



Literary Comparison

The *Princess* Books and *Phantastes*

“What he does best is fantasy,” C. S. Lewis wrote, “fantasy that hovers between the allegorical and the mythopoeic. And this, in my opinion, he does better than any man” (*Phantastes* ix). George MacDonald’s fantasy is the work of a storyteller at his best; it “goes beyond the expression of things we have already felt... arouses in us sensations we have never had before, never anticipated having... It gets under our skin, hits us at a level deeper than our thoughts or even our passions, troubles our oldest certainties till all questions are reopened, and in general shocks us more fully awake than we are for most of our lives” (*Phantastes* x-xi).

George MacDonald’s writing differs somewhat between the two sets of books. The fact that *Phantastes* is written for adults and the *Princess* books for children accounts for much of the difference. *Phantastes*, being a novel for older readers, is more cumbersome and flowery in language than the *Princess* books, which have to be simpler of necessity. The vocabulary is a lot lengthier and the descriptions are not so concise. *Phantastes* was also written several years before the others, when MacDonald was not as practiced a writer. The fact that *Phantastes* is a grownup book allowed MacDonald to do more direct allegory, where the *Princess* books are mostly story.

The general message and tone of these books, however, is very similar. Both books demonstrate the clear-cut dichotomy between Good and Evil that is the hallmark of a fairytale. It is done in a more sophisticated fashion in *Phantastes*, where the main character has to face evil within himself as well as without, but it is present in both. Both books use the symbolism of an old woman who looks young and old at the same time to represent God—the great-great-grandmother in the *Princess* books, the old woman in the cottage by the sea in *Phantastes*. Both books deal with the theme of sight, of learning that there is more to the world than simply what our eyes make of it. It is only observed as a fact in the *Princess* books; in *Phantastes* George MacDonald goes further to identify the cause of this fact as sin, the Shadow. People’s actual natures are much closer to the surface in Fairy Land. In *Curdie*, hypocrites’ bestiality can be felt with a touch. In *Phantastes*, agnostics can make Anodos forget about Fairyland by their simple presence, while those who believe in it remind him just as easily. It is perhaps noteworthy that those whose presence most strongly radiates Fairyland are children—but, as MacDonald says, “the child is not meant to die, but to be forever freshborn.” And again, “He who will be a man, and will not be a child, must—he cannot help himself—become a little man, that is, a dwarf. He will, however, need no consolation, for he is sure to think himself a very large creature indeed” (“Fantastic Imagination”).

Both of these books also share the similarity of conveying a central theme that is much easier to feel than to put into words. George MacDonald himself wrote that

[A fairytale] cannot help having some meaning; if it have proportion and harmony it has



vitality, and vitality is truth. The beauty may be plainer in it than the truth, but without the truth the beauty could not be, and the fairytale would give no delight. Everyone, however, who feels the story, will read its meaning after his own nature and development: one man will read one meaning in it, another will read another... Nature is mood-engendering, thought-provoking: such ought the sonata, such ought the fairytale to be.

One difference between God's work and man's is that, while God's work cannot mean more than he meant, man's must mean more than he meant. For in everything that God has made, there is layer upon layer of ascending significance.... It is God's things, his embodied thoughts, which alone a man has to use, modified and adapted to his own purposes, for the expression of his thoughts; therefore he cannot help his words and figures falling into such combinations in the mind of another as he had himself not foreseen... he was dealing all the time with things that came from thoughts beyond his own ("Fantastic Imagination").

Like all good fairytales, George MacDonald's are stories first, which teach only by example, when they teach at all. The good we take away from them is rather encouragement than instruction, and if there are meanings and themes, they are one unified sense with many facets, not something easily summed up in words. It is this that makes novels more effective than sermons, an effectiveness which George MacDonald had learned. A piece of fiction can go "touching hearts and stirring consciences" where a sermon would never find entrance. That is the beauty of fiction. That is the beauty, especially, of fantasy.

Works Cited (should be a separate page)

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Chronicles of Narnia and The Space Trilogy

Good writers, it is said, point out not the profound but the blatantly obvious, things which we skip over everyday by “seeing” without really looking at what we see. Thus when we read their observations, we are moved not because they are different from what we know but because something within us says, “Yes, of course! Why didn’t I see that before?” By this test C. S. Lewis is not just a good writer, but a great one.

The *Narnia* books and the *Space Trilogy* have little in common stylistically. *Narnia*, written for children, is much more “homely” compared to the sophistication of the *Space Trilogy*. The *Space Trilogy* is able to go much deeper into philosophy and explicit theology, since it is technically set in the same universe. Where the *Space Trilogy* discusses these things outright, *Narnia* deals with the same themes in a more subtle fashion. These two series do have several themes in common, such as challenging the view that the “modern,” “scientific life is everything — indeed, when compared with beliefs and insights from the past, it turns out to be rather pitiful. They also have in common the subtle wisdom of their author. Compare Prince Rillian’s observations on his enchantment — “Now that I am myself I can remember that enchanted life, though while I was enchanted I could not remember my true self” (*Silver Chair* 169)— with the following comment by King Tor of Perelandra:

We have learned of evil, though not as the Evil One wished us to learn. We have learned better than that, and know it more, for it is waking that understands sleep, and not sleep that understands waking” (*Perelandra* 209).

Both are very telling observations about the nature of sin.

The greatest beauty of both these series is Lewis’s portrayal of God — again, a case not of the profound so much as of the obvious that we fail to see. What C. S. Lewis does in Aslan of *Narnia* and Maleldil of *Space Trilogy* is bring to life those things about God which we know but often do not really understand, or at least do not live in the consequences of them. He appeals to our imaginations. Though we know that God is omnipresent, that knowledge rarely hits us in the same way as when, in *Perelandra*,

“Maleldil is telling me,” answered the woman. And as she spoke the landscape had become different, though with a difference none of the senses would identify. The light was dim, the air gentle, and all Ransom’s body was bathed in bliss, but the garden world where he stood seemed to be packed quite full, and as if an unendurable pressure had been laid upon his shoulders, his legs failed him and he half sank, half fell, into a sitting position (*Perelandra* 61).

Though we know Christ is our King, who is to inspire our love and worship, somehow it never seems so obvious and *right* as when we see Him pictured as the Lion Aslan, gentle and stern and incredibly wise all at the same time. In the story we are *drawn* to love him, with a power that



mere intellectual theories can never have. Lewis wrote to a mother who worried that her son loved Aslan more than Jesus,

Laurence can't *really* love Aslan more than Jesus, even if he feels that's what he is doing. For the things he loves Aslan for doing or saying are simply the things Jesus really did and said. So that when Laurence thinks he is loving Aslan, he is really loving Jesus: and perhaps loving Him more than he ever did before (*Companion* 438).

A direct corollary of this presentation of God is a clearer presentation of His world from the Christian perspective. Lewis portrays in a new and striking way what it means to believe in a God, and what it means to live what we believe. He shows us that He permeates the world, that our faith brings something to bear on every part of life, not as a separate mental category but as that which underpins everything, a truth as much a part of life as breathing, or seeing, or even the process of thought at all. He depicts our faith rather as a lens for seeing than as an object to be seen. Jane observes at St. Anne's,

It occurred to her that the Director never talked about Religion; nor did the Dimbles nor Camilla. They talked about God. They had no picture in their minds of some mist steaming upward: rather of strong, skilful hands thrust down to make, to mend, perhaps even to destroy (*Hideous Strength* 318).

Being a philosopher, as well as a writer and a Christian, C. S. Lewis gives form to those things about God and the world that we affirm everyday. He shows us what it means to live in a world where "The heavens declare the glory of God," where the incredible diversity and creativity of what has been made reflect praise back to the Creator. As Tinidril marvels, "He can think of all, and all different... How has He made me so separate from Himself? How did it enter His mind to conceive such a thing" (*Perelandra* 61, 70)? Lewis gives us a taste, a glimpse as it were, of what is meant by the words, "more than we ask or imagine" (Eph. 4:20 NIV).

In both his series, there is also the shared element of mythology, which was so important in C. S. Lewis's own life. He makes free use of it. His fiction blends Norse, Roman, and Greek myths, as well as Arthurian legend and references to the worlds of his friend Tolkien. Throughout, there is the sense of reclaiming that which is good in the old pagan myths (in the stories of Narnia) or of interplanetary travel fiction (in the *Space Trilogy*). The presence of the Christian God sanctifies what otherwise is tinged with pride, or drunken orgies, or immorality, or selfishness, and allows that which is truly good and noble, that which is the real appeal, the element of the "good dreams" of pagan men, to be truly enjoyed. As Ransom says of Mother Dimble's view of marriage and Venus, "She has not rejected it, but she has baptized it" (*Hideous Strength* 314).

In *Prince Caspian*, in the scene where Aslan first returns to Narnia, there is a wonderful early-morning revelry, at which all sorts of strange and delightful people seem to show up out of nowhere.

At that moment the sun was just rising and Lucy remembered something and whispered to Susan,
"I say, Su, I know who they are."
"Who?"



“The boy with the wild face is Bacchus and the old one on the donkey is Silenus. Don’t you remember Mr. Tumnus telling us about them long ago?”

“Yes, of course. But I say, Lu —”

“What?”

“I wouldn’t have felt safe with Bacchus and all his wild girls if we’d met them without Aslan.”

“I should think not,” said Lucy (*Caspian* 160).

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