

Lessons of Literature in C.S. Lewis's The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe and Eva Ibbotson's Which Witch?

"It is certainly true that many children's stories are narratives of journey, rites of passage, or entry and return..." (After Alice, pg. 11).

There are many genres of literature available for exploration by children. Once such genre experiencing vast popularity in recent years is fantasy. Children appear to be inexplicably pulled to the perusal of worlds far different from the known. These stories interest children and encourage them to read, yet valuable life lessons are also found hidden within the pages of these stories of fantasy.

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis and Which Witch? by Eva Ibbotson are children's fantasy novels that contain varying lessons. The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe is a very positive book, reinforcing behavioral ideals. To see the opposite end of the spectrum on lessons taught in literature, Which Witch? contains some negative lessons. I focus on these books because they are read at critical ages when children are possible most influenced by the content of what they read, (American Library Association). I read The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe in my second grade classroom with my teacher and classmates and that was my first experience discussing the depths of the story. Which Witch? I read as an adult and was able to analyze specifically what it contains and to think carefully about how I may have viewed it as a child.

C.S. Lewis's The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe is a story of fantasy that reinforces these positive lessons. In this story the characters (four children, siblings) are transported from their modern day England, through a wardrobe into a land called Narnia. Within this fantasy land the children are faced with multiple events that require them to employ all of the actions that they have been taught are characteristics of good people. This constant choice between good and bad and the characters internal struggles mirror (in a very interesting way) the everyday decisions that children have to make and gently reveal the correct direction to be taken. (Lewis).

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe is set in England during the second world war. The four children, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy have been sent away to the country in order to be safe from the bombings and other dangers of the large cities (Lewis, 3). C.S. Lewis uses this circumstance as a way to show how the siblings rely upon one another to manage their time away from home and their parents. C.S. Lewis may have included this specifically to reflect the closeness of the children that stayed at his home during World War II, or to emphasize to them such important connections, (Harper Children's). The children's dependence upon each other suggests how brothers and sisters should regard each other, and stresses the importance of time spent together.

One very specific occurrence in this story reveals an important social ideal. Lucy, the youngest child, upon her first visit to Narnia meets Mr. Tumnus, a faun. Mr. Tumnus is described:

“From the waist upward he was like a man, but his legs were shaped like a goats (the hair on them was glossy black) and instead of feet he had goats hoofs. He also had a tail...his skin was rather reddish too. He had a strange but pleasant little face, with a short pointed beard and curly hair, and out of the hair there stuck two horns, one on each side of his forehead.” (Lewis, pg. 10).

Lucy takes an immediate liking to Mr. Tumnus and rather than focusing too harshly on his differences, automatically accepts them as wonderful distinguishing characteristics of her new friend (Lewis). Lucy and Mr. Tumnus provide an example to children (as well as adults) of acceptance of all people for who they are.

The never-ending choice between good and bad actions and character are well demonstrated by this fantasy story. The two characters representing the differing sides of the struggle are Aslan and the White Witch. Aslan is a lion with a kind heart and calm yet powerful nature. The White Witch is represented as very cold (as evidenced in part by the constant winter she has inflicted upon the land of Narnia) and unforgiving. The two are in disagreement over their separate personalities and eventually they come to a point in which a decision must be made. The White Witch has Edmund in her possession and agrees to trade his life for that of Aslan's. Aslan's decision to be good of character reward him by his returning to life after the White Witch has taken it. The ensuing battle is won by Aslan, the White Witch losing her life and therefore demonstrating to the reader that being good is well rewarded and being bad is deservedly punished. (Lewis).

A lesson that most children are given with emphasis is to be wary of strangers. In The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe Edmund is faced with a similar situation. Edmund's first visit to Narnia leads him to a woman who describes herself as the “Queen of Narnia” (Lewis, pg. 33). Edmund at first is apprehensive about the encounter but the queen easily convinces him of her importance and how helpful he could be to her by using Turkish Delight as a persuasive mechanism as seen on page 38:

“Because if you did come again-bringing them with you of course- I'd be able to give you some more Turkish Delight. I can't do it now, the magic will only work once. In my own house it would be another matter,” (Lewis, 38).

To me this seems very reminiscent of the idea that nothing good can come from taking candy from strangers (also as seen in the fairy tale Hansel and Gretel by the Brothers Grimm) and is very indicative of a lesson soon to be learned. Edmund soon learns his lesson after he has agreed to bring his siblings to the White Witch, and is not rewarded with what he covets most, more Turkish Delight. Returning to his senses, Edmund realizes that the queen was obviously not acting in the interests of anyone but herself and rethinks his opinion. (Lewis) Which Witch? by Eva Ibbotson is a story about a wizard, Arriman the Awful, who possesses very dark magical powers. Arriman decides that he needs

to find a witch to marry with magic as dark as his own to produce a child with even darker, mightier magic. A contest is arranged to find the ideal witch, the witches having to prove their magical skills against one another. (Ibbotson)

Which Witch? places and emphasis on all things dark, and in some cases the darkness may be construed as amusing if viewed incorrectly. The following passage demonstrates the response of a character, Madame Olympia, to the magic she performs, the cannibalism of one thousand rats.

“And then one...A single, huge rat sitting on its torn haunches in the middle of the floor, blood dripping from a wound in his side, and the still twitching tail of his neighbor vanishing down his gullet.

Even then it was not quite done. For now this last rat was seized with the most terrible madness of all, and, gasping, the onlookers saw it begin, slowly and relentlessly, to *eat itself*.

Madame Olympia waited until the dripping jaws hung in the air. Then she flicked her whip, the jaws vanished-and she turned to the judges and bowed.

“The Symphony of Death is completed,” said Madame Olympia. And laughed...” (Ibbotson, 160).

Passages such as these, while possibly quite frightening, may also have the effect of desensitizing children to instances of violence or even death.

This novel also makes note of the differences of certain characters and shows others being left out of certain circles due to these differences. The story seems to split in two ways on this, one way leads the reader to believe that judging or avoiding others is acceptable, and the second shows that a person can be hurt by this, yet no real lesson against such discrimination is actually found within the pages of the book. This dislike is eventually only resolved when the object of such dislike and disappointment (Belladonna, a good witch) marries Arriman and the dark witches accept her because of her powerful husband, “However much they had sneered at Belladonna, now that she was Mrs. Canker and Wizardess of the North, they were only too ready to be friendly,” (Ibbotson, 223).

Life lessons can be found in various children’s books. These lessons may be good and very influential, or they may be less than ideal, but in the end what does or does not influence one child may not influence another. What a child gets out of a book is all in how they approach it.

“Good books have no hallmark-and if they had one, children would probably disregard it,” (After Alice, 11).

Works Cited

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