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A Study Of Christian Symbolism In C. S. Lewis' The Last Battle

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Abstract

This paper is the study of the last book of the Narnian series, *The Last Battle*, with special reference to Christian symbolism found in the text. The last book of the Narnia series, *The Last Battle* is filled with Christian symbolism depicting the end of the world as prophesied in **The Bible**, in the book of Revelation 12-22. The title of the book *The Last Battle* symbolises the battle of Armageddon, which according to **The Bible** is The Last Battle that is to be fought before the end of the world. The return of Aslan and the entering of the faithful Christians into new Jerusalem.

Keywords: *Symbolism, Formalists, Parnassian, Canonical, Armageddon.*

1. Introduction

The study of symbolism as a literary device comes under the formalistic approach of literary criticism. Formalism is a school of literary criticism and literary theory having mainly to do with spiritual purposes of the particular text. "Formalists seek to be objective in their analysis focusing on the work itself rather than on the external factors or any outside influence"(Murfin and M. Ray, bsc.bedfordsmartins.com).

Symbolism is the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities by giving them symbolic meaning that are different from their literal sense. A glossary of literary terms says, "a symbol is generally an object representing another to give it an entirely different meaning that is much more profound and significant" (M.H.Abrams, 176). It brings out an idea, belief, action or entirety. There are two types of symbols, conventional and private symbols. "The conventional symbols are those such as the "Cross" and the "good Shepherd" in which the further significance is fixed and traditional in a particular culture. Private or personal symbols on the other hand are those that the poet develops himself. Some poets, however, generate symbols whose significance they themselves develop". (M.H.Abrams, 176).

"There were various English romantic poets who employed private symbols in their poetry but William Blake was one poet who wasn't paralleled by anyone and exceeded all the contemporaries of his time in the use of sustained and persistent symbolism. He had no close parallel until the symbolistic movement which began in France with Baudelaire's "Fleurs du Mal" (1857) and was continued by other poets such as Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarme and Valerie. Symbolism originated in the revolt of these

French Poets against the rigid convention governing both technique and theme in the traditional French poetry as evidenced in the precise description of Parnassian Poetry. They wished to liberate poetry from its expository functions and formalised oratory. The techniques of the French symbolists who employed private symbols had a great influence throughout Europe, England and America on poets such as Arthur Symons, Ernest Dowson, Yeats, Elliot, Pound and Dylan Thomas. English and European literature after the first world war has been a notable era of symbolism in literature” (M.H.Abrams, 177).

Christian symbolism is the use of symbols, including archetypes, arts, artwork or events to convey to the readers the Christian beliefs, ideals and morals. **The Bible**, the canonical text of Christianity, is the base from which all Christian symbols, metaphors and allusions originates from. **The Bible** occupies the epicentre of the Christian faith since it is believed to be the word of God and therefore it is held in high regard by all Christians regardless of the various denominations. **The Bible** is filled with a lot of symbolism which the writers of various texts used to convey to the readers their view or belief in a particular area. One such writer who employed a lot of Christian symbolism in his writing was C.S.Lewis.

2. Symbolism and C.S.Lewis

Symbolism is found in a lot of C.S. Lewis’ writings. In the book *Viva Modern Critical Interpretation – The Chronicles of Narnia* C.S.Lewis himself says in one of his letters, “if I am now good for anything it is catching the reader unaware-thro’ Fiction and symbol” (E.Glover, 77). As a child Lewis had always loved reading but he had very little interest in religion. And later he began to wonder how stories might have helped him to embrace a faith that he neither understood nor appreciated. What if stories could have opened up the wonder and joy of a faith that he had to wait two decades to discover? In the same book, Margaret Patterson Hannay states of him having said, “I saw how stories of this kind could steal past one’s inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood” (Hannay, 65).

C.S.Lewis was an eminent figure in the field of literature. His works were not restricted to one particular field but spread over a wide range he wrote children’s literature, Sci-Fi novels, was a Christian apologist and a scholar of Mediaeval and Renaissance literature. These faith-based arguments are seen in texts such as *The Great Divorce*, *Miracles*, *The Screwtape Letters* and *Mere Christianity*. *The Space Trilogy* is one of his well renowned sci-fi novels. *The Chronicles of Narnia* a literary text that comes under children’s literature is the author’s most loved piece, first published in Great Britain by The Bodley Head 1956.

C.S.Lewis himself never really planned to bring in the Christian symbolism to the story. Neither did he expect that the entire collection would serve to retell the story of creation, fall and redemption of mankind. In the *Viva Modern Critical Interpretations – The Chronicles of Narnia*, Margaret Paterson Hannay, states Lewis having said, “It all began with the images; a faun carrying an umbrella, A queen or a sledge, a magnificent lion. At first there wasn’t anything Christian about them; that element pushed itself in of its own accord” (Hannay, 65).

Numerous Christian symbols are seen throughout the series. Aslan For example, symbolises Christ. All the books in this series deal with different aspects of Christianity. **The Magician's Nephew** tells about the creation and of how sin entered Narnia. **The lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe** is about the crucifixion and resurrection. **Prince Caspian** deals with restoration of the true religion after corruption. **The horse and His Boy** portrays the calling and conversion of the heathen. **The Voyage of the Dawn Treader** is about spiritual life and **The Silverchair** brings out the continuous wars against the power of darkness. In **The Last Battle** C.S.Lewis brings the end of the Narnia and the beginning of the new Narnia.

3. Symbolism in *The Last Battle*

We can see the various parallels in the title of the novel, *The Last Battle* with the battle of Armageddon, which is prophesied in The Bible to be The Last Battle that will be fought before the return

of Christ and the end of age. 'Battle' doesn't just mean a single conflict in this context it involves a series of conflicts. The persecution, the slavery, the false teaching, the rise in the power of Shift in *The Last Battle* act as symbols of the Signs of the end of the age that is prophesied in *The Bible* in the book of Revelation 12 - 22.

The very word "battle" involves conflict between two sides. Here in the book we see that the conflict is between the Narnians and Calormenes. The Calormenes represent the forces of darkness in the form of lies, deception, treachery, slavery, persecution and blasphemy while the Narnians on the other hand represent truth and freedom. Narnians have fought a lot of battles already against all of these forces. This is the final battle that the Narnians fight and right after this we see the end of Narnia that we have known, along with all the evil and the beginning of new Narnia.

The title *The Last Battle* in very general terms symbolised the finality, the ultimatum of something that does not end in a peaceful and pleasant manner that is quite chaotic And involves a conflict. That is, the word "last" conveys to the reader two things. One is that this conflict has been an ongoing process for quite a while and second it is coming to an end.

When we look at the word "battle", again it is made quite clear that there are two sides and there is a struggle between them. All the Narnian series in general have a lot of parallels with *The Bible*. As said earlier they retell the story of creation, the fall of mankind and redemption. Keeping in mind that this is one of the seven series of the Narnian Chronicles, it is impossible to overlook the numerous parallels that the title has with the end of the age prophesied in the book of Revelation, the last book of *The Bible*, a canonical collection of texts sacred to Christianity. According to the prophecies found in Revelation 16: 16, 21:1-3, 7 - 10 The battle of Armageddon is the final battle that all the faithful and true Christians living in the last days have to fight to enter heaven or New Jerusalem. Armageddon is the symbolic scene of the final battle of the last age when the powers of evil seemed to overcome the church and in which Christ intervenes and destroys the armies of the anti-Christ and become victorious.

The Last Battle that Tirian and a small band of faithful Narnians fight against the Calormenes has a lot of parallels to the battle of Armageddon prophesied in *The Bible*. As mentioned earlier, the battle at Armageddon is a series of struggles and conflicts. In the book of Matthew 24:3, 4 when one of the disciples ask Jesus what will be the sign of The end of The age, Jesus answers, "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ', and will deceive many." Therefore the element of deception by false claims of being Christ is one of the major signs of the end of age prophesied in *The Bible*. Similarly in *The Last Battle* we find that deception is one of the most important components that Shift uses against the Narnians to make them serve him. We see even in *The*

Last Battle that the Narnians and the Calormenes fight, a lot of the Narnians pick sides with the ape in the fear of displeasing the false Aslan.

After the persecution, the slavery and the rise in power of the false Aslan, When all hope seems to be gone and when a small band of Narnians are putting up a last fight, Aslan makes his entry, At the battle of Armageddon that is prophesied in *The Bible* in revolution 16:16 we find that all who oppose the Christians gather together to fight against them. At that moment Christ descends And the battle is won. Similarly, here we see that though it appears as if the Narnians are losing the battle, in the end Aslan comes and wins the battle for the Narnians. The title therefore, serves to be one of the major symbols that project the novel to be an adaptation of the end of the world as prophesied in *The Bible*.

Apart from the title, there are numerous other symbols in the story which all have remarkable resemblance to the way *The Bible* prophesies the world to end. This can be seen in the events that unfold after Aslan returns and summons Father Time. All the symbols seen in the heavenly bodies are heralded by the sounding of the horn by Father Time , Which also serves as a symbol and also bears a lot of significance. We read of Father Time sounding a horn, The very sounding of the horn by Father Time Can be considered as a symbol of the "sounding of the trumpet" which is prophesied in *The Bible* in the book of Matthew 24:31 as a sign of Christ returning back to earth and in the case of Narnia it symbolises

the coming of Aslan and his reign. Here we see C.S. Lewis' creativity as he draws out symbols from The Bible and adapts it in his own way so that it would fit into the story. He chooses to use the horn as the instrument rather than the trumpet because in the Narnian world The horn has a lot of significance attached to it. There are many other instances in the Narnian Series where the horn is blown right before the arrival of the kings and queens of Narnia. Therefore the horn symbolises a declaration to the Narnian World that their true king had returned and that help has reached the Narnian land that was in the clutches of evil. This is exactly what the sounding of the trumpet also signifies in the biblical references, that Christ had returned as a king and that he had come to save his faithful followers. Lewis has used the horn and not a trumpet in the last book because a trumpet for that matter would have been out of place in the story, as there is no earlier mention of something like that in the entire series. The throwing away of the horn by Father Time after he finishes blowing the horn, also symbolises that rule of time in Narnia was over and eternity had begun.

4. Conclusion

All of these symbols point very clearly to the fact that, the last series of the Narnian series, **The Last Battle** has a lot of Christian symbols depicting the end of age and that C.S.Lewis has brought that out by not just replicating the symbols exactly as they are given in **The Bible** but using his own creativity also. The author has adapted these symbols In such a way that they fit into the setting of the novel. C.S.Lewis has therefore employed his creativity and has very clearly brought out through the novel, **The Last Battle** a depiction of the end of age and the events that follow based on biblical references.

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