

‘QUEST MOTIF’ IN THE FICTIONAL REALM OF C.S.LEWIS’S *THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA*

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Abstract:

With a vast panorama of enchantment, Fantasy worlds hold the primary position among the mesmerizing factors of the literary works of Children’s Literature. Its association with imagination and with desire has made it an inimitable province. It is evident that children from the classical antiquity to the modern digital era are succumbed to the magic spell of fantasy due to their inquisitive nature of probing into the incomprehensible regions. To intensify the readers anxiety, often the story of such fantastic realms spins around the motif of ‘Quest’. At this juncture, among the wide gamut of Fantasy narratives, C.S.Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia* deserve an unique province with the stunning adventures of the protagonists. Thus, the present paper focusses on the fantastic region of Narnia with its storyline of ‘Quest’.

Index Terms – Quest Motif, Fantasy World, C.S.Lewis

In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, despite of the numerous worlds, most of the action takes place in the inventive world of Narnia, where the Pevensie children entered magically to save the country. As Richard Wagner precisely utters in *C.S.Lewis & Narnia for Dummies*:

Narnia refers to both the enchanted world in *The Chronicles of Narnia* as well as to specific country within that world. Aslan, the Great Lion creates the world of Narnia in *The Magician’s Nephew* and has dominion over it. Narnia is filled with a host of creatures, including talking animals, dwarfs, giants, dryads, naiads, centaurs and fauns. Humans traditionally rule Narnia, except during the Hundred Years Winter when the White Witch casts a spell over the land. (118)^[1]

Accordingly, *The Chronicles of Narnia* portrays the adventures of children, who play imperative roles in the unfolding history of the fantastic monarchy of Narnia. Each of the books in the series, except *The Horse and His Boy* exposes various adventures of the protagonists, who are magically transported through various portals to Narnia, where they are called forth to regain the serenity of the magical realm. Hence, the series finely appropriate to the common structure of a fantasy story, as defined by John.H.Timmerman in his *Other Worlds: the Fantasy Genre*:

It seems obvious that fantasy relies upon a compelling, well-paced story... In its traditional sense, story requires a narrative plot line, the unfolding of events, the development of characters into living beings who think about actions, who do act, and whose actions have effects. A story moves from a beginning, through a middle, to an end, and in the process emotionally or psychologically moves the reader. Story, considered within these boundaries, is a structure with a purpose and end. (5)^[2]

True to this definition, the story line in *The Chronicles of Narnia* shows a similar pattern in which the children protagonist leaves their home to seek adventure in the unknown world and returning home after accomplishing their tasks. However, this classic model of a story proves to be vibrant for the primitive strength of the plot structure, which starts to shine forth from Beatrix’s *Squirrel Nutkin*, Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz* to J.R.R.Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*. Moreover, in this assortment of literary master pieces, C.S.Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia* series is of no exception. In both the series, the authors adeptly handle this story pattern to grab the attention of the readers as well as to intensify the captivating thrill of the plot. In addition to these gratifications of the minds of the children, these silhouettes of the story are very supportive in the mental development of a child, which Bettelheim claims in his *The Uses of Enchantment*:

Having taken the child on a trip into a wondrous world, at the end the tale returns the child to reality, in a most reassuring manner. This teaches the child that permitting one’s fantasy to take hold of oneself for a while is not detrimental, provided one does not remain permanently caught up in it. The hero returns to reality – a happy reality, but one devoid of magic. (63)^[3]

Meanwhile, not only the child finds it exciting to enter into a variety of fictional realms but also many adults derive extreme pleasure while reading such fantasy excursions. In accord with this notion, Deborah O’Keefe in his *Readers in Wonderland: The Liberating Worlds of Fantasy Fiction* finely explicates:

Grown-up readers of children’s fantasy have been accused of escapism, regression to an immature state. Yet an adult may be drawn to fantasy fiction because it offers not a simplified alternative to the complex ordinary world, but an equally complex, difficult, alternative world, dense with patterns to discover and solutions to work out and meanings to find. (20)^[4]

As is the norm of the genre, in the entire series, there is a looming doom, since evil has struck. The White Witch has casted a magic spell of unending winter to Narnia in the magical realm of Narnia, in which later the region was saved by the four Pevensie children from the terrifying weather.

In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the traditional motif of quest can be traced to intensify the action of the narrative. Apparently, quest is a primary pattern in many of the children's fiction. Embracing a wide variety of pursuits, this prototype of story reigns Children's literature even in the primordial times. Maria Nikolajeva appropriately spells out in *Aesthetic Approaches to Children's Literature*:

Quest is by far the most common motif in Children's literature. Quests are common in folktales where the hero leaves home in order to search for treasure, a kidnapped princess or simply fortune. We see the motif most clearly in genres closely related to folktales, primarily heroic fantasy. In adventure stories, there are many examples of searching for treasure, *Treasure Island* being the best known. (82)^[5]

However, a persistent structure for alternate fantasy world is the quest or journey, which depicts a story in which the protagonist and his companions attained their task of expedition with the assistance of many fantastical elements. And W.A.Senior adroitly articulated in *Fantasy Fiction*:

The predominant twentieth century fantasy is the quest story, a stepped narrative in which the hero or heroine, along with a group of companions, goes on a journey of increasingly dangerous and challenging adventures and foes, culminating in a wasteland symbolic of death. Many takes place in a magical secondary world while others are portal fantasies. (113)^[6]

In the meantime, the quest provides a basis for exploring the traits of the explorer and also it enables the reader to search for himself. And John.H.Timmerman finely echoes in his *Other Worlds*: "Fantasy provides not a hiding place but a point from which the reader can begin anew. The fantasy artist expects the reader to learn something about himself by having made a sojourn through fantasy." (92). And he also validates the nature for such pursuit as:

In place of the quest, modern fantasy literature has often provided an adventure... The quest is always toward something... the quest is always a grave, serious undertaking. It is often life-threatening, marked by a sense of struggle, of imminent or immediate danger in which the character must call upon all of his will and power to push on. (91)^[2]

This statement is true in the case of *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, in which the quest shows diverse ways of the protagonists to fulfil their goals. Meanwhile, the children pursuers in the series are oblivious of their numinous pursuit as W.H.Auden claims in "The Quest Hero", *The Texas Quarterly*: "To go in quest means to look for something of which one has, as yet, no experience; one can imagine what it will be like but whether one's picture is true or false will be known when one has found it." (40)^[7]

Since the seven books of *The Chronicles of Narnia* dealt with varied dimensions of quest, they have depicted with a wide range and hence mark the difference in the ratio of the application of this attribute of quest motif. *The Magician's Nephew* leaves the trace and the initiation of quest, with the creation of Narnia, where Aslan confronts Digory with his responsibility for bringing Jadis, the White Witch into the world and tells Digory that he must protect Narnia from her spells. Since, he predicts:

Evil will come of that evil, but it is still a long way off, and I will see to it that the worst falls upon myself. In the meantime, let us take such order that for many hundred years yet this shall be a merry world. And as Adam's race has done the harm, Adam's race shall help to heal it. (162)

Pertaining to this, Aslan assigned the task of getting the seed of a tree, which can protect Narnia from the White Witch. This pursuit of Digory and Polly traces the element of quest motif. However, while comparing with other books in the series, this mission appears to be relatively quick. They accomplished their quest very shortly with the help of Fledge, the winged horse.

The Lion, Witch and the Wardrobe, however, establishes the model for the adventures that follow in the rest of the series. During the Second World War, the four Pevensie children – Peter, Susan, Lucy and Edmund - are evacuated from London to escape from the bombardment. In the old country house of Professor Kirke, where they are sheltering, they fall through a portal in a wardrobe to Narnia, which is besieged by a seemingly endless winter caused by the White Witch. The children begin a quest through a magical fantasy land to help their friends and to end the unnatural winter. And to these children, as Anirbun Gupta claims in "Wardrobe Warriors", "Crossing the threshold into the unknown world is a point of commitment. The limits of the ordinary world are suspended; new creatures, new rules and a new array of powerful forces must be faced." (56).^[8] During their mission, they acquire guides, gifts of magical objects and knowledge as they meet with an array of magical and mystical creatures like talking animals, dwarves, tree nymphs and even Father Christmas. In the final battle, along with Aslan, they had succeeded in their quest of regaining serenity of Narnia and crowned as Kings and Queens. "These two Kings and two Queens governed Narnia well, and long and happy was their reign." (197). However, the entire action of this plot finely declared by Maria Nikolajeva in *Aesthetic Approaches to Children's Literature*:

The numinousness of child characters is heightened when they find their way to a wonderful alternate world and then fulfil an important mission there. The Pevensie children find high spiritual purpose in fighting the evil and saving Narnia from eternal winter. And they are validated as kings and queens in an alternate universe. (83)^[5]

In *Prince Caspian*, the quest pattern emerged, when Caspian wish to recapture the prosperity of Narnia from the cruel clutches of his uncle King Miraz. However, he completed his task with the help of four Pevensie children,

Doctor Cornelius, Trufflehunter, Nikabrik and Trumpkin. And in the end, Aslan declares Caspian as, "... under us and under the High King, you shall be King of Narnia, Lord of Cair Paravel, and Emperor of the Lone Islands." (222). In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the story revolved around the quest motif of Caspian to find the seven lost Lords of Narnia. He himself admits this to Lucy and Edmund, whom were again drawn to Narnia through the portal of a picture of a ship at sea:

"... you remember that when I was a child my usurping uncle Miraz got rid of seven friends of my father's ... by sending them off to explore the unknown Eastern Seas beyond the Lone Islands."

"Yes," said Lucy, "and none of them ever came back."

"Right. Well, on my coronation day, with Aslan's approval, I swore an oath that, if once I established peace in Narnia, I would sail east myself for a year and a day to find my father's friends or to learn of their deaths and avenge them if I could." (29)

With this declaration - Caspian, Lucy, Edmund, Eustace and Reepicheep, a talking mouse - all set out for their mission of finding those lost Lords. After their long adventurous expedition - including encounters with a scary sea-monster, two retired stars and a terrifying black hole where dreams come true - they were able to finish their tasks.

Along with the quest of Caspian, C.S.Lewis also depicted the Reepicheep's quest to go to Aslan's country, which began in his cradle when a dryad sang to him:

*Where sky and water meet,
Where the waves grow sweet,
Doubt not, Reepicheep,
To find all you seek,
There is the utter East.* (30-31)

And his quest too attained in the end of the story, when Lucy, Edmund, Eustace and Reepicheep ventured in a small boat through an ocean of flowers, until they reach a wall of water that extends into the sky. And there, Reepicheep paddles his coracle up the waterfall and is never seen again. Thus thereby the narrator hints that, "he came safe to Aslan's country and is alive there to this day." (268)

The Silver Chair is finely blended with the notable quest of finding Prince Rilian. For this mission, Aslan assigns Jill and Eustace and to guide them, he gives four signs. After many audacious deeds, finally they found the Prince and freed him from the Lady of Green Kirtle. Apart from the four Pevensie children who usually played a vital role in all quest patterns, this book garners unique attention since it has been involved by Jill and Eustace Scrubb to pursue the quest. Thus in all books, in one way or the other, C.S.Lewis adroitly handled the theme of quest and provides a delightful and thrilling experience to the reading young minds.

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