

Teaching Guide:

C. S. Lewis and *The Chronicles of Narnia*

Student Level: Year 5 and up

Learning Objectives

- Develop a deeper understanding of C. S. Lewis's core literary themes and preoccupations
- Engage with the genre of literary allegory and develop a deeper understanding of the concept
- Practice close reading
- Practice identifying recurring themes across chapters and inferring authorial lessons from narrative events

Readings to prepare outside of class: The seventeen chapters of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* are around 10-15 pages and the book overall is 180-200 pages in most editions, with fairly large print and illustrations. Depending on the age and reading level of students, the book as a whole can be read over one to three weeks. A single class can focus on chapters 1-4 (Lucy and Edmund's first ventures into Narnia) and 13-15 (the sacrifice and resurrection of Aslan at the Stone Table). If students are interested in the rest of the books in the series, they can be assigned as outside reading; individual books can be assigned for students to present on to the class (see below).

Narrative Summary of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

The Pevensie children (Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy) are evacuated from London during the Blitz and sent to stay with Professor Digory Kirke in the countryside. During a game of hide and seek in the mysterious and massive old house, Lucy Pevensie hides in a disused wardrobe, and discovers it is a portal to a world called Narnia. She meets a faun called Mr Tumnus, who invites her to tea; Tumnus eventually admits that he planned to report Lucy to the White Witch, who has named herself queen of Narnia and cursed the land to be always winter and never Christmas, but that having met Lucy he cannot now do so. When Lucy emerges from the wardrobe, she thinks she's been gone several hours, but in England it's only been a few minutes. Her siblings don't believe her story of the world in the wardrobe, but eventually Edmund follows her in and finds himself alone in Narnia. There he meets the White Witch, who offers Edmund sweets and persuades him to bring his siblings to her, saying she will make him a prince. Edmund pretends to Peter and Susan that Narnia isn't real, despite Lucy's protestations.

Hiding from the house's caretaker, all four children soon end up in Narnia. Edmund's lie is revealed, but they discover Mr Tumnus has been arrested.

Following a friendly robin, the children are led to the dwelling of Mr and Mrs Beaver, who tell them that Aslan, the great lion who is the true ruler of Narnia, is returning to the land, and that a prophecy predicts that when ‘two Sons of Adam and two Daughters of Eve’ sit on the Narnian thrones in the city of Cair Paravel, the rule of the White Witch will end. Edmund sneaks away to tell the White Witch that he has brought his siblings to Narnia, and at her castle he discovers a courtyard filled with her enemies, all of whom she has turned into stone. Edmund is taken to the Stone Table by the White Witch, who treats him with increasing cruelty and is increasingly enraged that spring seems to be returning. Meanwhile, the Beavers take Peter, Susan, and Lucy to meet Aslan at the Stone Table; on the way, they meet Father Christmas, who gives them gifts and weapons. At the Stone Table, the children meet Aslan, and Peter kills the White Witch’s wolf captain Maugrim. Aslan’s forces find and rescue Edmund from the Witch, but the Witch shows up at the Stone Table and invokes the Deep Magic, under which all traitors (including Edmund) are hers to kill. Aslan and the Witch speak alone, and when they return Aslan says nothing except that the Witch has renounced her claim on Edmund. That evening, Aslan goes to the Stone Table alone; Lucy and Susan secretly follow him. They watch from a distance as Aslan sacrifices himself to the Witch in exchange for Edmund. In the morning, however, the Stone Table breaks, and Aslan is restored to life through Deeper Magic, which allows for the reversal of a death if a willing, innocent victim takes a traitor’s place on the Stone Table. Aslan and the girls go to the Witch’s castle, revive all those turned to stone, and join the Narnian army, led by Peter and Edmund. The Narnians triumph, the Witch is killed, and the Pevensies become kings and queens in Cair Paravel.

After reigning for many years in Narnia, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy, now adults, go on a hunt for a magical white stag in the forest and accidentally pass through the wardrobe portal and back to England. When they emerge from the wardrobe they are children again, and no time has passed since they left. Professor Kirke, however, believes their story and reassures them that they will return to Narnia when the time is right.

The complete *Chronicles of Narnia* books tell the story of a variety of children who find their way into Narnia, and of children and young people within Narnia, beginning with the creation of the world in *The Magician’s Nephew*. *The Last Battle* concludes with an apocalypse in Narnia and our main characters dying in England. They enter Aslan’s country, the ‘true’ Narnia, which is heaven, and Aslan sheds his lion form to become something else entirely.

Discussion Questions and Points

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe

1. What are Lucy and Edmund’s first experiences of Narnia like, and why are they so different? Does it matter that Edmund shuts the door of the wardrobe, when everyone else knows not to?
2. What do we make of the mix of influences in Lewis’ Narnia? Fauns are from Greek mythology, but lampposts and sewing machines are from Victorian England. What kind of effect do these contrasting fantasy elements have?
3. Why are Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve so important in Narnia?

4. What do we make of the fact that the White Witch causes it to be ‘always winter and never Christmas’? Why does she want Edmund to deceive his siblings?
5. Why does Edmund lie about going into Narnia? By contrast, what do we make of Professor Kirke’s attitude toward truth?
6. Once in Narnia, Edmund insists that the children don’t know who is good and who is bad, but Lucy seems to go by instinct when deciding who is an ally. Why might Lewis include this dynamic?
7. What do we make of each child’s reaction to the name *Aslan*?
8. What is food like in Narnia? Are there morals attached to food? What are the differences between Mrs. Beaver’s marmalade roll and the White Witch’s Turkish delight – ‘good ordinary food’ and ‘bad magic food’?
9. Why a lion? And what does Mr Beaver mean when he says ‘Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good’?
10. Discuss: ‘When you meet anything that’s going to be human and isn’t yet, or used to be human once and isn’t now, or ought to be human and isn’t, you keep your eyes on it and feel for your hatchet.’
11. Do we feel sympathy for Edmund? Does the text encourage us to have sympathy for him? Does our level of sympathy for him change over the course of the story, and why does the White Witch’s attitude toward him change so much? What about Lewis’ offhand comment about his terrible school? What do we make of his interaction with the stone lion?
12. Why does Father Christmas give them their weapons and tools? And what do we make of his saying, ‘Battles are ugly when women fight’?
13. What do you think Aslan said to Edmund?
14. What is the power of Aslan’s sacrifice? Why does it work, and what does it mean – both as a Christian allegory and as a narrative, thematic choice?
15. Is the ending a satisfying one? Why do you think Lewis sends them back to England?

The Chronicles of Narnia (general)

1. What do we make of Jadis? What are her motivations like? How does she relate to the Biblical Satan? Why is she a woman? What do we make of the Lilith connection in *LWW*?
2. What do we make of the importance of doorways, portals, and old houses in the *Chronicles*? Why must Narnia be a fantasy world you can get into from our world, rather than a self-contained universe like Middle Earth, Earthsea, or Westeros?
3. What do we do when we encounter the racism in Lewis’s depiction of the Calormen? What role do the Calormen play in Lewis’s universe, and why? What prejudices can we identify in those depictions? How should we respond when we find racism in the books we read?
4. Compare Edmund and Eustace as two poorly behaved boys in the *Chronicles*. Why do they misbehave? How do they compare to characters like Digory, or like Peter?
5. What about the girls and women in the *Chronicles*? Why doesn’t Susan get to go to heaven at the end of *The Last Battle*? Do you agree that she shouldn’t? What is Lucy like as a character?

6. What makes a good ruler in Narnia? Who is a good king or queen, and who is a poor king or queen, and why?
7. Where in Narnia is there magic, and where is magic absent? Why?

Further Reading and Writing Exercises:

Lewis and Christianity

Students should read excerpts from Lewis's text *The Screwtape Letters*, which are a series of letters written by the demon Screwtape to his nephew Wormwood, a 'junior tempter' trying to lead humans astray. Suggested letters include numbers 1, 2, 6, 12, 14, 25, and 28. How does Lewis use Screwtape's voice, ostensibly arguing against Christianity, to argue *for* it instead? What does 'being a Christian' mean to Lewis? What kinds of values can you find in each of his letters, and how does Lewis think we should live? What do we make of Lewis's distinctions between 'the no. 7 bus' and thoughts of God, between 'the Church... terrible as an army with banners' and 'the sham Gothic erection on the new building estate'? What is 'mere Christianity'?

Younger students can read Lewis's very short poem 'What the Bird Said Early in the Year', and discuss or present on the following questions: what does Lewis mean when he writes 'This year the summer will come true'? What are 'the circle' and 'the spell' that must be escaped and undone? What are the gates that open at the end of the poem? What are your favourite images in the poem? What is this piece about? Does Lewis's Christianity help us read it more clearly?

Lewis and Romance

Lewis was a scholar of medieval romance, and many of its conventions can be found in his fantasy world, especially his depictions of Cair Paravel throughout the novels, the hunting of the White Stag in *LWW*, and the quest to find Prince Rilian and defeat the Lady of the Green Kirtle in *The Silver Chair*. Students should read the short verse romance *Sir Orfeo*, available online [at this link](#), with a modern English translation available [at this link](#). Students can discuss in small groups or present as pairs or individuals on shared features in the Narnia books and the romance, paying particular attention to: the depiction of the human court and the fairy court, Orfeo's sojourn in the woods, the nature of the fairies, the trope of recognising/not recognising noble characters, and the undoing of death.

Further Reading in The Chronicles of Narnia

Students can be invited to prepare book reports, as individuals or small groups, on one of the other six books in the *Chronicles of Narnia* after having read *LWW*. Assigning students to present on the books in chronological order (starting with *The Magician's Nephew* and concluding with *The Last Battle*) with plot summaries and commentary on important themes and ideas will allow an entire class to grasp the arc of the whole series without having to take the time to read all seven books in the classroom. Alternatively, students who have read or wish to read all seven can investigate a theme across books. See the second set of discussion questions for ready-made theme ideas; students can also choose their own.

Resources for Teachers and Advanced Students: Information on Tolkien's Life and Career and the Composition of *The Silmarillion*

- Katherine Langrish, *From Spare Oom to War Drobe: Travels in Narnia with my Nine-Year-Old Self* (Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2021).
 - Note that this volume serves as a reader's guide to all seven Narnia books, with plot summaries and extensive commentary.
- Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings of Oxford: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Their Friends* (Harper Collins, 1978, repr. 2006).
- Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings* (FSG, 2016).
- Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life, Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Tyndale House, 2013).
- Useful Oxford Fantasy podcasts: 'C. S. Lewis and The Wind in the Willows', 'Faith in Fantasy Literature', and 'A Walk Around C. S. Lewis's Oxford', all available at <https://writersinspire.org/themes/fantasy-literature-further-thinking>.