

# Christianity in Children's Fantasy Literature

Tuesday, December 2, 2014 3:25 PM



## Christian Allegory and Mr. Tumnus

- Mr. Tumnus's physical form (half human and half goat) is symbolic of the Christian understanding of the dual nature of human beings- animal and spiritual
- "Man is truly himself when his body and soul are intimately united; the challenge of eros can be said to be truly overcome when this unification is achieved. Should he aspire to be pure spirit and to reject the flesh as pertaining to his animal nature alone, then spirit and body would both lose their dignity. On the other hand, should he deny the spirit and consider matter, the body, as the only reality, he would likewise lose his greatness." (ENCYCLICAL LETTER DEUS CARITAS EST OF THE SUPREME PONTIFF BENEDICT XVI TO THE BISHOPS PRIESTS AND DEACONS MEN AND WOMEN RELIGIOUS AND ALL THE LAY FAITHFUL ON CHRISTIAN LOVE)
- Lewis's theology was influenced by that of his friend J.R.R. Tolkien, a devout Roman Catholic

## Christianity without the Church in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

- Lewis upholds what he terms "merely Christian" doctrine while creating a world in which Christianity as such does not exist" (Wood 239)
- Characters interact directly with Aslan, the Christ figure of the story who enacts the salvation, death, and resurrection acts of Christ in feline form
- In spite of the overt presence of Christian theology in Lewis's novel, the constructs of a church or the Church are not present in Narnia



## Pullman's Church in *The Golden Compass*

- In direct contrast with Lewis, The Church is very present in the text
- Pullman's Church (and God) are oppressive forces
- In keeping with the particular style of Pullman's writing, which he calls fantastic realism, The Church is recognizable as an image of the Christian Church, but Pullman alters details as needed to fit his purpose
- Pullman utilizes and edits Biblical text

## J.K. Rowling and Harry Potter

- Some scholars claim that elements of Christian morality and symbolism are present throughout the series
- Rowling also makes use of the Christ archetype in her *Harry Potter* series
- Christian themes only become explicitly element in the final book of the series however, when the protagonist becomes clearly defined as a Christ figure through self-sacrifice and resurrection



### Orthodox Reading of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

Before the beginning of time, a group of angels led by Satan and motivated by pure malice rebelled against God's rule and were condemned to Hell. God then created the universe as a hierarchical structure with Himself at the top. In this hierarchy, humans were created to rule over animals, and men to rule over women. God designed the world for human enjoyment but set one rule: they must not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. The original humans, encouraged by Satan, disobeyed God's command, and at this point they and the world fell into a state of sin, with death as the proper punishment for sin.

Most critics and scholars read Milton's account of humanity's fall from grace as a cautionary tale in which innocence and obedience is equated with goodness, while experience (sexuality) and disobedience is equated with evil.

### Romantic Reading of *Paradise Lost*

Asserting that Milton was "of the Devil's party without knowing it," Romantic poets William Blake, Percy Shelley, and Lord Byron saw Milton's God as an unjust and arbitrary tyrant, while portraying Satan as "a gallant Promethean rebel" fighting for a righteous cause. By their understanding, Satan's rebellion was motivated not by malice or greed but by a desire for justice; similarly, Adam and Eve's defiance of God's command was a bid for understanding and agency.

### William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*

Exchanging childhood innocence for maturity is not inherently sinful to Blake, but an inevitable stage in human maturity and a necessary step on the path to higher innocence. This "higher innocence" denotes a state in which one's good behavior is made more significant by one's awareness of sin. By Blake's logic, which he articulates in his *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, Eve's defiance of God's order was necessary in order for humanity to attain a state of "true" morality.

### Innocence and Experience, Good and Evil in the Fantasies of Lewis and Pullman

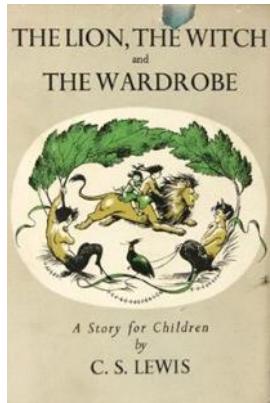
C.S. Lewis supports the traditional, orthodox reading of *Paradise Lost*. Accordingly, his God figure in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Aslan, is a benevolent but absolute authority. Lewis feels that Eve's defiance of God's authority had a wholly negative effect on humankind, and thus he makes an example of Susan in *The Last Battle*, denying her re-entry into Narnia when she, like Eve, seeks to exchange her innocence (childhood) for experience (adulthood). To Lewis, innocent children are inherently "better" than experienced adults.

Meanwhile, Philip Pullman, in keeping with William Blake's ideas, sees Eve's disobedience as a necessary step towards a higher existence in which wisdom, freedom, and independence—personal agency—trump the authoritarian dictates of a deity like Milton's God or Lewis's Aslan. In Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, the God figure is a tyrannical usurper of the throne of Heaven. His protagonist, Lyra, is not only allowed to grow up, but gains a more profound understanding of the world as she matures. Neither childhood nor adulthood are inherently bad to Pullman.

# Cultural Reception: Transatlantic Religiosity

Tuesday, December 2, 2014 3:26 PM

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe (1950)



*The Chronicles of Narnia:* Over 100 million copies sold worldwide since 1950

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe (2005)



Budget: \$180 million  
Opening Weekend:  
US: \$65.6 million  
UK: £8.8 million -> \$13.9 million

Both movies took the overt religion out of the story in order to succeed with mainstream audiences - but *The Golden Compass* still flopped in the US. **Why?**

**Politics of Advocacy, Attack, and Assent:**  
Conventional Western morality is based on Christianity. *His Dark Materials* subverts that order, even completely reverses it, whereas *The Chronicles of Narnia* reaffirms it.

Both worlds, however, operate within dichotomous moralities of Good and Evil. But in *The Chronicles*, the "Right" path is understood and established; only Edmund "strays" and then Aslan corrects him - whereas in *His Dark Materials*, Lyra has to discover for herself which side is Right, and does not do so until the very end of *The Golden Compass*.

**So what?** The evolution in children's literature indicates that morality is becoming more fluid, at least to certain audiences: fiction readers, for one, specifically young adult fiction readers.

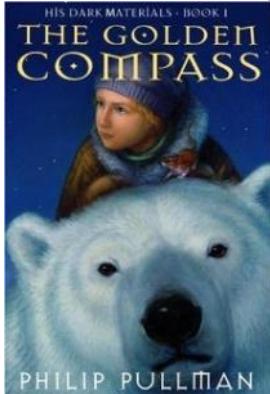
However, the moviegoers, particularly American moviegoers, seem to be a different demographic. *The Golden Compass* was a highly controversial film and performed poorly at the box office. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, however, was a booming box office success - particularly in America, more than quintupling UK sales. *The Golden Compass*'s domestic sales, however, were barely twice that of the UK.

## Meaning...?

- America is more religiously conservative than the UK
- Moviegoers are more religiously conservative than fiction readers
- Morality has become more fluid in the past fifty years
- Children's literature is still a huge force in shaping morality in the public conscious
- Children's literature is heavily political

\*These are not definitive conclusions, just thoughts I had after doing my research and observing trends.\*

His Dark Materials: The Golden Compass (1995)



*His Dark Materials:* Over 15 million copies sold worldwide since 1995

His Dark Materials: The Golden Compass (2007)



Budget: \$180 million  
Opening Weekend:  
US: \$25.8 million  
UK: £7.2 million ->\$11.4 million

## Putting it All Together: Good and Evil in Children's Fantasy

Tuesday, December 2, 2014 3:26 PM

Children's fantasy literature in the twentieth century often takes its perceptions of good and evil from the Christian belief system. *The Chronicles of Narnia* provides the most overt example of Christian morality within a fantasy series, though the institutional Church is never mentioned.

In Christian morality, mercy, obedience, and innocence are some of the most highly valued virtues. Adults particularly value these traits in children.

Fantasy allows authors to literalize many of the spiritual elements of Christianity, like God and the Devil as manifested in Aslan and the White Witch. Writers like C.S. Lewis and Philip Pullman draw on traditional Christian literature like *Paradise Lost* in creating conflict situations for their characters.



Recently, some authors like Philip Pullman have used fantasy as a way to "write back" against Christian morality and traditional expectations for children. Their stories often result in controversy, because they posit unorthodox ideas of good and evil.

Other authors, like J.K. Rowling, may use some Christian elements in their good vs. evil conflicts but generally deal with morality in a more secular sense.