

C. S. LEWIS ON STORIES

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Abstract

The paper is an exposition and synthesis of C. S. Lewis's ideas on story as elaborated in his essay "On Stories" in the Charles Williams festschrift (1947). The purpose of Lewis's essay was to flush out of the underbrush of literature what distinguishes true Story (with a capital letter "S") from story as mere entertainment. The paper concludes that a key to Lewis's essay on stories is to be found in his initial vocation as a poet and his ideas about poetic imagination.

Keywords: *the Inklings, C. S. Lewis, fantasy stories, the poetic element, writing for children*

I. INTRODUCTION

When we think of C. S. Lewis and story, most of us are likely to think immediately of his Narnian Chronicles, published between 1950 and 1956, beginning with *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. If one happens to come across his contribution, "On Stories," first published in the 1947 festschrift *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (Lewis 90-105), there is a natural tendency to see this essay as perhaps laying the preliminary groundwork for Lewis's soon-to-be-written Narnian stories. That is, one would think this supposing that one had actually come across Lewis's essay at all, since this important work has been strangely overlooked both then and subsequently. As far as I can tell, of the five standard reference works on Lewis, only one deals directly with Lewis's "On Stories." (Smith 305) The rest either have passing references or none at all. (Hooper

“Preface” to C. S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, 571; Edwards; MacSwain and Ward). The same seems to be true of the bulk of literary studies of Lewis and his work. There are, of course, quite a few modern treatments of Lewis’s literary work that mention “On Stories,” but usually only in passing and not very analytically. Lewis began his disquisition by noting that “It is astonishing how little attention critics have paid to Story considered in itself.” (Lewis, *Essays Presented to . . .* 90) It could be said with equal validity, “It is astonishing how little attention Lewis scholars and aficionados have paid to Lewis’s essay on story itself.”

This obviously raises the question: Why was and is this? One explanation is that the volume was rather poorly distributed in the first place and likely had a very limited print run. According to one leading bibliographer, the number of copies printed is not known. (Gilbert 159) This despite the fact that such distinguished names as those of C. S. Lewis, who edited the book, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Dorothy L. Sayers were among the contributors. On the other hand, Charles W. S. Williams (1886-1945) was not exactly a household word and perhaps the reading public thought this was just another of those tiresome volumes that appear principally to commemorate the longevity of some old geezer or another. Since then, the paucity of literature on Williams has been more than rectified. (Lindop; Zaleski and Zaleski; Fiddes)

Thirdly, Sir Humphrey S. Milford, who since 1913 had headed the London branch of Oxford University Press in London and turned it into a publishing powerhouse, retired in 1945. Williams worked for OUP London for most of his life, beginning in 1908, and most of that was as an editor under Sir Humphrey. (Paulus) Williams’ most notable accomplishment was to edit the publication of the first English edition of the works of Søren Kierkegaard. It seems likely that Milford’s successor, Geoffrey Cumberlege, who had earned a reputation as a budget cutter when heading OUP’s New York office during the depression, and who was now facing severe post-war economic challenges, was not inclined to go beyond meeting minimal commitments in promoting the volume.

Reaction to this apparent neglect of the Williams volume by OUP was most vehemently expressed by Tolkien, who vented his considerable annoyance in a 1955 letter to W. H. Auden that the Williams festschrift had, in his opinion, been “most scurvily allowed to go out of print.” (Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* 216) In another letter, Tolkien voiced his exasperation that “the OUP have infuriatingly let it go out of print, though it is now in demand.” To top it all, Tolkien lamented, “my only copy has been stolen.” (Tolkien 220)

Lastly, the book was almost invisible from the point of view of the reviewers. According to the assiduous Walter Hooper, he was able to find only two reviews: “the one in *Time and Tide* was lukewarm, and the other in *Theology* (published in 1948) was hostile.” (Lewis, *Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis* 817)

Given that Hooper was indefatigable in searching out mentions of Lewis and his work in the British and American press, however brief, one can be reasonably certain the book suffered from a virtually non-existent reviewer response.

Be that as it may, seeing this essay as a preliminary first step by Lewis into consideration of the world of imaginative fiction would be to ignore the reality that, by 1947, Lewis was already decidedly an old hand at story. As we all know by now, he had actually begun his writing career before 1920 as a poet. (King 1 ff.) His first two published works, written while he was still an atheist, were volumes of poetry: *Spirits in Bondage: A Cycle of Lyrics* (1919) and *Dymer* (1926). Both books were published under the pseudonym Clive Hamilton, a composite of his given first name, “Clive” and his mother’s maiden name “Hamilton.” (Lewis’s poetic work has been superbly analyzed by Don King, Jerry Root, and David C. Downing, with King also providing a first-rate critical edition. (King 2001; Root 2020; Downing 2016, Lewis 2015)

Following his conversion to Christianity, his first book was a quasi-autobiographical and allegorical story which he consciously modeled on John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), entitled *The Pilgrim’s Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity*. (Lewis 1933) The allegory proved to be so difficult to understand that in the third edition (Lewis 1943), Lewis added a long introduction and running page headlines to help the reader grasp the more obscure philosophical allusions. (See also Downing 2016)

The list of Lewis’s fictional works between 1933 and 1946 might, indeed, have been more than enough to convince most anyone that his principal vocation was professional novelist: *The Pilgrim’s Regress* was followed by a space travel trilogy that has remained a staple of science fiction ever since: *Out of the Silent Planet* in 1938, then 1943’s *Perelandra*, culminating with *That Hideous Strength* in 1945. In the meanwhile, in 1942, Lewis had published *The Screwtape Letters*, a brilliant fictional description of temptation from the devils’ perspective; and in 1945, an imaginative account of Heaven and Hell, *The Great Divorce*. Thus by 1947, Lewis was no mean storyteller.

All of this in spite of the fact that C. S. Lewis had been heavily involved since 1925 in his actual job: doing academic research and publication while engaged in the extremely time-intensive tutorial system of educating students at Magdalen College, Oxford. A litany of his academic writings between 1927 and 1946 reveals that as a scholar he was no slouch either with dozens of articles, pamphlets, and books to his credit. Nor was he a slacker when it came to religious writings, lectures, and broadcasts, which speak for themselves. (Hooper 2005)

Now, one might ask, what is the point of referring to this catalogue of Lewis’s work published prior his essay “On Stories”? It is to argue that almost all of Lewis’s professional and literary work contributed to the developmental

process of Lewis's ideas about story well before Narnia was in view. As Charles Huttar pointed out in a 1977 essay, virtually all of his life, Lewis had been gradually moving in his writings—fictional, academic, and religious—toward a “Grand Design,” of which Narnia eventually would be the culmination. Or as he put it: “Lewis’s mind was unconsciously preparing itself” for Aslan. (Huttar 122) One might say that instead of waiting for Godot, Lewis, without knowing it, was waiting for Aslan, just as the pre-Christian Lewis had spent half a lifetime looking for what he called “joy,” when, without knowing it, he was really longing for Christ.

II. A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

Before we turn to look at Lewis's essay “On Stories,” a review of the bibliographical details concerning it seems in order. The original version was a paper read by Lewis at a November 14, 1940 meeting of the Martlets Society, an Oxford literary society to which Lewis had been elected as an undergraduate. (Hooper, “To the Martlets,” 81-82) According to the minutes of the meeting, the title of his paper was “The Kappa Element in Romance.” (cited verbatim in Hooper, “To the Martlets” 81-82). Romance was defined by Lewis as “that element concerned with events other than the everyday,” which had “two distinct elements.” The first was “excitement in adventure,” the second was the Kappa, or “hidden element.” Lewis identified five forms of Kappa Element: the sense of mystery in life, use of the familiar to illustrate the unfamiliar, the surprise we experience when our experiences differ from our expectations, the fulfillment of prophecy as an interplay of destiny and free will, and the unexpected turn or twist as the divergent elements of a story converge.

Subsequently, Roger Lancelyn Green heard Lewis give a similar paper at a Merton College literary society with a slightly different title: “The Kappa Element in Fiction,” which gives a clearer idea of the contents. (Hooper, “To the Martlets” 82) The date is uncertain. Hooper tantalizingly notes that he had “read and compared the Martlets notes and the finished essay many times,” and that he was “tempted to write at length about the obvious, and not-so-obvious, changes which the Martlets version went through before it became the polished version published in 1947. But I do not feel the reader would thank me for that—especially at the tail-end of a long essay. Besides, he may do that for himself. I hope he will.” (82-83) Unfortunately, Hooper never did follow through. This was the version cited by Hooper in his 1966 collection of Lewis's essays and stories which began with “On Stories,” where he notes that the 1940 variant was “in a slightly fuller form” than that published in 1947. (Hooper, “Preface,” to C. S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds* viii) Presumably it was after this that Hooper encountered the Martlets archives at the Bodleian.

Hooper's observation that Lewis repeatedly tinkered with the essay is surprising because Lewis rarely edited his non-fiction writings (as opposed to his poetry), but the finished redaction was finally published as "On Stories" in the 1947 Williams festschrift. The volume had been planned to appear in 1945 or 1946 as a tribute to Williams' wartime sojourn in Oxford from 1939-1945. Lewis wrote in a preface to the volume: "We had hoped to offer the whole collection to Williams as what the Germans call a *Festschrift* when peace would recall him from Oxford to London. Death forestalled us; we now offer as a memorial what had been devised as a greeting." (Lewis, "On Stories," *Essays Presented to . . .* vi)

Apparently, all of the contributions were written by 1946. (Lewis, *Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis* 704) In May 1945, shortly after Williams' death on May 24, 1945, Lewis had sent a letter to Dorothy L. Sayers that while they were "mourning the death of Charles Williams . . . Professor Tolkien and I had already been proposing a *Festschrift* for him in the form of a volume of essays by his friends. Tolkien and Mr. Barfield and I had in fact written our contributions." He went on to ask if Sayers would contribute; she agreed. (649-650) That same day, Lewis went on to write to T. S. Eliot—who was an ardent admirer of Williams' writing (see Eliot's effusive and thoughtful "Introduction," to the American edition of Charles Williams, *All Hallow's Eve*). (Eliot vi-xv)—to ask if he, too, would contribute. (Lewis, *Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis* 650-651) In the event, Eliot was not able to participate and Lewis wrote to express his regrets: "We have now reluctantly come to the conclusion that much as the book will be weakened by the loss of a contribution from you, it might be even more disastrous to postpone publication too long. Perhaps you will find your own way of honouring our friend later and no less effective . . ." (708-709)

When the volume appeared in 1947, it led off with three brilliant essays on story. The first was Dorothy L. Sayers' engaging discussion of Dante the Story-Teller, a preliminary to her superb eventual translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. (Sayers, '...And Telling You a Story') Her participation in the Williams volume was a natural since she had been completely bowled over by Charles Williams' book on Dante, *The Figure of Beatrice. A Study in Dante* (1943). In fact, at the foundation of this essay was a series of letters she had written to Williams beginning in 1944 while she was reading *La Commedia*. (These letters are now republished in Sayers 1998. Some of the letters to Williams were in excess of 30 pages.)

Sayers later described her essay as

representing a spontaneous and almost unconsidered reaction to the work of a major poet, encountered for the first time in middle life and, as far as may be, with no preconceptions at all. My immediate impressions were jotted down as I

read, in a series of letters to Charles Williams, who was entertained by these comments and had intended to make some use of them in one of his critical works. His death prevented the carrying-out of this project, and eventually, in order that his intention might not be altogether lost, the substance of the letters, tidied into a form more decorous than one uses in writing to a friend, took shape in this essay . . . (*Further Papers on Dante* vi-vii)

Sayers went on to become one of the leading Dante scholars and translators of the twentieth century.

Sayers' study was followed by J. R. R. Tolkien's now-renowned essay "On Fairy Stories," (Tolkien, *Essays Presented to . . .* 38-89; see Michelson "J. R. R. Tolkien on Faërie and Faërie-stories") which provided a historical, philological, and philosophical analysis of the fantasy genre. It was based on a considerable revision and enlargement—what else? Unlike Lewis, Tolkien over-edited and revised almost everything he published—of the 1939 Andrew Lang lecture Tolkien had given at St. Andrews University in Scotland, an expansion that coincided with his work on one of the greatest of all epic fantasy stories, *The Lord of the Rings*, which he eventually completed in 1954-1955. (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*) Tolkien's essay was of considerable importance in igniting the fantasy boom which burst onto the scene in the 1960s and has burgeoned ever since. (Shippey) Thus, three classic essays on story in a single volume published by C. S. Lewis and kindred spirits.

In addition to those by Lewis, Tolkien, and Sayers, the book also contained contributions by three other members of Lewis and Tolkien's Oxford circle, the Inklings: Owen Barfield, "Poetic Diction and Legal Fiction," Gervase Mathew, "Marriage and *Amour Courtois* in Late-Fourteenth Century England," and Lewis's brother, Warren Hamilton Lewis, "The Galleys of France." It is essential to note that all of the essays in the Williams festschrift most likely were read and discussed not only by the authors, but also by the other members of the Inklings on whom there is now a vast literature. (Carpenter; Glyer 2007; Zaleski and Zaleski, 2015)

In 1966, Eerdmans of Grand Rapids MI published a photostatic American edition whose paginations was identical with the 1947 edition, except for omitting the frontispiece photo of Williams. (Lewis 1966) This version was significant for getting the 1947 essays back in circulation, especially in the US, though by that time Tolkien's contribution had already been revised, republished, and once again made accessible to the reading public in his 1964 *Tree and Leaf*. (Tolkien 1964) In 1972, a similar photostatic edition was published by Books for Libraries, Freeport NY.

That same year, 1966, Lewis's essay was anthologized for the first time, along with some of Lewis's other writings on story and four of Lewis's own

stories, in C. S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds. Essays and Stories*. (Lewis 1966) This edition conveniently brought Lewis's essay, other literary criticism, and some of his own stories to a much larger audience. As with a number of other posthumous Lewis collections, this book went through a several, sometimes confusing, republications.

In June 1982, a new volume of Lewis's story-related writings appeared in the US from Harcourt Brace Jovanovich as C. S. Lewis, *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*. (1982) This created additional bibliographical confusion since the book had an appreciable overlap with the 1966 *Of Other Worlds* and many assumed that the two volumes were the same. The publisher fostered further perplexity by giving the copyright dates for *On Stories* as "1982, 1966." The two volumes were far from being identical. Indeed, the new volume was actually more useful from the literary point of view, since it omitted the stories and added eleven other Lewis pieces on literature, including his responses to Tolkien's writings, previously unavailable in book form. A US paperback edition was published simultaneously by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich as a Harvest Book.

An identical UK edition appeared in September 1982—reversing the usual first publication in UK procedure—three months after the US editions. It muddied the bibliographical waters even more by unhelpfully giving the UK volume a different title from the US version, *Of This and Other Worlds*. (Lewis 1982) The similarity of this "new" title to the 1966 *Of Other Worlds* further cultivated the idea that the 1966 and 1982 collections were identical.

The current 2017 HarperOne editions continue to offer the two separate versions under the titles, respectively, *Of Other Worlds. Essay and Stories* (Lewis 2017) and *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*. (Lewis 2017) These raise additional bibliographical questions in that Walter Hooper is no longer listed in these reprintings as the editor of both books on the covers or on the copyright page of *On Stories*, though both still carry his prefaces. The copyright page of *Of Other Worlds* does mention Hooper in passing as "writer of supplementary textual content," and, inferentially as the unnamed provider of "bibliographical references," which in fact are found in the preface. Why this was so is unknown.

III. C. S. LEWIS "ON STORIES"

Let us turn now to "C. S. Lewis on Stories." At the outset, Lewis's intentions in this deceptively short essay—16 pages—seem deliberately obscure, partly because he appears to be trying to define the undefinable. In the end, however, it seems clear that the purpose of "On Stories," is to flush out of the underbrush of literature that distinguishes true Story [with a capital letter "S"] from story as mere entertainment. The Kappa Element reference in the original 1940 title of his paper

suggests that “Kappa” is from the Greek, meaning “hidden element.” He does this with a myriad of examples, but tends to leave it to the reader to decipher his aims. The overlap between the concepts in the 1940 essay and the 1947 version is not overwhelming since Lewis winds up choosing other illustrations for the Kappa Elements, abandons the Kappa usage, and only fleetingly mentions Jungianism.

Lewis begins his essay with the observation that “It is astonishing how little attention critics have paid to Story [capitalized in the original] considered in itself.” (Lewis, *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* 90) This distinction, “Story considered in itself,” underlines Lewis’s lack of sympathy with criticism that treats Story “merely as a means to something else,” or as something to be disregarded in favour of looking at style, or character, or structure or as vehicle for the validation of theoretical constructs or social criticism, or considering almost anything else rather than Story itself. (90)

There are, in Lewis’s notes, several “notable exceptions”: Aristotle’s *Poetics* that “constructed a theory of Greek tragedy which puts Story in the centre and relegates character to a strictly subordinate place”; “Boccaccio and others” who “developed an allegorical theory of Story”; and Carl Jung’s theory of archetypes. (90) However, on the whole, “those forms [of literature] in which everything else is there for the sake of the story have been given little serious attention.” (90)

The deplorable result was twofold. First, there developed the idea that “literature as Story” is mainly “fit only for children,” (90) which needed to be differentiated from serious or “art literature” fit only for adults. Both Lewis and Tolkien vigorously and forthrightly attack this idea. (Lewis 1982; Tolkien 1947) Obviously, fantasy writing fell into the first category, a type of literature unsuitable for grownups.

Lewis strongly agreed with one of his literary mentors, G. K. Chesterton, who argued that what the world needed more of was childlikeness (NB: not childishness). In his enduring book, *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton wrote:

Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, ‘Do it again’...It is possible that God says every morning, ‘Do it again’ to the sun; and every evening, ‘Do it again’ to the moon....It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we. (Ch. 4)

Chesterton developed this further in his 1929 *The Poet and the Lunatics*:

Man is a creature; all his happiness consists in being a creature; or, as the Great Voice commanded us, in becoming a child. All his fun is in having a

gift or present; which the child, with profound understanding, values because it is 'a surprise'. But surprise implies that a thing comes from outside ourselves; and gratitude that it comes from someone other than ourselves. It is thrust through the letter-box; it is thrown in at the window; it is thrown over the wall. Those limits are the lines of the very plan of human pleasure. (Chesterton, *The Poet and the Lunatics* Ch. 4)

Not surprisingly, Chesterton also wrote: "Well, I left the fairy tales lying on the floor of the nursery, and I have not found any books so sensible since." (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* Ch 4) Chesterton knew whereof he spake since he was converted by reading fairy tales.

Both Lewis and Chesterton took seriously Christ's commendation of children's attitudes, such as in Matthew 11:25-26, where "Jesus declared, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.'" and Matthew 18:3: "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (ESV) It may even be that this commitment to humour and childlikeness was at the root of Lewis's (and Chesterton's) argument for the existence of God from Joy. (Nichols 1991; Lindvall 2012)

The second negative consequence was that modern criticism denigrated with wide effect the reading pleasure of Story. Such pleasure was definitely "low brow" where it was not entirely childish. As a result, works of Story were and are relegated to the Kiddie Lit section of the book store or else to the book racks at airports for people who want to frivolously pass the tedium of a long trip with a little light reading. This is the "injustice" that Lewis's essay was "most anxious to remedy." (Lewis, *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* 90; see Lewis, *Rehabilitations* 95-116; Lewis, *On Stories* . . . 119-125) Toward the end of his life, Lewis would return to these matters with a much extended argument in his 1961 *An Experiment in Criticism*.

Lewis does not disagree that there may be different kinds of pleasure in reading. In fact, he welcomes it. He even allows that "the pleasure of Story" might be "as low in the scale as modern criticism puts it." However, he believes that "a very hasty assumption has been made on this subject. I think that books which are read merely 'for the story' may be enjoyed in two very different ways. It is partly a division of books (some stories can be read only in the one spirit and some only in the other) and partly a division of readers (the same story can be read in different ways)" from higher or lower motives. (Lewis, *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* 90)

The critics also decree that books fall into distinct categories and those that appeal to children or low brow or childish readers are not fit to be alongside

those that appeal to mature audiences. The first category is for entertainment and less sophisticated readers, while the second is for enlightened, educated, sophisticated connoisseurs of the writing arts. This distinction, Lewis contended, is bosh.

It was one sure sign that modern critics and writers took themselves too seriously and pompously. In *The Personal Heresy*, Lewis caustically refers to this as “Poetolatry.” Lewis explicitly rejects the “naturalistic theory” of poetry. Poets are not “a separate race of great souls or mahatmas...” (Lewis & Tillyard 128) Returning again to a Lewis’ mentor, Chesterton wrote in “The Ethics of Elfland”:

SERIOUSNESS is not a virtue. It would be a heresy, but a much more sensible heresy, to say that seriousness is a vice. It is really a natural trend or lapse into taking one’s self gravely, because it is the easiest thing to do... It is easy to be heavy: hard to be light. Satan fell by the force of gravity. (*Orthodoxy*, Ch. 4)

Lewis moves next to an anecdote regarding a conversation he had had with an undergraduate about books they had enjoyed. Eventually they got around to discussing why these books had given them pleasure. The student found delight in the sheer excitement of the hero’s being in danger, whereas Lewis felt that the “whole world” caught by the story was what delighted him. “Dangers, of course, there might be,” but it was the context, the world in which these dangers, suspenses, and excitements existed that mattered first of all. Without the world, danger was simply danger, excitement was “simply ‘excitement.’” Lewis concludes: “My pupil was a very clear-headed man and he saw at once what I meant and also saw how totally his imaginative life as a boy had differed from mine.” (Lewis, *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* 90-91)

Lewis follows with another example to illustrate “the distinction . . . I am trying to make between two kinds of pleasure.” He compares his experience of reading H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (see Lewis, *On Stories and Other Essays* 97-100) with his experience of seeing a 1937 film version of the story directed by Robert Stevenson and starred Cedric Hardwicke, Anna Lee, Paul Robeson, and Roland Young. The Wikipedia entry says this “is considered to be the most faithful to the book.” One can only imagine what Lewis would have thought of the later versions.

Of its many sins—not least the introduction of a totally irrelevant young woman in shorts who accompanied the three adventurers wherever they went—only one here concerns us. At the end of Haggard’s book . . . the heroes are awaiting death entombed in a rock chamber and surrounded by the mummified kings of that land. The maker of the film version, however, apparently thought this tame. He substituted a subterranean volcanic eruption, and then went that one better by

adding an earthquake. Perhaps the scene in the original was not ‘cinematic’ and the man was right, by the canons of his own art, in altering it. But it would have been better not to have chosen in the first place a story which could be adapted to the screen only by being ruined. Ruined at least for me. (Lewis, *Essays Presented to . . .* 92)

The mistake was to have confused “mere excitement” and escalating dangers for the cause of pleasure in the story. “What I lose [in the film] is the whole sense of the deathly (quite a different thing from simple danger of death)—the cold, the silence, and the surrounding faces of the ancient, the crowned and sceptred, dead.” One gets such effects in Lewis’s *The Magician’s Nephew* (1955) with the great hall of Charn; and in frequent lyrical passages in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (2004) such as in the Mines of Moria. The effects of the scene in the book and the scene in the film are “extremely different. The one lays a hushing spell on the imagination; the other excites a rapid flutter of the nerves. In reading that chapter of the book curiosity or suspense about the escape of the heroes from their death-trap makes a very minor part of one’s experience. The trap I remember for ever: how they got out I have long since forgotten.” (Lewis, *Essays Presented to . . .* 92) Subsequently, Lewis restates his problem with the film version of *King Solomon’s Mines* and expands on the kinds of danger and the different kinds of fear they may produce (ranging from fear of cannon fire to fear while on a wild horse to fear of snakes and scorpions). He concludes that “in imagination...the qualitative difference is much stronger.” (Lewis, *Essays Presented to . . .* 94) In fairness to the film maker, it should be noted that later Lewis recognizes that reading is an active experience and watching is a passive experience. (101-102)

Lewis now summarizes. Talk about Story (again with a capital “S”) is “concerned . . . principally with the imagined event and not with character or society.” We err when we think “‘excitement’ is the only pleasure” that Story gives. To narrow his point even further, Lewis argues “I know that something else comes in for at least one reader—myself.” Calling upon a lifetime of reading such stories, he finds it interesting that “what is said to be the most ‘exciting’ novel in the world, *The Three Musketeers*, makes no appeal to me at all.” Why not? Because the “total lack of atmosphere repels me. There is no country in the book . . . no weather . . . no feeling that there is London differs from Paris. There is not a moment’s rest from the ‘adventures...’” The reason is that there is no real backstory. If Lewis got nothing out of this book, he argues, “then it follows that ‘excitement’ is not the only kind of pleasure” to be gotten out of that sort of book. Lewis concludes, “If I am alone in this experience then, to be sure, the present essay is of merely autobiographical interest. But I am pretty sure that I am not absolutely alone. I write on the chance that some others may feel the same and in

the hope that I may help them clarify their own sensations.” (Lewis, *Essays Presented to . . .* 93-94)

Lewis next adduces several reactions of the kind he is seeking here: giants in Jack the Giant Killer and giants “blowing after” Sir Gawain in the north-western fells of England, pirates running up the Jolly Roger, and Bedford’s horror in Wells’ *First Men in the Moon* (1901) at being shut out of his base in “the infinite and final Night of space” and its eternal silence. (Lewis, *Essays Presented to . . .* 94-96)

“And here . . .,” writes Lewis, “we come to one of the differences between life and art. A man really in Bedford’s position would probably not feel very acutely that sidereal loneliness. The immediate issue of death would drive the contemplative object out of his mind . . . That is one of the functions of art: to present what the narrow and desperately practical perspectives of real life exclude.” Indeed, Lewis speculates, “I have often wondered whether the ‘excitement’ may not be an element actually hostile to the deeper imagination . . . the poetry of the basic idea is lost.” (94-97)

As further examples of what he is getting at, Lewis cites Homer (“supreme excellence” in telling a story), Walter de la Mare (in his best stories “Our fears are never, in one sense, realised; yet we lay down the story feeling that they, and far more, were justified.”), and, especially, David Lindsay’s *Voyage to Arcturus* (Lindsay) which “makes threats and promises” that we feel “sure that they cannot be carried out,” but he, “Unaided by any special skill or even any sound taste in language” continually “leads us up a stair of unpredictables. . . He builds whole worlds of imagery and passion, any one of which would have served another writer for a whole book, only to pull each of them to pieces . . . There is no recipe for writing of this kind.” Lindsay was “the first writer to discover what ‘other planets’ are really good for in fiction.” He realized that to achieve the “idea of otherness which is what we are trying to grasp...you must go into another dimension. To construct plausible and moving ‘other worlds’ you must draw on the only real ‘other world’ we know, that of the spirit.” (Lewis, *Essays Presented to . . .* 97-98)

Lindsay not only influenced Lewis’s space trilogy, but also the work of Tolkien, who wrote to his publisher in 1938 that he “read *Voyage to Arcturus* with avidity,” declared that in comparison with Lewis’s *Out of the Silent Planet* “it is both more powerful and more mythical” though “less rational, and also less of a story...” (Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien . . .* 34).

Of course, this has led some to misunderstand stories of the “marvellous or supernatural.” For instance, Samuel Johnson (who was highly valued by Lewis) thought that “children liked stories of the marvellous because they were too ignorant to know they were impossible. “But,” Lewis responds, “children do not always like them, nor are those who like them always children; and to enjoy

reading about fairies—much more about giants and dragons—it is not necessary to believe in them. Belief is at best irrelevant; it may be a positive disadvantage.” (Lewis, *Essays Presented to . . .* 98-99)

Nor is it correct to assume that fantasy stories are arbitrary and unpredictable. “The logic of a fairy-tale is as strict as that of a realistic novel, though different.” It was no arbitrary whim that led Kenneth Grahame to make the ludicrously “quasi-human” Mr. Toad his primary character in his *Wind in the Willows*. (Grahame) Indeed, for Lewis, the egregious Mr. Toad was a symbol of modern, time driven, motorcar mad Western civilization, which Lewis very much disliked. (Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* 157-158) In Lewis’s opinion, *Wind in the Willows* is an “excursion into the preposterous” which “sends us back with renewed pleasure to the actual,” yet another characteristic of Story. (Lewis, *Essays Presented to . . .* 99-100) The same is true for stories dealing with predictions or prophecies, such as *Oedipus* or *The Hobbit*. (Lewis, *Essays Presented to . . .* 100-101)

The same may be said of the charge of “escapism” in children’s books and fantasy stories. (Lewis, *Essays Presented to . . .* 100) Once more we can summon Lewis’s mentor Chesterton, who wrote: “the materialist, like the madman, is in prison; in the prison of one thought.” (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* Ch. 4) To escape from such prisons is commendable not reprehensible, any more than to attempt to escape from a Nazi concentration camp or a Soviet GULag or a Chinese Uyghur “reeducation” center should be mocked or reproved.

Tolkien in his contribution to the Williams volume, which Lewis obviously had already read, wrote caustically and pointedly about this:

I have claimed that Escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories . . . and it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which ‘Escape’ is now so often used: a tone for which the uses of the word outside literary criticism give no warrant at all. In what the misusers of Escape are fond of calling Real Life, Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic . . . Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? (Tolkien, *Essays Presented to . . .* 75-76)

For Lewis, acceptance of escapism was an important element in his spiritual as well as literary conversion, as Chapter XIII of *Surprised by Joy*, “The New Look,” makes clear. (Lewis, *Surprised . . .*) It was part of his own escape from the typical undergraduate fear of being thought gullibility adolescent. In the process, he let his rationalistic side dominate—sharpened by his tutor, the irascible W. T. Kirkpatrick (see Michelson “The ‘Great Knock.’ . . .” 26)—and repressed his visionary, imaginative side (egged on by the Modernists and the psychoanalysts). Lewis summarized his predicament, comparing his imaginative

life with his intellectual life: “The two hemispheres of my mind were in the sharpest contrast. On the one side, a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow ‘rationalism’. Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless.” (Lewis, *Surprised* . . . 170)

But, by the late 1920s, he had come to the conviction that “imagination at its highest is real...” (Lewis, *All My Road Before Me* 432) A few months earlier, he had written in his diary: “I began to think that I had let my ‘forensic’ dominate my ‘recondite’ too long and too severely . . . Perhaps now that I have learned my lesson I can begin to encourage the recondite a bit more. One needn’t be asking questions and giving judgements *all* the time.” (411) The key here is “recondite,” which the *Oxford Universal Dictionary* defines as “things; Removed or hidden from view . . . Removed from ordinary apprehension . . . deep, profound, abstruse . . . uncommon or profound knowledge.” (Oxford Dictionary 1955, 1675) In other words: that elusive Kappa Element.

Lewis earlier had had to combat the idea that only children can enjoy fairy stories, Stories with a capital “S”. Now he has to deal with the usually snobbish criticisms of adults who enjoy “children’s books.” He finds the distinction between children’s books and adult books “silly.” We need to remember, of course, that the meaning of “adult book” has drastically changed since Lewis’s time, where it meant books that were worthy of reading by adults, not the slapdash prurient writing and pornographic media that are preposterously called “adult” today.

As for so-called children’s books, Lewis writes,

No book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally (and often far more) worth reading at the age of fifty—except of course books of information. The only imaginative works we ought to grow out of are those which it would have been better not to have read at all. A mature palate will probably not much care for *crème de menthe*: but it ought to enjoy bread and butter and honey. (*Essays Presented to* . . . 100)

Lewis was no longer apologizing for giving free rein to his recondite side. Far from it. Indeed, Lewis later stated publicly: “When I was ten, I read fairy tales in secret and would have been ashamed if I had been found doing so. Now that I am fifty I read them openly. When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up.” (*On Stories and Other Essays* 25)

So, Lewis continues, “if I am right in thinking that there is another enjoyment in Story besides the excitement, then popular romance even on the lowest level becomes rather more important than we had supposed.” Lewis

believes that “something which the educated receive from poetry can reach the masses through stories of adventure, and almost in no other way.” That, incidentally, is why Lewis thinks “nothing can be more disastrous than the view that the cinema can and should replace popular written fiction. The elements which it excludes are precisely those which give the untrained mind its only access to the imaginative world. There is death in the cinema.” (*Essays Presented to . . .* 101-102)

The test that Lewis suggests is to ask how many times a reader reads a particular book. If only once, then that book is merely excitement based and not worth re-reading because excitement (or “surprise”) “must disappear from a second reading” once one knows what will happen. But if a reader goes back to his old favourites again and again, then you have pretty good evidence that they are to him a sort of poetry. The re-reader is looking not for actual surprises...but for a certain ideal surprisingness.” In this sort of Story, “[i]t is the quality of unexpectedness . . . that delights us. It is even better the second time” because the first reading may be absorbed in “the sheer narrative lust.” Then “are we at leisure to savour the real beauties.” Children, in fact, “understand this well when they ask for the same story over and over again, and in the same words.” (102-103)

Lewis’s hope is that his essay will encourage “a better school of prose story...of story that can mediate imaginative life to the masses while not being contemptible to the few...” However, he has to recognise that “perhaps this is not very likely.” (103) Of course, in a sense, he was cheating because he knew by this juncture that Professor Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* was already well on the way.

Indeed, Lewis’s interest in the “whole world” caught by Tolkien’s story was clearly one of the reasons why he was so taken with Middle-earth, a “whole world” with a back story a mile deep. (Lewis, *On Stories and Other Essays* 81-90) Ironically, this may also have been one reason Tolkien disliked Narnia. Though it was a “whole world,” Lewis was not as concerned with building a consistent back story and amalgamated a hodge-podge of mythologies, folklore, stories, and children’s literature into his tale. He also felt that Lewis, despite their common abhorrence of allegory, had introduced allegorical elements into Narnia. Lewis argued that this was analogy (or “supposal”), not allegory which has to have a one to one correspondence, but...

On the other hand, we may take the reactions of “high art” literary critics to the unpleasant fact that Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* was persistently chosen as the book of the Twentieth Century as representative of elitist writers. Thus, Germaine Greer felt compelled to write: “It has been my nightmare that Tolkien would turn out to be the most influential writer of the twentieth century. The bad dream has materialized.” (Shippey xii) Lewis would have been both gratified and justified.

Lewis concludes: “It must be admitted that the art of Story as I see it is a very difficult one.” Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* starts out as “mere plot and excitement,” but escapes “by a very curious shift of tone. As the humour and homeliness of the early chapters, the sheer ‘Hobbitry’, dies away we pass insensibly into the world of epic.” Conversely, even when a writer, such as William Morris in his *Well at the World’s End*, seems to succeed at the beginning (“can a man write a story to that title?” Lewis inquires), often the magic is lost. (Lewis, *Selected Literary Essays* 219-223)

In the end, Lewis asks, “why anyone should be encouraged to write in a form in which the means are apparently so often at war with the end. But I am hardly suggesting that anyone who can write great poetry should write stories instead.” On the other hand, “good work in this kind...can come where poetry will never come.” (Lewis, *Essays Presented to . . .* 103-105)

And so, Lewis concludes, though an

authors plot is only a net, and usually an imperfect one, a net of time and event for catching what is not really a process at all, is life much more? . . . In life and art both...we are always trying to catch in our net of successive moments something that is not successive . . . Whether . . . we can throw away our nets away and follow the bird to its own country, is not a question for this essay. But I think,” Lewis writes, “it is sometimes done—or very, very nearly done—in stories. I believe the effort to be well worth making. (105)

IV. CONCLUSIONS

What is then going on in C. S. Lewis’s essay “On Stories”? The use earlier of the phrase “a sort of poetry” is a key to Lewis’s argument. So, too, is Lewis’s point made above that he was not “suggesting that anyone who can write great poetry should write stories instead.” And, finally, his observation that “good work in this kind...can come where poetry will never come,” is a further clue.

This leads to the principal conclusion of this paper: The key to understanding Lewis’s attempts to grapple here with what appears to be mostly ungrappable is to be found in his original writing vocation as a poet. This is because, in Lewis’s view, the essence of “Story” (with an uppercase “S”, although Lewis is not always consistent in this) lies in the exercise of the poetic imagination, but in prose, not in poetry—which is mostly inaccessible to most people. Repeatedly, what Lewis has described above is the essence of the poetic imagination emerging in prose form. Indeed, compare what Lewis has to say about Spenser, whose *Faerie Queen* (1596) inspired both Lewis and Tolkien (Lewis, *Spenser’s Images of Life*.) Poet Kathleen Raine’s contribution to the 1965 Lewis memorial volume *Light on C. S. Lewis* says precisely that, arguing that Lewis

“understood that poetry and the other arts are the language of tradition, and exist to serve ends which are not literary.” (Raine 105) This is more Kappa Element stuff, the unknown, the recondite that can only be expressed in poetry...or a certain kind of prose, imaginative fantasy.

Unfortunately, this raises two questions which Lewis deals with in his essay only inferentially: what is poetry and what are the purposes of poetry? The importance of these questions requires us to take seek answers in two books that Lewis published prior to his “On Stories” essay: *The Personal Heresy* (1939) and *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942).

In *The Personal Heresy*, Lewis writes that the poet’s work is to produce “imaginative experience,” doing “what no one else can do.” (Lewis and Tillyard 30-31) Now “[i]t is clear that many artefacts [including poems] can be used for purposes for which they were not intended . . . You can make a poultice out of porridge or use a thin volume of Shakespeare’s sonnets to support a rickety table” but this does not tell us what the real purposes of poetry are. (Lewis, *Of Other Worlds. Essays and Stories* 121) In the end, “poetry is an art or skill—a trained habit of using certain instruments to certain ends.” (Lewis and Tillyard 20, 27)

And what of Lewis’s own “theory of poetry”?

[B]y poetry I mean...imaginative literature whether in prose or verse . . . I believe poetry to be an art or a skill. A skill usually defined by its instruments. I suppose that we shall all agree that the instrument of poetry is language. But since language is used for other purposes . . . we now need the *differentia* of the poetical use of language. [Poetry is a] skill or trained habit of using all the extra-logical elements of language—rhythm, vowel-music, onomatopoeia, associations, and what not—to convey the concrete reality of experiences . . . But as, in ordinary terminology, we mean by a tall man or a rich man one who is taller or richer than most, so by a poem we mean a composition which communicates more of the concrete and qualitative than our usual utterances do. A poet is a man who produces such compositions more often and more successfully than the rest of us. (Lewis and Tillyard 131-133)

How does this differ from scientific language? By no means is it that the task of science is to describe the real and that of poetry to describe the imaginary. “On the contrary everything that is concrete is real, and some suspect that everything real is concrete,” but both use abstractions. “Only science can tell you where and when you are likely to meet an elm: only poetry can tell you what meeting an elm is like. The one answers the question *Whether*, the other answers the question *What*.” (134-136)

What then about “the content of poetry”? The “necessary condition of an art of ‘saying’ [is that] you must say something. It follows that, in a certain sense, poetry is not an ‘Art’. . . It is by art or skill that the poets contrive to utter

concretely what they want to say, but the thing is not ‘Art’ . . . The means are art; the thing conveyed, said, or uttered is not.” (Lewis and Tillyard 138-139)

What, then, is the value of poetry? ‘The truth is that the value of literature . . . has always been pretty well understood by the great mass of readers.’ Thus, the “first demand” of poetic utterance “is that it should be interesting . . . And in the second place, we demand that an utterance . . . should have a desirable permanent effect on us . . . It is all of a piece with what we want in other departments of life . . . The only two questions to ask about a poem, in the long run, are, firstly, whether it is interesting, enjoyable, attractive, and secondly, whether this enjoyment wears well and helps or hinders you towards all the other things you would like to enjoy, or do, or be.” (145-146)

And from there, *The Personal Heresy* leads back to story: “The most characteristic contents of literary utterances are stories—accounts of events that did not take place. The primary value of these is that they are interesting.” (146)

Our second source, Lewis’s 1942 book, *Preface to Paradise Lost*, understandably has a lot to say about poets and poetry as well. At the outset, Lewis suggests that when we are “judging any piece of workmanship” we need “to know what it is—what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used...The first thing is to understand the object before you . . .” (1) In other words, we need to ask: what is poetry and what are its purposes?

In response, Lewis writes that poetry “is an organization of words which exist to produce a particular kind of patterned experience in the readers.” (3) It is

the awakening and moulding of the reader’s or hearer’s emotions is a necessary element in that vision of concrete reality which poetry hopes to produce . . . [I]n poetry passion is present for the sake of imagination, and therefore, in the long run, for the sake of wisdom or spiritual health—the rightness and richness of a man’s total response to the world . . . that is why the old critics were right enough when they said Poetry taught by delighting, or delighted by teaching.

In the end, “The grandeur which the poet assumes in his poetic capacity . . . is for our benefit.” (54, 60)

“Taught by delighting; delighted by teaching.” In the final analysis, poetry is also for our pleasure and enjoyment, perhaps in the same sense as the 1647 Westminster Shorter Catechism’s response to its opening question: “Q. 1. What is the chief end of man? A. Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.” (Westminster Shorter Catechism 1647)

We summarize with one more quotation from a later essay. In 1956, Lewis wrote: “In the sixteenth century when everyone was saying that poets (*by which they meant all imaginative writers*) [emphasis mine] ought ‘to please and instruct’, Tasso made a valuable distinction. He said that the poet, as poet, was concerned

solely with pleasing.” (Lewis, *Of Other Worlds. Essays and Stories* 35) Interesting, enjoyable, attractive, meaningful in an individual’s life: clearly for Lewis, the *raison d’être* of poetry, whether in verse or in prose, is to provide pleasure.

It was for these reasons that both C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien began their writing careers as poets. Ironically, both Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien may also be considered failed poets. However, at the same time, both of them became successful and powerful fictional prose writers of epic fantasy/science fiction writing. It is by now a commonplace that both Lewis and Tolkien’s being frustrated epic and narrative poets—in a genre that we have to admit was considerably out of fashion in Western culture by post-World War I—played an important role in their later epic prose mythologies. (Shippey, 200-201, 236, 324-325) In the words of Malcolm Guite: the “great project” of Tolkien and Lewis “was to heal the widening split between outer and inner, rational and imaginative, microcosm and macrocosm . . . by re-enchanting the disenchanting, by re-mythologizing a demythologized world.” (306) Their hope had been to do this as epic poets. Failing in this, they spectacularly succeeded as epic prose writers.

Interestingly, the importance of such awe-inspiring, re-enchanting poetic imagination gets recent support from the secular atheist social psychologist Jonathan Haidt who argues that the emotion of awe “acts like a kind of reset button: it makes people forget themselves and their petty concerns. Awe opens people to new possibilities, values, and directions in life.” (Haidt 2012, 264), This seems rather like Bilbo Baggins’ experiences in *The Hobbit*. As he returns from his great adventure to the Lonely Mountain and back, he burst into song and Gandalf looks at him in surprise: “My dear Bilbo!” he said. Something is the matter with you! You are not the hobbit that you were.” (Tolkien 273-274)

Don W. King, the leading expert on Lewis’s poetry, aptly describes Lewis’s poetic efforts as “the source of his golden prose.” (King ix) While King’s analysis of Lewis the poet and “the legacy of his poetic impulse” does not utilize or mention “On Stories,” his book on *C. S. Lewis, Poet*, provides considerable support for the thesis of this paper. King devotes an entire chapter to “Poetic Prose: Lewis’s Poetic Legacy,” founded on the idea that “he wrote his best ‘poetry’ in prose” and that “Lewis’s poetic legacy is seen most clearly in his prose.” (224) See also 1 ff. and 19 ff.) My argument here is that the reach of Lewis’s poetic legacy carried over into his definition and defense of “Story,” which in turn contributed to what may be called a “revolution” in imaginative prose. This was not nearly as influential to the degree that Tolkien’s essay in the same Williams volume was, but it certainly reinforced Tolkien’s work. Tolkien wrote that “An essential power of Faërie is . . . the power of making immediately

effective by the will the visions of ‘fantasy’.” (Tolkien, *Essays Presented to . . .* 51) This is the poetic imagination.

Secondly, writes Bruce L. Edwards, “The emphasis in Lewis’s fiction (and nonfiction) is always ‘seeing with the heart,’ of apprehending images and tracing metaphors that instill faith and inspire journeys into the never-never land of the spirit. For the heart reveals our true character, and, ultimately, where our treasure is. And the perfect genre for hosting such stories and themes is the fairy-tale.” (Edwards, *C. S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy. Vol2* 4) Once Lewis saw that intellect and the recondite (the Kappa Element) were not inherently incompatible, but actually two sides of the poetic coin, he was liberated to become the writer he had hoped to be, but as a prosodist not a poet. (Root and Neal 3 ff)

Thirdly, Lewis’s essay is important because it clearly sets forth a number of themes that Lewis continued to work out. These later coalesced into Lewis’s important and provocative classic *An Experiment in Criticism* which was published shortly before his death. (Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*)

Fourthly, as was pointed out above by Charles Huttar, Lewis’s articulation and defense of “Story,” had emerged from Lewis’s entire body of work prior to 1946, eventuating in a “Grand Design” that was articulated in “On Stories” and eventually produced Narnia as well as *Till We Have Faces* in 1956. (Huttar; see also Thorson 123-155) Though arguably not as significant in many ways as Tolkien’s Middle-earth, Narnia—to borrow a phrase Lewis used about George MacDonald’s *Phantastes* (Lewis, *Surprised . . .* 181)—has baptised the imaginations of millions, and that is a significance all of its own.

Let us sum up with one more quotation from G. K. Chesterton:

The things I believed most then, the things I believe most now, are the things called fairy tales. They seem to me to be the entirely reasonable things. They are not fantasies: compared with them other things are fantastic. Compared with them religion and rationalism are both abnormal, though religion is abnormally right and rationalism abnormally wrong. Fairyland is nothing but the sunny country of common sense. It is not earth that judges heaven, but heaven that judges earth; so for me at least it was not earth that criticised elfland, but elfland that criticised the earth. (*Orthodoxy* Ch. 4)

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