FEMINIST VIEW OF QUEEN SUSAN THE GENTLE

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***Introduction*:**

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.

The Chronicles of Narnia have always been labelled as literature for children, despite the fact that many adults read it to this day. Lewis started the series by wanting to write a book for younger audiences. "When C. S. Lewis began writing what eventually turned into *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, however, he had no idea he was working on a series. He simply wanted to write a book with talking animals in it, of the kind he had loved as a child". The simplicity of the plot is perhaps one of the main features that distinguish his work of fiction for adults and for children. The presence of animals and their ability to talk makes the kids understand the story without the necessity of explaining their actions any further. Even Aslan, the God of the story, has the appearance of a Lion and is physically present in the story. The emphasis is given on the simplicity of his actions. He is very open about religious matters and explains them fully without the need of analyzing or seeking for their meaning.

The books tell the story of kids from England who get to a strange place where one can enter any world by jumping into a puddle. They pick a dark, empty one and witness the creation of life upon it by an enormous lion called Aslan (*The Magician's Nephew).* The following books map the history of the world. One of the books though, *The Horse and His Boy*, has a slightly different main character. It is the only book that is not set in Narnia. The story happens in a neighbouring country of Calormen during the reign of the Pevensie siblings in Narnia. The description is transmitted by the children who enter Narnia. It is not always the same group, the characters change, but they always have a connection to one another. In the real world (England) these figures hold close together, share and treasure the secret existence of Narnia.

The last one depicts the destruction of the world and the selection of the humans and animals worthy entering heaven, known as Aslan's country *(The Last Battle).*

However, there is the case of Susan Pevensie, the oldest girl from the Pevensie children and the second oldest altogether. Susan Pevensie is the oldest girl in the family and tends to take care of her siblings. She holds back on most occasions and does not seek for adventure. She is also the only one to forget Narnia and label their time there as a game they used to play when they were young. Upon entering Narnia together, the kids find out that the Faun was kidnapped by the Witch. Susan's first reaction is that "it doesn't seem particularly safe here and it looks as if it won't be much fun either. And it's getting colder every minute, and we've brought nothing to eat. What about just going home?" Sometimes she comes out as bitter and complaining, but she is wise and represents a mother figure for the other kids.

Some fans of the book argue that Susan was on the train that crashed as well. Unlike the other children, their parents and friends, she did not enter Heaven and, logically derived, ended up in Hell. Another, much more positive, outlook is that because she hardly kept in touch with her other siblings, she did not join them on the train ride. Therefore, she lost all her siblings and parents in one day. That may have triggered some remorse in her and made her return back to God. As an adult, Susan stopped believing in Narnia and Aslan, which could be perceived as losing her faith to God. Lewis made this matter easier, so children could read it in a similar manner,

but would not understand these hinted elements. Her case is discussed only once in the last book *The Last Battle* as follows:

'Has not your Majesty two sisters? Where is Queen Susan?' 'My sister Susan' answered Peter shortly and gravely, 'is no longer a friend of Narnia.' . . . 'and whenever you've tried and to get her to come and talk about Narnia or do anything about Narnia, she says 'What wonderful memories you have! Fancy your still thinking about all those funny games we used to play when we were children.' . . . 'She's interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipstick and invitations.'

It is interesting that Susan apparently forgot the time she has spent in Narnia, which with the regards to the time change was several years. She may be deliberately choosing to avoid the topic.

Heaven in a Christian belief has always served as a reward and some kind of motivation for people. The essential thought is that "good people go to heaven as a deserved reward for a virtuous life." (*Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy)* Heaven and the reward of the pleasant and worry-less afterlife are widely emphasized in the books. Rather than Heaven it is called 'Aslan's country', but it has exactly the same attributes as Heaven has. Lewis makes a difference between our physical world and Heaven, claiming that there is no 'Heaven on Earth'. In *The Last Battle*, Digory, Polly, Peter, Edmund and Lucy experience a railway accident and suddenly find themselves in "a new country . . . but that was not the real Narnia. The old Narnia had a beginning and an end. It was but a shadow, a copy of the real Narnia. In the same way, Digory says, our world is only a shadow or a copy of something in the real world." It is the afterlife for the good, honest people and the talking beasts of Narnia. By the end of *The Last Battle,* when the world is being destroyed, Aslan makes a selection of the creatures who receive the right to enter 'his country'.

The final judgement of one's actions and whether the person has the right to enter Heaven is a part of Christian belief. The circle of people who visited Narnia keeps close together they were not judged in such opened manner. However, their faithfulness to Aslan and Narnia and longing to get back there certainly played a major part or even substituted their recognition.

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. Susan is tender-hearted, 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". Susan's femininity, Fry says, is ultimately why she is excluded from Lewis's version of heaven.

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".

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 favour

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.

***Conclusion*:**

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.