Hope for Susan: Moral Imagination in The Chronicles of Narnia

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Hope for Susan: Moral Imagination in *The Chronicles of Narnia*

Emily Rose Kempton

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

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The fate of Susan Pevensie has been one of the most controversial and interesting topics of debate about *The Chronicles of Narnia* since readers realized that she was no longer a friend of Narnia. Many critics have condemned C. S. Lewis for being sexist, thus making the stereotypically feminine Susan with her love of parties, nylons, and lipstick ineligible for salvation. This thesis proposes to look at Susan’s choices and fate from the perspective of moral imagination. It argues that Lewis did not bar Susan from heaven to belittle femininity, but rather to comment on the consequences of choice, belief, and the vital exercise of moral imagination. Placing Susan in a fairy-tale world highlights the differences between what is real and what seems impossible and pushes both Susan and the readers to develop their own moral imagination in the pursuit of belief in the truth. Looking at Susan’s ambiguous fate and comparing her story to other characters’ journeys throughout the series shows readers the power of the imagination and offers hope that Susan, like the rest of her siblings, may make it to Aslan’s Country after all.

Keywords: moral imagination, belief, choose, Susan Pevensie
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Both scholars and casual readers of C. S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia* will inevitably run into the problem of Susan Pevensie. “The problem of Susan” (so named by British author Neil Gaiman and picked up by fans and critics alike) is one of the stickiest points of debate from Lewis’s *Chronicles*. The problem is this: by the time the final book in the series concludes, we discover that Susan, a character we have journeyed to Narnia with several times and come to know as intimately as we have any other Son of Adam or Daughter of Eve, is no longer a friend of Narnia. *The Last Battle* sees all of the other children from our world (some of whom we have not heard from for several books) who have aided Narnia in its times of need reunited with Aslan and a host of Narnian friends and ultimately shepherded up to the heights of “Aslan’s Country,” Lewis’s version of heaven. Susan alone is absent—she remains behind in our world as the rest of her family moves on. Scholars and fans alike have been troubled by Lewis’s treatment of the elder Pevensie sister. The most prominent scholarship of this sort consists of feminist commentary: Susan’s disappointing fate becomes the backbone for arguments about Lewis’s negative treatment of women throughout the whole series.

A god, these scholars say, who would punish a woman for being interested in sex, nylons, lipstick, and parties is not the kind, honest, gentle god that readers want Aslan to be. Feminist scholars such as Karin Fry and Jean Graham have argued that Susan’s treatment is a reflection of Lewis’s negative attitude towards women and his obvious favoritism towards more masculine characteristics. However, countering this trend among readers and critics is the view that Susan herself might just be at fault. Lewis’s anti-feminism is certainly a viable reading of *The Chronicles of Narnia*: one has to look no farther than his portrayal of beautiful, evil witches such as Jadis, the White Witch, and the Green Witch to see that he often pairs beauty and femininity
with evil. However, there are plenty of women in the series who are beautiful and *good*, too. Lucy, for example, is “gay and golden-haired” with plenty of suitors of her own (*LWW* 201), and Ramandu’s daughter is so lovely that she seems to teach the heroes of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* what beauty truly is (215). Further, Lewis has written good female characters that are not specifically described as beautiful, such as Aravis and Jill, as well as evil, ugly females such as the hag in *Prince Caspian*; feminine beauty, in other words, has no correlation with how good or evil Lewis’s characters are. This being said, rather than contribute to the discussion of Lewis’s anti-feminism, this paper will add to the argument that Susan herself deserves further study. In most cases, feminist scholars oversimplify or objectify Susan by treating her as little more than a pawn in Lewis’s hands. Ironically, they then accuse Lewis of turning Susan from a strong, gentle, brave Queen of Narnia into a young woman more concerned with lipstick and nylons than answering a Narnian call for aid: for them, Susan becomes little more than Lewis’s tool used to disparage feminine qualities and praise masculine strengths. What these scholars fail to acknowledge and what this paper will demonstrate is that *The Chronicles of Narnia* make it clear that Susan Pevensie makes a deliberate choice to stay behind. I argue that the fact that Susan is female has nothing to do with her exclusion from Narnia. Instead, her exclusion from Aslan’s country has everything to do with her deliberate choice to abandon what she once believed. Her worldly interests function at their core as a symbol of her choice to turn her back on her belief.

To understand Susan’s choice to estrange herself from Narnia, we must first understand some of the context in which she makes the choice. Setting has a great deal to do with Susan’s choice, as this paper will discuss at greater length in later sections. The land of Narnia is a fantastic blend of fairy tale creatures, impossible experiences, magical properties, and Christian beliefs and parallels. This depth has allowed scholars to explore the series both as children’s
literature and theological allegory. Though most scholars choose to look at the problem of Susan from either a theological or feminist perspective, I argue that Susan’s exclusion from Aslan’s country is not a slight on femininity or a simple commentary on Christianity’s beliefs about the next life, but rather a study in the moral imagination. The moral imagination deals with our ability to examine options or alternate solutions to a situation and then make the appropriate decision based on what would be morally appropriate for us and the world around us. In the midst of chaos, high emotion, or limited alternatives, moral imagination allows us to choose the best option even when a decision seems impossible to make. This is where Narnia as setting becomes important to our discussion of Susan: as a chaotic, imaginary fairy tale world closely paralleled with our own “real” world, Narnia is the perfect setting in which to examine Susan’s relationship with belief, imagination, and moral truth. Using Narnia as the backdrop for an exploration of Susan’s moral imagination helps us to more completely examine her relationship with her own beliefs, doubts, and desire to grow up in the context of a world that asks her to make impossible decisions on a regular basis.

Ultimately, the problem of Susan must conclude in one of two ways: with her exclusion from Aslan’s country based on her decision to remain in the “real” world or with her joining her family and again becoming a friend of Narnia. By looking at Susan’s choices through the lens of moral imagination and her belief in a fairy tale world, a world that proves to be an ideal testing ground for development of the moral imagination, this paper takes the latter stance and argues that we can indeed have hope that she might arrive at Aslan’s country, as Lewis himself puts it, “in her own way.”
Susan and Feminism

Feminist scholars tend to argue that Susan ought to be allowed to find Aslan’s Country “in her own way” without having to give up the worldly possessions she has become so fond of. These symbols of her womanhood, they say, should not keep her from heaven. One modern “Susan apologist,” author Neil Gaiman, addressed this concern in a speech given at Mythcon in 2004 when he said that Lewis’s treatment of women makes him “uncomfortable” and that the problem of Susan is, for him, the culmination of everything unfair about Lewis’s treatment of his female characters. This is what prompted him to write the short story “The Problem of Susan,” in which he imagines Susan as an adult grappling with the trauma of losing her entire family in a train accident years earlier. Gaiman’s story also tackles the issue of Lewis’s god, a lion who finds it acceptable and even amusing to punish a woman for liking nylons and lipstick by forcing her to identify her siblings’ remains in the aftermath of a horrific crash. Of course, how Susan deals with the train crash (while her siblings and parents enter happily into Aslan’s Country with hardly a thought for her) is left unaddressed by the Narnia books themselves, which leaves plenty of space for both fans and critics to debate the issue.

Karin Fry’s stance is similar to Gaiman’s. In her interpretation of the problem, the most positive qualities in the female characters (Lucy, Susan, and Jill in particular) are those that lift them “above” their femininity. The girls are held, she argues, to a masculine standard, and since Susan the Gentle (as opposed to Lucy the Valiant, a much more masculine title) ultimately fails to meet this standard of masculinity, she is not invited to Aslan’s Country in the end (159). Susan is tenderhearted, beautiful, passive, careful, and the voice of reason and safety amongst her four more reckless, courageous siblings; when she returns to the real world she is more interested in dating, dress, makeup, and social occasions than school or the world of Narnia. Furthermore,
“Susan is the only one who is not forgiven or given the opportunity to work out her problems. Most of her flaws are connected to negative female stereotypes that go against Aslan’s morality, and unlike the other girls, Susan is not interested in rejecting feminine roles” (164). Susan’s femininity, Fry says, is ultimately why she is excluded from Lewis’s version of heaven (160).

Similarly, Jean Graham argues that Susan’s interest in entering adolescence is what prevents her from entering heaven, along with girls like *The Horse and His Boy*’s Lasaraleen, a young woman also preoccupied with boys, parties, and clothes whose story ends less than satisfactorily. In contrast, Graham notes that Lucy, Jill, and Aravis (*The Horse and His Boy*’s heroine), who are more adventurous, athletic, and for her argument’s purpose, *masculine*, are exalted as queens at the end of their stories. In other words, they are rewarded for their masculine qualities, whereas the more feminine women in *Chronicles* are punished for being too feminine: “The successful woman,” Graham says, “also buries her sexuality, represented in the children’s series by lipstick and nylons. . . . [S]he retains her interest in manly things, which makes her a better companion for the men around her” (42).

Graham makes an interesting but flawed point here: she equates Susan’s feminine interests with sexuality and the abandonment of childish ways. On the surface, it is true that Susan abandons Narnia in favor of these feminine, sexualized, adult pursuits and possessions, but I (and other readers interested in defending Lewis and Susan) argue that the sexualized nature of Susan’s new interests is unimportant. They are simply representative of Susan turning her back on Narnia and choosing worldly pursuits, something that Lewis obviously felt would bar her from paradise, at least for the time being.

After all, we see other characters interested in worldly possessions as well, and these characters are just as ineligible for Aslan’s country as Susan. Edmund Pevensie is a prime
example: he quickly sells his siblings and ultimately his freedom to the White Witch for the promise of Turkish Delight. Eustace Scrubb sells his human form (though quite by accident, to be fair) for a dragon’s hoard of gold. Susan is no different from her brother and cousin—she, as they, simply has weaknesses that she chooses to cling to instead of abandoning them for the promise of something better in the future. The only difference between Susan and other characters who sell their salvation for worldly possessions is that we see Edmund and Eustace redeemed within the story. Susan’s fate is, of course, left unwritten.

Susan and Belief

So as interesting as these and other gender studies may be, Graham, Fry, and other scholars’ arguments are far too selective; they fail to account for Susan’s attitude while she is in *Narnia*, which differs significantly and importantly from that of other “exalted” females. For example, Susan’s attitude upon first entering Narnia differs drastically from that of other Daughters of Eve. Lucy feels “a little frightened” but “inquisitive and excited as well” upon first realizing that she has stepped through the back of a wardrobe into another world (*LWW* 7) and moves forward unhesitatingly. Jill is initially frightened at her first meeting with Aslan in our world, but once she begins her journey to Narnia she is “frightened only for a second,” and once she arrives she takes in her surroundings with awe rather than fear; the tasks Aslan has set her are her first priority (*VDT* 26, 34). Susan, on the other hand, is also initially frightened but unlike the other girls, she is more interested in getting home to her comfortable reality than exploring a strange new world: “It doesn’t seem particularly safe here and it looks as if it won’t be much fun either. . . . What about just going home?” (*LWW* 65). Susan is the only one of her four siblings to suggest going home upon first entering Narnia, and she suggests turning around several times as they venture further into the wardrobe. She is the voice of reason, the sensible one, and also the
one least enamored with the possibility of exploring a magical land. “I don’t want to go a step further,” she says, “and I wish we’d never come” (LWW 65).

It is important to note here that Susan’s sensibility is not a wholly negative trait. Her caution is an effective foil to the others’ recklessness, and she is quick to give ground when the others insist on pushing forward and quick to feel a sense of duty to help the missing Mr. Tumnus. However, she is also consistently and uniquely turned towards home until she and her siblings meet the beaver and become aware of their role as potential saviors of Narnia. One reading of this attitude is simply that Susan has a more cautious, careful personality than most of Lewis’s other female characters; another reading might be to see her reluctance to move forward into Narnia as an indication of her later reluctance to return to it. Also important to note is that Lewis does not disparage being tender-hearted and gentle (two of Susan’s defining characteristics)—rather, he treats these qualities with respect, choosing to christen her “Queen Susan the Gentle” in contrast to the more masculine, vibrant “Peter the Magnificent,” “Edmund the Just,” and even “Lucy the Valiant.” Susan’s title is not a slight at femininity—it is a celebration of it.

No, it is not Susan’s feminine qualities that keep her from Aslan’s Country; it is her decision to believe only in what she can see that bars her from entering. This consequence is not unique to Susan: several characters throughout the book fall into disbelief or rebellion and by so doing are temporarily or permanently banned from Aslan’s presence. For example, in a devastating scene in The Last Battle, Aslan confronts a group of dwarfs (all male, interestingly enough) who refuse to be “taken in” by what they perceive to be false religion. After they have proven their unwillingness to accept his help or indeed, to believe that the Lion is even standing in front of them, he teaches, “They will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead
of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds” (*LB* 185-86). This idea that individuals must choose to believe if they are to be saved is, of course, a very Christian idea: as Lewis writes in his book *The Great Divorce*, “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell, choose it” (506). The dwarfs choose not to believe, and so they choose hell: likewise, Susan Pevensie chooses not to believe, and by consequence chooses to be left behind as the rest of her family joins Aslan in his country—gender does not factor into the equation. In Lewis’ words, “The point is not that God will refuse you admission into His eternal world if you have not got certain qualities of character. . . . [I]f people have not got at least the beginning of those qualities inside them, then no possible external conditions . . . could make them happy [in Heaven]” (*Mere Christianity* 81). “Qualities of character” do not refer to gender—in other words, Susan’s gender has nothing to do with her disassociation with Narnia (obviously enough, since Lucy, Jill, Polly, and countless other females make it to Aslan’s Country alongside many male characters). Rather, these “qualities of character” in Susan’s case would be her ability to put her desire to believe above that of her desire for worldly pleasures. Susan certainly had this and other essential “qualities of character” at one point in her life, having reigned as a Queen of Narnia for decades in the Golden Age; the question is not if she has the capability to reach Aslan’s Country, but if she will choose to do so.

This disbelief is not just a product of her “real” life, but stems from an inherent personality trait that we see on display even while she is in a fanciful, “imaginary” world. Susan chooses not to believe in what she finds distasteful or inconvenient in Narnia, just as she does in the real world. We see this reluctance to pursue the truth on display when Susan and her siblings return to Narnia in the beginning of *Prince Caspian*. The Pevensies have just discovered the
abandoned ruins of a great castle; Peter is the first to put the pieces together, and impetuous, believing Lucy is the first to agree with his conclusion that they are standing in the ruins of Cair Paravel. Edmund, also characteristically, questions his older brother, pushing him to examine all of the evidence to the contrary, but eventually concedes that that Peter is right. Susan, however, is uncharacteristically quiet, leaving Edmund to step into her usual role as the voice of reason. It is not until Peter and Edmund express a desire to explore the ruins further that she steps into the conversation. “Oh, do let’s leave it alone,” she says. “We can try it in the morning” (PC 21). She is quickly overruled by her siblings, who are all anxious to reconnect with their Narnian roots despite the lateness of the hour, and though she protests the exploration several times she is simply told to “cheer up” and follow along. Not until they are standing among their treasures does she let go and ease back into her role as a Queen of Narnia (PC 26).

The most noteworthy example of Susan’s reluctance to believe occurs in Prince Caspian, when Lucy leads her siblings towards an Aslan only she can see. Initially, Edmund is the only Pevensie who decides to believe that Lucy is telling the truth about seeing Aslan (having learned from previous experiences that believing Lucy is generally a good idea), but eventually, when faced with his own failure to lead his siblings in the right direction, Peter reluctantly agrees to believe his little sister as well. Interestingly enough, because of his willingness to believe in what he cannot see, he soon finds the belief easier to maintain. “I saw something,” he says finally. “But it’s so tricky this moonlight. On we go, though, and three cheers for Lucy” (PC 160). When he does find himself face-to-face with Aslan again, he drops instantly to one knee, apologizes for leading his siblings wrong, and is immediately forgiven by the lion.

Susan, on the other hand, deliberately ignores her beliefs and refuses to let them guide her actions or behavior. In a telling conversation between her and Lucy after she has heatedly
opposed following the invisible Aslan but then realized that he has been there all along, she says, “I’ve been far worse than you know. I really believed it was him tonight, when you woke us up. I mean, deep down inside. Or I could have, if I’d let myself” (PC 161). Again, as we see illustrated here, it is not that Susan cannot believe, but rather that she chooses not to. It is this deliberate refusal to believe in Aslan or her sister’s story that makes her the last to truly see Aslan, and ultimately this skeptical, stubborn personality trait that keeps her out of Aslan’s Country when He calls.

**A Brief Look at Moral Imagination**

Susan’s fate, therefore, is not attached to her femininity; rather, it has a direct correlation to her lack of belief, or more specifically, her lack of what we might call the moral imagination. The term has a long history, but is widely believed to have been coined by Edmund Burke in 1790. In his words, moral imagination is a collection of “superadded ideas . . . which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation” (66). Russell Kirk interprets Burke’s philosophy in this way: moral imagination is that “ethical perception which strides beyond the barriers of personal experience and momentary events” and allows us to see and make important ethical and moral choices from a fresh perspective. Kirk’s interpretation of Burke’s ideas deals with humanity as both an individual and a collective matter. That is, “the moral imagination aspires to the apprehending of right order in the soul and right order in the commonwealth.” In his interpretation of the moral imagination, our values and beliefs help us look beyond our personal experiences and biases to a more objective look at how our actions affect the world around us. Without this imagination to guide the actions of individuals (the collection of which
makes up the “commonwealth”), we forfeit peace and order and descend into chaos and confusion.

George MacDonald, one of Lewis’s greatest literary influences, had his own idea of how the intellect, or the way we interpret the world around us in a reasonable manner, is connected with the imagination. Rather than imagination serving the intellect, MacDonald believed that the imagination is of the foremost importance. He wrote,

It is the far-seeing imagination . . . which beholds what might be a form of things, and says to the intellect: “Try whether that may not be the form of these things”; which beholds or invents a harmonious relation of parts and operations, and sends the intellect to find out whether that be not the harmonious relation of them, that is, the law of the phenomenon it contemplates.

Intellect, for MacDonald, must serve imagination. Subtle differences in theories aside, however we look at the connection between the intellect and imagination, we can see these theorists all believed essentially the same thing: that together, imagination and intellect can produce a more perfect knowledge of moral truth. Kirk is careful to note, however, that it is only the moral imagination that, once combined with intellect, can bring us to a more perfect state of “right order.” Other types of imagination, such as the idyllic imagination, which rejects convention and embraces emancipation from duty; and the diabolic imagination, which “delights in the perverse and subhuman,” will only perpetuate boredom, disillusion, and eventually narcosis. Moral truth is only found by pursuing moral imagination.

Ultimately, moral imagination is that ability that allows us to weigh various alternatives to any choice and judge those alternatives based on their moral implications. Human nature might reject moral decisions out of fear or distaste or love of an “easy way out,” but moral
imagination gives us the ability to step outside ourselves and consider our values, beliefs, and
decisions from a moral high ground. In other words, it allows us to clearly determine the choices
available to us and then gives us the ability to act based on what we have observed.

Moral imagination works on several levels in a literary sense. First, literature helps us to
develop our own moral imagination through the decisions made by the characters with whom we
identify. Andrew Pudewa, the director for the Institute of Excellence in Writing, says in a speech
given at a seminar about children’s literature and the moral imagination that “when we inject
ourselves and identify with the characters even when they’re doing stupid or wrong things, we
start to build our own concept of what’s right, of what’s good.” And as Pudewa argues, this
development of a moral sense and the bestowal of some kind of lesson, wisdom, or
understanding is stories’ (and specifically for his speech, fairy tales’) ultimate purpose. Lewis
agrees: fairy tales, he says, can “give us experiences we have never had and thus, instead of
‘commenting on life,’ can add to it” (“Sometimes Fairy Stories” 48).

For us as readers of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, watching Susan develop her own moral
imagination can in turn help us build ours. According to Pudewa, all stories can be categorized
into the following: *whole* stories, in which good is portrayed as good, bad is bad, and good
always wins (this is, for the most part, what we see in *Chronicles*); *healing* stories in which good
is good, bad is bad, and good wins but not in the way you might expect and always with some
element of redemption (these first two types are generally found in fairy tales); *broken* stories, in
which good is good, bad is bad, and bad wins; and *twisted* stories, in which good is portrayed as
evil and evil as good. These four types of story “give us experiences” that help us develop our
moral imagination in different ways. In each type of story, the reader must question the choices
that the characters make. Stepping into the story and relating with various characters and
situations develops our sense of morality as we ask ourselves if we could, should, or would make the same decisions as the characters on the page. Pudewa says, “It’s a very powerful experience to see the darker side of human nature pictured in a story and then imagine that you would not do that.” In Susan’s case, for example, readers might see Susan turn her back on her belief in Narnia and easily think that they would never choose such a path. However, it may be just as valuable to evaluate Susan’s choice from a more objective or merciful perspective. What exactly makes her turn away, and what elements of this “immoral” imagination or propensity to disbelieve the fantastic can we honestly see in ourselves?

Literature such as Chronicles allows us to examine characters’ moral development, or the way they use their own moral imagination. Characters make decisions that influence their fictional world in ways that reflect the way our decisions influence our world; the defining choices characters make are what help us relate to and learn from them. Characters in a book or story have an interesting kind of agency—in one way, they are of course controlled and created by an author but they also act completely independently as they make decisions that cannot be altered by the will of the reader. If possible, many fans of Chronicles would surely redeem Susan before the end of The Last Battle, bringing her to Aslan’s Country safely with the rest of her siblings. However, wrestling with characters’ difficult choices and the consequences of these choices, Pudewa says, builds “real-life sources of strength” for readers and develops our own abilities to make difficult ethical choices based on a developing set of morals, values, and beliefs that will influence the wider world around us. Susan’s being left behind as a direct result of the decisions she makes reminds readers that wrong decisions rarely go without consequence in real life or in literary worlds, and it is this “real world application” that gives Susan’s story such power. The misuse of moral imagination is a powerful tool both for good storytelling and the
development of real-world morality. Despite the controversy among fans, Lewis was wise to have Susan make the choices he did. 

Susan’s choices make her a much more interesting character than her siblings in several ways. Like readers in the real world and the rest of the characters in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Susan wrestles with difficult choices, and the choices she makes and the consequences of these choices make her hard to slot into character stereotypes. Gayne Anacker divides the characters in *Chronicles* into three broad categories: the flawed character who repents, the inherently good character that ultimately triumphs over challenges, and the fatally flawed character who refuses redemption (132). Peter Pevensie falls easily into the second category. He is a brave, kind, loyal young man who is consistently forced to make difficult decisions because of his position as the eldest of the Pevensie children. Lucy also falls into this category: it is her consistent, unwavering belief that carries the children into Narnia in the first place. Edmund, of course, is the epitome of the first category as he betrays his siblings, Narnia, and Aslan himself before repenting and receiving redemption at the end of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Interestingly, like Susan, Edmund’s flaws and the consequences of his misuse of his agency and moral imagination make him one of the most compelling and relatable characters in the series. 

Unlike her siblings, Susan Pevensie does not slot into any of Anacker’s three character types. She is Queen Susan the Gentle of Narnia, a good person with a large role in both *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and *Prince Caspian*. She is beautiful, skilled with a bow, fiercely protective of her siblings, and the “mother” of the group, always prone to making the safe, sensible decision rather than taking risks like her three siblings. Susan, though she endures tests and challenges and overcomes them in both *Wardrobe* and *Caspian*, is the only child from the real world who does not enter Aslan’s Country in the end of *The Last Battle*. When King Tirian
calls for aid at the end of the world, Susan is not one of the seven friends of Narnia who return to assist him. Rather, she has “outgrown” Narnia and the “funny games we used to play when we were children” (LB 169). She is not initially flawed with need for redemption (as was Edmund or Eustace Scrubb), nor does she ultimately find rest with Aslan as do her three siblings. But despite her absence at the end of the series, she is not so fatally and irredeemably flawed as the series’ predominant villains (Jadis, Uncle Andrew, Shift the ape, etc.). Rather, she overcomes many challenges and trials that test her faith and courage to become a Queen of Narnia (and once you are a Queen or King of Narnia, you are always a Queen or King of Narnia, as Aslan dictates in Wardrobe). It is just that she has lost her way.

**Susan and the Moral Imagination in a Fairy Tale World**

To be kind to Susan, the choice to turn away must have been a difficult one, especially for one as sensible and mature as Lewis always portrays Susan to be. As Thomas Senor says in his essay “Believing the Incredible” about Susan’s dilemma in the beginning of *Wardrobe* after Lucy returns with tales of a fairy-tale land in the back of an old wardrobe, “believing her [Lucy] required rejecting some fundamental beliefs to which, like the rest of us, her siblings were deeply committed” (34). Susan (and Peter, in this case) had to exercise their moral imagination here at the very beginning, before Narnia became a reality to them: should they reject Lucy’s story as a lie, believe their sister is insane, or accept her incredible story as truth? It is a difficult position to be in, Senor acknowledges (29-30), and indeed, readers find it easy to have sympathy for characters in such a predicament. Lewis, however, does not seem to think the position quite as difficult: he has Professor Kirk lay out the dilemma quite logically and guides Susan, Peter, and the readers to an inevitable conclusion: “You know she doesn’t tell lies and it is obvious that she is not mad. For the moment then and until further evidence turns up, we must assume that she is
telling the truth” (*LWW* 52). Peter and Susan have difficulty accepting this logic, and yet there is nothing else to be done. In this, the beginning of their journey to belief, they find themselves “articulating and examining alternatives” without finding one that fits their current value system. Fauns and kingdoms inside wardrobes are simply not in the realm of possibility.

However, once Susan reaches Narnia, anything becomes possible. This is a fairy tale world, a place where lampposts grow out of the ground, a witch rules over an eternal winter, fauns carry umbrellas and make tea, and the Lamb of God has taken the form of a lion named Aslan. In Burke’s words, she has been cast “from this world of reason, and order, and peace, and virtue, and fruitful penitence, into the antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, confusion, and unavailing sorrow” (83). Or, to put it in a Narnian context, she has been cast from “real” England with its reason and order to a fairy-tale world of imagination—an admittedly confusing and “mad” experience for anyone, much more anyone as inherently sensible as Susan Pevensie. Here, it seems only reasonable that Susan’s propensity for disbelieving the incredible would cease to be a part of her personality (much as it does with Edmund and Peter over the course of their adventures). However, unlike her brothers and sister, as we see in the passage from *Prince Caspian*, she has a tendency to cling to her comfortable version of reality, even in a fantastical world.

But it is here that Susan’s moral imagination is truly tested. The fairy-tale world is the very place in which her decision to believe or not holds the most weight, for it is this imaginative world that allows children to “develop intellectual curiosity about the world, and they [that is, stories] arouse the exploratory energy that allows them to take some control over their own destinies” (Tatar 157). Maria Tatar is speaking here of children’s stories in general, but the principle applies directly to the concept of moral imagination and the choices it allows and
requires readers to make about the world around them and, in particular, within the literary world of fairy stories. A fairy tale, or a fairy tale world, gives readers the energy and license to explore various options, their implications, and their effects. Fairy stories hold a unique position in literary genre: they allow readers to explore other options or, as Lewis puts it, “whole classes of experience” (“Sometimes Fairy Stories” 48) that we can then use to make moral judgments about the world around us. This is the power of story: that characters living within the pages of a book can teach lessons about belief, choices, and consequences in a way that allows readers to more readily make sense of the real world. Susan’s moral imagination must be tested in this sort of world—a fairy tale land that has the ability to open up her eyes to new experiences that she could not experience anywhere else.

Such experiences include witnessing Aslan’s death and rebirth, being crowned Queen of Narnia, saving Trumpkin the dwarf from Telmarines, and waking entities like Bacchus and Silenus from their long sleep. Adventures such as these could not reasonably fit into our world, but in Narnia they reshape Susan’s notion of what the world should be and teach her and her siblings what is possible in a magical, imaginative realm. In his essay “On Fairy Stories,” J. R. R. Tolkien argues that

Fantasy . . . certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy it will make. If men were ever in a state in which they did not want to know or could not perceive truth (facts or evidence), then Fantasy would languish until they were cured. If they ever get into that state (it would not seem at all impossible) Fantasy would perish, and become Morbid Delusion. (72)
Is this not what happens to Susan Pevensie? Despite the evidence of her own eyes, despite the fantastical experiences that teach her about the magic and logic of other worlds, Susan returns to a pre-Narnia state in which she does not even “want to know” and cannot perceive the truth (that Narnia exists and that her memories are more than childhood games). Ironically, according to Tolkien, the “keener and the clearer is the reason,” the better fantasy one should be able create with or from it. Lewis likewise claimed that myth (admittedly different than a fairy-tale or fantasy, but the basic premise of his argument remains the same) is a touchstone for reality, or that it has the ability to support or convey truths about human experience. Additionally, George MacDonald argues that there is no imagination without intellect, and that intellect (or reason) must “labour, workman-like, under the direction of the architect, Imagination” (11). By this logic, Susan, so firmly rooted in the “real” world, should be in an optimal position to understand and accept Narnia. Susan’s problem, however, is not her stubbornness in clinging to the real world; Susan’s problem is that, as we have seen from certain episodes from *Prince Caspian* in particular, she has also cast away reason, truth, facts, and evidence by deeming her own true experiences false. Her decision to cast aside the reason and truth of her adventures in Narnia has also blinded her to the fantastic, fairy-tale elements of the journey, and both together languish. This might seem to be the end of the line for Susan. By the end of *The Last Battle*, fantasy and truth have, for Susan, become morbid delusion. Hope for Susan, despite Lewis’s reassurances that she might reach heaven in her own way, seems bleak—if she has exercised her moral imagination and come up short, what hope can we see for a young woman who has chosen wrongly?

We find some hope for Susan by returning to the scene in *Prince Caspian* in which Susan does not let herself believe in Aslan’s presence. At the end of that scene, when the company
come face-to-face with Aslan at last, Susan shrinks back in his presence, recognizing that she has failed to believe the way she knows she should have. The wise and compassionate lion says after an “awful pause,” “You have listened to fears, child. Come, let me breathe on you. Forget them” (PC 162). Susan’s moral imagination is simply not as developed as her siblings’: she is not as selflessly good and brave like Lucy and Peter, nor has she already gone through her trial of faith and courage as Edmund has. She needs help from Aslan to look beyond her fears at other possibilities that may be more morally right, and fortunately, Aslan freely gives her that aid in this moment. As David Downing says in *Into the Wardrobe: C. S. Lewis and the Narnia Chronicles*, “The crucible of character is not moral precepts but actual moral choices, situations where the right decision is not the easiest or the safest one” (91). Susan’s character as revealed in this episode is clearly deficient in this way: she chooses to walk the easiest or safest route rather than search for other alternatives that may ask her to take the harder road. We see this same attitude when she pleads to return to the safety of the wardrobe upon first entering Narnia, again when she votes against exploring the ruins at Cair Paravel, and even when she counsels her siblings against pursuing the White Stag at the end of *Wardrobe*. She and her siblings feel the same foreboding, but unlike Susan, her brothers and sister are not afraid to press forward along the hard road despite and even because of the unknown. She similarly waits for Lucy to take the initiative at the breaking of the Stone Table. “I feel afraid to turn round,” she says; it is Lucy who turns, pulling Susan around with her, Lucy who is more concerned for Aslan than she is for her own safety.

But the fact that Susan honestly confesses her refusal to believe and recognizes her own shame when face-to-face with Aslan indicates that she has the capacity to develop her moral imagination if she so chooses. As Peter Schakel says, “Central to this book’s development of this
theme is that belief leads to trust, and that trust not only endures the hard times but is shown to be trust only by enduring the hard times” (53-54). Within the narrative arc of all seven Narnia books, Susan endures the hard times until the very end, when she slips away. It is only with Aslan’s direct help that she becomes a “little brave[r],” only after she sees Aslan that she chooses to believe. Schakel continues, “In Lewis’s thinking, the old adage must be reversed: Believing is seeing. Those who believe are able to see; those who do not believe cannot see” (55). If Susan is to be redeemed and reclaim her title as a Queen in Narnia, she must learn to believe, as her siblings have done, without seeing.

**The Redemption of a Calormene, Or, How Susan Might Find Redemption**

Emeth the Calormene is another important character who believes without seeing, though he spends his life believing in the wrong source of wisdom and morality. He appears only briefly in *The Last Battle*, but his story is significant as we look at the path Susan has chosen to walk. Emeth has spent his life in the service of the false god Tash, but upon entering Aslan’s Country by accident, he discovers that the being he has been worshiping his whole life is not Tash, but Aslan himself. Emeth has a “great desire for wisdom and understanding” (*LB* 205), and once Aslan convinces the soldier that Aslan has accepted the Calormene’s offerings despite his lack of understanding, Emeth is filled with longing for the lion’s presence. “And since then, O Kings and Ladies,” he says, “I have been wandering to find him and my happiness is so great that it even weakens me like a wound” (*LB* 206).

In many ways, Emeth and Susan Pevensie are very alike. Emeth is born without the birthright, without the information he needs to fully exercise his moral imagination and come to the best decision. As a Calormene, he does not have the privilege that the Pevensies do of being quickly led to the truth as soon as he stumbles across evidence of a new belief system. However,
much like Prince Caspian (another character raised without knowledge of Old Narnia), once he discovers the truth about Aslan and Narnia, he chooses instantly to believe and never looks back. Susan is born in our world, and, like Emeth and Caspian, she is raised without knowledge of Narnia—her belief system has taught her that fauns, talking animals, and worlds within wardrobes are purely imaginative. But she also accepts the truth when confronted with evidence, however reluctant she is to enter Narnia in the first place. The difference is that we see Susan’s fall from grace; we do not see Emeth or Caspian revert to their original belief systems. However, Emeth is one hopeful example of a man who finds his way to Aslan’s Country in “another way,” much like Susan herself will have to. He exercises his belief in that which he cannot see, and this faith allows him to find and accept Aslan quickly when given the opportunity, much as Shasta does in *The Horse and His Boy*. As James F. Sennett notes, the difference in the way various characters make it to Aslan’s country is important in that it is not important. Aslan has the ability to receive various characters to himself no matter what door they enter, and as he tells the Pevensies in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, “There is a way into my country from all worlds” (269). “All” worlds includes our world, or the world in which Susan finds herself alone at the end of the series.

If the likes of a Calormene soldier can enter Aslan’s Country without the proper knowledge to even recognize the Lion when they are face to face, surely a wayward Queen of Narnia can enter as well. Like Emeth, she will have to set aside the path she has chosen for herself and again become the Queen of Narnia she has the potential to be. She will simply (or perhaps not so simply) have to find her own way.
Jim and Kay prestgard duke Emeth’s story mirrors Susan’s potential path, but others have walked still other paths more parallel to hers. To find concrete hope for Susan, we need look no farther than Susan’s younger brother, Edmund. If we return to Gayne Anacker’s classification of the main characters in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, we find Edmund at the top of the list of flawed characters who find redemption. I would argue that these characters are the easiest for readers to relate to. Readers might find it harder to connect emotionally to Peter or Lucy, characters that never go through a crisis of faith, than we do with characters who struggle with significant character weaknesses like Edmund, Susan, or Eustace. Jocelyn Chadwick maintains that readers tend to understand characters who feel alienated or who are struggling with identity. Characters unhappy with their lot in life (such as Edmund in the beginning of *Wardrobe*) are familiar to readers, and especially younger readers struggling with their own identity. Using characters that struggle with identity and morality makes it easier to “back into a novel” and allows readers to evaluate their own choices through these fictional characters (35-36). In this way, characters like Edmund and Susan are ideal vehicles in the search for moral imagination. Edmund starts the series in much the same place that Susan leaves it: in a state of rebellion. He is quickly ensnared by the White Witch and turns his back on his siblings—he remains in this rebellious state for a large portion of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and not until the end is he completely redeemed through Aslan’s sacrifice.

Edmund’s rebellion, however, does not begin in Narnia—the seeds are planted before he ever climbs through the wardrobe. He is grumpy, moody, and cruel to Lucy, teasing her incessantly about her invisible country in the wardrobe. As Peter eventually berates him, “It’s just spite. You’ve always liked being beastly to anyone smaller than yourself; we’ve seen that at school before now” (*Wardrobe* 49). Once Edmund meets the White Witch in Narnia, these
childish, cruel traits are only compounded as she plays on his weaknesses. As Deborah Higgens writes, the Turkish Delight the White Witch feeds Edmund is terribly addictive (156), and she knows it. “The Queen knew quite well . . . though Edmund did not, that this was enchanted Turkish Delight,” Lewis narrates, “and that anyone who once tasted it would want more and more of it, and would even, if they were allowed, go on eating it till they killed themselves” (LWW 39). Edmund is not an inherently bad person, but he allows himself to get caught up in self-indulgence—an addiction that drives a wedge between himself and his siblings and eventually between himself and Aslan. The White Witch knows that enslaving Edmund with the promise of power, revenge on an older brother Edmund feels mistreats him, and as much Turkish Delight has he can possibly eat will be enough to draw the young man away from everything he understands is good. Lewis’s commentary on temptation in The Screwtape Letters comes to mind: “It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man way from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed, the safest road to Hell is the gradual one” (220). Murder is no better than Turkish Delight in Edmund’s case—the Turkish Delight is a most important step on his gradual path to betrayal. It makes him sticky, red in the face, and rather ill, but he pursues it relentlessly despite his own hesitations. Lewis writes, “When he heard that the Lady he had made friends with was a dangerous witch he felt even more uncomfortable. But he still wanted to taste that Turkish Delight again more than he wanted anything else” (LWW 44). Edmund knows that he has chosen the wrong side, but he is in too deep at this point to turn back on his own without help.

But of course we know that Edmund does come back. His redemption comes at great cost, but Edmund accepts Aslan’s sacrifice and is ultimately redeemed and becomes King
Edmund the Just, to return at the end of *The Last Battle* to aid Narnia in the last hour. Lewis said of Edmund that he “is like Judas a traitor and a sneak. But unlike Judas he repents and is forgiven (as Judas no doubt would have been if he’d repented)” (*Collected Letters* 3:1158). If Lewis believed Edmund to be a Judas figure worthy of forgiveness with the proper atonement, surely Susan, whose betrayal is no worse than Edmund’s, can also be forgiven if she also desires to return to Aslan’s fold.

Susan’s betrayal of what she knows to be true may be similar to her little brother’s, but of course, her weakness is not Turkish Delight. Higgens says, “Along comes Edmund, another character type . . . giving in to those seemingly tasteful moments of pleasure” (156). Might we reword this to say, “Along comes Susan, another character type . . . giving in to these seemingly tasteful moments of invitations, nylons, and lipstick”? Susan has become ensnared by worldly pleasures just as Edmund has, and her “addiction” to parties and fashion is no more or less dangerous than Edmund’s addiction to Turkish Delight. Both addictions destroy their good standing with Aslan as well as with the rest of their family, and both have the potential to keep them from Aslan’s presence forever.

But if a Judas-like Edmund can come back to the truth after betraying his siblings and giving into weaknesses and temptations, we must believe that Susan can, too—and perhaps believing that Susan can find redemption gives us hope that our own course corrections might prove fruitful in our own lives. Of course, Edmund did have something that Susan might not, and here we find another point of contention with critics who insist that Lewis treats Susan unfairly: the Pevensie siblings remain stubbornly loyal to Edmund when he betrays their confidence, but within the text they seem fairly quick to abandon Susan when she loses her faith. Peter says of Susan in *The Last Battle*, “My sister Susan is no longer a friend of Narnia” (169). And after the
seven friends of Narnia have listed Susan’s faults (her love of parties, her desire to be older, her belief that Narnia is only a “funny game we used to play,” etc.), Peter dismisses the painful discussion of his sister with the words, “Well, don’t let’s talk about that now” (169). This might seem cruel, to dismiss Susan so abruptly, but as Lewis writes in *The Great Divorce*, “Pity . . . can be used the wrong way round. . . . Those who choose misery can hold joy up to ransom” (534). In this moment of transcendence, Peter is wise to move forward past a misery he cannot change and let joy transcend the pity he undoubtedly feels for his sister. Susan is not mentioned again. As Narnia dies and the Pevensies move on to Aslan’s Country, Susan ceases to exist within the narrative. Whether or not she remains in her siblings’ thoughts is up to the reader’s interpretation, but whether or not the Pevensies think of her does not change the fact that they are forced to leave her behind. At Aslan’s bidding, Peter closes and locks the door on the old Narnia, and in that moment he also symbolically closes the door on Susan. “So,” he says, “night falls on Narnia. What, Lucy! You’re not *crying*? With Aslan ahead, and all of us here?” (LB 198). They are *not*, of course, all present: Susan is absent, but the friends of Narnia recognize that Susan has made her choice and must find Aslan’s Country from her own world (a world that has not yet fallen into darkness).

Many fans and critics have deemed Susan’s abandonment to be a severe oversight on Lewis’s part. Contrasting Peter’s reaction to Susan with his reaction to Edmund’s lapse in moral judgment in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* shows some striking differences. When Edmund slips away to inform the White Witch of his siblings’ arrival in Narnia, Peter says, “All the same, we’ll still have to go and look for him. He is our brother after all, even if he is rather a little beast. And he’s only a kid” (92). Peter and Edmund do not have the closest of relationships in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*—Edmund resents his older brother’s authority, and
Peter disapproves of the way Edmund treats Lucy, with whom Peter has a strong bond. And yet despite their differences, Peter rallies his siblings to look for Edmund despite knowing that he has no doubt betrayed their position to the White Witch. When Edmund joins them in the Narnian camp after being rescued from the White Witch, he is instantly forgiven by his siblings. “Everyone wanted very hard to say something which would make it quite clear that they were all friends with him again,” Lewis writes (LWW 153). Edmund is accepted back into the fold instantly despite his betrayal of both Narnia and his family—indeed, once he has realized that he has allied himself with the wrong side and wished to redeem himself, he is both rescued and defended from the White Witch by the very creatures he once pit himself against. Once he realizes he has been in the wrong and makes proper restitution, his redemption is instant and complete—all he has to do is reassess his moral system and come back to the fold.

Edmund’s and Susan’s choices are remarkably similar—both are redeemable people who choose to exercise their moral imagination in pursuit of worldly pleasures rather than more eternal, “real” happiness and success. However, when it comes to Edmund, the Pevensies (and Aslan) refuse to give up on him. They seek him out and defend him without question against the White Witch who would claim him for her own; Aslan even sacrifices himself to pay a debt that Edmund cannot. When it comes to Susan’s betrayal, however, she is left behind at the end of all things without even a final word from Aslan or her siblings. Fortunately, we know that our world has not yet ended, so even if her siblings have been forced to continue on without her, Susan still has time in her own world to come to Aslan’s Country in another way.

The one hint we get that the Pevensies have not quite given up on their sister is the fact that they have done their best to bring her back to Narnia up to this point in the narrative. Clearly, Susan’s family have been attempting to bring her back to the fold behind the scenes;
even Eustace, the Pevensies’ cousin, has been determined to bring Susan back to remembrance, though he never experienced Narnia with his older cousin. Eustace tells Tirian, “Whenever you’ve tried to get her to come and talk about Narnia or do anything about Narnia, she says, ‘What wonderful memories you have!’” (*LB* 169). We are not told if Susan’s loss of belief was a gradual or instantaneous one, but clearly, her siblings, cousins, and even Jill Pole and Polly have done their best to keep Narnia alive for Susan. Again, we do not know quite how long Susan is absent from Narnia or how vehemently her siblings try to bring her back to remembrance, but Peter speaks “gravely” of his sister, and Eustace’s comment certainly makes it sound as if the battle for Susan’s belief was a long, hard one. In the end, however, over the course of the months or years that she is absent from Narnia, nothing Susan’s family can do can bring her back to Narnia. Only her own choices can do that.

So the question, here at the end of Susan’s story, is not necessarily if Susan can be redeemed, but if she will be. Susan, just like Edmund, Eustace, and all of the other characters who choose to turn to Aslan, can indeed be redeemed and make it to Aslan’s country in the end. Whether or not she will abandon the wrong road she has set herself upon and set her sights on Narnia again is another matter. But here, too, there is hope. Narnia is a fairy-tale world, after all, and many scholars have argued that *The Chronicles of Narnia* ought to be read as a fairy tale. Lewis himself thought them to be fairy tales—that was the “ideal form,” he said, that seemed to fit best what he had to say (“Sometimes Fairy Stories” 47). And if we believe that *Chronicles* are indeed a fairy tale, then on a basic storytelling level, Susan is not likely to remain in exile forever. Susan’s story might slot best under Ruth Bottigheimer’s second classification of fairy tale—that of restoration tales. Restoration fairy tales are generally longer and more complex, Bottigheimer says, and both begin and end with royalty (as opposed to “rise” fairy tales that end
with a poor hero who though magic or marriage becomes royalty in the end) (213). One could argue that since the Pevensies were prophesied from the beginning to become Queens and Kings of Narnia (and once a Queen or King of Narnia, always a Queen or King) that the story of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is simply the story of the children’s restoration to their throne. Another more viable interpretation may be that the children are simply restored to their birthrights (in title as well as physical and mental ability: in *Prince Caspian* we see the children’s advanced abilities, such as Susan’s marksmanship and Edmund’s fencing, slowly restored as the “air of Narnia” works on them [109]) every subsequent time they return to Narnia and become again Kings and Queens. Susan may not be restored to her throne within the narrative, but perhaps the demands of the fairy tale genre are enough to suggest that such a restoration is in her future. Lewis’s account of his own childhood gives this restoration theory additional support. He says, “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” (“Three Ways” 34). This is precisely what Susan needs: to put away her fear of being “childish” with the “funny games we used to play as children” and become again as a child in her desire to believe.

But how to eliminate this fear? As uncomfortable and frightening as it can sometimes be, pain can turn us back to the comfort of past beliefs, and we can hope that it might do so for Susan. As Joshua Rogers, a Christian writer and Narnia fan, notes, “Susan’s inevitably tragic life after the train wreck now gives a new sense of hope. It reminded me that actually, some of Aslan’s best work has yet to be accomplished on this side of heaven, and one of his most effective agents is pain.” As Lewis himself puts it in *The Problem of Pain*, “Pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our
pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world” (604). We might not hear any more from Susan after Peter closes the door on his sister’s story in *The Last Battle*, but we can only imagine the kind of pain she must have to deal with after losing her cousin, siblings, and parents in a single tragic train accident that catapults her family to paradise and leaves her stranded in our world. If Lewis abides by his own philosophy, the pain a young woman feels at losing her entire family in a single instant may be enough to “rouse” her, enough to “be attended to,” and perhaps enough to drive her back into Aslan’s embrace after all. Readers know enough of their own pain to understand, sympathize, and even be indignant for Susan’s severe losses, but in the end, they might also recognize the truth of Lewis’s philosophy on pain through characters such as Susan, Eustace, and Edmund. Just as Aslan, of necessity, puts Eustace through terrible pain to strip him of the dragon skin and restore him to his human self, Susan must be “stripped” of the material wealth and beauty she so prizes with a reminder of what really matters: her family, her faith, and her power to believe in something beyond what she perceives as the “real world.”

Ultimately, Susan’s fate is left unresolved. But those fans and critics who choose to condemn Lewis for his sexist treatment of Susan miss the mark. Susan’s love of invitations, parties, and dressing up is not a commentary on her sexuality, feminism, or emergence from adolescence. Rather, it is a sad commentary on what happens to a human being who decides that worldly pursuits or pleasures are higher on the priority list than what might be best for them as an individual or for society as a whole. The worldly goods represent a poor use of moral imagination and a loss of belief, not a loss of innocence or discovery of inappropriate sexuality per se; Susan’s moral imagination, like that of many readers who might resonate with her story, is simply underdeveloped. But despite the fact that she does not get a redemptive arc within the narrative, the books are filled with characters who have made similar poor choices and been
redeemed in the end. Hope for Susan is not lost despite her seeming lack of interest in redemption. Lewis himself wrote in a hope-filled letter to a young fan in 1950 that “the books don’t tell us what happened to Susan . . . but there is plenty of time for her to mend, and perhaps she will get to Aslan’s country in the end” (Collected Letters 3:826). This is the same letter in which Lewis offers the possibility of Susan finding “her own way.” Her own way might be a long, difficult one, but Lewis has given us the evidence we need to see that, if Susan chooses to return to belief, Aslan will be waiting to welcome her back. Likewise, he has given readers the tools to see that whatever version of Aslan they might believe in, they, like Susan, might find redemption in their own way. After all, he sacrifices his own life for Edmund. He cleanses Eustace from his dragon skin. He seeks out Emeth the Calormene despite Emeth’s lack of understanding. He tenderly reaches out to the apostate dwarfs at Lucy’s tearful request. And when Susan approaches him after refusing to see him in Prince Caspian, he breathes gently on her and gives her strength.

At another key point in Prince Caspian, as she and her siblings are slowly being roused to the reality of their return to Narnia, Susan asks dreamily, “How could I forget?” (14). Returning to Narnia after an extended absence brings back her memories and eases her back into her role as Queen. If this same kind of restoration is to happen after her written story ends in The Last Battle, Susan needs to develop her moral imagination and “return” to Narnia in her own mind and heart. Like her siblings who have learned to hold onto belief, Susan must choose to put belief in the seemingly impossible above other more “real” sensibilities. Only when she chooses to exercise her moral imagination will she be able to turn again to that which seems beyond the realm of possibility and reclaim her status as a Queen of Narnia. J. K. Rowling gives us this definition of imagination in her Harvard Commencement speech to the class of 2008:
“Imagination is not only the uniquely human capacity to envision that which is not. . . . [I]n its arguably most transformative and revelatory capacity, it is the power that enables us to empathize with humans whose experiences we have never shared.”

This “transformative and revelatory capacity” is precisely what Susan needs. It is also precisely what we as readers need. Lewis has, in Susan’s character, given us a glimpse into experiences we will never share and yet cannot help but relate to and, as Lewis must have hoped, learn from. Critics and fans might criticize Lewis for what they assume is his mistreatment of the feminine. But it is clear from the favorable way he treats Lucy, Ramandu’s daughter, Aravis, Jill, and other strong female characters who struggle through both internal and external difficulties that he is not condemn Susan because she is a weak, silly, vain woman. Rather, Lewis gives her a variety of positive qualities such as sensibility, gentleness, and tenderness that balance the other Pevensies’ impetuous, strong-willed temperaments. He also shows us Aslan’s affection for her despite her weak moral imagination and provides several accounts of other characters who likewise get distracted by worldly pleasures but return to grace and are redeemed to offer hope that Susan’s story might end in a similar way. Evidence such as this indicates that Lewis might have written her the ambiguous, difficult pseudo-conclusion he did precisely because he does like her and because he, like his readers, hopes for her eventual redemption.

Here we may find Lewis’s real purpose for leaving Susan behind at the end of the series. His is not a condemnation of a beloved character, but a voice of warning and of hope for readers he hopes might learn to exercise their own moral imagination after watching Susan slip away from hers. And in the end, hope for Susan’s redemption (and perhaps hope for our own) is not, after all is said and done, dependent solely upon her turning away from superficial, worldly pursuits, nor is it destroyed by a sexist author with a vendetta against the feminine. Susan’s hope
lies firmly in her ability to open herself up to other ways of finding truth and develop her belief in the impossible.
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