

Portfolio of Writing

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Name of Tutor: Rob Jones

I was definitely a Narnia child. Countless hours were spent banging the backboards of wardrobes and climbing in cupboards in the hopes that I would tumble into a snowy wonderland. When the snow fell in the winter, I would walk the forests of fir trees that surrounded my house in the hopes of finding a single lamppost. Alas it was all in vain, and I have yet to find any world other than my own. In my tiny bedroom in the caravan, my boxset of books sat in a pile on the floor (I had no space for a bookshelf) next to other beloved favourites such as Harry Potter or The School for Good and Evil. They were among the first to make the move into my new bedroom in the house.

One of my favourite parts of secondary school was the library, and I was a regular visitor. I would stock up on books for the holidays and weekends, hand picking those that looked the most interesting from the vast shelves. It was just before the Christmas holidays and a series had caught my eye, when I took the books to the librarian, she just smiled a sly smile and said 'enjoy.' I broke my own rule of finishing one book to start another that evening, Harry Potter tossed aside as I readied to enter a new world. The book was Northern Lights by Philip Pullman, and I felt as though I truly had stepped into a magical world.

Whilst taking place in a world parallel to ours, with characters whose souls existed outside of their bodies in the form of Daemons, I was struck with how real the characters were. Pullman's characters were intensely human. Lyra would cheat and lie and fight and say nasty things, because she could, because that is what humans do. She wasn't flawed for a reason; she was just human. Furthermore, Pullman's celebration of human sexuality was something in direct contrast to Lewis' Christian narratives and messages. Admittedly, there was something of a thrill to be reading a book that, although not banned in the UK, was still highly challenged in other, more conservative parts of the world.

It is no secret that Lewis was considered sexist, having famously worried that the supposed limited capacities of female students would make his work more difficult and that the school may degenerate into a women's university (Van Leeweun, 2010, p.37). His sexism is most apparent in his treatment of female characters, in particular Susan. When we are first introduced to Susan in 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,' she takes on a nurturing role, taking care of her siblings, a mother without the sin of motherhood. She is crowned 'High Queen Susan the Gentle', and never married, thus still upholding the virtue of chastity. However, by the time the final book takes place, Susan is 'no longer a friend of Narnia' (Lewis, 1956, p.127-128). Jill Pole states that she is more interested in 'nylons and lipstick' (Lewis, 1956, p.118). In simple terms, Susan discovered sex, and as a result she is no longer welcome in Narnia. On the surface, somewhat distasteful but nothing too extreme, the problem truly arises when one considers what Narnia is an allegory for. Susan is denied entrance into Heaven because she succumbs to, what Lewis believed to be, sin. Many have leapt to Lewis' defence saying that Susan's greatest sin was vanity rather than sexual awakening (Brown, 2015, p.96), however it is important to note that other female characters in the books also express vain tendencies. Jill Pole and even Lucy Pevensie express moments of vanity and materialism, but they are still allowed into Heaven. The primary difference between Susan and her younger sister Lucy is that Lucy was 'always gay and golden-haired' (Lewis, 1950, p.167). In simple terms, Lucy remained an eternal child, untouched by the troubles of growing up.

An author who not only commented on this but also subverted it in his own work is Philip Pullman. In an article from 1998 titled 'The Dark Side of Narnia,' Pullman states that Susan's sin was not vanity nor her sexual awakening, but rather her choice to grow up, something that 'Lewis didn't approve of' (Pullman, 1998). In Pullman's highly controversial trilogy 'His Dark Materials,' he portrays sexual awakening and the fall of man as the fundamental good, a necessary part of self-awareness and maturation, additionally it has been observed that Pullman may make a connection between wisdom and sex (Schweizer, 2005, p.169). This is important as such an understanding could be linked to feminism, with the second wave of feminism in particular creating a clear divide between the act of sex and reproduction. It is also important to note that Pullman's novel was published in 1995. The nineties saw the rise of a new school of thought called New Atheism, a more aggressive and polarising view on religion. Additionally, it has been noted that Lyra is a female fantasy heroine in a genre dominated by men, and that the blurring of boundaries is something very common in modern feminist discourse (Solhaug, 2008). This is most apparent in the unity of Lyra and her male Daemon Pantalaimon, despite being opposite genders, they both have male and female attributes, coming together to create one whole being. This is quite opposing to the four Pevensie siblings, each of whom fulfils a specific role in regard to the stories, with attributes other than what is required of them, more specifically, Peter and Edmund are the masculine gatherers and protectors whereas Susan and Lucy are the healers and nurturers.

Pullman's Lyra is in some ways the antithesis of Susan Pevensie, being described as a 'coarse and greedy little savage' (Pullman, 1995, p.37) in comparisons to Susan's 'tall and gracious woman' (Lewis, 1950, p.166-167). Furthermore, Lyra is shown taking an active role in her battles, fighting and negotiating her way out of troubles, whereas both Susan and Lucy are given passive roles in Narnian battles, being relegated stereotypical fantasy roles such as healers. More importantly, Lyra is in the position of Eve, Adam's wife, who was responsible for the Fall of Man. Her fulfilment of the Second Fall is key to the plot, and her sexual awakening is necessary for the liberation of society. Unlike Narnia, where Christian values permeate everything with intended positive effect, the Magisterium in Pullman's world is a twisted and totalitarian version of the Catholic Church. Everyone in the world, including the institutions of learning must remain on good terms with the Church (Pullman, 1995, p.128). The Witches state the Lyra is 'destined to bring about the end of destiny' (Pullman, 1995, p.310), in other words Lyra is tasked with restoring Free Will to the oppressed subjects of the Magisterium, much as Eve did when she ate the Fruit.

I think perhaps the key difference between Pullman and Lewis' as authors is their different portrayals of characters growing up. Pullman sees it as a positive thing, a necessary thing not only for individual development but also for the good of society. In an interview he states that he wanted to portray the Fall of Man as an entirely good thing, as he believes that our transition into sexual beings is good (Waldman, 2015). On entirely the other hand, Lewis stated in a sermon that people were too ignorant and foolish because of sex and personal ambition that they could not see infinite joy (Heaven) if it was offered to them (Lewis, 2001). In the same sermon he argues that pleasure can turn into self-appreciation, thus going against the virtue of humility (Lewis, 2001). From this we can clearly see where the difference in perspective lies. This being said I do not believe that these views should discourage potential readers from either authors work. Both are cornerstones in the fantasy genre, and both are immensely influential works.

To conclude, whilst I may not wholly agree with Lewis' treatment of Susan nor his somewhat scathing view on women, *The Chronicles of Narnia* played a fundamental role in how I read, write and view literature. They showed me the value of drawing from ideas that already existed in the cultural conscience to make a story more accessible and relatable, whilst also reiterating how changing such ideas could also be a good thing. If anything at all, they are good fun to read. Pullman, however, challenges his readers to think not only on philosophical questions such as free will and freedom of thought but also our own learned ideas of gender. He challenges the stigma surrounding sex and blurs the line between the genders to such a degree that gender itself becomes irrelevant. Pullman's novels not only entertained me, but introduced me to the importance of worldbuilding, the usefulness of politics in story and that nothing was off limits. No idea was immune to criticism. In the digital era, I believe this to be more important now than ever.

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