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Is the Book Really Better?: Comparing the Facets of Fantasy Apparent in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and its 2005 Cinematic Adaptation

Brianna J. Manzano

Christian Fantasy Literature

Dr. Branson Woodard

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“Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy. This story is about something that happened to them when they were sent away from London during the war because of the air-raids” (Lewis 2). Sixty-eight years ago, these two simple lines introduced the world to the Pevensie children, who were destined to travel through a wardrobe into one of literature’s most creative, compelling, and enveloping fantasy worlds. Seven books later, the Pevensie children were kings and queens, yes, but considering the hugely expanded scope, they were merely inhabitants of the sprawling lore of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Narnia, then, became much more than a world beyond a wardrobe. Narnia, the place and the lore, became a staple of any sturdy fantasy diet.

Thus, in 2005, the prospect of a Walt Disney Company cinematic adaptation of C.S. Lewis’ immortal mythos was met, as most cinematic adaptations of popular literary properties are, with some hesitation from fans of the books. The journey from bookshelf to silver screen is complicated, to say the least. Textual media and visual media may share love of and support for the creative vision, but countless variables must shift in the transition. Lewis’s direct writing style was as much the bridge to Narnia as the wardrobe. Regardless of skill, resources, or intention, the emotion, breadth, intrigue, or atmosphere of his world seemed likely to get lost in translation.

But this hesitation was not without its healthy counter of optimism: Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* had begun its twenty-first-century cinematic run only four years prior and was met with overwhelming critical and commercial success. Peter Jackson’s triumph with Tolkien’s own cornerstone fantasy series seemed to prove that properly helmed and managed cinematic adaptations of iconic properties were not doomed from the start. The two media could serve well their powerful source material, even if its facets of fantasy might be conveyed differently on film

than on the page. Andrew Adamson's adaptation of Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was released in the United States on December 9, 2005. The film did not quite receive the critical acclaim of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*, but it was received well by critics, and even more so by audiences (Rotten Tomatoes).

As noted, textual and visual media offer entirely different interactions with a creative property, regardless of how much care is put into careful translation. Adamson's adaptation conveys Lewis's plot more faithfully than many cinematic adaptations of literary properties (like nearly every literary adaptation Disney has undertaken), adding and detracting little, and changing even less. This steadfastness to the book's plot allows for an excellent side-by-side comparison of the two media and their strengths and weaknesses in portraying facets of fantasy. Such an investigation yields that, while film and text have their limitations, both can do justice to a piece of fantasy literature.

In order to investigate such a claim, one question must first be answered: what *is* fantasy? What does a piece of fantasy literature contain that designates it as fantasy? What are the elements of fantasy that these media are conveying through their respective conduits? The question of what designates a work of fantasy as such has plagued literary scholars for the genre's entire history. The comparison of fantasy text and film might best be served by the fundamental facets of fantasy outlined by Dr. Branson Woodard, Professor of English at Liberty University: 1) utilization of improbable events; 2) inclusion of otherworldly beings; 3) integrity of narrative truth; 4) focus on nature but alertness to supernatural; and 5) elevation of setting over all other elements.

Such a comparison must also begin with an understanding of certain terms. "Setting," for example, refers not only to a physical place, but also to a cultural, temporal, and scientific

context. The events of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* do not merely take place in the Narnian winter wasteland and the Stone Table; there is also the context of the Deep Magic, the prophecy, the White Witch's reign, and Aslan's journey through the fantasy land. Animals speak, and thus there is some fundamental difference between Narnia and the human world – not only physically, but scientifically. “Setting” encompasses all of these elements. “Real world,” as well, is an irrelevant term through the lens of integrity of narrative truth. The Narnian continuity considers all of the events “real,” so the world that the Pevensie children leave and consider real initially will, for the purposes of this investigation, be termed the “human world.” As well, “events” and “circumstances” are here interchangeable, as events form circumstances, and circumstances form events.

Certain fantasy elements in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* must remain in its retelling regardless of medium. The inclusion of these elements is not a matter of technique; it is a fixture of the narrative's plot – without these elements, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is no longer being adapted, but change beyond recognition. These are, of course, the utilization of improbable events and the inclusion of otherworldly beings. The specifics of these elements are, of course, markedly similar across the film and the novel.

Various improbable events crucial to the story are conveyed in both Adamson's adaptation and Lewis's original text. There is no known wardrobe which serves as a portal to another world, and generally such basic laws of physics remain the same, making the passageway's unreliability a similarly improbable circumstance. The existence of magic could also be considered an improbable circumstance. The kinds of magic and magical objects which manifest in both media include the White Witch's food-and-beverage-manifesting liquid, her wand that turns living creatures into stone statues, and her magic that keeps the land in perpetual

winter; Lucy's cordial that heals the wounded; and Aslan's resurrection and his ability to restore the Witch's statues into living creatures. Susan's bow that "does not easily miss" (Lewis 47) and horn that is bound to bring help could be considered enchanted, but neither the film nor the novel confirms this.

Various otherworldly beings also inhabit both the film and the original text. Talking animals, for example, are common in both works. (An animal's talking might also fall under the category of improbable event, especially when considering that the human world is familiar with beavers, foxes, squirrels, and other animals that speak in the work and are not distinctly otherworldly, but these animals display a level of sentience that animals in the human world do not display, implying a separation from the human world's animals which qualifies them as otherworldly.) The book names at least thirty separate species of otherworldly entity (faun, dryad, naiad, satyr, tree-spirit, centaur, minotaur, ghou, etc.), many of whom the film does not have time to call out particularly. Some in the film, however, are easily identifiable, such as fauns, centaurs, minotaurs, and unicorns – not to mention Father Christmas.

Clearly, these elements are integral to the heart of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* regardless of the medium in which it may come. When the topic of medium arises, the question in relation to these elements becomes how well the specific medium suits their use.

Lewis's original text uses descriptive language in an attempt to make these fantastical fixtures real. This technique is much more involved with elements of fantasy related to the physical setting of Narnia, as Lewis does much more to develop this feature than the beings that inhabit Narnia, which are given little more description than their mythical names, and events and circumstances do not lend themselves well to descriptive imagery. Still, their mention implants the image in the reader's mind, and raw imagination can do infinitely more than dollars and cents

can. The efficacy of these elements in the text, though, is limited by the investment and the imagination of the reader. Imagination itself is a resource which can conjure the most magnificent images of Narnia, but not every reader will possess unlimited reserves of imagination, in the same way that not every adaptation of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* will possess a budget of \$180 million (Box Office Mojo).

Adamson's adaptation, by comparison, utilizes practical and visual effects to manifest the appearance of unlikely events and otherworldly beings – thus, there are practical limits to these manifestations. The film's budget exists as a finite number, and as such, can only purchase so many set builders, animators, and effects artists. Although the film was amply furnished, and it was produced by one of the most powerful studios in the industry's history, so Lewis's story was being adapted with some of the time's most state-of-the-art technology and resources. This ample furnishing allowed a seamless transition from spare-room to snow-dusted clearing. With the exception of the mighty and magnificent Aslan, the film's animal effects have aged poorly, despite receiving critical praise at the time (Rotten Tomatoes). Conversely, the film's practical effects are stunning. The film offers a direct sensory stimulation which, obviously, cannot be supplemented by the text.

Which medium better suits these elements of fantasy? "Better" and "worse" are terms nearly as irrelevant as "real world" and "fantasy world." While there does exist a framework within which fantasy should be read, considered, and judged, the text engages a reader's imagination, which has no practical limitations. The fantasy world, its magic, and its creatures can exist in whatever form the reader assigns them within the confines of the form created by the author and the conventions of fantasy. The film, however, provides a visual counterpart. Viewers experience a vision of the fantasy world, its magic, and its creatures apart from their

own, backed by millions of dollars' worth of effects which offer a convincing vision, and are provided a sensory stimulation that the text, by definition, must lack. Both are limited by the resources upon which they call. Both are appealing to different audiences. Both are valuable to one individual and less to another.

The utilization of unlikely events and the inclusion of otherworldly beings must remain if C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is going to be told. The execution of other crucial elements of fantasy, however, will change based on the medium. For example, the film and the text must handle differently the story's integrity of narrative truth. A work of fantasy does not acknowledge that it is fiction; it does not refer to itself as fanciful for the sake of undermining its truth. A work of fantasy is told as though it is history, and since this element involves technique, it will vary in execution based on the medium.

C.S. Lewis's original text handles its integrity of narrative truth very firmly. Lewis tells the story in past tense, implying, of course, that the events he is describing have taken place in the past. This is a convention of fiction which lends itself to a retelling as history; most fictional works are told in past tense, which implies a historical, factual status, as people recount stories to each other in past tense. Not only is the story told in past tense, but, more in keeping with a historicity than most works of fiction, Lewis opens his narrative not with a character's action or from a character's point of view, but with a point-blank assertion that he is conveying facts: "Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy. This story is about something that happened to them when they were sent away from London during the war because of the air-raids" (Lewis 2).

The textual medium also allows for the insertion of details that are not relevant to the story for world-building purposes, as Lewis also does in his opening paragraph when naming the

professor's servants ("Their names were Ivy, Margaret and Betty, but they do not come into the story much" [2]) and when drawing attention to Susan's blister when the children are trekking to the Stone Table in chapter twelve. Some of these additional world-building details refer specifically to the story, like Lewis's inclusion that there are other stories about the professor's house "even stranger than the one I am telling you now" (22). In the text, insertion of such details is done in order to give a greater breadth to the world than the relevant details do; it is done to show that the world exists apart from the narrative. It becomes clearer that films and text serve different purposes when considering that such a technique is often viewed as detrimental to a film's flow and focus, but the novel's world benefits from such a tangent.

The textual medium also allows Lewis to insert references to absolute knowledge that corresponds to the reader's perception of reality, creating the illusion that the novel's reality and the reader's reality are one and the same. This technique can be seen in Lewis's repetition "that it is very foolish to shut oneself into any wardrobe" (4). Lewis's speaking with authority on these subjects brings a similar weight to absolute statements made about Narnia as well, bringing a feature of reality to the fantasy world ("This was bad grammar of course, but that is how beavers talk when they are excited; I mean, in Narnia – in our world they usually don't talk at all" [45]). This includes one particularly intriguing reference to human-world experiences with the idea of Father Christmas, an otherworldly being:

Everyone knew him because, though you see people of his sort only in Narnia, you see pictures of them and hear them talked about even in our world - the world on this side of the wardrobe door. But when you really see them in Narnia it is rather different. Some of the pictures of Father Christmas in our world make him look only funny and jolly. But now that the children actually stood looking at him they didn't find it quite like that. He

was so big, and so glad, and so real, that they all became quite still. They felt very glad, but also solemn. (Lewis 46)

In addition to these bridges to reality, the textual medium allows the author to make direct references to himself and to the reader. Instead of removing himself from the work and acting as an omniscient narrator whose presence could only be fictional, Lewis writes himself as a conduit for information, referring often to his own ability to tell the story and calling upon readers' own experiences to incite empathy. In fact, he occasionally inserts himself as a barrier between the reader and certain information, as an adult would when omitting unsavory details from a true story being told to a child. Lewis can be seen doing this when describing some of the witch's acolytes as so vile that "I won't describe because if I did the grownups would probably not let you read this book" (64) and when Mrs. Beaver provides something clearly alcoholic for the children to imbibe ("Then Mrs. Beaver handed round in the dark a little flask out of which everyone drank something – it made one cough and splutter a little and stung the throat, but it also made you feel deliciously warm after you'd swallowed it and everyone went straight to sleep" [45]).

When weighing all of these textual techniques for maintaining integrity of narrative truth, it would seem the text has a clear advantage over film. The visual medium lends itself to a feeling of creative expression – historical accounts are shot very differently from films of fictional narrative. Shot composition, camera movement and placement, color control – all of the meticulous elements of style unique to narrative film production can betray the creative intentions of the work.

Also compromising to the illusion is the use of any largely recognizable actor or actress. Adamson's adaptation broadcasted the talents of Georgie Henley, Skandar Keynes, Anna

Popplewell, and William Moseley as Lucy, Edmund, Susan, and Peter, respectively. These four were relatively unknown at the time, and to this day each of them is still known mainly for their performances in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Tilda Swinton (Jadis, the White Witch) and James McAvoy (Mr. Tumnus), however, have since gone on to play much more notable roles, and many actors involved (Dawn French, Rupert Everett, Jim Broadbent, Michael Madsen, etc.) were already well-established and celebrated actors, diminishing any genuinely historical quality.

The visual medium does, however, carry some advantages in the area of integrity of narrative truth. Aside from the obvious – how very easy and straightforward it is to trust one’s own eyes and ears – the visual medium allows for a more subtle, cohesive world-building experience. Text can only engage a reader’s mind’s eye, and the flow of information is limited to the text’s direct assertions. Even when the text includes information in the form of a sensory image, it is still made clear by its mere mention that it is important information for world-building purposes. Film, meanwhile, does not need to thrust important details to the forefront.

This contrast is visible in both media when comparing Lucy’s emergence from the wardrobe. Lewis’s text includes an exchange which spans several lines in order to reveal to his readers that no time has passed in the human world while Lucy was in Narnia. Even if he did not choose to reveal this through a confused dialogue between the siblings, Lewis would have had to tell his readers that no time had passed for the other three Pevensie children. The film’s audience, though, can hear Peter counting as Lucy enters the wardrobe, and he can still be heard counting when she emerges shouting, “It’s alright! I’m back! I’m alright!” several minutes later, implying only through audio stimuli that Lucy is arriving back in the same instant that she left (Adamson). This kind of indirect world-building mimics the way in which people interact

with and learn about their own situations – not by reading that the sky is blue, but by seeing that the sky is blue.

This subtlety can also be observed by noting the gradual disappearance of the White Witch's crown throughout the film. When viewers first meet her during her first encounter with Edmund, her icy crown grows directly from the top of her head. As all ice does, her crown slowly diminishes in size as the spell breaks. Despite her apparent victory as she stands above Aslan wielding her knife, her crown has completely disappeared, conveying silently that her power has completely disappeared. This method of storytelling also mirrors the indirect observational method people use when interacting with the world, which comes across much more naturally than any upfront declaration on Lewis's part that the Witch's power is fading.

In terms of integrity of narrative truth, the film is unable to promise its authenticity and does not masquerade as a true-to-life tale. It would be limited in its ability to do this, even if it were to adopt the self-awareness that more recent films have come to possess. This considered, though, fantasy is commonly assumed to be a genre of fiction, and all that a work must do in order to include this element of fantasy is avoid referring to itself as a work of fiction. Different consumers of media, depending on their preference and susceptibility, will more readily find one real than the other. Both media are able to portray Narnia as real in one way or another.

Finally, the two setting-heavy elements of fantasy ~~come~~ must be considered: focus on nature with alertness to (or awareness of) supernature, and elevation of setting over all other elements. The story itself must focus on setting, and the setting must include the possibility of the supernatural. In consideration of these two elements as conveyed by the textual and visual media, as usual, the imagination/sensory stimulation preference meddles with the balance. However, attention must also be paid to whether or not one medium demands the emphasis of

one story element over another. In this vein, the text has a decided advantage.

As mentioned, Lewis's original text uses sensory imagery to bring Narnia to life in the minds of his readers, most powerfully when illustrating the transition from the White Witch's winter to Aslan's glorious spring:

Every moment the patches of green grew bigger and the patches of snow grew smaller. Every moment more and more of the trees shook off their robes of snow. Soon, wherever you looked, instead of white shapes you saw the dark green of firs or the black prickly branches of bare oaks and beeches and elms. Then the mist turned from white to gold and presently cleared away altogether. Shafts of delicious sunlight struck down on to the forest floor and overhead you could see a blue sky between the tree tops.... Coming suddenly round a corner into a glade of silver birch trees Edmund saw the ground covered in all directions with little yellow flowers – celandines. The noise of water grew louder. Presently they actually crossed a stream. Beyond it they found snowdrops growing. (Lewis 51)

Not only does the sensory imagery engage readers of the work differently than the direct sensory stimulation of the cinematic adaptation, but the text being allowed to do this separates it and inherently serves the setting-heavy elements of fantasy more than a cinematic adaptation could. Lewis's text, as a text, is able to go on indulgent descriptive excursions through Narnia as the characters pass through it; in his freedom to interject whatever he likes, he is able to elucidate not only the physical setting, but also the cultural setting of Narnia, as he does while Lucy dines with Mr. Tumnus in chapter 2, or while the Pevensie children take refuge with the Beavers in chapter 8. These elucidations elevate the setting all the more when taking into account the rest of Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, which paint the Pevensies more as players in Narnia's all-

enveloping mythos than as characters whose story the reader follows (notice how it is not known as Lewis's *Chronicles of the Pevensie Family*).

Film, on the other hand, elevates character above nearly anything else. This is not a specific focus of Adamson's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*; this is a fairly standard guideline for filmmaking. Character is the impetus driving everything else forward – people watch movies to connect with characters. On the powerful impact that strong characters have on a film, one Howard Sklar of the University of Helsinki writes, “As anyone who has watched an engaging film or read an engaging novel knows, we invest ourselves deeply in the experience of living with those characters... We tend to respond to them as though they were real individuals” (Sklar qtd. in Nuwer).

The importance of character considered, Adamson's adaptation emphasizes the Pevensies' response to this fantastical world, highlighting their relationship with the fantasy much more than the fantasy itself. Adamson even injects a bit more personality into Lewis's fairly flat characters – Pevensies and Narnians alike. The professor is even named, unlike in Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (though he was named later in the series). The physical and cultural setting becomes more of a backdrop for the characters and the plot – the plot, which, as a standard rule of filmmaking, is second in importance to character. Certain scenes (like one between Edmund and Mr. Tumnus in Jadis's prison) and character conflicts (like Peter's inability to act decisively) are inserted in the interest of drama and intrigue. This makes for a more enjoyable viewing experience, but the importance of these other elements forces setting to accept, at most, a tertiary role.

These shifted priorities, however, simply signify that the film conveys the importance of the setting differently than Lewis's text does. Yes, the text does have the freedom to explore the

setting through sensory imagery and yes, character and plot are more crucial to a film's quality than in-canon physical and cultural context. However, the plot and the characters of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* are a product of, and therefore an expression of, of its fantastical setting (with the exception of the Pevensies). In the same way that the Pevensies' behavior, personalities, and idiosyncrasies could tell the audience one thing or another about World-War-II-era England, the pronounced personalities of Narnia's inhabitants and the heightened drama of its Deep Magic illuminate the emotional atmosphere of the land that spawned them. Setting may have less of a direct importance, but the intrigue and appeal of the film can only come from the characters' relationship with the setting. Narnia is a backdrop, but as a backdrop, it provides the characters with their much-needed boon – without the fantastical setting, the Pevensies are relegated to games of hide and seek in Professor Kirke's old English-countryside estate.

Adamson's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was nominated for three Oscars for its remarkable atmospheric elements (makeup, sound design, and visual effects), taking the year's win for makeup ("Academy Award Nominations") and becoming Walden Media's most successful film to date, and 2005's second-highest grossing film (Box Office Mojo). Its success led Disney to produce two later Narnian works – *Prince Caspian* (2008) and *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (2010). Critical and commercial success, though, do not necessarily translate to a faithful relaying of facets of fantasy. C.S. Lewis's original text became a foundational text for the genre, doing much to create the landscape of fantasy literature today; its cinematic counterpart cannot be praised so highly in terms of its own medium. Clearly, the film's facets of fantasy and the text's facets of fantasy do not exhibit a one-to-one correlation.

But is this a bad thing? Must this technique be used over that technique in order for fantasy to be experienced effectively? The textual medium offers a direct interaction with the

material and allows consumers to participate in the world-building through imagination; the visual medium gives consumers a subtler, more sensory relationship with the creative work. Both media are limited by the resources from which they draw their appeal, and both media are controlled according to the creative vision of the creator. One has one type of effect; the other has another. It seems the only requirement for an effective fantasy experience, apart from the fantastical, is a devout respect for the material at hand.

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