

Sulpicius

The Urth list — 30 messages, 15 voices, 03 Oct 2004

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4236>

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Roy C. Lackey — 03 Oct 2004, 23:39

In the early hours of Severian's autarchy he was told by the aquastor Malrubius that his immediate predecessor, the Old Autarch Appian, had been the only ruler since the first autarch, Ymar, to represent Urth at trial in Yesod. (IV, p.214)

At another time, when Sev was trying to recall something, he began "to search those veiled lives that lie behind the last, memories that I have scarcely mentioned in this narrative, that dim as they grow stranger and stretch backwards, perhaps, to Ymar, and behind Ymar to the Age of Myth." (V, p.294)

I am interested here only in the thousand years between Ymar and Appian. Appian, just before his death, told Sev that he contained "hundreds of personalities. . . .We are many lives." (IV, p.202)

Now to my point: Ultan spoke to Sev of ". . . the room we of the library have maintained for three hundred years against the return of the Autarch Sulpicius (and into which, in consequence, no one ever comes) . . ." (I, p.47)

So, where did he go? Elsewhere on Urth? Off planet? The Corridors of Time? We know from the above that he didn't go to Yesod. The only things that are clear are that when he left he was autarch and that he didn't come back. Had he come back, there would have been no point in preserving the room for three centuries and, anyway, he should have been long dead. In any event, the autarchy survived him. Even if we posit that he just disappeared inexplicably, dead or alive, how was the chain of autarchial succession maintained and, more importantly, the seemingly unbroken links of memories that stretched from Ymar to Sev?

It would be easiest to assume that Wolfe just screwed up somewhere, but I doubt that he did. Of the relatively few things that Ultan might have said or did say in his only scene in the Urth Cycle, why did Wolfe put those words in his mouth? It doesn't serve the larger plot in any way that I can see, but G.W. must have had an answer. I don't.

-Roy

Andrew Bollen — 04 Oct 2004, 00:11 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Roy says:

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Nathan Spears — 04 Oct 2004, 06:48 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14332a.htm>

http://www.brainyencyclopedia.com/encyclopedia/s/su/sulpicius_severus.html

I wish I could say something really intelligent, but I just googled this guy's name.

Here's a couple interesting excerpts from the second link:

"Sulpicius Severus was an aristocrat of Aquitaine intended for an administrative career and educated in the classical manner who, after the early death of his wife, renounced his career and entered the monastic life."

"Sulpicius wrote a world chronicle . . ."

Jeff Wilson — 04 Oct 2004, 08:42 · in reply to Nathan Spears

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"Sulpicius wrote a world chronicle . . ."

Could it be that Sulpicius ordered that the room be kept for him until he came back, as long as necessary, and they have simply followed the order, since no other Autarch has bothered to withdraw it?

Or perhaps it foreshadows the memory-transfer, since Sulpicius live on in his successors?

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com

Lead Playtester, GURPS Ultra-Tech for 4/e

< <http://www.io.com/~jwilson> >

Jason Willard — 04 Oct 2004, 09:43 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Hello! I've been lurking here for a while: but as most here have re-read all of Wolfe _at least_ once, whereas I've only read most of Wolfe _once_, (and my science skills are non-existent) I've been shy about writing. But, I've just finished re-reading SotT and CotC and have been doing a lot of research. A lot of it into dead ends, I'm sure.

But I was struck by the passage in Ultan's library about Sulpicius as well, and as there is/was a Sulpicius Severus (as well as another Sulpicius, a saint, with whom Sulpicius Severus, from my understanding, is confused), and as as Severian means a follower of Severus (although OED refers to "the Monophysite patriarch of Antioch (early 5th c.)"), I have thought for a while that

there must be a connection between these two autarchs, Sulpicius and our hero Sev. I have also wondered if Wolfe hasn't set up some elaborate verbal joke on the Pelagian heresy. According to W2, 'Pelagian' is "a follower of Pelagius"; 'pelagian' (little 'p') is either an adjective meaning "pelagic" ("the pelagic argosy sights land!") or a noun: "A pelagic animal." (Like an undine, or something bigger?) Also, as the Oxford Classical Dictionary notes in its entry for Severus, Sulpicius, "In old age he seems to have passed through a period of Pelagianism." Could it be said that Severian has passed through a similar period in his allegiance to Vodalus?

I'm also intent on reading (Time! I need more Time!!!) Severus's history. (Yes, he is, importantly, an influential writer, as Severian is.) His history, again according to the OCD, is "a universal chronicle to AD 400 which is an important source for the history of 4th-cent. events ... The whole book is an interesting attempt to present a 'breviarium' of history from the Christian point of view: it uses Christian chronographers ... but also pagan writers." I'd be very surprised if Mr. Wolfe hasn't come across this work at some point. Or, perhaps, this is yet another dead end.

Jason

----- Original Message -----

From: Roy C. Lackey<mailto:rclackey at stic.net>

To: urth<mailto:urth at urth.net>

Sent: Monday, October 04, 2004 1:38 AM

Subject: (urth) Sulpicius

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So, where did he go? Elsewhere on Urth? Off planet? The Corridors of Time? We know from the above that he didn't go to Yesod. The only things that are clear are that when he left he was autarch and that he didn't come back. Had he come back, there would have been no point in preserving the room for three centuries and, anyway, he should have been long dead. In any event, the autarchy survived him. Even if we posit that he just disappeared inexplicably, dead or alive, how was the chain of autarchial succession maintained and, more importantly, the seemingly unbroken links of memories that stretched from Ymar to Sev?

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-Roy

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 04 Oct 2004, 11:20 · in reply to Jason Willard

H'mmm. I had never thought to connect "pelagic" with "pelagian," but there is a kind of sense to it - the Pelagian heresy is, at root, the ideal of self-sufficiency. Rejecting Augustine's doctrine of Man's inherent sinfulness and the resultant absolute need for grace in order to be saved, Pelagius taught that humans had the ability to absolutely reject evil of their own free will, and so be saved.

It occurs to me that there is a certain analogy here to the Vodalarian belief (the Vodelarii being the users of the "pelagic" password) that humanity can pull itself up by its bootstraps and return to their days of glory. (It is in this context not insignificant to note that this belief is encouraged by the demons of the posthistorical period, Abaia and his ilk.)

Cheers,

--Dan'I

www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer
No president who has presided over Abu Ghraib should ever
say he wants to put anyone on a leash. That's all.
--Andrew Sullivan

mournings glory — 04 Oct 2004, 12:44 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

From Jeff Wilson:

<Could it be that Sulpicius ordered that the room be kept for him until he came back, as long as necessary, and they have simply followed the order, since no other Autarch has bothered to withdraw it? Or perhaps it foreshadows the memory-transfer, since Sulpicius live on in his successors?>

Agree, but with some modification.

Perhaps Sulpicius, knowing what lays ahead of him (he will be eaten by his successor, though his memories will survive), has merely sought to ensure that one of the places he likes most in the world will survive and that he, via his new host, will still be able to visit it and savor his favorite books post-corporally. Thecla, after all, "returns" to the House Absolute and at times her presence is so dominant she takes over the narrative as well as Severian's body language (iirc he's mistaken for a woman a number of times). Sulpicius may thus be hoping he'll be able to return to the library and even be recognized as Sulpicius if he can channel himself through strongly enough. Ultan's riff about how this is not yet happened may speak to the ill-fated poignancy of this notion. Nevertheless, his 300-year-old-edict remains still operational.

There's also a nice bit of irony here: Severian, as Sulpicius's future host,
has come to the library, foreshadowing both Sulpicius's return and Severian's own rise to the

Phoenix Throne. Plus the entire notion of the Autarchy as a huge collective volume of personalities, with each chapter representing a different Autarch's life.

msg

Seth Lombardi — 04 Oct 2004, 19:57 · follows mournings glory

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msg

I've always wondered: aren't there WAY more subsumed personalities in the personage of the Autarch than there have been Autarchs? Don't know what to do with that. Unless Ymar or someone requested a democratic buffet of brains in order to best serve his subjects.

seth

Chris — 04 Oct 2004, 20:36 · follows Seth Lombardi

There's a lot more to be troubled about in this. Because at least one of the previous Autarchs bouncing around in there is Severian himself, who at that point would have already been through all of the events described in the New Sun and also have (within his own memories) the echoes of all the other autarchs.

This is not necessarily a complete snake-eating-its-tale scenario, however. We know that Severian's memory causes him to get a deeper effect from the alzado. My guess is that everyone else, having a normal human memory, would not receive or transmit a precise copy of the memories picked up from their predecessor. As a result, what ends up coming to Severian by way of Appian is a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy... what he perceives of the traces of his own memory in this is faded and confusing; events which he knows have already happened take on the appearance of having been through them more than once (case in point is the scene at the beginning where he almost drowns, and his later reflections on it), and events which haven't happened yet seem to him to be presentiments of what's to come.

Another possibility that has occurred to me is that perhaps his memory has never been perfect at all. He has perhaps been given the illusion of perfect memory by having received an infinite number of very-faded copies. For this time travelling thing involves an infinite regress - however many copies of his own memories he receives from Appian, he ends up transmitting that number plus one to one of his predecessors earlier on in the timeline. An infinite number of imperfect copies laid on top of each other may appear to have perfect clarity, and yet contain errors...

Just dabbling with ideas a bit,
Civet

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Roy C. Lackey — 04 Oct 2004, 21:58 · follows Chris

Andrew Bollen wrote:

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If you're looking for internal inconsistencies in the Urth Cycle, here's another. Aquastor Malrubius told Sev, "If you pass -- if our race is judged ready to reenter the wide seas of space -- such a white fountain will be created in the heart of our sun." (IV, p.214)

That's not the way it happened in Book V, where a white fountain was created at an unknown distance from Urth and took thousands of years to _travel_ to the Old Sun. It was the passage of this heavenly mass close enough to Urth on its journey to the sun to cause geological upheavals and massive tidal waves, resulting in the inundation of low-lying Nessus two days before reaching its destination.

-Roy

Roy C. Lackey — 04 Oct 2004, 22:24 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Civet wrote:

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Okay, I'll bite. Which of the previous autarchs was Severian, and when?

If you're referring to the "first Severian" scenario outlined by Sev on p.270 of CITADEL, that doesn't count. That Severian was replaced at some point by our Sev, and history was rewritten, so to speak. Sev _did not_ contain the memory of that "first Severian" becoming autarch and receiving the memories of Appian and the rest.

-Roy

Chris — 04 Oct 2004, 22:46 · follows Roy C. Lackey

It could be that, considering the white fountain as an "anti-black-hole" and some of the odd statements about time made by the cacogens, that Wolfe is attempting to describe the white fountain as coming into being *in* the sun at that moment, and then travelling out and away but in a backwards-time direction, ie, from the point of view of someone from Urth, it would start from far away and then proceed in toward the sun.

This is a little pseudoscientific and based off the quirky observation that anti-particles can be described as particles travelling backward in time. But I don't think it's beyond the realm of what Wolfe might do, especially since he's not writing hard sci-fi anyway.

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-Roy

Chris — 04 Oct 2004, 22:57 · follows Chris

Well, a couple things. The first is the tomb that Severian plays in as a child, which he later finds out is his own (from one of his many lives as the Conciliator in and out of time). I believe that somewhere it's stated that this is the tomb of an autarch. Secondly, I think Severian himself makes the conjecture that he's been autarch more than once, in UotNS, though I don't have a copy to go looking.

Not to be confused with whoever's theory it was that Ymar was actually Severian, which I never really bought into (or the theory that he was Severian's clone).

The only place that the passing from Citadel you're referring to comes into play is that I think that perhaps Severian comes up with the *idea* of there having been another Severian from the fact that he had these echoed memories, and had no way at hand to explain them otherwise.

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-Roy

Tony Ellis — 17 Oct 2004, 08:04 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Jason McCready wrote:

I've been reading the short stories in Endangered Species. Could anyone give me some hints on even beginning to understand the three Procreation stories...

The Procreation stories are among my all-time favourite Wolfe short stories (admittedly, it's a long list). They're funny, inventive, moving, and wonderfully concise - all things I love about Wolfe's writing. Apologies in advance if I'm just stating the obvious, but:

'Creation' is a jokey skit on Genesis. A scientist accidentally creates a universe, and each day of its evolution corresponds to a stage in the Bible story: the land separating from the waters, life, Adam, Eve etc. The fly is the introduction of evil. Is this perhaps 'our' universe?

Most writers would have been happy enough with a story like 'Creation'. Wolfe, and this is absolutely characteristic of the man, takes the idea and runs with it. 'Re-creation' introduces the idea that maybe a second universe was created at the same time as the first, but one that has evolved backwards through time. Sure enough, as it propagates back through his life, the scientist suddenly finds himself 'remembering' encounters with it.

Finally, 'The Sister's Account' ups the ante again. We witness the birth, flowering and death of one of the worlds of this backwards universe - in barely three pages. But we're no longer in the realm of shaggy-god jokes and scientists. There's something very poignant about these little glimpses of a paradise now lost forever, and it's no coincidence that Wolfe makes our narrator a spinster. "When Gene had married and it was clear I never would" is an incredible line - it tells you so much about Sis in so few words, and where she stands in relation to this world. As does the image of all the little rockpools on a shore teeming with new life, each one reflecting her empty spinster's bed.

The final sentence raises the bar again, and never fails to send a shiver down my spine. Have we been listening all the while to the thoughts of a woman who lived and died a whole universe ago?

One rabbit after another, all pulled from the same unremarkable-looking hat. Irreverent tall story; beguiling could-it-work-like-that SF idea; elegiac meditation on the mystery and transient nature of life. That's how I understand Procreation, anyway.

Adam Stephanides — 28 Oct 2004, 20:02 · in reply to Tony Ellis

The fantasy anthology FLIGHTS, which contains a novella by Wolfe (at least according to the editor, though the boundary between a novella and a novelette has never been clear to me) also contains a short story by Neil Gaiman, called "The Problem of Susan." In general I'm not keen on Gaiman as a writer, either of comics (I regard SANDMAN as overrated) or prose, but I think this story is a good one, though it functions more as a critique of the Narnia books than as a work of fiction in its own right. As it deals with issues which I know are of interest to several people on this list, I'm curious if anyone else has read it; and if so, what did you think about it?

--Adam

Charles Reed — 02 Nov 2004, 06:57 · in reply to Adam Stephanides

I've read Gaiman's THE PROBLEM OF SUSAN and have a few thoughts to share.

SPOILERS abound, so be warned.

My initial reaction to the story was one of anger and disappointment, not so much at the story's visceral imagery as at Susan's lack of hope/redemption/salvation at the end. The visceral imagery I mentioned was something that I actually liked quite a bit. Well, "liked" isn't quite the right word. Let's say I thought it was very effective in its attempt to pull the reader into the story. The descriptions of the battlefield, of Aslan's copulation with the White Witch, and especially of what Susan endured after the train crash (and what she thought about it afterward) are all disturbingly powerful scenes. Of course, it helps if you already have an emotional investment in the character, which I do, having been a big fan of the Narnia books ever since my fourth grade teacher -- Mrs. Pixler from Jane Long Elementary in Abilene, Texas if anyone's interested -- read THE LION, THE WITCH, AND THE WARDROBE to us. I don't know how emotionally resonant those scenes would be to someone not familiar with Susan Pevensie.

[Side note on Mrs. Pixler: In addition to introducing me to Narnia, she also read parts of Stephen King's THE SHINING to us, which literally gave me nightmares and which planted within me a deep-seated distrust of topiary that I still can't quite shake. All in all, though, Mrs. Pixler was cool, even though I'm sure if she were to read such stuff as obvious Christian allegories and nightmare-inducing horror to fourth graders in today's public schools, she'd have her pants sued off. :-)]

Anyway. Gaiman does a good job of using that pre-existing emotional investment to create a grown-up Susan that I was really interested in and cared about. I think, however, that he (or more accurately, the grown-up Susan) misinterprets Lewis's (or Aslan's) reasons for not allowing Susan to go higher up and higher in. Susan wasn't denied heaven because she liked lipstick and boys. She was denied heaven because she turned her back on and denied the existence of the living God. I desperately wanted some kind of redemption for her at the end, which I suppose is a testament to how much the story affected me. I certainly can't say that I liked it, and its nightmarish bitterness really left me down in the dumps after reading it, but it is certainly a valid "take" on Susan. All stories can't end happily and hopefully, and a consequence of Christian belief is the idea that some people will accept God's love and be saved while others will deny God's love and be damned. Seeing that damnation in practice is a bitter thing, even when it applies to a person who exists nowhere but in the minds of those who have read about her.

Charles

Adam Stephanides wrote:

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Michael Straight — 03 Nov 2004, 09:48 · in reply to Charles Reed

Susan wasn't denied
heaven because she liked lipstick and boys.

Funny how so many people don't understand this.

For Lewis,

Wonder/Adventure of Narnia: Wonder of Knowing and Loving God::lipstick and boys:dull grey
mundane world of ignoring God

Lewis (following Chesterton) sees the Christian worldview as an exciting Romance (in the old sense), like reading Narnia. He sees the atheistic worldview as dull, like reading a modern romance (in the new sense) novel.

-- Rostrum

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 03 Nov 2004, 11:07 · in reply to Michael Straight

I've been slowly plodding through FLIGHTS for the past few weeks. I'm finding most of it dull: fantasy mostly doesn't work for me at short lengths, except for contemporary/dark/urban fantasy, and only about half of that in this book is actually any good. So I've avoided this thread until I got to the Gaiman story. I generally like Gaiman's work, from Black Orchid and The Sandman to American Gods and Coraline, so I was looking forward to this story & didn't want to know anything about it in advance.

Well, I read it this morning, and did not like it at all. I'm not really surprised; it's currently fashionable to trash Lewis and especially the Narnia books, and Gaiman is nothing if not fashionable. In this case, I wish he hadn't been.

Charles and Rostrum are quite right in their interpretation of Susan's obsession with "lipstick, boys, and invitations," but they miss something even more important - Susan is most emphatically not "denied Heaven." This is the "Pullman Heresy" that is, I think, at the heart of the trash-Lewis fad.

Susan is not damned; she simply doesn't die in the train crash. The books neither say nor imply anything about her eternal fate, and in the one place that I know of where Lewis had anything to say about it - in a letter to a child - he was of the opinion that God kept her alive so that she could come back to Him by some other route. (That's from memory, so the wording is probably nowhere near CSL's.)

Lewis was not a Universalist, but he was (by the standard of most orthodox Christians) almost unbelievably optimistic about God's will that "all the world be saved" and His ability to do so; cf. The Great Divorce, in which he suggests (albeit in a fictional form that allowed him to avoid, at some level, responsibility for the idea) the possibility that even those already in Hell might be saved. The assumption that he fated Susan for damnation would almost certainly offend him deeply. Like near-'bout everything else in Narnia, the "lipstick" bit is there for a polemic point - a point further driven in by the statement that Susan is "no longer a Friend of Narnia," that she regards Narnia as a "game we used to play."

Perhaps that last point is the most telling, but it's also one that is too easily overinterpreted. The heart of Edmund's betrayal in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe is his pretending, after getting into Narnia, that he and Lucy were "playing." Then, too, in The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader", Eustace believes that the Pevensie children "play games about Narnia" until he winds up there himself. So it's easy to see Susan's dismissing Narnia as a "game" as a sign of ultimate rejection, of damnation.

But in terms of such symbols, the Narnia books are (to be quite frank) written very sloppily. There is very little real consistency from one book to the next; each has its own set of polemic points to make, and its own set of allegorical symbols to make them. The only really constant symbol is Aslan himself.

Heck, I'm just sort of wandering on here. The point is, that Gaiman bases his story on an interpretation of Susan's fate that I believe would be far from the intentions of Susan's creator. I'm sorry he didn't take Lewis's own beliefs into account in writing "The Problem of Susan," because there is a very real question about Susan's fate; a talented writer who wasn't kneejerkingly hostile to Christianity might make an interesting story about what Aslan/God does to bring Susan back to Himself, now that Narnia is gone.

But Gaiman is clearly not the writer to do it.

www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer
"Saddam would still be in power if he were the President
of the United States, and the world would be a lot better off."
-- The Forty-Third President, 10/8/04

David Duffy — 03 Nov 2004, 15:27 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

On Wed, 3 Nov 2004, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:
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her alive so that she could come back to Him by some other route.
(That's from memory, so the wording is probably nowhere near
CSL's.)

I am irresistibly reminded of Luther explaining how dogs also go to heaven: "Be comforted, little
dog, thou too in the Resurrection shalt have a tail of gold." ;)

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 03 Nov 2004, 16:58 · in reply to David Duffy

You know, this is almost the only thing I've ever heard about Luther that I liked...

On Thu, 4 Nov 2004 09:22:10 +1000 (EST), David Duffy <davidd at qimr.edu.au> wrote:
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Adam Stephanides — 05 Nov 2004, 14:23 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

I'll confess that when I started this topic I was being a bit of a provocateur (though there's at
least one person on the list who iirc shares Gaiman's view), so I appreciate both Charles and
Dan'I's thoughtful responses.

Spoilers follow.

I see Gaiman as making two criticisms of the Narnia books. The first is that Lewis casually
consigned Susan, a major character in the series, to a cruel ordeal (by which I'm referring to
what would happen to her on Earth after her family's death, rather than her eternal fate--see
below), seemingly without being aware that he had done so; or if he was aware, no trace of this
awareness appeared in the books. Hence Lewis here displayed a lack of imagination and
empathy. This criticism hadn't occurred to me before, but now it seems obvious.

The second is that the books perpetuate views of men and women that are psychologically damaging to both sexes. Gaiman doesn't make this criticism explicitly; it's implicit in the reference to "the role of children's fiction in creating the belief systems we adopt as adults" (398), and in Greta's dream, in which the girls are eaten while the boys are transformed into a "twisted thing" (401). Whether this criticism is true or fair, I couldn't say without rereading the Narnia books, but it's a powerful image at any rate.

Charles Reed wrote:
Susan wasn't denied
heaven because she liked lipstick and boys. She was denied heaven
because she turned her back on and denied the existence of the living
God.

That interpretation is consistent with the theological allegory, and it may be what Lewis intended, but it's not what the text says. None of the characters say that her fault is to have denied Aslan, but Jill and Lady Polly, who have the last words on the matter, do say that her fault is to be interested in "'nothing ... except nylons and lipstick and invitations'" (End of ch. 12, in THE LAST BATTLE). In any case, it's because Susan is too interested in nylons and lipstick and invitations that she's turned her back on Narnia.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:
it's currently fashionable to trash Lewis and especially the
Narnia books,

Is it? I know Pullman criticized them prominently; I'm not aware of any other prominent figures who have done so recently.

and Gaiman is nothing if not fashionable.

Again, I hadn't particularly noticed this. He writes in popular genres, but so does Wolfe (not that Gaiman is anywhere near Wolfe's level as a writer). In any case, I think Gaiman's critique of Lewis here is too deeply felt to be just an effort to be "fashionable."

Susan is most emphatically not
"denied Heaven." This is the "Pullman Heresy" that is, I think, at the
heart of the trash-Lewis fad.

If I give all your brothers and sisters candy, and I don't give you any, then I've denied you candy, even though I still have the option to give you candy later.

Susan is not damned; she simply doesn't die in the train crash. The books neither say nor imply anything about her eternal fate, and in the one place that I know of where Lewis had anything to say about it - in a letter to a child - he was of the opinion that God kept her alive so that she could come back to Him by some other route. (That's from memory, so the wording is probably nowhere near CSL's.)

[snip]

Like near-'bout everything else
in Narnia, the "lipstick" bit is there for a polemic point - a point
further driven in by the statement that Susan is "no longer a
Friend of Narnia," that she regards Narnia as a "game we used
to play."

I, and I suspect most others who criticize Lewis, certainly "get" Lewis's point. Our point is that as his exemplar of someone who had turned their back on God, Lewis chose a girl whose "fault" is to be preoccupied with just those things that most adolescent girls in his society were preoccupied with. No doubt you'll retort that it was just by chance that his exemplar was a girl,

and has no larger significance; I'm not so sure.

Heck, I'm just sort of wandering on here. The point is, that Gaiman bases his story on an interpretation of Susan's fate that I believe would be far from the intentions of Susan's creator.

Though Greta does use the word "damned" at one point, that's not what the story turns on. It's the naive Greta who is preoccupied with Susan's eternal fate; Gaiman himself places much more emphasis upon the cruelty of what would happen to Susan on Earth.

I'm sorry he didn't take Lewis's own beliefs into account in writing "The Problem of Susan,"

Actually he does incorporate Lewis's belief, though he may not have been aware it was Lewis's: "She [Greta's English teacher] said that even though Susan had refused Paradise then, she still had time while she lived to repent."

because there is

a very real question about Susan's fate; a talented writer who wasn't kneejerkingly hostile to Christianity

Because Gaiman is hostile to the Narnia books, it doesn't follow that he's hostile to Christianity as such, let alone kneejerkingly so.

--Adam

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 05 Nov 2004, 15:16 · in reply to Adam Stephanides

On Fri, 05 Nov 2004 16:27:31 -0600, Adam Stephanides <adamsteph at earthlink.net> wrote:
Greta's dream, in which the girls are eaten while the boys are transformed into a "twisted thing" (401).

This is, for me, probably the single thing I found most distasteful about the entire story: it is based on an actual scene in *LW&W* in which (as I imagine you can guess) neither Aslan nor Jadis destroy any of the children, nor do they have sexual relations. The scene in question is the one in which Aslan offers his life for Edmund's, which would be in many ways the most important scene of the entire book; rewriting it in this way is one of my reasons for claiming that it is simple Lewis-bashing.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

it's currently fashionable to trash Lewis and especially the Narnia books,

Is it? I know Pullman criticized them prominently; I'm not aware of any other prominent figures who have done so recently.

If I had to name the three "big hot" names in fantasy right now, they'd be Pullman and Gaiman and Mieville. Mieville has also dumped on Lewis (though not as deeply as Tolkien "the wen on the arse of fantasy literature" Tolkien). "The Problem of Susan" makes the trifecta.

and Gaiman is nothing if not fashionable.

Again, I hadn't particularly noticed this.

You have not, I take it, seen him or read much in the way of interviews. He has the post-punk all-in-black too-cool-for-school bit down to a tee. Mind you, I still think he's one hellofa writer.

In any case, I think Gaiman's critique of Lewis here is too deeply felt to be just an effort to be "fashionable."

I think you misunderstood. I don't mean that he makes efforts to be fashionable. I meant that he is a character from the Dreaming: the Fashion Thing. He is fashionable, he doesn't have to make efforts for it.

Susan is most emphatically not "denied Heaven." This is the "Pullman Heresy" that is, I think, at the heart of the trash-Lewis fad.

If I give all your brothers and sisters candy, and I don't give you any, then I've denied you candy, even though I still have the option to give you candy later.

The analogy is badly flawed. If you give my brothers and sisters candy, and I'm not there, but you give me some when I show up, you haven't denied me anything. Susan won't "show up" until she's dead.

Like near-'bout everything else in Narnia, the "lipstick" bit is there for a polemic point - a point further driven in by the statement that Susan is "no longer a Friend of Narnia," that she regards Narnia as a "game we used to play."

I, and I suspect most others who criticize Lewis, certainly "get" Lewis's point. Our point is that as his exemplar of someone who had turned their back on God, Lewis chose a girl whose "fault" is to be preoccupied with just those things that most adolescent girls in his society were preoccupied with.

Oh, my. You mean a Christian writer illustrated the idea that excessive concern with Things Of The World [tm] is Not Necessarily A Good Thing? How shocking! What a sexist!

No doubt you'll retort that it was just by chance that his exemplar was a girl, and has no larger significance; I'm not so sure.

No, I don't think it's a coincidence; I think it was a necessary outcome of the nature of his characters. There are in all eight children who've visited Narnia that he could choose from.

o Two (Polly and Digory) are no longer children and so not well-suited for example-making in a children's book.

o Two (Eustace and Pole) are the only ones currently allowed to visit Narnia, and so neither can be the one who has turned away from Narnia.

This leaves the Pevensies.

o Peter is the High King and symbolically tied up with Peter the Apostle. Not a good choice.

o Edmund might be a candidate, but he's been singled out for special salvation and deep conversion in the very first book, so it would be very problematic.

o Lucy is the series' primary POV character and the one most loved by readers (and CSL himself).

This leaves Susan as pretty much Hobson's Choice, if there's to be an example of turning away.

Though Greta does use the word "damned" at one point, that's not what the story turns on. It's the naive Greta who is preoccupied with Susan's eternal fate; Gaiman himself places much more emphasis upon the cruelty of what would happen to Susan on Earth.

Okay, and that's fair.

I'm sorry he didn't take Lewis's own beliefs into account in writing "The Problem of Susan,"

Actually he does incorporate Lewis's belief, though he may not have been aware it was Lewis's: "She [Greta's English teacher] said that even though Susan had refused Paradise then, she still had time while she lived to repent."

I said "beliefs" and I meant "beliefs," not this one limited matter. There is room for an interesting story about Susan's life after the accident that would remain within the orthodoxy of Lewis' "mere Christianity," and I for one wish someone had written that instead of this. (Not necessarily a "how Susan was saved story," btw; I would be quite content with one, like O'Connor's Wise Blood, that depicts Susan's spiral into damnation, if it were done well and honestly. Though I know a lot of readers wouldn't. . .)

Because Gaiman is hostile to the Narnia books, it doesn't follow that he's hostile to Christianity as such, let alone kneejerkingly so.

No, that statement was a result of reading quite a bit more of Gaiman than this one story.

--Dan'l

www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer
"Saddam would still be in power if he were the President of the United States, and the world would be a lot better off."
-- The Forty-Third President, 10/8/04

James Wynn — 05 Nov 2004, 15:57 · in reply to Adam Stephanides

I haven't read "The Problem of Susan", but I have read "Narnia" several times so I will butt in on only one point.

Like near-'bout eveyrthing else in Narnia, the "lipstick" bit is there for a polemic point - a point further driven in by the statement that Susan is "no longer a Friend of Narnia," that she regards Narnia as a "game we used to play."

I, and I suspect most others who criticize Lewis, certainly "get" Lewis's point. Our point is that as his exemplar of someone who had turned their back on God, Lewis chose a girl whose "fault" is to be preoccupied with just those things that most adolescent girls in his society were preoccupied with. No doubt you'll retort that it was just by chance that his exemplar was a girl, and has no larger significance; I'm not so sure.

The point about the "lipstick and nylons" was that she turned her back on all things of childhood - such as Narnia (which, in life, only children could enter). "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a child shall not enter in at all" (Mark 10:16). This is the reference Lewis seemed to be reaching for.

Susan, most significant among all the Narnian heroes as especially beautiful, was an obvious choice for this type of temptation: to reject childhood for the *trappings* of adulthood. Had C.S. Lewis chosen Peter for this role instead, he would doubtless have had him all wrapped up in "business" or "science". But these are less elegant symbols than "lipstick" (remember that

Susan's rejection of Narnia is explained in 3 or 4 sentences), and anyway the lure of adulthood is profoundly different for boys than it is in girls and so I would say that Susan was simply the better choice. She just was. It wasn't misogynistic.

~ Crush

Adam Stephanides — 07 Nov 2004, 18:11 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Thanks for your courteous reply; I'll try to keep my answer in kind.

on 11/5/04 5:16 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes at danldo at gmail.com wrote:
On Fri, 05 Nov 2004 16:27:31 -0600, Adam Stephanides
<adamsteph at earthlink.net> wrote:

Greta's dream, in which the girls are eaten while the boys are transformed into a "twisted thing" (401).

This is, for me, probably the single thing I found most distasteful about the entire story: it is based on an actual scene in *LW&W* in which (as I imagine you can guess) neither Aslan nor Jadis destroy any of the children, nor do they have sexual relations. The scene in question is the one in which Aslan offers his life for Edmund's, which would be in many ways the most important scene of the entire book; rewriting it in this way is one of my reasons for claiming that it is simple Lewis-bashing.

In fact, I remembered that scene. I was a fan of the Narnia books as a child and read them all, most of them more than once.

If I had to name the three "big hot" names in fantasy right now, they'd be Pullman and Gaiman and Mieville. Mieville has also dumped on Lewis (though not as deeply as Tolkien "the wen on the arse of fantasy literature" Tolkien). "The Problem of Susan" makes the trifecta.

Undoubtedly you're more in touch with the current fantasy scene than I am, but are these really the three hottest names in fantasy right now? Hot, no doubt; but hotter than anyone else? (And shouldn't Susanna Clarke be on the list?)

I wasn't aware that Mieville had criticized Lewis (or Tolkien); I've never read anything by him, fiction or nonfiction. For that matter, I've never read Pullman's notorious attack on Lewis: anybody have a citation?

You have not, I take it, seen him or read much in the way of interviews.

You are correct. As I said, I'm not much of a Gaiman fan.

Susan is most emphatically *_not_* "denied Heaven." This is the "Pullman Heresy" that is, I think, at the heart of the trash-Lewis fad.

If I give all your brothers and sisters candy, and I don't give you any, then I've denied you candy, even though I still have the option to give you candy later.

The analogy is badly flawed. If you give my brothers and sisters candy, and I'm not there, but you give me some when I show up, you haven't denied me anything. Susan won't "show up" until she's dead.

Well, I'd been taking it for granted that the other "friends of Narnia" didn't just "show up" in the afterlife: Aslan caused the railway accident. Does your reading differ?

I, and I suspect most others who criticize Lewis, certainly "get" Lewis's point. Our point is that as his exemplar of someone who had turned their back on God, Lewis chose a girl whose "fault" is to be preoccupied with just those things that most adolescent girls in his society were preoccupied with.

Oh, my. You mean a Christian writer illustrated the idea that excessive concern with Things Of The World [tm] is Not Necessarily A Good Thing? How shocking! What a sexist!

To be frank, I threw in the paragraph you quoted at the last minute; and the issue as a whole is not something I'd given much thought to until reading Gaiman's story. I'll try to make my point clearer. The stereotype of adolescent girls when Lewis was writing, and to a large part today, is that they are preoccupied with "nylons and lipstick and invitations." To the extent that a reader accepts in this stereotype (which, like many stereotypes, has an element of truth in it), she could reasonably conclude from THE LAST BATTLE that most teenage girls had, at least temporarily, shut themselves out of Heaven. On the other hand, there is as far as I know nothing in any of the Narnia books to suggest that adolescent boys, by following their usual interests, are shutting themselves out of Heaven. Hence, it's easy to see how a female reader might conclude that the Narnia books denigrate her sex--whether or not that was Lewis's conscious intent.

In any case, I don't believe that Gaiman's implied critique of the sex roles in the Narnia books is based solely upon Susan's temporary or permanent exclusion from Heaven (which, as I said in my last post, is not what Gaiman is most concerned with). Greta's dream, which expresses this critique most vividly, is based on a scene from the first of the books, as you point out; and the cover of the Narnia book the professor sees in her dream is also based on a scene from one of the earlier books, iirc.

Because Gaiman is hostile to the Narnia books, it doesn't follow that he's hostile to Christianity as such, let alone kneejerkingly so.

No, that statement was a result of reading quite a bit more of Gaiman than this one story.

I've read all of Gaiman's adult novels as well as SANDMAN (for a review of AMERICAN GODS, which may or may not ever appear), and I don't recall any of them being hostile to Christianity. Written from a non-Christian viewpoint, to be sure, but that's not the same thing. But, as I said, I've only read a couple of his interviews.

--Adam

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 08 Nov 2004, 12:18 · in reply to Adam Stephanides

On Sun, 07 Nov 2004 20:15:03 -0600, Adam Stephanides

<adamsteph at earthlink.net> wrote:

Thanks for your courteous reply; I'll try to keep my answer in kind.

Looks like you did a better job of it than I; I've been grumpy of late.

If I had to name the three "big hot" names in fantasy right now, they'd be Pullman and Gaiman and Mieville. Mieville has also dumped on Lewis (though not as deeply as Tolkien "the wen on the arse of fantasy literature" Tolkien). "The Problem of Susan" makes the trifecta.

Undoubtedly you're more in touch with the current fantasy scene than I am, but are these really the three hottest names in fantasy right now? Hot, no doubt; but hotter than anyone else? (And shouldn't Susanna Clarke be on the list?)

I think it's a bit soon for that. One hot book does not a hot name make; I hesitated even about Mieville.

I wasn't aware that Mieville had criticized Lewis (or Tolkien); I've never read anything by him, fiction or nonfiction.

Mieville is a very political socialist. That he would diss old religious righties (though not what we would call the Religious Right today) such as the core Inklings really isn't all that surprising. He's pretty much following in the footsteps of Michael Moorcock here, down to touting Mervyn Peake as the guy who should have got the props Tolkien did get. (And Peake certainly did deserve more than he got in his lifetime.)

For that matter, I've never read Pullman's notorious attack on Lewis: anybody have a citation?

<http://books.guardian.co.uk/guardianhayfestival2002/story/0,11873,726818,00.html> might be of some use.

If I give all your brothers and sisters candy, and I don't give you any, then I've denied you candy, even though I still have the option to give you candy later.

The analogy is badly flawed. If you give my brothers and sisters candy, and I'm not there, but you give me some when I show up, you haven't denied me anything. Susan won't "show up" until she's dead.

Well, I'd been taking it for granted that the other "friends of Narnia" didn't just "show up" in the afterlife: Aslan caused the railway accident. Does your reading differ?

Let me put it this way. If I tell you that seven people have died and gone to Heaven, and one is still alive, do you think that the one has been punished in some way? To equate a young and violent death with candy strikes me as just a bit wonky.

Again, I think Lewis was in many ways a sloppy writer. The ending of The Last Battle is actually one of the weakest parts of the whole series, because Lewis clumsily wrapped things up with an "and they all got run over by a truck" ending. Gaiman is right to point out that, because it utterly ignores the effect of the trainwreck on the survivors, this is a bad way to pull a happy ending out of a hat; I've thought so myself for years.

My basic problem with it, and I stand by this, is that Gaiman doesn't deal with the problem of Susan at all; Susan Pevensie lived in a particular world where a particular set of things were true, even if she came to deny some of them. Gaiman has written about a vaguely similar character in a completely different world where those things are not true, and so it does not (in my opinion) provide any real conclusion to, or even any real commentary upon, "the problem of Susan."

This is vaguely similar to Delany's very apt criticism of Robert Heinlein's Starship Troopers: It posits a universe with certain basic moral and ethical postulates, and the rest of the book follows pretty logically from those postulates. But if you don't accept the postulates, the whole thing falls apart.

Gaiman doesn't accept the fundamentally Christian postulates of the Narnia books, which is absolutely his right. But if you can't accept the postulates of a world, you shouldn't write a story set in that world. "The Problem of Susan" falls apart because it simply doesn't fit logically with the texts to which it nominally a coda.

Oh, my. You mean a Christian writer illustrated the idea that excessive concern with Things Of The World [tm] is Not

Necessarily A Good Thing? How shocking! What a sexist!

Please forgive my sarcasm. As I said, I've been rather grumpy lately.

[...] I'll try to make my point clearer. The stereotype of adolescent girls when Lewis was writing, and to a large part today, is that they are preoccupied with "nylons and lipstick and invitations." To the extent that a reader accepts in this stereotype (which, like many stereotypes, has an element of truth in it), she could reasonably conclude from THE LAST BATTLE that most teenage girls had, at least temporarily, shut themselves out of Heaven.

I have to disagree strenuously. "Most teenage girls" have not had the experience of Narnia to turn their backs upon. Since the story does not, in any case, address the situation of "most teenage girls," but one particular girl, the question then is whether Susan has "at least temporarily shut [herself] out of Heaven."

Frankly, we know almost nothing about Susan at the time of the series, _except_

(a) that she has ceased (or claims to have ceased) to believe that her adventures in Narnia ever actually happened, and

(b) that she's become a bit of a social butterfly - something, by the way, clearly foreshadowed at the beginning of _The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"_, when Lewis explains why Lucy and Edmund are at the Scrubbs' house without their older siblings.

(a) Not believing in Narnia anymore, while it may be foolish, even delusional, does not seem to me to automatically mean that Susan had abandoned the Christian faith (which is clearly what the children are expected to follow in the "real" world: viz. Aslan's words at the end of _Dawn Treader_, to the effect - since I don't have the text at hand I'm quasi-quoting from memory - that "I brought you here so that you would know me better when you met me in your world.")

(a.1) Since Narnia is not their world, Aslan is not, in that name, their savior; their path to Heaven is through "the name of Christ Jesus." (That this name is never directly invoked at any point in the books is part of Lewis's overall plan and intent, which was to sneak Christian ideas and imagery past children's intellectual cynicism and into their imaginations.)

(a.2) Further, it's clear that Aslan isn't the only path into Heaven, given that the Pevensie parents, who (so far as we know) never met Aslan, are waiting for them in Heaven at the series' end.

(a.3) At any rate, Susan at the end of the Narnia books for all we know be a completely faithful, churchgoing Anglican.

(b) Which leaves the question of whether being a social butterfly is a vanity sufficient (in Lewis's mind) to shut oneself out of Heaven, an idea I find extremely dubious, and which I very much doubt you could support from the text.

As a final note on the "lipstick and invitations" thing - it should be noted that the remark is made by a younger child, who seems to rather resent the older child's having abandoned their clique, and while Lewis was a rather sloppy writer, he was generally pretty good about keeping straight the points of view of his various characters.

On the other hand, there is as far as I know nothing in any of the Narnia books to suggest that adolescent boys, by following their usual interests, are shutting themselves out of Heaven.

This would be relevant only if. I might add, however, that if we had a picture in the series of an adolescent boy following "their usual interests"

- which, based on my own experience as an adolescent boy, are mostly sex - it would doubtless be, ah, rather problematical whether that boy was Heaven-bound.

Hence, it's easy to see how a female reader might conclude that the Narnia books denigrate her sex--whether or not that was Lewis's conscious intent.

H'mmm. "You forgot Poland" - or in this case, Lucy, who is far and away the series' most important child-character, the most identified-with of the eight children who visit Narnia. She is also the most loved of Aslan. If Susan is a "problem," Lucy is almost the opposite problem, a woman-on- a-pedestal. Fortunately, we have the additional cases of Polly and Pole, both of whom are quite normal, if a bit tomboyish, girls, neither as all-fired holy as Lucy nor "taken up with lipstick" like Susan - though Polly, at least, is likely to have gone through that phase, and still winds up in Aslan's Paradise.

In any case, I don't believe that Gaiman's implied critique of the sex roles in the Narnia books is based solely upon Susan's temporary or permanent exclusion from Heaven (which, as I said in my last post, is not what Gaiman is most concerned with). Greta's dream, which expresses this critique most vividly, is based on a scene from the first of the books, as you point out; and the cover of the Narnia book the professor sees in her dream is also based on a scene from one of the earlier books, iirc.

Unfortunately, by completely reimagining the scene, Gaiman makes any critique of Lewis based on that dream problematic. If he had stuck to what actually happened in that scene, and shown how it was "sexist" - which it is not, really, though the book as a whole is, rather - he'd have been playing a bit more fairly. But the scene he chose to present simply has no real bearing on what Lewis actually wrote.

--Dan'l

www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer
"Saddam would still be in power if he were the President of the United States, and the world would be a lot better off."
-- The Forty-Third President, 10/8/04

Adam Stephanides — 19 Nov 2004, 17:52 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Sorry it's taken so long to reply; I was out of town. Actually, on the question of sex roles in Narnia, either in general or as regards "the problem of Susan" in particular, I don't really have anything else to add. But there are a few things in Dan'l's last post that I wanted to respond to, if only for clarity's sake.

on 11/8/04 8:17 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes at danldo at gmail.com wrote:
To equate a young and violent death
with candy strikes me as just a bit wonky.

Not the way Lewis depicts the "young and violent death."

My basic problem with it, and I stand by this, is that Gaiman doesn't deal with the problem of Susan at all; Susan Pevensie lived in a particular world where a particular set of things were true, even if she came to deny some of them. Gaiman has written about a vaguely similar character in a completely different world where those things are not true, and so it does not (in my opinion) provide any real

conclusion to, or even any real commentary upon, "the problem of Susan."

But Gaiman isn't interested in discussing "the problem of Susan" in Lewis's terms. He's rejecting these terms, and in so doing criticizing Lewis. I don't think this is necessarily an illegitimate thing to do.

But if you can't accept the postulates of a world, you shouldn't write a story set in that world. "The Problem of Susan" falls apart because it simply doesn't fit logically with the texts to which it nominally a coda.

I'm a bit confused now. Do you believe that the professor is Susan or not (as the paragraph I quoted earlier seems to imply)? I lean towards the view that she isn't. To be sure, there are obvious hints (too obvious, I'm tempted to say) that she is. But afaik, there's nothing in the professor's thoughts, as we're shown them, to indicate that she's Susan (I could be wrong about this, since it's been a long time since I read the Narnia books.) And of course, there's the problem of how, if the Narnia books are true, did Lewis know about the events in The Last Battle, since all the witnesses died without returning to Earth? No, I think that for once in Gaiman's work, the professor is just who she seems to be: a woman who, as a child, went through a few of the mundane experiences that Susan did, and who later came to dislike the Narnia books.

If you do think that the professor is Susan, then your dislike of the story is more understandable. While I don't think, as you apparently do, that it would be illegitimate for a writer to try and continue Susan's story while rejecting Lewis's Christian worldview, I agree that "The Problem of Susan," if read as such, doesn't continue Susan's story in an interesting way.

(a) Not believing in Narnia anymore, while it may be foolish, even delusional, does not seem to me to automatically mean that Susan had abandoned the Christian faith (which is clearly what the children are expected to follow in the "real" world: viz. Aslan's words at the end of *Dawn Treader*, to the effect - since I don't have the text at hand I'm quasi-quoting from memory - that "I brought you here so that you would know me better when you met me in your world.")

(a.1) Since Narnia is not their world, Aslan is not, in that name, their savior; their path to Heaven is through "the name of Christ Jesus." (That this name is never directly invoked at any point in the books is part of Lewis's overall plan and intent, which was to sneak Christian ideas and imagery past children's intellectual cynicism and into their imaginations.)

(a.2) Further, it's clear that Aslan isn't the only path into Heaven, given that the Pevensie parents, who (so far as we know) never met Aslan, are waiting for them in Heaven at the series' end.

(a.3) At any rate, Susan at the end of the Narnia books for all we know be a completely faithful, churchgoing Anglican.

Of course, if Susan's denying Narnia is not meant to be equivalent to rejecting Jesus, then there is no "problem of Susan." But, as I said before, that doesn't seem to fit with the quotation from Lewis you gave earlier. It also leaves Susan's absence without an allegorical interpretation, in a book in which (even more than in the other Narnia books iirc) everything is allegorical.

As a final note on the "lipstick and invitations" thing - it should be noted that the remark is made by a younger child, who seems to rather resent the older child's having abandoned their clique, and

while Lewis was a rather sloppy writer, he was .generally pretty good about keeping straight the points of view of his various characters.

But it's seconded by Polly.

Unfortunately, by completely reimagining the scene, Gaiman makes any critique of Lewis based on that dream problematic. If he had stuck to what actually happened in that scene, and shown how it was "sexist" - which it is not, really, though the book as a whole is, rather - he'd have been playing a bit more fairly. But the scene he chose to present simply has no real bearing on what Lewis actually wrote.

I see I expressed myself poorly. I didn't mean to imply that Gaiman was basing his critique on that particular scene from LtWatW, which, as you point out, is radically different from what Gaiman wrote. I just meant that the fact that the dream refers to other books besides The Last Battle indicates that Gaiman's complaint is not solely with The Last Battle, even though that's what Greta and the professor discuss. And it was probably misleading to call Greta's dream a critique of the Narnia books, even an implied one. It's a metaphorical representation of a certain response to the Narnia books.

--Adam

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 27 Nov 2004, 16:11 · in reply to Adam Stephanides

Adam -

I too have been travelling & so have a HUGELY full in box & not much time in which to reply ... but ...

Yes, I did take it as NG's intent that "the Professor" was Susan. I can't see how the story makes any sense at all otherwise. And certainly that's the only element that would give it any legitimate place in a collection of fantasy stories.

[...] there's nothing in the professor's thoughts, as we're shown them, to indicate that she's Susan (I could be wrong about this, since it's been a long time since I read the Narnia books.)

I read it thus: The Professor has continued in the line of denial that some think is the only meaningful interpretation of the last we hear of her in _TLB_. Because she still denies Narnia there would be no such hints in her thoughts.

And of course, there's the problem of how, if the Narnia books are true, did Lewis know about the events in The Last Battle, since all the witnesses died without returning to Earth?

That's pretty much true for all the Narnia books ... nothing in them suggests that any of the children ever talked to Lewis at all...

If you do think that the professor is Susan, then your dislike of the story is more understandable. While I don't think, as you apparently do, that it would be illegitimate for a writer to try and continue Susan's story while rejecting Lewis's Christian worldview, I agree that "The Problem of Susan," if read as such, doesn't continue Susan's story in an interesting way.

H'mmmph. Not what I said. I said

Gaiman doesn't deal with the problem of Susan at all; Susan Pevensie lived in a particular world where a particular set of things were true, even if she came to deny some of them. Gaiman has written about a vaguely

similar character in a completely different world where those things are not true, and so it does not (in my opinion) provide any real conclusion to, or even any real commentary upon, "the problem of Susan."

Note that I did not say it would not be acceptable to reject the Christian worldview in such a sequel - but if you are to reject it, you must acknowledge and deal with its influence on what has gone before, not simply decide that Aslan and the White Witch were lovers with no explanation offered at all. (Yeah, yeah, I know, it's a dream sequence. It's also the most blatant example of what I'm talking about.)

Of course, if Susan's denying Narnia is not meant to be equivalent to rejecting Jesus, then there is no "problem of Susan." But, as I said before, that doesn't seem to fit with the quotation from Lewis you gave earlier.

To be sure, I agree; and I therefore think that the "problem" at that level is somewhat exaggerated _to begin with_. Nonetheless, it is there and is a real problem: but a writer who wants to deal with the "problem of Susan" needs to deal with the problem in the rules in which it was stated (so to speak), or else they're simply waving a wand and saying "Here's a problem I like better."

--Dan'l

www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer
"Saddam would still be in power if he were the President of the United States, and the world would be a lot better off."
-- The Forty-Third President, 10/8/04

Adam Stephanides — 29 Nov 2004, 07:01 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

A couple of comments before we lahy this to rest (as we seem to have reached the point of talking past each other):

on 11/27/04 6:11 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes at danldo at gmail.com wrote:
[...] there's nothing in the professor's thoughts, as we're shown them, to indicate that she's Susan (I could be wrong about this, since it's been a long time since I read the Narnia books.)

I read it thus: The Professor has continued in the line of denial that some think is the only meaningful interpretation of the last we hear of her in _TLB_. Because she still denies Narnia there would be no such hints in her thoughts.

But Gaiman could have figured out some way to have the Professor's thoughts reveal that she had been to Narnia without admitting to herself that Narnia was real; after all, he's a clever writer, and likes to do that sort of thing. Or he could have put some other sort of clue in her thoughts that would show she was Susan, which again he didn't, as far as I can tell. His not doing either of these is, to my mind, indirect but fairly strong evidence that the Professor is not intended to be Susan.

If you do think that the professor is Susan, then your dislike of the story is more understandable. While I don't think, as you apparently do, that it would be illegitimate for a writer to try and continue Susan's story while rejecting Lewis's Christian worldview, I agree that "The Problem of Susan," if read as such, doesn't continue Susan's story in an interesting way.

H'mmmph. Not what I said. I said

Gaiman doesn't deal with the problem of Susan at all; Susan Pevensie lived in a particular world where a particular set of things were true, even

if she came to deny some of them. Gaiman has written about a vaguely similar character in a completely different world where those things are not true, and so it does not (in my opinion) provide any real conclusion to, or even any real commentary upon, "the problem of Susan."

Apologies for misinterpreting you; I took the "particular set of things" that Gaiman denies to be the Christian world-view, and Aslan as the equivalent of Christ. If that isn't what you meant, it's not clear to me what you did mean.

Note that I did not say it would not be acceptable to reject the Christian worldview in such a sequel - but if you are to reject it, you must acknowledge and deal with its influence on what has gone before, not simply decide that Aslan and the White Witch were lovers with no explanation offered at all. (Yeah, yeah, I know, it's a dream sequence. It's also the most blatant example of what I'm talking about.)

Whether or not the Professor is Susan, Greta's dream is not real. If Narnia isn't real in Gaiman's story, then of course Greta's dream isn't real; and if the Professor is Susan, then Greta's dream can't be real, because in it Susan gets eaten as a child (I take it we can exclude the possibility that Narnia being real but the professor isn't Susan.) The dream is a metaphorical "critique" (see my last post) of the Narnia books, not Gaiman's version of "what really happened in _TLtWatW_."

--Adam

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 29 Nov 2004, 12:18 · in reply to Adam Stephanides

Adam wrote:

A couple of comments before we lahy this to rest (as we seem to have reached the point of talking past each other):

Yeh, I think you're right.

I read it thus: The Professor has continued in the line of denial that some think is the only meaningful interpretation of the last we hear of her in _TLB_. Because she still denies Narnia there would be no such hints in her thoughts.

But Gaiman could have figured out some way to have the Professor's thoughts reveal that she had been to Narnia without admitting to herself that Narnia was real; after all, he's a clever writer, and likes to do that sort of thing.

H'mmm. No doubt _Wolfe_ could have done so; but I can't see Gaiman doing it. I've only read four novels, a scattering of shorts, and some funnybooks, but I've never seen anything in Gaiman's work that suggested he was capable of the kind of subtlety required to pull off this kind of "unreliable point of view" trick. (Note that I said the _kind_ of subtlety, not the _degree_; there is some very subtle stuff in his work, but of a different sort.)

Or he could have put some other sort of clue in her thoughts that would show she was Susan, which again he didn't, as far as I can tell. not doing either of these is, to my mind, indirect but fairly strong evidence that the Professor is not intended to be Susan.

Or, perhaps, that he intended the reader to make up his or her own mind on that question (that being another "problem of Susan," so to speak). One thing Gaiman clearly _does_ do in a lot of his work is leave certain matters open to contradictory interpretations.

Apologies for misinterpreting you; I took the "particular set of things" that Gaiman denies to be the Christian world-view, and Aslan as the equivalent of Christ. If that isn't what you meant, it's not clear to me what you did mean.

Well, you're within an inch but a very important inch of what I meant. The inch of difference is this: within the fictional construct up to the point at which Lewis left off, the evidence appears to point to this being a world in which (a) basic ("mere") Christianity is true and (b) Aslan is Christ-in-Narnia. Taking this point:

Note that I did not say it would not be acceptable to reject the Christian worldview in such a sequel - but if you are to reject it, you must acknowledge and deal with its influence on what has gone before, not simply decide that Aslan and the White Witch were lovers with no explanation offered at all. (Yeah, yeah, I know, it's a dream sequence. It's also the most blatant example of what I'm talking about.)

further, it would be possible, for example, to write a perfectly acceptable sequel in which it turns out that Aslan's claims to be Christ - well, he never directly claims it, but he hints at it very strongly in several places - are lies, and that the various other bits of the text that point to this interpretation are part of his overall deception. (Indeed, one of the "Narnia is evil!" type Christians could write a very interesting book in which Susan is the only one saved because Aslan is a lying demon... though that book would have to somehow deal with the apparent ascent into Heaven at the end of TLB.) But what you can't reasonably do is simply ignore those claims and other bits of the text; you can't simply start with another interpretation and leave the existing meaning-structure lying on the floor. Which in the end is what it seems to me Gaiman has done, and I respect him the less as a writer for it.

To put it in somewhat more concrete terms: one of the things the British comic writers were famous for was reinventing moribund characters - Alan Moore was the best at this, but Gaiman, Delano, and Morrison all did it, Moore most famously with the Swamp Thing (which included reinventions of Cain and Abel, the Geek, and others), Gaiman with Black Orchid and others, Morrison with Animal Man and the Doom Patrol, etc. But what was important, and what Moore was especially good at, was maintaining and even respecting the existing continuity. His most spectacular job of this was Miracleman, which turned Captain "Shazam!" Marvel inside out but kept the entire mythology intact (with, to be sure, the serial numbers filed off for legal reasons) even while wiping it out.

Gaiman proved himself able to do this on some occasions, notably with his reworkings of Matthew Cable, the Witches Three, Hector and Lyta Hall, and ... oh, hell, what was her name, the Element Girl ... but at times he utterly refused to acknowledge what had gone before. And that is more or less what I'm complaining about with "The Problem of Susan."

I think it's necessary for the Professor to be Susan for the story to make any sense as fantasy.

But if the Professor is Susan, then the whole thing fails for me, because it ignores the existing continuity.

Whether or not the Professor is Susan, Greta's dream is not real.

Okay, we can agree on that. What I can't agree with is that this takes it out of the center of the story's meaning.

--Dan'l

www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer
"Saddam would still be in power if he were the President
of the United States, and the world would be a lot better off."
-- The Forty-Third President, 10/8/04

Adam Stephanides — 08 Dec 2004, 07:05 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

on 11/29/04 2:17 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes at danldo at gmail.com wrote:

But Gaiman could have figured out some way to have the Professor's thoughts reveal that she had been to Narnia without admitting to herself that Narnia was real; after all, he's a clever writer, and likes to do that sort of thing.

H'mmm. No doubt _Wolfe_ could have done so; but I can't see Gaiman doing it. I've only read four novels, a scattering of shorts, and some funnybooks, but I've never seen anything in Gaiman's work that suggested he was capable of the kind of subtlety required to pull off this kind of "unreliable point of view" trick.

Upon thinking about it some more, Gaiman doesn't do it as often as I'd had the impression he did. In fact, the only real example I can think of is "Murder Mysteries," which is in his collection "Smoke and Mirrors." But that story does show that Gaiman is capable of doing it.

--Adam