

University of Mary Washington

Eagle Scholar

Student Research Submissions

4-20-2014

In Defense of Women: Exposing the Sexist Portrayals of Women in Lewis's "Chronicles of Narnia"

D. Niki Brenett

University of Mary Washington

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brenett, D. Niki, "In Defense of Women: Exposing the Sexist Portrayals of Women in Lewis's "Chronicles of Narnia"" (2014). *Student Research Submissions*. 19.

https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research/19

This Honors Project is brought to you for free and open access by Eagle Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Research Submissions by an authorized administrator of Eagle Scholar. For more information, please contact archives@umw.edu.

**IN DEFENSE OF WOMEN: EXPOSING THE SEXIST PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN IN
LEWIS'S "CHRONICLES OF NARNIA"**

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

D. Niki Bernett

April 2014

By signing your name below, you affirm that this work is the complete and final version of your paper submitted in partial fulfillment of a degree from the University of Mary Washington. You affirm the University of Mary Washington honor pledge: "I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work."

D. Niki Bernett
(digital signature)

03/26/15

Niki Bernett
Dr. Rochelle
English 449: C. S. Lewis Seminar
Friday, April 25th, 2014

In Defense of Women:
Exposing the Sexist Portrayals of Women in Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*

C. S. Lewis is famously known for his beloved children's fantasy stories known as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and while many enjoy these works of fiction, not all embrace the messages he sends to his readers. Upon reading *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* as a child, I thought all was well and wonderful in the land of Narnia. However, as I've read the entirety of *The Chronicles* as an adult, I am angered by the extremely inaccurate and unfair portrayals of strong female characters throughout the series. While the female characters in *The Chronicles* vary from heroines to evil temptresses, young to old, magical beings to humans, they all are bound to some outdated gender specific role, and the females are often represented as inferior to males. Lewis's oppressive portrayal of female characters is falsely misleading about the lives of women, and only serves to further perpetuate negative stereotypes of females. Lewis himself said that "a children's story is the best art-form for something you have to say," so by writing such negatively stereotypical characters and portraying females so inappropriately, just what is Lewis trying to say to children? (*On Stories* 32). This question can be answered by analyzing Lewis himself, and some of the most prominent female characters from *The Chronicles*: Lucy, Susan and Jadis, the White Witch, to demonstrate Lewis's sexism and blatant mistreatment of female characters in Narnia.

Merriam-Webster online first defines sexism as "unfair treatment of people because of their sex, especially unfair treatment of women." That this definition specifically points at sexism aimed at women, rather than be inclusive of all genders or sexualities, is a step backwards

in preventing sexism overall. Merriam-Webster also listed other definitions: such as “1) a prejudice or discrimination based on sex; especially: discrimination against women and 2) behavior, conditions or attitudes that foster stereotypes of social roles based on sex” (Merriam-Webster.com). The secondary definition presented here is precisely the form of sexism we see in Lewis—his attitude and overuse of stereotypical social roles. While Lewis himself may or may not have been sexist in his words and actions in day to day life, his stereotypical characterizations of females prove that his mentality towards women was prejudiced. When determining whether or not he was sexist, many Lewis scholars analyze both his life and his published works. In *The Magician’s Book*, Laura Miller quotes Lewis from both instances:

In *Surprised by Joy* [he said] “the two things that some of us most dread for our own species” are “the dominance of the female and the dominance of the collective.” He so resented the intrusion of his friends’ wives into his social life that he once wrote, “A friend dead is to be mourned; a friend married is to be guarded against, both being equally lost.” (134)

If Lewis was so blatantly obvious about his disregard for women in his own life as well as his non-fiction writing, how then can Lewis scholars not approach his fiction as sexist?

In Lewis’s defense, Margaret Hannay claimed that he almost never had a chance to like women. In “‘Surprised by Joy’: C. S. Lewis’ Changing Attitudes Toward Women,” Hannay argues that “the army was notoriously misogynist, almost as much so as was Oxford,” and before Lewis joined these institutions, he attended sexually segregated schools, and so never had any interactions with women (19). Hannay also references Lewis’s religious belief as factors that encouraged his oppressive views of women, especially when his Christian opinion became sought out. Hannay argues that C.S. Lewis “is cited as an authority on almost every aspect of Christian life and doctrine, including, unfortunately the ‘place’ of women” (15). Furthermore, Hannay asserts that Lewis’s views on women were shaped by the lack of a mother, or any other

woman in his life, until he lived with Mrs. Moore. Some critics believe that Lewis changed his views of women following the relationship he developed with Joy Davidman; others think he never changed. Whichever way critics believe, most agree that his earlier work is unfair to women. In *The Fiction of C. S. Lewis*, Kath Filmer argues that:

There is something a little unpleasant about the way Lewis portrays women in his fiction. As with many of his arguments, he adopts a kind of ‘either/or’ position; with women, they are either saints or sluts. There is no attempt to show women who are, perhaps, neither; who are simply intelligent and highly competent, whose minds are centered neither upon ‘higher things’ – which for Lewis, means obedience to men—nor upon trivialities such as the use of cosmetics and clothing to improve their sexual appeal. (88)

When it comes to the females in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, these unpleasant ultimatums for female characters are easily discernable. Filmer claims that part of these “either/or positions” of women stem from Lewis’s romanticized view of “Ladies and chivalry”:

If Lewis wished to portray his fictional women as Ladies of the Courtly Love tradition, he must have realized at some point that the image did not sit comfortably with narratives set in the twentieth century. It is hardly surprising, then, that he should select a setting for his Narnian Chronicles which would allow him to establish very clearly the correspondence between chivalric values and those he projected on to his ‘ideal’ for twentieth-century women. (104)

As Lewis chose to write a fantasy for children, he had poetic license for the background and the conventions of the society he was creating. As Lewis was against modernism and industrialism, his use of chivalry to teach children his messages is very significant, especially because this outdated notion is what fueled Lewis’s construction of stereotyped female characters. As Leland Ryken argues in *A Reader’s Guide Through the Wardrobe*, Lewis “was a professor of Mediaeval literature, saturated in the knightly ideals of honor and valor. Of course his view of women was different than ours” (147). In addition, Lewis’s Christian beliefs further reinforced these chivalric notions and what defined his ideal woman. In *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, Lewis himself says,

“An angel is, of course, always He (not She) in human language, because whether the male is, or is not, the superior sex, the masculine is certainly the superior gender” (Lewis, *Preface* 109).

Opposite of Filmer’s analysis, Paul Ford addresses claims of sexism in the *Chronicles*. In *Companion to Narnia*, he defends Lewis and argues that, “The issue of sexism in the *Chronicles* is more complex than might at first be supposed. Although the books are filled with superficially sexist references, Lewis’s insights into character often reveal a basic sympathy for the equality of women” (388). I have to disagree with Ford: what he calls superficial references are in fact the very either/or positions that Filmer previously identified, and they can easily be recognized in the three main female characters in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. The young female Pevensies and Jadis the White Witch are all stereotyped because of their gender, and the fact that they all represent different models of sexism, these “superficial references” should not be taken lightly. Many seem to argue that because Lewis does not exclude females in his adventures he is not sexist towards women; however, it is not the inclusion of women that grants equality, but the treatment of their sex and social roles that perpetuates sexism. In her critique of Narnia, Miller argues, “Girls of course aren’t necessarily excluded from adventures in Narnia, but they must learn to be less girly first. They ought to abandon their feminine wiles and concerns. Lucy, in contrast with her sister, is a paragon in this department” (141). Establishing that Lewis prescribed specific expectations and roles from his female characters is vital to proving his sexism, so from here we move into the analysis of innocent little Lucy.

“It is Lucy, the youngest of the Pevensie children, who first discovers Narnia. She is intensely feminine,” but she is very much meant to represent youth and innocence (Filmer 105). Lucy’s femininity is not to be mistaken as sexuality, therefore, she can be considered a sexless

character and escapes some of Lewis's harsh comments, though she does fall victim to stereotypes and gender roles.

The first thing about Lucy is that most of the time, I consider her somewhat sexless because she is a representation of innocence and youth. When Lucy enters Narnia for the first time, she is only 8 years old, and as a child before puberty she can represent either a male or female because she has not sexually matured. Even when she dies in *The Last Battle*, she is still only 17 years old, and has barely still reached full sexual maturity. For this reason, I think that Lewis puts Lucy on a pedestal of perfection. As she is neither male nor female, Lewis can do what he wants with her. It is only when Lucy begins to exhibit inklings of sexuality that Lewis finds it necessary to criticize her. There are two reasons that this maturing both physically and sexually imperfect Lucy in Lewis's eyes. First, as a Christian, Lewis believes in the Virgin Mary. I believe that Lewis sees Lucy as a childlike version of this divine figure, her strong connection to Aslan in comparison to her siblings further evidences this distinction. Mary as the mother of Jesus brought Christ into our lives, Lucy to serves as the medium between Aslan and her siblings when she introduces them to Narnia. Because Lewis sees Lucy as a representation of the holy Madonna figure, he normally treats her character with respect, but when she shows signs of growing up and losing her innocence or virginity Lewis feels the need to make an example of her with some backhanded sexist remark. The second problem with Lucy's maturing is that as she grows out of childhood she grows into womanhood. As a child she remains innocent and controllable by Lewis, as a woman she is not even a mentionable equal. Miller argues that in Narnia, "The only way out is to remain a child forever, as Lucy does, but somehow even this is much easier for men" (142). The link between remaining as a child and as the Virgin Mary is that Lucy, unlike her sister, supposedly maintained virginity, or at least sexual innocence, thus

she followed Christian doctrine and that is why she is allowed into Aslan's Country in the end and Susan is not.

By comparing Lucy to the Virgin Mary, we see Lewis's religion define his observations of women, but it also perpetuates normalized roles for women. The Virgin Mary as the mother of Jesus is essentially the mother of us all. Thus Lucy, as representative of the Virgin Mary, must exhibit some characteristics of mothering. Filmer argues that the mothering side of Lucy can be observed in her first time in Narnia: Lucy "comforts [Mr. Tumnus] in a motherly fashion, but when the sobs continue Lucy becomes even more a corrective maternal figure" (106). When Lucy is not on the innocent pedestal Lewis created for her, she steps down only to fulfill the stereotypical role of caretaker. Ryken argues that this fact, that "the female children are the ones who nurture and care for others while the male characters mainly (though not exclusively assume the task of protection and fighting in physical battles—[is] evidence of [Lewis's] chauvinistic sexism" (147).

In *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, Father Christmas presents Lucy with "a cordial made of the juice of one of the fire-flowers that grow in the mountains of the sun. If you or any of your friends is hurt, a few drops of this will restore them. And the dagger is to defend yourself at great need. For you also are not to be in the battle [...] But battles are ugly when women fight" (160). In this one instance, Lucy is victimized twice, as she has been prescribed the stereotypical female role of "nurse." At the same time she has been equipped to protect herself, but has been told that she is to be excluded from battle simply because she is a woman, and according to Lewis, or Father Christmas, women cannot fight well. While the gift of the cordial does not make Lucy a nursemaid alone, Aslan's orders finalize her purpose, "There are other people wounded [...] Daughter of Eve, [...] others are also at the point of death. Must *more*

people die for Edmund?” (LWW 193). As Aslan, a male deity commands Lucy to perform stereotypical nursemaid duties, he specifically mentions that she is a daughter of Eve, reinforcing the idea of her gender as a basis for determining her role. Lucy’s role as nurse is revived again in *Prince Caspian* by Trumpkin, “It’s not a sight for little girls [...] I suppose you’re as likely to be a great surgeon as your brother was to be a great swordsman or your sister to be a great archer” (PC 365). Contrastingly, Lucy is regarded as a surgeon instead of a nurse, a more established and respected profession of both males and females, but in comparison to her siblings’ roles as protectors and fighters she is once again reduced to a typically female role of caretaker.

Lucy gets a chance to redeem herself as battle ready in *The Horse and His Boy*, but in the same instant that she is praised, she is also dismissed by Corin, an overly masculine representation of a battle-ready prince, “She’s not like Lucy, you know, who is as good as a man, or at any rate as good as a boy” (290). Lewis writes that though both Pevensie girls have grown into adults and become queens of Narnia, Lucy is more battle ready than her sister Susan, who is an avid archer, but does not enter into battle. Why does Lucy need to be compared to a man? Can she not just be good in general? The stripping of Lucy from man-like to boy-like is in itself criticism of Lucy; she is better than most women, but because she is female she cannot ever achieve the same status as a full-grown man, even though she is an adult at this time, and therefore must be equated to a male child only. At the time of *The Horse and His Boy*, Lucy has been able to grow up in Narnia and she is actually 22 years old, the oldest she will ever get in any of the *Chronicles*, she has grown up so much that despite being the youngest sibling, she is trusted to rule the country while the others are gone. While is obviously a fully capable adult, she is still likened to a child because of her gender. While this statement is derogatory in nature, it also perpetuates the harsh ideas in which women must identify themselves as either man-like or

woman-like. Must Lucy enter battle and act manly in order to attain any kind of recognition or significance? Do women encourage men to act feminine in order to be acknowledged or respected? This double standard for women is explained by Miller, “But unlike Lucy, who apparently dies a virgin I eventually faced the paradox that confronts most heterosexual women: revel in girly stuff and you’re viewed as shallow; reject it and you’re unattractively mannish” (142).

In dealing with “girly stuff” we move on to examine Lucy’s only fall from Aslan’s grace, the temptations of the spell book in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. “*An infallible spell to make beautiful her that uttereth it beyond the lot of mortals [...]* ‘I will say the spell,’ said Lucy. ‘I don’t care. I will.’” (495). Here we see that Lucy is tempted to make herself beautiful, because as Miller said, if we reject beauty and femininity then we must alternately be manly, there are no other alternatives. While this is part of Lewis’s “either/or” position that Filmer explains, this is also a construction of society, but it was ultimately Lewis’s decision to incorporate this specific contradiction into his children’s novels. Again I ask, what was Lewis’s message to his young readers? Despite saying she will say the spell, Lucy does not after she sees an image of Aslan’s face on the page of the spell book, she is saved by Aslan, because he is trying to protect her innocent and sexless soul from frivolities of womanhood.

Still in the book of spells, Lucy is tempted once again by a “spell which would let you know what your friends thought about you. Now Lucy had wanted very badly to try the other spell, the one that made you beautiful beyond the lot of mortals. So she felt that to make up for not having said it, she really would say this one” (VDT 496). Lucy then hears the voices of her friend Marjorie Preston, and schoolmate Anne Featherstone gossiping about her and sheds a tear at what they said. With this presentation, Lewis is highlighting his view that women are full of

vices, most specifically vanity and gossip, as both are exhibited in the two spells that Lucy is fascinated with. Miller said, “I believe Lewis did think that women are more prone to that sort of trivial vanity than men are” (130). While on the *Dawn Treader*, the male characters exhibit some vices of their own, but none that are so detailed and exploited as Lucy’s. Miller makes the same argument that men are full of their own vices, but because they are considered manly, they are dismissed and not thought of as such a bad vice as that of a woman:

If [Susan] keeps on as she has been, preoccupied with feminine nonsense, this alone will be enough to bring her to a bad end. And that prompts a question: Why does Lewis consider an interest in lipstick, nylons, and invitations such an especially pernicious form of silliness? What makes these amusements so much worse than pipes and beer and “bawdy” with your buddies at the pub? Why is feminine triviality so much worse than its masculine counterpart? (132)

Though Miller’s argument here is in defense of Susan, the same logic applies to Lucy’s entrapment with the spell book. Why does Lewis only single out the vices of his female characters? Sexism is an attitude that discriminates against one sex, and by attributing bad vices to females only, Lewis’s portrayal of Lucy and Susan is obviously a sexist one.

Hannay quotes Stella Gibbons’s *Light on C.S. Lewis*, “[I received] an impression that Lewis disapproved of women... of some women; women who have entered rather boldly into the world that men have reserved from themselves. The domesticated, fussy, kind woman gets an occasional pat on her little head” (Hannay, 15). Lewis approves of innocent sexually inexperienced children of both genders. Lewis approves of the Virgin Mary and of mothers. As Lucy remains innocent and follows orders to be a caretaker she has domesticated herself to the likes of Lewis. Her vices of vanity and gossip make her fussy, but in general she is kind and always comes back to Aslan. As with comment of her being a boy rather than a man is exactly as Gibbon says, the pat on her head, for it is a small amount of encouragement, but she can never fully achieve the status of man. Though Lucy is on her pedestal as innocent, and virginal, even

she does not escape the harrowing sexism of Lewis, how then do we expect poor old Susan to fare?

Many critics consider *The Chronicles* sexist solely based on the mistreatment of Susan's character in *The Last Battle*. As Susan is the oldest female of the Pevensie children she is subjected to fulfil roles that Lucy is not. Like Lucy, Susan is equated to a famous female religious figure, but only in terms of negative connotations. This comparison along with the other stereotypical gender roles Susan is forced into exhibit all the things Lewis disliked about women.

Unlike the sexless youthful Lucy, Susan has already reached the age of 12 in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, almost to her teenage years about to become a woman; she can no longer be valued for childlike innocence. As Susan is the elder female of the Pevensie family, who can no longer maintain innocence, she is linked to the original sinner and mother of us all, Eve. It is no stretch to relate any of the human characters of the *Chronicles* to Eve or Adam as true Narnians refer to them as "Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve." That Lewis incorporates this notion into the lives of the Narnians is evidence of their understanding or recognition of the story of Eve, and Lewis own submission of sexual bias. Under the section of "Son of Adam, Daughter of Eve," Ford writes, "Used interchangeably with the word human to identify human boys and girls. The use of these phrases by Lewis denotes the theological background against which the stories unfold, and his belief that man and woman have fallen from a primordial state of innocence" (404). In addition to Ford's definition, I argue that Lewis believed that Eve, who gave the fruit of knowledge to Adam, caused the fall of *man*, not *humanity*. As Eve was the first woman on Earth, every woman to come after her is to be blamed for her actions. Susan then, serves as the surrogate Eve in the *Chronicles*, and is therefore often attacked by Lewis simply because she is the eldest female child.

Critics too see connections between Susan and Eve; in his online post “What Ever Happened to Susan?” T. S. Graveline says:

In our world, our Lady and Mother Eve fell victim to "if only," too. If only she could eat that fruit, she would know the difference between good and evil, and be like God. Her husband, our King and Father Adam, too desired something more, something different than what God had given him [...] Susan was no better and no worse than Eve, or than you or me. (Narniafans.com)

While Graveline does not explicitly say that Susan represents Eve, he justifies that she should not be mistreated for falling victim to “if only,” and certainly not because she is a woman.

The connection between Susan and Eve also prescribes a stereotypical mothering role for Susan, similar to Lucy’s mothering role as the Virgin Mary. The difference between these two mothers is that the Virgin Mary was blessed as being the mother of the redeemer as an innocent virgin while Eve’s mothering role to bear and rear children for the rest of her life was cast upon her as punishment for her sins. Society often tells women that their place is in domestic roles like child rearing and caretaking, and based on previous quotes from Lewis himself, it is evident that he too subscribed to this ideal. Therefore, Lewis subjects Susan to the role of surrogate mother to her siblings as a means to keep her in line, simply because she is not the innocent Virgin Madonna, and must be a sinning temptress like Eve. Thus Susan receives her punishment before her crime and attempts to control her siblings by looking out for their best interest, like eating, staying warm and safe and cooperatively getting along.

When Susan tries to talk to her younger siblings into behaving Edmund responds with “Don’t go on talking like that [...] Trying to talk like Mother [...] who are you to say when I’m to go to bed?” (LWW 111). Susan is trying to comfort her siblings and ascend into the gender role she has been thrust into, only to have her surrogacy rejected by the very siblings she is trying to protect. The prescription of this gender role and the rejection of her in this role are both

sexist ploys on Lewis's part. In comparison, Peter, the eldest of all the Pevensie children bosses his siblings around in a similar way; he is not ridiculed for doing so. Lewis's preferential treatment of the male character over the female character serves as evidence of his disregard for female equality. While Susan's forced role as surrogate mother to her siblings is restrictive and sexually biased in itself, it also forces Susan to grow up sooner than her siblings, a reason that later keeps her out of Narnia.

As Susan was rejected as the mother figure, she is thus forced to re-establish her identity and roles in life, and searches for them from her mature standpoint. Her human curiosity of femininity and womanhood in England are then turned against her and used to explain why she is no longer considered a friend of Narnia: "Oh, Susan! She's interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipstick and invitations. She always was a jolly sight too keen on being grown-up" (LB 741). Lady Polly continues to degrade Susan when she says that she is "Grown-up indeed [...] I wish she would grow up. She wasted all her time in school wanting to be the age she is now, and she'll waste all the rest of her life trying to stay that age" (741). I disagree with these characterizations for two reasons: the first being that I believe the materialistic reasons Susan's family cites as reasons for her forgetting Narnia, were introduced to her in Narnia itself. The second problem I have is that Susan is not there to defend herself while her family stands around and condemns her character.

In exploring the first issue of Susan being materialistic, I propose that Narnia itself introduced Susan to some of the evils she supposedly fell in love with in her world, "And Susan grew into a tall and gracious woman with black hair that fell almost to her feet and the kings of the countries beyond the sea began to send ambassadors asking for her hand in marriage" (LWW 194). Lewis's description of Susan's hair pertains to beauty and vanity such as "lipsticks." It

would not completely cross a line to consider a marriage proposal as an "invitation." Would Susan still have found pleasure in them within her own world, had they not been introduced to her in the paradise of Narnia? The fact that Susan's vices are beauty products and men implies that Susan has grown vain and developed a sexual appetite. Miller argues, "At best, in Lewis's view, a taste for 'clothes and parties and gossip' makes a woman useless and annoying; at worst, the snares of sex lead to danger, war and devastation" (141). How can Lewis reject Susan from his version of heaven simply because she fell in love with the ideas of women that he introduced her to? According to J. K. Rowling in a *Time Magazine* interview with Lev Grossman, Lewis justifies Susan's rejections on the basis of her sexuality taking over her faith, Susan "is lost to Narnia because she becomes interested in lipstick. She's become irreligious basically because she found sex. I have a big problem with that" (accio-quote.org). As Lewis is the creator of Narnia, he made the decision to bring these ideas into Susan's head, he chose to have her, the oldest female, fall victim of these vices because he needed a scapegoat to demonstrate the ways to fall away from Aslan/God. I believe that had the gender dynamics of the Pevensie children been any other way, (all boys, Susan as the oldest, Susan as the only girl—no matter what age) Susan, or the oldest (or only) female would still be the one to fall simply because Lewis believes woman is the cause of the fall of man and continues to punish all women for the devious actions of one particular woman.

While it is apparent that Lewis is punishing Susan for her sexual maturity, others argue that it is vanity, a common trait of those in power, especially women, is what keeps Susan out of Narnia. In his *Keynote Address at The 12th Annual Conference of The C.S. Lewis and Inklings Society*, Devin Brown argues that it is indeed womanly vanity that keeps Susan out of Narnia:

Susan's transgression isn't growing up, nor is it being interested in boys; Susan's transgression here is vanity. A careful reading of *The Chronicles* shows that

simply talking about or being interested in clothes or parties is not enough to classify someone as vain--what has happened here is that Susan has made what should be a second thing into a first thing [...] Susan's excessive interest in nothing except nylons, lipstick, and invitations has not barred her from the great reunion in Aslan's country: she has barred herself. (narniaweb.com)

While Susan herself could agree with Brown's logic, the quote from which he bases his evidence is actually hearsay; Thus leading to my second problem with the portrayal of Susan's character in *The Last Battle*, that Susan deserves the chance to speak up for herself. When asked where Susan is, the others account for her absence, but does Susan ever get to make her own defense or account? Not to mention the phrase "interested in nothing nowadays except" is rather ambiguous, it could just be a casual expression. Is there proof of this, quantifiable for the words "nothing/except?" Do we actually see Susan so caught up in these things that she can't even feel Aslan's presence within her? Brown's argument is that Susan is consumed by vanity, but how do we know this beyond the words of other characters? As Lewis does not give Susan a chance to defend herself, he restricts her much like society does to most women in stifling her voice. Does her voice not deserved to be heard? With this treatment of Susan, Lewis is enforcing societal implications that women should not be heard simply because they are females. Women in the United Kingdom earned the right to vote in 1918 if they were at least 30 years old, at the time Lewis was 20 years old. Though it was an impressionable age, women all over the world were trying to make themselves heard in the course of his lifetime, yet he did not hear them. In his life Lewis voted to keep women out of Oxford, again we see his decisions to stifle women's voices demonstrated by his fictional characters. By perpetuating societal norms into works of fiction, Lewis is trying to further stimulate sexism through the oppression of women.

In keeping of the theme of oppressed women, Susan also fills the stereotypical role of female protagonist in fairy tales. More specifically, Susan is compared to the well-recognized

female fairy tale character, Cinderella. In an article in "The Darkside of Narnia," Philip Pullman (known as the anti-Lewis) argues that:

Susan [is] like Cinderella; [she] is undergoing a transition from one phase of her life to another. Lewis didn't approve of that. He didn't like women in general, or sexuality at all, at least at the stage when he wrote the Narnia books. He was appalled and frightened at the notion of wanting to grow up. Susan, who did want to grow up, and who might have been the most interesting character in the whole cycle if she'd been allowed to, is a Cinderella in a story where the Ugly Sisters win.

I agree with Pullman, as Susan was first brought into Narnia at the age of 12, she then grew until the age of 26, at which point she returns to England and was once again 12. When her horn is blown, she is called back into Narnia at the age of 13 and is then told after a heroic battle that saves Narnia, that she is never to return to Narnia because "[Aslan] says we're getting too old" (PC 418). Peter is 14 when he is told he cannot return, which should mean that Susan deserves at least another year in Narnia until she turns 14 (Ford 466). In fact, Edmund and Lucy both return to Narnia within a year, so why doesn't Susan get to go with them when she is 14? If Susan was distancing herself as it is apparently so evident to so many critics, it should have been imperative for her to take another trip into Narnia, perhaps spend some more one-on-one time with Aslan, like Lucy and Edmund had, and then she might never have lost her faith. Not only does Susan have to "transition" between her life and age in England between her life and age in Narnia, but as Pullman says, she is not allowed to grow up in Narnia anymore. While Lewis's mistreatment of Susan forces her to grow up again and again and rediscover herself, her connections with the Cinderella character reinforce women's gender roles in fairy tale stories, and ultimately paints women in a gendered way for modern readers.

It is possible to interchange, Susan with the character of Cinderella, because in many ways, Cinderella is the archetype for an acceptable female protagonist of fairy tale. Cinderella, as

a fictional character, is the picture of Lewis' ideal woman, one that is focused on her domestic duties and searches to find a man worth marriage. She is also controllable by those who write her, much like Lewis is in control of Susan. Susan seeks to live up to the Cinderella ideal, as she too is a mother or caretaker figure that satisfies the needs of the domestic requirements.

However, when Lewis implies that she has found sex rather than love of man, he casts her out of his circle of accepted females, because she is seeking sexual gratification rather than submitting to a male husband, and suffering the burden of Eve, by baring and rearing her own children.

While Pullman's mention of Cinderella is in defense of Susan's character, the connections he makes can be stretched further to demonstrate Lewis's discontent with modern day women, and thus explain his desire to portray his fictional women in stereotypical gender roles as a means of controlling them.

Ultimately, Susan is kept out of Narnia because she has lost her faith. While I understand Lewis's need to display the ways in which we fall from God, I find his portrayal of Susan, and the downward spiral that is her fall, overly critical of women, rather than of human beings in general. Susan serves as Lewis's scapegoat for everything that he dislikes in the world, simply because she shares the gender of Lewis' ultimate bad-guy, Eve. Lewis shuns the idea of women breaking out of their gender-bound roles, and thus punishes those that do. In *The Natural History of Make-Believe*, John Goldthwaite argues that, "Lewis feared women and disliked them categorically [...] The actual provocation for executing these seven novels sprang from his need to put a woman in her place—or two women, perhaps, or all of them" (230). As with his carefully constructed visions of Lucy, Lewis writes Susan in a way that solidifies stereotypical gender roles and further perpetuates sexist ideals of women.

While Susan and Lucy are females, though different ages and different levels of maturity, it could arguably be said that both are children or young girls in comparison to the White Witch. Analysis of Jadis is a little more complicated than that of the Pevensie ladies because she only appears in one of the books (with a cameo in another) as opposed to being in multiple books. However, as a true adult in Narnia, the White Witch, or Jadis, is truly the standout stereotypical woman of *The Chronicles*. With beauty, vanity and power, Jadis represents all the things Lewis deems inappropriate for women.

Jadis serves as a perfect example of the archetypal evil sorcerer/seductress; mainly because she too, like Susan can be connected to Eve. In the end of *The Magician's Nephew*, when Digory is sent to the Garden to pick the apple for Aslan, Jadis is there as the temptress of evil, Eve herself:

You have plucked fruit in the garden yonder. You have it in your pocket now. And you are going to carry it back, untasted, to the Lion; for *him* to eat, for *him* to use. You Simpleton! Do you know what that fruit is? I will tell you. It is the apple of youth, the apple of life. I know, for I have tasted it; and I feel already such changes in myself that I know shall never grow old or die. Eat it, Boy, eat it; and you and I will both live for ever and be king and queen of this whole world. (93)

Here, Lewis takes the creative license to retell the story of Adam and Eve, but in his version, man is not tempted by woman. Why then, if Lewis has theoretically saved all of mankind from sin, does he still discriminate against the rest of his female characters in Narnia, in which a fall never happened? For without this somewhat understandable explanation for a lifetime of women hatred, what evidence does Lewis have to support that women are inferior to men other than his own male prejudices? Placing Jadis as an Eve figure, though she does not succeed, highlights the fact that Lewis just had a blatant disregard for all women in general without any real reason to do so.

In Lewis's mind the archetype of evil seductress is fitting because, women specifically, as direct descendants of Eve (or in this case a re-imagining of her), introduced evil and should therefore represent it in the world. Filmer argues that as Jadis is a powerful woman, "She is a clear instance of devilry being identified as female. And she is also an example of the 'Great Goddess' figure on which many sinister female literary characters are based" (110). Miller furthers this argument by describing the origins of the evil witches in Narnia, "Both of these witches are very beautiful: the White Witch in the frosty tradition of the Snow Queen, the Lady of the Green Kirtle, or the Green Witch, in the merrier spirit of Celtic sorceresses. These two are after more than just party invitations; they want power. Vain, silly women may be annoying distractions for men who have better things to do; the witches are seducers" (132). So while Hans Christian Anderson developed the archetype of the Snow Queen, and the Celts invented the hyper-sexualized sorceresses, Lewis made the conscious decision to further demonstrate these archetypes as sexist approaches to women with power and/or sexuality.

In society, women are generally seen as powerless, so in a patriarchal society, when a woman does maintain a powerful status she is equated with being evil. Women who defy gender norms are cast out, or discredited for having a false sense or misplaced power. Often times the evil witches of fairy tales are represented as overly sexual seductresses in order to tempt their victims. Lewis relies heavily on this stereotype in *The Chronicles*, as several male characters, including Digory, Peter, Edmund, Caspian, Eustace, and Rillian are tempted by evil women, but not just because of their sexuality. While she does seduce Edmund into doing her bidding, it is not her beauty that gets his attention, but more power and fear, "It was a beautiful face in other respects, but proud and cold and stern" (LWW 122). Digory too, admires Jadis, and though he references to her as "so beautiful," he too is entranced by her power, "She's wonderfully brave.

And strong. She's what I call a Queen!" (MN 39). Digory is attracted to the mannish qualities that establish Jadis as a powerful leader.

Though Lewis beautifies his evil ladies, he does not focus on their beauty, but instead the power he believes they obtained unrightfully. Miller argues that Lewis had to make the witches beautiful to make them more realistic, "Desire acts as a honey trap to the unwary male, luring him into unworthy and catastrophic enterprises. The beauty of the Narnia witches isn't ancillary to their evil, but integral to it, one of the weapons in their arsenal. Evil must, after all, appear attractive if it's going to be tempting, and from there it's only a small step further to the conclusion that feminine beauty is inherently wicked" (139). However, the connection between feminine beauty and evilness is what makes the characterization of Jadis a sexist portrayal. As Jadis is the only real female throughout *The Chronicles*, she is made an example of women everywhere as she is later stripped of her powers. Can women have power and still maintain goodness and purity? Lucy is treated as a virginal child, while she has the authority of a mother figure, she does not explicitly have power. Susan too, though represented as childish most of the time, is instantly banished from Narnia the moment she expresses a level of power by exploring her sexuality.

While Jadis and the other witch, the Lady of the Green Kirtle, and several are overly sexist portrayals of powerful or evil women, they are not the only link between Lewis and sexism. Filmer argues that this idea of women as evil incarnate is evident in many of Lewis's works, "What is disturbing in the Narnian *Chronicles*, as well as in the whole range of Lewis's literary corpus is the way in which ultimate good is depicted as ultimate masculinity, while evil, the corruption of good, is depicted as femininity" (110). Filmer also argues that "the female characters which merit Lewis's approval are those who symbolize nature transcended by

submission, obedience and subservience these are the Amazons, the Earth Mothers and the goddesses. And these are Lewis's personal projections of the exalted Lady of Courtly Love tradition who held such a high place in his heart and consequently also in his fiction" (130). Unfortunately for Jadis and our little Pevensie ladies, the fact that they don't meet all of these standards all the time, means they are subjected to Lewis sexist persecution.

To reiterate, my goal with this paper is not to prove that C. S. Lewis was in fact outrageously sexist towards women in his everyday life; however, I am trying to highlight the unfair ways in which Lewis's sexist visions and ideals of women hinder his ability to write a fair portrayal of a female character. The biggest problem that I have with the sexism in this series is that it was intended for children. Miller argues about the same issue I find with this series, "We expect a children's book to avoid depictions of sex, but Lewis takes this further by surrounding almost every approach to the subject with contempt or fear" (141). Lewis's overuse of sexual inequality and stereotypical gender roles makes it hard for some adults, like myself, to find the good and enjoyment in *The Chronicles*. Lewis said "I am inclined to set it up as a canon that a children's story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children's story" (*On Stories*, 33). However, it might be that because of his prejudices against women, Lewis's *Chronicles* might only be enjoyable to children because they are too young to pick up on all the sexism. Or if said children are mature and grown up (the other concept Lewis discriminates against) they too would find little satisfaction in reading *The Chronicles*. Ryken argues that "Nonetheless, some who genuinely enjoy and value the writings of Lewis (including the Narnian stories) still question certain of his gender attitudes (147). So whether a reader enjoys or hates *The Chronicles*, many can still agree that it is to some extent sexist, evidenced by the fact that almost every other page

of the series is undercut with some snide sexist remark and all the female characters fulfill stereotypical gender roles.

Even though Lewis befriended and married Davidman while still writing the series, examples of sexism, are still present in all of the series to varying degrees. In concluding her analysis of Lewis as a perpetual sexist, Hannay's states, "It is most satisfying example of poetic justice that Lewis' world should finally have been overturned by a woman—and an American woman, a Jewess, and a divorcée. [...] One can only wish that Lewis had found Joy Davidman earlier—both for his own happiness and also for the difference it would have made in his work" (19-20). Hannay asserts that Lewis must have undergone some changes in his sexist views. Filmer on the other hand argues the opposite, Lewis never changed when she argues that "It is quite clear, then, that Lewis's attitudes to, and treatment of, his female characters underwent no marked change with the writing of the Narnian Chronicles or with his developing friendship with Joy Davidman. The characterizations typical of Lewis's earlier fiction recur in *The Chronicles* with the same bitterness and the same slightly sneering and superior authorial tone" (111).

While I conclude that Lewis's portrayals of women in *The Chronicles* are sexist and unfair, it is important to understand why this knowledge is critical. Part of interpreting a text's meaning is understanding where the author comes from. In this case, Lewis comes from a world without women, and therefore knowledge is replaced by fear and stigmatism that perpetuate an inequality between the genders. Future readers and authors alike need to realize the importance that our own lives play on our fictional work, and that to really be well received we must be as fair as possible to all parties, and try not to let our own vices and prejudices get in the way of our creative productions. While I'm unhappy with Lewis's Narnian portrayal of women, I believe that had he lived longer or met Davidman earlier, he could have potentially redeemed himself

as less sexist in the eyes of many critics. I concede that Lewis, like most of us are, was very much a product of his environment, including his time, religion, upbringing and general interactions with people. Arguing for this same point, Ryken cites an unknown critic that discusses Pullman's anti-Lewis rhetoric as arguing that "Lewis certainly had a different view of women from what is commonly accepted today, but that is not the same as being 'disparaging of girls and women.' How could his view not be different? He was writing fifty years ago. [...]

Lewis was a child of his time; just as Pullman is a child of his. In fifty years, what will people criticize Philip Pullman for (147)? While I do not think Lewis's sexist remarks and portrayals are acceptable, I cannot completely judge him for his beliefs; I can however, freely criticize Lewis for letting his personal opinions bias his portrayals of women in the *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

While I complain about the problem of sexism evidenced by Lewis's works produced almost 65 years ago, I have to wonder, *what* will the readers of the future complain about? Hopefully not sexism, as my analysis of Lewis's example demonstrates the problems associated with sexist literature.

Works Cited

- “Sexism.” *Merriam-Webster Online*. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2014. Web. 21 April 2014.
- Brown, Devin. "Are the Chronicles of Narnia Sexist and Racist? A Discussion in Eight Parts." *Narniaweb.com* 28 Mar. 2009. Web. 31 Jan. 2014
- Filmer, Kath. *The Fiction of C. S. Lewis*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1993. Print.
- Ford, Paul F. *Companion to Narnia: A Complete Guide to the Magical World of C. S. Lewis's The Chronicles of Narnia—Rev.Ed.* New York: Harper San Francisco, 2005. Print.
- Goldthwaite, John. *The Natural History of Make Believe*. London: Oxford University Press, 1996. Print.
- Graveline, T. S. "What Ever Happened to Susan?" *Narniafans.com*, 11 July 2005. Web. 31 Jan. 2014.
- Grossman, Lev. "J.K. Rowling Hogwarts and All." *Time Magazine*. Time, 17 July 2005. Web. 31 Jan. 2014.
- Hannay, Margaret. "'Surprised by Joy': C. S. Lewis' Changing Attitudes Toward Women." *Mythlore* 4.1 (1976):15-20. Print.
- Lewis, C. S. *A Preface to Paradise Lost*. London: Oxford University Press, 1941. Print.
- Lewis, C. S. *The Chronicles of Narnia*. New York: Harper Collins, 2001. Print.
- Lewis, C.S. "On Three Ways of Writing for Children." *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*. New York: Harcourt, 1982. Print.
- Pullman, Phillip. "The Darkside of Narnia." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media Limited, 1 Oct. 1998. Web. 31 Jan. 2014.
- Ryken, Leland and Marjorie Lamp Mead. *A Reader's Guide Through the Wardrobe: Exploring C. S. Lewis's Classic Story*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2005. Print.