The Portrayal of Evil in C.S. Lewis’s *The Horse and His Boy*
Abstract

C.S. Lewis’s Chronicles of Narnia (there are seven books all together) are often perceived as children’s books that in a simple and uncomplicated way convey the positive message of Christianity. However, Lewis’s intention was as much to deal with negative moral issues such as selfishness, dishonesty, betrayal, cruelty, vindictiveness and hypocrisy, in other words: aspects of evil. The purpose of this essay is to examine C.S. Lewis’s portrayal of evil in the Chronicles of Narnia, in order to show the novel’s complexity. My main focus will be on one of the lesser known of the books, The Horse and His Boy.

I believe that Lewis through his books convey the complexity of live, but through a perspective which makes it easier for children to accept. All the ingredients of real life are included in the Chronicles, even the ugly side to life, namely evil. By displaying the phenomenon of evil in so many different ways in his books, I believe that Lewis is trying to show the complexity which lies in the workday world as well as in heaven and the world of fantasy. Lewis uses evil as an expression to encourage the moral imagination within the readers. I believe that he urges his readers to take a stand and see what evil is and what it does. Lewis demonstrates that good and evil is in each and every one of us, and that it is the choices we make that defines us.
C.S. Lewis’s Chronicles of Narnia (there are seven books all together) are often perceived as children’s books that in a simple and uncomplicated way convey the positive message of Christianity. However, Lewis’s intention was as much to deal with negative moral issues such as selfishness, dishonesty, betrayal, cruelty, vindictiveness and hypocrisy (Schakel 170), in other words: aspects of evil. In Peter Schakels words, “[r]eaders often concentrate on the Christian dimension of his works, but equally or more important to him was the moral dimension” (170). Lewis has expressed his own thoughts regarding the origin of Chronicles of Narnia and he stresses both its religious and Fairy Tale roots:

There are usually two reasons for writing an imaginary work, which may be called the Author’s intention and the man’s … In the author’s mind there bubbles up every now and then the material for a story. For me it invariably begins with mental pictures. This ferment leads to nothing unless it is accompanied with the longing for a form … On that side (as author) I wrote fairy tales because the Fairy Tale seemed the ideal form for the stuff I had to say.

Then of course the Man in me began to have his turn, I thought I saw how stories like this kind could steal past the certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one feel it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? (as quoted in Lancelyn Green and Hooper 315)

It seems as if Lewis partly wrote the books about Narnia so that children (and adults for that matter) more easily could grasp the context of religion and God. And since the Bible focuses on the origin and consequences of evil, its presence in Narnia is not strange. Lewis speaks of the sufferings of Christ, a very dark side of Christianity. Jesus was sent down to earth by God to teach its inhabitants the right way of life and to atone for the evil of humanity. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the great lion Aslan’s sacrifice is clearly associated with the
crucifixion of Jesus (Coren 79); both are acts of unselfishness, and are reactions against human egocentricity.

While Christianity and the Bible deal with such moral issues and the Chronicles are permeated with biblical allusions, yet the evil that play a rather large role in his books is portrayed in other ways as well. Another source for the Chronicles of Narnia that Lewis mentions in the quotation above, are old fairy tales, and in them too evil is an important ingredient. As Bruno Bettelheim points out, evil is just as present as good in fairy tales. The two extremes many times take form in different characters in the tales, and the characters reveal themselves through their actions. Furthermore, he argues that it is this dualism which creates a moral dilemma that demands battle in order to be resolved (Bettelheim 12-14). These are aspects that Lewis incorporates in his own modern fairy tales.

In fairy tales, good and evil are usually described in terms of black and white. However, in *The Horse and His Boy* the circumstances are not as simple. The characters that are evil are not always described as being ugly and dumb, nor are the characters that are portrayed as good always beautiful and smart. The complexity is much greater in Lewis’s fairy tales. That is to say, I believe that Schakel is incorrect in his claim that “In C.S. Lewis’s Chronicles good and evil are presented in starkly obvious contrasts” (174). I would argue that he is generalizing. His explanation is based upon the Chronicles being presented in black and white. I believe that the Chronicles, figuratively, also contain shades of grey. There are not only good or bad happenings, nor are there only good or evil characters. Some of the actions are not as easily defined and some characters have both evil and good characteristics, as will be demonstrated later on in this essay.

George Sayer adds that Lewis’s “idea of heaven was of a place where all sorts of people could come together to celebrate, dance, and sing with fauns, giants, centaurs, dwarfs, and innumerable and very different animals” (316). I believe that Sayer, like Schakel, is
missing the complexity in Lewis’s books about Narnia. The purpose of this essay is to examine C.S. Lewis’s portrayal of evil in the Chronicles of Narnia, in order to show the novel’s complexity. My main focus will be on one of the lesser known of the books, *The Horse and His Boy* (HHB), even if examples will be taken from the other Chronicles as well. The reasons for examining the different forms of evil in this particular book are simple. First and foremost, this book contains many different examples of evil, evil acts as well as through thoughts, ideas and opinions. Secondly, this book has not been studied as much as the others have been.

According to the Wikipedia online dictionary, the term evil is “a term describing that which is regarded as morally bad, intrinsically corrupt, wantonly destructive, inhumane, or wicked” (wikipedia). A complementary definition is that evil is every willful deviation from written or unwritten laws or standards. Another belief is that evil is to intentionally inflict harm on someone else. According to all definitions of evil there are always victims, either the person that is the aim of the evil act or the person committing it (wikipedia). Lars Svendsen argues in *Ondskans filosofi* that man is both good and evil. Not just in the sense that we are good *or* evil, but that we in a more fundamental perspective are both. He claims that this duality defines who we are. This is due to the fact that man is independent and therefore able to determine his or her own acts (80). The characteristics of evil can be ascribed to people, objects and events. He states that evil in its widest sense can be understood as everything that prevents us from living a good life (Svendsen 23). Gloria Cigman adds in her book *Exploring Evil* that evil generally is one out of two basic elements: “the abuse of free will and a denial of the humanity of others” (Cigman book cover). As can be seen from these definitions there are many different forms of evil. This essay, however, will be limited by examining three different aspects of evil occurring in the Chronicles of Narnia: pure evil, evil within those who are good-natured and evil as prejudice.
The Horse and His Boy is the fifth book (out of seven) about Narnia. In this book we are introduced to the countries surrounding Narnia. We meet a young boy, Shasta, practically living as a slave in a fisherman’s home. He runs away with a talking horse named Bree that comes from the country of Narnia (which is why he possesses the ability to speak). Peter the Great still rules over Narnia together with his brother Edmund and sisters Susan and Lucy. Shasta is on a mission to Archenland, to warn its king that the Tisroc (the ruler of Calormen) is coming to conquer his country with the intention of later invading Narnia. He wants revenge, since Queen Susan had refused to marry him. On their journey Shasta and Bree encounter many dangers that have to be overcome. They also find companionship in a princess, Aravis, who is also a runaway, and who has also come across a talking horse, Hwin. Together they fight and struggle on their expedition, and with great effort they reach Archenland and its king at last, who realizes that Shasta is actually his long lost son. His name is really Cor and he has a twin brother named Corin. The Tisroc and his army is defeated and the Tisroc is sentenced to a suitable punishment.

In The Horse and His Boy we are for the first time introduced to Tash (HHB 36), who is an evil God of the Calormene (not an actual participating character until the very last book The Last Battle). Nevertheless, Aslan is seen as Tash’s enemy, showing that the two are each other’s opposites (HHB 170). While there is a rumour in the book that Aslan and Tash are actually one and the same being, Aslan denies this and declares it false. As Shanna Caughey explains, “Aslan was the true creator of Narnia and Tash was the god of all that is vile” (25-26). Accordingly to this view, pure evil exists only as an opposite or contrast to all that is good. Evil and good are situated on the same scale, but function as contrasts to one and other (Svendsen 83). Hence, the Great Lion Aslan can be seen as the personification of all that is good and his opposite is represented by the evil God Tash, who is the incarnation of all that is evil, exemplifying the seeming simplicity of evil that some see in the Chronicles of Narnia.
Still, the dilemma of such an easy definition of evil is that it does not cover every aspect of evil occurring in the novels. There is, for example, nothing in the statement above that clarifies the fact that good and evil can exist in the same being, something we shall return to later in the essay.

Svendsen defines pure evil with another term: demoniacal evil. Demoniacal evil is evil that refers to an evil act, or thought, that is carried out intentionally, without considering that someone could get hurt. For the person that carries out the act, it is an act of good because in the sense of egotistical reasons it benefits him or her (Svendsen 83). This kind of evil, however, is not very common in the Chronicles. There are, however, those who only possess evil or good characteristics. An obvious example of a truly evil character in *The Horse and His Boy* is Prince Rabadash. He wants to conquer Narnia and Archenland for his own personal greed and in order to reassure his ego (HHB 59). However, this type of evil character is not as obvious in *The Horse and His Boy* as in many of the other books about Narnia. For example, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, it is clearly shown that the White Witch is evil both through her title as well as through her actions, which is not as obvious in the case of Prince Rabadash. Nevertheless, he is evil both through his actions and his thoughts. He does not consider the consequences that come with hurting others, mentally or physically (HHB 95). Prince Rabadash never changes, and even when defeated he never develops a good side (HHB 172). Nonetheless, he does live in peace with his neighbouring countries after the day he was punished by Aslan, and he eventually becomes the king of Calormen. However, he lives in peace only because if he was to leave his own country he would be permanently transformed into a donkey, which shows his reasons to be selfish. Selfishness, according to Lewis, is considered one of the worst forms of evil, believing that the core of evil was selfishness (Caughey 30).
Prince Rabadash’s father, the Tisrock of Calormen, is an evil man as well. He knows of his son’s evil plans and sends him off to avenge the loss of Queen Susan. However, he could be considered twice as evil as his son. Neither is he taking action against Rabadash’s unjust and evil plans, nor is he accepting responsibility of his own behaviour, since he wants his son to succeed on his mission to conquer Narnia and Archenland. Nevertheless, he will not stand by his son if he fails:

‘Go my son’ he said ‘And do as you have said. But expect no help nor countenance from me. I will not avenge you if you are killed and I will not deliver you if the barbarians cast you into prison. And if, either in success or failure, you shed a drop more than you need of Narnian noble blood and open war arises from it, my favour shall never fall upon you again and your next brother shall have your place in Calormen.’ (HHB 96)

This quotation illustrates the complexity even of pure evil. Not only in the sense of premeditated evil, since the father knows of his son’s evil plans, but also in the sense of egoism. The Tisrock liberates himself of responsibility and puts it all on his son. Consequently, he rids himself of bad consequences but is willing to profit if the war is a success.

Evil is always present in the Chronicles of Narnia, just as in real life. As mentioned earlier we are first introduced to Tash in the book The Horse and His Boy (36). He is an evil God worshiped by the Calormenes. The mystery of Tash’s presence in Narnia can be clarified through a comparison with the Christian definition of evil personified: Satan, or the devil. The devil was present from the very beginning (in the Garden of Eden). He was the one that tempted Eve, in the shape of a snake, to eat from the forbidden tree. And as such can the presence of Tash be explained (Caughey 28). Tash represents the always present contrast to all that is good.
The fact that people that are considered good do evil acts or thinks evil thoughts is a phenomenon which we in the real world consider normal, though many children’s books do not confront this most difficult problem. In the imaginary world of Narnia we are introduced to imaginary characters who possess both good and evil characteristics. According to Caughey, Lewis introduces the idea that all that is good originate from God, and all that is evil relates to mankind’s refusal to accept God (30). The complexity within his characters and his plots are shown through this model. The perhaps clearest example of this complexity can be found in another of the Chronicles, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, in which one of the four “heroes”, Edmund, betrays both his siblings and the inhabitants of Narnia when he befriends the White Witch and tells of the plans to free Narnia of her rule. The betrayal is a result of greed and selfishness. The witch offers him power and glory and tempts him with Turkish Delights in exchange for information and cooperation. Edmund has never met Aslan, nor has he even heard of him before, yet he betrays him by betraying both Narnia and his siblings. Eventually, the white witch takes off her mask of kindness, revealing her true self, and Edmund too becomes a target of her wickedness. Nevertheless, Edmund is eventually rescued and Aslan shows forgiveness. Edmund’s loyalty is ultimately converted to Aslan and the good side, but for most of the book he is an example of a basically good character who nevertheless is able to do evil deeds.

Another form of evil that Svendsen has defined is ignorant evil, meaning that you do evil acts or think evil thoughts without considering the consequences, so called thoughtlessness. Svendsen claims that ignorance can be regarded as lacking the ability to reflect and that this lack of common sense creates, unknowingly, an evil heart. This type of evil is more or less created when acting on impulse and without consideration for the consequences (Svendsen 85). Aravis friend Lasaraleen, in *The Horse and His Boy*, is a very good example of evil through thoughtlessness. She does not regard the fact that there are more
to life than what pleases the eye. She treats her slaves without any consideration of their feelings and perception. For example, she threatens to kill one of her slaves if he does not obey. Of course not intending to ever carry out her threats seeing as it would be impossible. She says she announces to her staff that: “[n]o one is to be let out of the house today. And anyone I catch talking about this young lady will be first beaten to death and then buried alive and after that be kept on bread and water for six weeks” (HHB 81). Aravis friend displays evil features without being aware of it herself. She does not do so intentionally, but in accordance to Svendsen’s definition she still has an evil heart. This again shows that humans are free, but bound by the responsibly of their own actions.

There is also evil in the sense of hurtful feelings, such as envy. For example, in the book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* Lucy encounters a magic book which belongs to a magician, Coriakin, who lives on an island they have just encountered. The magician’s subjects have become invisible after reading in the his book and therefore send Lucy to read a spell to liberate them from the invisibility spell. When she is browsing through the book she finds an infallible spell of beauty. The pictures that turn up on the pages show Lucy the fateful future that will come if she reads the spell. Kings will start wars over her favour. This, however, does not trouble Lucy as she is shown the result that will come when returning to England. Susan, the older sister who has always been regarded the beauty in the family, is envious of Lucy for her newly gained beauty. However, Lucy is not troubled by this either since no one cared about Susan any more. “I will say the spell,’ said Lucy. ‘I don’t care. I will’” (154). This shows that if the future Susan feels envious towards her beautiful sister, it is obvious that Lucy feels envy towards her sister in the present, or she would not even consider reading the spell. When reading the book and when having the opportunity and power she becomes jealous of Susan and wants to take away the one thing that makes her special. Of
course, Lucy never reads the spell since Aslan’s presence prevents her, but she is clearly
tempted by it.

Envy is also an ingredient in the book *The Horse and His Boy*. Shasta feels a bit
envious after he and Bree encounter Hwin and Aravis. He feels left out since Bree only speaks
to Aravis, and his envy if founded in the feeling of being out of it and his lack of knowledge
about Aravis’s and Bree’s past lives. For Bree and Aravis have many things and
acquaintances in common and gladly reminisce over these. Unfortunately these are things,
happenings and people Shasta knows nothing about (HHB 41).

However, it can also be the lack of feelings such as compassion that can turn a
good character evil. For instance, Aravis, when she sees the Vizier getting kicked, does not
feel for him, but rather feels that he is getting what he deserves (HHB 90). Even though
Aravis does not always involve herself directly in evil acts, she is on more than one occasion
indirectly the cause (such as the beating of the slave) or a witness that does nothing to stop it.
Aravis is a perfect example of a character that displays the mixture of good and evil existing
in the same being.

Another example of good and evil in the same character is Edmund. As
mentioned above he has encountered the issues of moral before (when he betrayed Aslan) in
*The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and is no stranger to the term mercy. However, in this
book Edmund is not as gentle as one might expect of him. When Prince Rabadash has been
captured and his army have surrendered Edmund first advocates leniency. Even so, he is not a
stranger to having Rabadash killed if he tries something again (HHB 168), a clear example of
the ambiguity that can subsist in the same being.

The last definition of evil to be examined in this essay is evil in the sense of
prejudice. The participant that is doing the evil act, is convinced that he or she is actually
doing a good thing, while other people, who do not share that particular belief, sees that act as
evil. With this kind of evil there is an idea that in order to fight the perceived evil in others, all means are permissible, even if it means hurting them (Svendsen 84). Prejudices originate from ignorance and lack of knowledge. The following quotation from The Horse and His Boy illustrates an unwillingness to evolve and to broaden the mind, which some of the characters have: “’Oh my son, do not allow your mind to be distracted by idle questions. For one of the poets has said, ‘Application to business is the root of prosperity, but those who ask questions that do not concern them are steering the ship of folly towards the rock of indigence’” (HBB 12). If Shasta had listened to his “father’s” advice the country of Narnia and the countries surrounding would have never become what they are. Lewis suggests, through The Horse and His Boy, that curiosity should be rewarded and that danger lies in the lack of interest and understanding, which becomes the foundation of prejudices.

An important message in the Chronicles about Narnia is everyone’s equal value. Lewis does this by giving the animal inhabitants of Narnia the same possibilities as humans, qualities such as speech, emotions, the ability to think rationally and so on. However, prejudices are widely displayed throughout the novel. Actually we, the readers, encounter prejudice as early as in the title The Horse and His Boy. We do not expect horses to “own” boys. Lewis thought it difficult giving the book a suitable title (Lancelyn Green and Hooper 311-12), but through it he hints that the Narnian society does not resemble ours in a very direct manner. As readers we expect the boy to be superior to his horse, but this is turned around in the book. The Narnian talking horses that exist in the Chronicles are probably not to be seen as superior to humans, but at the least as their equals. In the book The Horse and His boy the relationship between the horses and the two main protagonists is more that of adults and children, even though the interaction is really between animals and humans. This is most clearly shown when Aravis questions the two horses’ communication:
"Why do you keep talking to my horse instead of to me?" asked the girl. ‘Excuse me, Tarkheena,’ said Bree (with just the slightest backward tilt of his ears), ‘but that’s Calormene talk. We’re free Narnians, Hwin and I, and I suppose, if you’re running away to Narnia, you want to be one too. In that case Hwin isn’t your horse any longer. One might just as well say that you’re her human." (HHB 33)

Through the title Lewis again conveys the message of everyone’s equal value. He acts on peoples general conceptions of how things are supposed to stand on that issue and according to me he succeeds in questioning my own general ideas.

Another example of equal value, or rather unequal value, is how the donkey is used in comparison when someone wants to ridicule or make fun of someone else (HHB 18 and 169-71). The donkey is in The Horse and His Boy considered something unworthy and of low rank. This, to me, seems a little paradoxical, since horses are considered equals in Narnia, but obviously donkeys are not. In addition, the donkey is regarded as a lower breed, which to me, again, appears strange, since horses and donkeys are related to one another in race.

A contrast to the prejudices discussed above is the Hermit and his view of life. He obviously looks upon all of Aslan’s creatures as equals. When he speaks to Bree (a horse) he calls him his cousin (HHB 120). He displays open-mindedness and tolerance toward others. Bree on the other hand is very judgemental and looks upon himself as being superior. This is shown, for example, through the way he looks down on the physique of Shasta (and other humans for that matter) (HHB 18 & 24). Shasta on the other hand never displays any signs of being narrow-minded, not even when he meets a faun (Mr. Tumnus) for the first time, or the giant talking hedgehog (HHB 133). Of course he reacts with astonishment but he never judges any of Narnia’s creatures as beneath him.

Another aspect of prejudices lies in the system of hierarchy, which is a very noticeable structure in The Horse and His Boy. As Sayer points out: “[T]hose who read the
Narnian stories accept without opposition a hierarchical society. Aslan is not a believer in equality and is of course supreme over all. Below him there may be kings and queens and princes to whom respect and obedience should normally be given” (317). Aslan does not answer to summons. However, when he summons someone else they appear at once. For Aslan it is very important that everyone knows of his superiority. He functions as an authority who governs his world and its inhabitants with force, however always in the periphery.

The prejudices that have been shown in this essay are related to racism (or “speciesm” since it deals with different species rather than races), for example, in the case of the donkey. Another more noticeable example of racism is when Edmund is referred to as the White Barbarian King, clearly showing a segregated view of people, us and them. However, in *The Horse and His Boy* the White people (the Narnians) are regarded as the inferior race. This is in contrast to today’s society, perhaps a means for the writer to highlight the racial systems that were current when writing his books. However, it very clearly shows that narrow-mindedness exists in the world of Narnia as well.

I have in this essay tried to give an account of the different evils that are portrayed in the book *The Horse and His Boy* written by C.S. Lewis. As I have demonstrated, evil is a major theme throughout the novel. Bettelheim writes that the most difficult task in raising children today is helping them find purpose in life (3). I believe that Lewis, through his books convey the complexity of life, but through a perspective which makes it easier for children to accept. All the ingredients of real life are included in the Chronicles, even the ugly side to life, namely evil. When asked if the use of evil was a required element in children’s books, Lewis replied that there is no use hiding reality, that they are born into a world of both good and evil (Schakel 177).

By displaying the phenomenon of evil in so many different ways in his books, Lewis is trying to show the complexity which lies in the everyday world as well as in heaven
and the world of fantasy. Lewis uses evil as an expression to encourage the moral imagination of his readers. I believe that he urges his readers to take a stand and see what evil is and what it does. Lewis demonstrates that good and evil are in each and every one of us, and that it is the choices we make that define us.
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