treaties for themselves and joined the newly formed League of Nations as independent states. When World War II broke out in 1939 the dominions made their own declarations of war, separately from Britain. Many parts of the empire contributed troops and resources to the war effort and took a growing independent view. Both wars left Britain weakened and less interested in its empire. Although Great Britain emerged as one of the victors of World War II, it had been economically devastated by the conflict. ("Decline of the British Empire")

Clive Staples Lewis (29 November 1898 – 22 November 1963) was a British author and theologian famed for his fantasy fiction for children. Lewis achieved literary acclaim as the writer of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The portal fantasy series follows the adventures of a group of children as they travel through multiple worlds filled with magic, mystery and talking animals, setting right from wrong. Though quite simple and straight-forward in nature on the outside, the novels abound in deeper and thought – provoking meanings. Originally intended for children though the series was, one cannot deny that Lewis has touched upon other serious issues in his work as well.

C. S. Lewis was part of the armed forces in combat roles in the First World War during his youth. Lewis entered Oxford in the summer of 1917 and soon enlisted in the army. In a letter to his friend, at a later stage in his life, Lewis recalled the chaos and horrors of war as he had witnessed firsthand. It was this gruesome experience, along-with other unfortunate incidents in his life, which led Lewis to question Christianity and its teachings (*C. S. Lewis and Human Suffering* 21). In *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of my Early Life*, his semi-autobiography, Lewis writes:

I was less than a term at Univ. when my papers came through and I enlisted; ... I passed through the ordinary course of training ... and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Somerset Light Infantry, the old XIIIth Foot. I arrived in the front line trenches on my nineteenth birthday (November 1917), saw most of my service in the villages before Arras — Fampoux and Monchy — and was wounded at Mt Bernenchom, near Lillers, in April 1918. ("Guns and Good Company")

Having served in the First World War, C. S. Lewis would have been intimately acquainted with the shifting landscape of global politics and the subsequent decline of the British Empire. These circumstances likely generated in him an intricate blend of emotions: an enduring belief in empire ideals shadowed by an increasing awareness of its ethical and political injustices. These ambivalences have found its way into *The Chronicles of Narnia* where vestiges of Britain's imperial past are embedded into the fabric of the narrative.

In “Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Classic Children's Literature, and the Imperial-Environmental Imagination in “The Chronicles of Narnia””, Clare Echterling talks about John Miller and his essay “Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Victorian Studies”, where Miller advocates for a fusion of postcolonial ecocriticism and Victorian studies to better understand the entanglement of nature and imperial ideologies. Miller argues that significant imperial themes are often found in Victorian and mid twentieth century literature, including the works of authors like C. S. Lewis, among others. In this context, Echterling writes:

British and American Victorian, and later children's literature, is a key subject for this important work, especially since even texts from the mid-twentieth century, such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, are often extremely conservative and replicate imperial, racist values and ways of thinking passed down from the nineteenth century even when their authors present anti-colonial and/or anti-racist sentiments elsewhere, as Lewis did. (96)

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader narrates the story of a King and his companions and their voyage into the unknown. Edmund Pevensie, Lucy Pevensie and Eustace Scrubb find themselves pulled into the magical world of Narnia once again and this time onto a ship. Once on board the Dawn Treader they meet the King of Narnia, Caspian X, who tells them about his quest to find the seven missing Lords of Narnia. The children too decide to join the King in his mission. The imperialistic ambitions of the voyage are set clear in the words of Reepicheep, who states: “To find all you seek, / There is the utter East” (*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* 31)[*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* will henceforth be referred to as *The Voyage*].

In his book *Geographics of Postcolonialism*, Joanne Sharp briefly talks about Edward Said's *Orientalism* where Said has argued that the concept of the orient is purely a western concept which is far removed from reality. This construct serves as a generalizing narrative which denies the heterogeneous forms of Eastern societies, replacing them with Western fantasies and desires. Sharp writes:

... he is suggesting that the concept of difference between east and west is a geopolitical difference which is written up throughout the texts of western culture whether through travel writing, political texts, paintings, or in academic discussions.... For Said, Orientalism is an imaginative geography for two reasons. First, Europeans projected a *single* culture into the space of the ‘Orient’ that was at odds with the diversity of peoples, cultures and environments contained within the space of the Orient, and second, this space was defined by texts and not by people from the Orient itself. These texts *preceded* experience, so empirical evidence was included but was fitted into the categories that were already constructed. Travellers saw what they expected to see. For Said, this is particularly important because of the link between this imaginative geography and European power. (16 – 17)

The central theme of the novel – a voyage to discover uncharted lands with the intention of governing it – mirrors the imperialist ethos of colonial acquisition and authority. Caspian and his crew, including the Pevensie siblings, represent the noble and superior power which the West thought they were, and they sought to govern and reform the unknown territories of the East. Their mission to locate the seven lost lords can be read as a symbolic gesture towards

the reassertion of imperial sovereignty. In his article “Medieval and Imperial Nostalgia and Abolition in Narnia and the Wizarding World”, Philip Smith states that certain British literature, despite advocating for compassion and justice, ultimately overlook the complexities of British imperial history. He writes,

It is an oft-made observation that the genre of children’s literature embodies an imperialist ideology. As Hunt and Sands argue, readers of postwar British children’s literature might be forgiven for “forgetting that the Empire had disappeared”. Clare Bradford similarly asserts that children’s books of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were “produced within a pattern of imperial culture. (47)

In “Imaginative Geography and its Representations: Orientalizing the Orient”, Edward Said elaborates on the constructed distinction between the East and the West. Citing examples from classical literature, Said pinpoints the way the East and its customs and religions have been represented in the West, shrouded in a veil of mystery and exoticism. He argues that Orientalism is not merely a passive study of the East, but rather an ideologically motivated narrative which reinforces the domination of the West. The biased Western discourse has therefore used the compelling technique of viewing the unfamiliar through the familiar to advance and assert their sense of superiority. Said writes: “The Orient at large, therefore, vacillates between the West’s contempt for what is familiar and its shivers of delight in — or fear of — novelty” (*Orientalism* 59).

The crew make their first stop in the Lone Islands. The Pevensie siblings seem quite familiar with the place as they had once ruled it, a long while ago. Once a part of Narnian territory, the Lone Islands had eventually drifted away from Narnia and formed their own administration system overtime. The group soon discover that the slave trade flourished in the Lone Islands, even though the Narnian laws prohibited it.

King Caspian, along with his loyal supporters, barge into the castle of the governor of the Lone Islands. They manhandle Governor Gumpas, eventually removing him from power. King Caspian then places himself in his place, proclaiming himself the King. He also abolishes slavery, putting an end to the abominable practice. Though much younger in years than the Governor, King Caspian lords over him eventually stripping him of all power and authority. Caspian also hands over the position of the ruler to one of his own, Lord Bern. Caspian thus expands his territory in the first stop of his journey.

Although the act of abolishing slavery seems like an honorable act on the outset, it also reinforces the framework of the benevolent imperial ruler who delivers justice to the uncultured natives. Echoing many colonial narratives, the act of violence is justified as a legitimate instrument of liberation. This reflects the imperial fantasy of righteous conquest: while slavery is denounced, the moral supremacy of the sovereign ruler remains unchallenged.

This imperialistic attitude is quite evident throughout their journey through the unknown. The second island they visit is uninhabited and is full of luxuriant vegetation. They decide to stop for a while but are forced to halt longer than intended due to unavoidable circumstances. In the process, they explore the island and soon discover it to be rich in resources, though they are aware that danger lurks on the surface. King Caspian claims the land

for his own by naming it Dragon Island, intending to come back and explore deeply at a later date.

The crew next reach an island, which also turns out to be uninhabited. There they chance upon an enchanted pool of water which had the power to transmute any object submerged in it to gold. They name it Deathwater Island. Though horrified by the possibilities, King Caspian once again claims the land as his own. He realizes the raw potential of the land and decides to utilize it to their advantage: “The King who owned this island,” said Caspian slowly, and his face flushed as he spoke, “would soon be the richest of all the Kings of the world. I claim this land for ever as a Narnian possession” (*The Voyage* 144).

The crew then move on and reach the island of the Dufflepuds, who address them all as “masters” (*The Voyage* 154). It is soon revealed that the island is ruled by the magician Coriakin, who had put them all under a spell of invisibility. Coriakin voices his thoughts on his perception of the Dufflepuds and says: “... they are very stupid but there is no real harm in them. I begin to grow rather fond of the creatures. Sometimes, perhaps, I am a little impatient, waiting for the day when they can be governed by wisdom instead of this rough magic” (*The Voyage* 180).

Lewis has portrayed the Dufflepuds as foolish, naive and lacking the capacity to govern themselves independently. This mirrors the representation of colonized subjects in imperial discourses: as overtly simplistic and dependent on the benevolent rule of the imperial power. This depiction reaffirms colonial hierarchies and serves to justify Coriakin’s actions by positioning him as the rational ruler whose authority is rendered not only just but also necessary. Using the context of environmentalism, Clare Echterling talks about C. S. Lewis’s imperial perception of the non-western lands. Echterling writes that the *Narnia* series perpetuates an imperial worldview, under the guise of a general philosophy of love for geographically distant lands. Echterling states:

... in the series Lewis presents a deeply imperial, parochial environmental vision that implicitly encourages imperial exploration and control of distant lands. It depicts English, pastoral environments in hierarchical and binary opposition to environments associated with non-white peoples and promotes a type of environmental stewardship based on his own interpretation of Christian theology that suggests only white, civilized, and Christian people are capable, rightful environmental stewards. (100)

Viewed through the lens of postcolonialism, the portrayal of the Dufflepuds story reveal key imperialist ideologies, namely, enforced governance, the infantilization of the natives and the rationalization of unethical and unequal power. While the tone is light-hearted and whimsical, the underlying power structures reveal crucial ideologies of imperial rule, where individual agency is denied and forced control is masked as benevolence.

Beneath the veil of Christian allegory and fantasy, C. S. Lewis has woven a narrative which is deeply entangled with the ideologies of Britain’s imperial past. Through the enactment of moral interventions and hierarchical power structures, Lewis has presented an imperialist worldview, where dominance is not just accepted but considered virtuous. Ultimately, *The*

Voyage of the Dawn Treader reveals how fantasy literature and imagined worlds can reproduce and subtly question the ideologies of imperial power.

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