

Chapter 6

Allegory and Symbolism: Deciphering the Chronicles

In This Chapter

- ▶ Deciding whether *The Chronicles of Narnia* is an allegory
 - ▶ Discovering the difference between allegory and supposal
 - ▶ Comparing and contrasting Narnia and Middle-earth
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When people read books, watch films, or listen to music, they can get carried away searching for hidden meaning. Sometimes the whole thing even starts to resemble a wacky conspiracy theory. Consider some of the more interesting ones — that the Hulk in *The Incredible Hulk* is actually a metaphor warning of the dangers of a worldwide Communist revolution or that the Hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings* represent a secret group of people bent on ridding the world of those “No shirt, no shoes, no service” signs.

These examples demonstrate the perspective you should avoid as you search for symbolism in *The Chronicles of Narnia* or any other work of literature or art: Just because someone claims that a work has a particular hidden meaning doesn’t mean that the author actually intended it to be so. Instead, you should fully examine the author’s intent and purpose. As I explain later in this chapter, you can certainly apply your own ideas to a story, but be sure to recognize that there’s a difference between this “personal application” and the author’s deliberate objective.

When most readers read *The Chronicles of Narnia*, they get the sense that Lewis is telling more than just a good story, that some of the themes and characters have underlying symbolism just waiting to be discovered. Some readers even suggest that the Narnian stories are an allegory of the Christian faith.

In this chapter, don your detective hat as you discover how to decipher the meaning behind the Narnian Chronicles. As you do so, you understand what author C.S. Lewis did and did not intend with the symbolism expressed in the

series. This chapter also helps you also compare Narnia with J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth and explore Lewis's and Tolkien's different approaches to penning *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings*, respectively. After you read this chapter, you'll be fully equipped to explore the symbolism detailed in Chapters 7 through 9.

Is Narnia an Allegory?

Perhaps the single most common question about *The Chronicles of Narnia* asks whether Lewis wrote the series as an allegory. After all, even if your biblical knowledge is limited to a few Sunday school classes in third grade, you probably notice that Aslan has many similarities to Jesus Christ. If Lewis added that symbolism on purpose, does that mean that everything in Narnia represents something in the Bible?

C.S. Lewis makes clear that he didn't write the Narnian Chronicles as a biblical allegory. But you may be asking: How can this be true given the obvious symbolism used throughout the series? In order to understand Lewis's side of the story, you need to understand the difference between allegory and something he called *supposal*.

The gory details of allegory

An *allegory* is a literary device in which an author uses the form of a person, place, or animal to represent an abstract idea. For example, an eagle can represent the abstract concept of "freedom," a witch can represent "evil," or a photo of yours truly can express "amazing, profound wisdom."

Some of the most popular literature in history is allegorical. In Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*, for example, Dante represents humanity as he journeys through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. In John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, concepts like hope and mercy become real-life characters in his saga of a man (named Christian) searching for salvation. So too, Lewis's first book written after his Christian conversion was *The Pilgrim's Regress*, a Bunyan-like allegory that describes his road to the Christian faith.

In *The Allegory of Love*, Lewis writes that when you use allegory, "you can start with [facts] . . . and can then invent . . . visible things to express them." He adds, "What is good or happy has always been high like the heavens and bright like the sun. Evil and misery were deep and dark from the first."

A slightly broader definition of allegory applies when an author represents real people or places in a fictional context. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is a well-known example of this allegorical type. As a way of addressing the issues surrounding the Russian Revolution, Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and other real historical figures are represented as pigs on a farm.



The Chronicles of Narnia is not in this genre. Lewis did *not* write the series as an allegory using his fantasy setting to represent abstract concepts or real people. In terms of literary style, the series bears no parallels to allegorical works like *The Divine Comedy*, *Animal Farm*, or even Lewis's own *The Pilgrim's Regress*.



In fact, Lewis explicitly warns readers against trying to make a one-for-one match between Narnia and in the real world. In a May 1954 letter to a fifth grade class in Maryland, he writes, "You are mistaken when you think everything in the books 'represents' something in this world. Things do that in *The Pilgrim's Progress* but I'm not writing in that way."

Supposedly, there's a supposal

Although Lewis makes it clear that *The Chronicles of Narnia* isn't an allegory, he doesn't deny that some symbolism was written into the series. But, to understand his approach, you need to recognize that Lewis differentiates allegory from something he calls *supposal*. In a December 1959 letter to a young girl named Sophia Storr, he explains the difference (emphasis mine):

I don't say. 'Let us represent Christ as Aslan.' I say, 'Supposing there was a world like Narnia, and supposing, like ours, it needed redemption, let us imagine what sort of Incarnation and Passion and Resurrection Christ would have there.'

Allegory and supposal aren't identical devices, according to Lewis, because they deal with what's real and what's unreal quite differently. In an allegory, the ideas, concepts, and even people being expressed are true, but the characters are make-believe. They always behave in a way reflective of the underlying concepts they're representing. A supposal is much different; the fictional character becomes "real" within the imaginary world, taking on a life of its own and adapting to the make-believe world as necessary. If, for example, you accept the supposal of Aslan as true, then Lewis says, "He would really have been a physical object in that world as He was in Palestine, and His death on the Stone Table would have been a physical event no less than his death on Calvary."



Aslan isn't an allegory of Jesus Christ. Instead, he's a supposal. Lewis emphasizes this point in a December 1958 letter to a lady named Mrs. Hook:

[Aslan] is an invention giving an imaginary answer to the question 'What might Christ become like if there really were a world like Narnia and He choose to be incarnate and die and rise again in that world as He actually has done in ours?' This is not allegory at all.

Much of *The Chronicles of Narnia* is built on the concept of supposal. For example:

- ✓ Suppose Christ came into the world of Narnia as Aslan. What would he be like?
- ✓ Suppose Aslan created Narnia out of nothing and centuries later brought it to a conclusion. How would these stories play out?
- ✓ Suppose evil were introduced into Narnia. What would that be like?
- ✓ Suppose a person or talking animal could freely choose to obey or disobey Aslan. What would life in Narnia be like?



By using supposal, Lewis doesn't feel compelled to have a direct 1:1 correlation between the experiences of Aslan and the real life of Jesus Christ. In his letter to Sophia Storr, Lewis talks of this freedom: "When I started *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, I don't think I foresaw what Aslan was going to do and suffer. I think He just insisted on behaving in His own way."

Using supposal as the vehicle for getting him there, Lewis views *The Chronicles of Narnia* as myth. He explains that an allegory is a story with a single meaning, but a myth is a story that can have many meanings for different readers in different generations. According to Lewis, an author puts into an allegory "only what he already knows," but in a myth, he puts "what he does not yet know and could not come by in any other way."

Comparing Narnia and Middle-earth

The fantasy worlds of Lewis's Narnia and J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth are both so enchanting and absorbing that readers can easily become lost in them. They're crafted so masterfully that you may finish *The Chronicles of Narnia* or *The Lord of the Rings* and start searching your house for a magic portal or check the Web for a discount flight to Hobbiton. They both seem so much like real worlds you can visit.

Given the major influences that both Narnia and Middle-earth have had on literature over the past 50 years, it's perhaps not surprising that the originators

of these worlds, Lewis and Tolkien, had a strong friendship and significantly influenced each other's work. (See Chapter 3 for more on their unique relationship.)



However, in spite of the ties that exist between their authors, don't get lulled into thinking that you can approach Narnia and Middle-earth in the same way. As I explain in the following sections, both are "subcreations" of this world, but these two worlds are quite distinct from each other, so much so that you're nearly comparing apples and oranges.

Both worlds are subcreations

Tolkien developed a concept he called *subcreation*. He believed God is the only one who can truly create *ex nihilo*, or create something from nothing. However, a fantasy author can take God's creations and use them as raw material for creating (or *subcreating*) an entirely new secondary world. When the author is successful, his subcreation has all the same stuff — such as the search for meaning and the struggle between good and evil — inside it as real life does. Middle-earth was Tolkien's subcreation.

Tolkien's idea of subcreation had a strong influence on Lewis, and Narnia became Lewis's subcreation. In *Transposition and Other Essays*, Lewis offers a glimpse into the thought that went into the world he subcreated. He writes:

We do not want merely to see beauty . . . We want something else which can hardly be put into words — to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. That is why we have peopled air and earth and water with gods and goddesses, and nymphs and elves.

Undoubtedly, one of Lewis's greatest joys in writing was subcreating the enchanted world of Narnia.

Both worlds feature eucatastrophes

Tolkien and Lewis both believed that at the heart of a real fairy tale is something Tolkien called *eucatastrophe*, which means, in essence, good catastrophe. According to Tolkien, a *eucatastrophe* is a sudden, miraculous, and unexpected turn in the story from the worst possible situation to the best. He believed that a *eucatastrophe* "contain[s] many marvels — peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: 'mythical' in their perfect, self-contained significance."

As a Christian, Tolkien considered the birth of Jesus Christ *the* *eucatastrophe* in human history. Christ's birth, death, and resurrection rocked the world apart: Before these events, evil was winning, but Christ's atonement on the

cross for the sins of the world perfectly defeated the eternal consequences of sin. In a similar way, each Christian's death becomes his or her personal eucatastrophe. Or, as the poet Robert Browning writes in *Prospice*, "For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave."

Tolkien features several eucatastrophes in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, such as Bilbo's finding of the Ring, the destruction of the Ring on Mount Doom, and the final defeat of Sauron.

Lewis, too, incorporates the concept of the eucatastrophe throughout the Narnian Chronicles. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Aslan's resurrection and defeat of the White Witch come only when all hope is lost. In *Prince Caspian*, Caspian and his army are on the verge of extinction when Peter and Edmund and later Aslan and his army arrive; together, they defeat King Miraz and the Telmarines. In *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader,"* Caspian and his crew face several mini-eucatastrophes in their odyssey to the remote end of the Eastern Sea. In *The Horse and His Boy*, the eucatastrophes are the defeat of the Calormenes and Shasta's discovery of his true royal self. *The Silver Chair* sees Prince Rilian eventually freed and restored to his proper place. In *The Magician's Nephew*, Queen Jadis is banished, and Digory's mother is healed. And finally, *The Last Battle* chronicles the final defeat of evil and the promise of eternal life in the real Narnia.

Allegory versus supposal versus applicability

Just as *The Chronicles of Narnia* is often mistakenly considered an allegory, many readers are similarly tempted to look for allegories in *The Lord of the Rings*. For example, some contend the Ring represents the atomic bomb, while others see Gandalf as a representation of Christ. But the problem with these interpretations is that, although there are some intriguing parallels, they break down when you look at the totality of the story. In fact, Gandalf, Frodo, and Aragorn all suggest Christ at certain points in the story.

Although neither can accurately be considered an allegory, Narnia and Middle-earth differ significantly in terms of their symbolism. On the one hand, Lewis embraced the idea of supposal (see the section "Supposedly, there's a supposal," earlier in this chapter). On the other hand, Tolkien argued for something he called *applicability*, the idea of giving a reader the freedom to extract meaning from an author's work rather than an author forcing a particular idea onto the reader. As he explains in the foreword to *The Lord of the Rings*:

An “allegoric” reaction

Lewis didn't write the Narnian Chronicles as an allegory, but he didn't have a problem with the use of allegory in literature. Not only were some of his favorite works allegories (*The Faerie Queene*, *The Divine Comedy*, and *The Pilgrim's*

Progress), but also he penned the allegorical *The Pilgrim's Regress*. In contrast, Tolkien detested allegory as a writing device and avoided it like the plague.

I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of the readers. I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.

Lewis openly expressed his intent to present Aslan as what God might be like if he appeared in Narnia. Tolkien, however, believed a writer should never be as explicit in his intent. As a result, Tolkien lumped Lewis's concept of supposal squarely into the allegorical camp, considering it just another a manifestation of allegory.

Fairy tale versus mythical history

Both *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings* are often referred to either as myths or fairy tales. As a result, people sometimes mistakenly believe that Lewis and Tolkien purposefully wrote in the same style for the same audience. In fact, it's my belief that *The Chronicles of Narnia* is best thought of as a “fairy tale,” while *The Lord of the Rings* may more accurately be depicted as a “complete mythology.”



Lewis wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia* as a fairy tale “in the spirit of E. Nesbitt.” Although Tolkien's Middle-earth came first, Lewis didn't set out to create a Middle-earth wannabe. He instead wanted to create a world perfect for a children's series. He spoke of his love of writing fairy tales in his essay “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said:”

I fell in love with the [fairy tale's] form itself: its brevity, its severe restraints on description, its flexible traditionalism, its inflexible hostility to all analysis, digression, reflections and 'gas.' I was now enamored of it. Its very limitations of vocabulary became an attraction; as the hardness of the stone pleases the

sculptor or the difficulty of the sonnet delights the sonneteer. On that side (as Author) I wrote fairy tales because the Fairy Tale seemed the ideal Form for the stuff I had to say.

In contrast, Tolkien created an entire mythical world in Middle-earth; it's a world that perhaps has no equal in literature. Tolkien's Middle-earth comes complete with original languages, distinct cultures, extensive background histories, and details out the wazoo. As such, Tolkien wrote for an older audience than Lewis, one that could handle his heavier prose style and appreciate the depth of the mythology.

Because of these differences, *The Lord of the Rings* fans sometimes write off the Narnian Chronicles as overly simplistic. But in doing so, they misunderstand the nature of Lewis's master work. Although *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings* are both fantasy stories, they're written in different styles for different audiences.