



The Voyage of the Dawn Treader

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This article originally appeared in the Winter 2010 issue of *Knowing & Doing*.

C.S. Lewis's Narnia Chronicles has been a best-seller in the category of children's stories, having sold 120 million copies in 47 languages since the first book of the series appeared in 1947. The seven books are adventures in the magical land of Narnia. In his highly acclaimed work, *The Narnian*, Alan Jacobs argues that every major theme Lewis addresses in his literary works and apologetics is reflected in the Narnia Chronicles. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (VDT), the third in the series, is coming to the screen in December. The first film, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (LWW), is number 36 in the list of best-grossing movies. Prince Caspian (PC) did not do as well, but there is hope that all seven books in the series will be seen in the theaters.

In VDT Edmund and Lucy return to Narnia with their cousin, Eustace, onboard a ship called the *Dawn Treader*, where they meet King Caspian. Peter and Susan, principal characters in LWW and PC, do not return to Narnia in the novel. However, they do make a cameo appearance in the film. The reason for the voyage is to find seven lost lords from Narnia who have not returned from a voyage. They also hope by sailing to the east, to come to the end of the world. Edmund and Lucy have many adventures on the seas and on islands they discover. Let's consider the characters, a plot summary, and Aslan's role in the novel, before focusing on specific thematic temptations presented in the unfolding story.

Characters

Lewis says in a letter (March 5, 1961) that the main focus of VDT is "the spiritual life," especially in Reepicheep (the mouse).¹ Reepicheep, as we will see, has a passionate longing for the "Utter East"—for the country of Aslan the lion, as it turns out. As Christ

is to our world, so is Aslan to Narnia. Peter Schakel maintains that the central themes of VDT are "longing and learning."² Reepicheep and Caspian exemplify the former theme. All the characters learn significant lessons during the voyage. In some ways it is a "semester at sea." Caspian, Lucy, Reepicheep, Edmund, and Eustace all are confronted by temptations they have to overcome.

Eustace is a new character. In many ways his transformation is the centerpiece of the book. The book's first line is "There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it."³ Eustace acts from the beginning as a spoiled, selfish brat. Edmund calls him a "record stinker."⁴ This is in part due to overly permissive parents, the wrong kind of schooling, and a failure to read books that might have helped him. In the end, though, Eustace chooses to be a bully, dominating others—putting himself at the center.



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Plot Summary

VDT has a different list of characters (from LWW and PC), because Peter has gone for the summer to study with Professor Kirke, who has become poor and has only one guest room. Thus the younger Edmund and Lucy cannot stay with him. Susan has gone to America with their parents, who don't have enough money to take the others also. Thus Lucy and Edmund are sent to stay at Eustace's house in Cambridge.

Edmund, Lucy, and Eustace are drawn into Narnia through looking at a mysterious painting hanging on the guest room wall that Lucy and Edmund recognize

as a Narnian ship. The three children suddenly find themselves in the ocean near the ship and are brought onto the *Dawn Treader* where Caspian greets Edmund and Lucy warmly as King Edmund and Queen Lucy of Narnia. (They had ruled for many years in Narnia in LWW.) Only three years have passed (in Narnian time) since the victory in *Prince Caspian* (the second film and book in the series). Caspian is now the king and has set out on a quest to find seven lost lords, who had been sent by King Miraz on a trip, supposedly to explore the lands to the east. The lords know that they have in effect been banished; they would fear for their lives if they were to return to Narnia. Caspian wants to find them and tell them it is all right to come home.

This book is unique in that none of the events in the story happen in Narnia. Some have compared the story to beads on a string—episodic events tied together with a single thread (to find the seven lords). Some have compared the book to the *Odyssey*, finding numerous adventures not only at sea but at various islands.

They eventually find the lost lords or some evidence about what happened to them. Lord Bern is found at the Lone Islands; evidence of Lord Octesian at Dragon Island (perhaps eaten by a dragon or become one); Lord Restimar at Deathwater Island (he fell into water that turned him into gold); Lord Rhoop at Dark Island; the remaining three in an enchanted sleep at the island of the star, Ramandu. In order to awaken the last three lords from their sleep, they must sail to the East and leave one of their party behind. Reepicheep volunteers for this task and is last seen paddling up a waterfall in his coracle. Though he is never seen again, the text indicates that he reached Aslan's country. In the end, Edmund, Lucy, and Eustace meet Aslan at the "End of the World." Aslan tells Lucy and Edmund that they will not return to Narnia; they are too old. Lucy weeps because "how can we live, never meeting you?" (p. 247). Aslan tells them that he is there in England too; Aslan says, "But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This is the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there."⁵ Lewis may have originally intended to end the series with this book, and if so, this would have been a fitting end of the stories.

Aslan

Aslan is not seen very often in VDT. In fact, Paul Ford says, "Only in *The Last Battle* is Aslan less on the scene than in *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*."⁶ The characters are left to their own devices until they have a special need that may be beyond their own strength to

endure—although Aslan is always in the background. He says, "I have been here all the time."⁷ He appears in the undragoning of Eustace at Dragon Island. He appears again at Deathwater Island when Edmund and Caspian are about to engage in a swordfight. In this case, he doesn't speak, but they are warned to leave this island before they are turned to gold. Aslan appears as an albatross, leading them along a shaft of light out of the darkness of Dark Island where dreams come true (not daydreams but dreams). Aslan appears to Lucy to help her overcome the temptations of "The Magician's Book." He appears to Caspian in his cabin, telling him not to go with Reepicheep to the end of the world as he had desired. Finally, Aslan appears to Eustace, Lucy, and Edmund as a lamb cooking a breakfast of fish on an island at the end of the world. The lamb turns into a lion (see Revelation 5). Although Aslan is always there, he only intervenes when necessary.

Thematic Temptations

There are many different themes that we could pursue in VDT. Every chapter has profitable insights. Having said that, in one short article I want to focus on three main temptations faced by the different characters: The temptation to penultimate, to pride, and to progress.

Penultimate

The temptation to the penultimate is the propensity to put second things (the penultimate) first (the ultimate). C.S. Lewis says in one of his letters: "Put first things first and we get second things thrown in."⁸ In *Letters to Malcolm*, Lewis says, "Our deepest concern should be for first things and our next deepest for second things, and so on down to zero, to a total absence of concern for the things that are not really good, nor means to good at all."⁹ Reepicheep, the mouse, has a prophecy spoken over him in the cradle (by a dryad):

*Where sky and water meet,
Where the waters grow sweet,
Doubt not, Reepicheep,
To find all you seek,
There is the Utter East.*¹⁰

These words captivated the daring mouse. He doesn't find out their meaning until the very end. He has been focused on second things rather than first things. He is willing to duel with his sword at the drop of a hat (with Eustace or the Sea People). He holds his slighted honor in high regard. He is willing to follow any adventure even though it may be foolhardy.

He challenges the crew to go into the darkness of Dark Island. (Although they do find Lord Rhoop there, they are only able to find their way out of the darkness with Aslan's help.)

In the end of the story, though Reepicheep finds the place where the sky and water meet (at the end of the world), where the waters grow sweet (fresh, life-giving water rather than salt water), Reepicheep is willing to paddle into the unknown in order to seek the "Utter East" (Aslan's country). Reepicheep throws away his precious sword and follows his previously stated plan:

While I can, I sail east in the Dawn Treader. When she fails me, I paddle east in my coracle. When she sinks, I shall swim east with my four paws. And when I can swim no longer, if I have not reached Aslan's country, or shot over the edge of the world in some vast cataract, I shall sink with my nose to the sunrise.¹¹

Reepicheep forsakes all other adventures for the greatest adventure. He forsakes second things for first things. Aslan describes this ultimate state of immortality in Aslan's country at the end of *The Last Battle* as the

beginning of the real story. . . . all their adventures in Narnia have only been the cover and title page; now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever, in which every chapter is better than the one before.¹²

Some have said that this concern for immortality (for the "Utter East") makes people so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good. Lewis says, on the contrary, that "If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. . . . Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in'; aim at earth and you will get neither."¹³ It is only by focusing on the ultimate that we can keep in perspective the penultimate. We can only truly enjoy second things when we put first things first. as Reepicheep discovers.

Pride

Eustace, as we have seen, was a proud, selfish, conceited boy. He admits it in the next book, "Gosh, what a little tick I was."¹⁴ Eustace needs to be saved from his self-centered life so that he can save others. The scene where Eustace is saved from himself (undragoned) is called by Michael Ward the "microcosm of the whole novel."¹⁵ Eustace (on Dragon Island) sneaks away from the crew in order to avoid work and take a nap. He

comes on an old dragon who is dying and takes refuge in the dragon's cave because of a downpour. He fell asleep on a bed of crowns, coins, rings, bracelets, diamonds, gems, and gold ingots. He turns into a dragon while he takes his nap: "Sleeping on a dragon's hoard with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart, he has become a dragon himself."¹⁶

When Eustace awoke and discovered that he had become a dragon, he at first thought of how he could get even with Caspian and Edmund, but he immediately realized that he didn't want to. Later, as he was lying awake, wondering in his loneliness how he could deal with his dilemma, he saw a lion and followed it to a well. The lion told him to undress (Eustace didn't have any clothes on). Eustace thought that perhaps, like a snake, he could peel off his outer layer of skin and get to a deeper layer. After trying this three times, he realized that it was a failure; he was still a dragon. Then Aslan said, "Let me undress you." The lion's claws were painful: "The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt." The effect was that he was undragoned. Note that he only tells this part of the story to Edmund, perhaps because only he would fully understand. Edmund responds (after Eustace's apology for how he acted), "Between ourselves, you haven't been as bad as I was on my first trip to Narnia. You were only an ass, but I was a traitor."¹⁷

C.S. Lewis understood the layers of pride that were present in his own life (and ours). He wrote in a letter,

And, will you believe it, one out of every three is a thought of self-admiration. . . . I pretend I am carefully thinking out what to say to the next pupil (for his good, of course) and then suddenly realize I am really thinking how frightfully clever I'm going to be and how he will admire me. . . . And then when you force yourself to stop it, you admire yourself for doing that. It's like fighting the hydra.¹⁸

In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis compares this process to removing armor or like a snowman beginning to melt.¹⁹ We all have layers of pride that take more than self-examination and moral reform to address. We, like Eustace, need a deeper cure.

Progress

We all want progress, don't we? But what kind of progress? In VDT, King Caspian encounters Gumpas, the governor of the Lone Islands. Gumpas tells Caspian that the slave trade practiced in his domain is "an essential part of the development of the island."

Caspian objects to the practice. Gumpas counters the objection by claiming that all the economic indicators prove his case, and he has statistics to back it up.

With due respect Caspian counters:

"I believe I understand the slave trade from within quite as well as your Sufficiency. And I do not see that it brings into the islands meat or bread or . . . anything else worth having. But whether it does or not, it must be stopped."

"But that would be putting the clock back," gasped the Governor. "Have you no idea of progress, of development?"

"I have seen them both in an egg," said Caspian. "We call it Going bad in Narnia. This trade must stop."²⁰

As Caspian indicates, not all progress is good. Some new developments must be resisted. G.K. Chesterton says, "Real development is not leaving things behind, as on a road, but drawing life from them, as from a root."²¹ Sometimes it's good to put a clock back, when it is telling the wrong time. If you are on the wrong road, the sooner you go back to the right road, the more progress you make. The one who turns back soonest is the "most progressive." Lewis says about his culture, "We are on the wrong road. And if this is so we must go back. Going back is the quickest way on."²²

Challenge

Enjoy watching the *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* this December. Lewis wanted the story to communicate the message. However, these insights may be helpful in talking to your family and friends. You can also look for an opportunity to talk about these ideas with nonbelievers. This film provides a point of contact to talk about C.S. Lewis in general or about the themes in VDT in particular.

Notes

1. C.S. Lewis, *Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis: Narnia*, Cambridge, and Joy 1950–1963, vol. 3, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), p. 1245.
2. Peter Schakel, *The Way into Narnia: A Reader's Guide* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 60.
3. C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952; repr. New York: Harper Collins, 1980), p. 3.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
6. Paul Ford, *Companion to Narnia*, rev. ed. (New York: St. Mar-

tin's Press, 1993), p. 66.

7. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, p. 159.
8. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, vol. 3, p. 111.
9. C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm; Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harvest, 1992), p. 22.
10. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, p. 21.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
12. C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (1956; repr. New York: Harper Collins, 1981), p. 228.
13. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr. New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 87.
14. C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (1953; repr. New York: Harper Trophy, 1994), p. 5.
15. Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 108.
16. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, p. 91.
17. *Ibid.*, 109.
18. C.S. Lewis, *The Letters of C.S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Collier, 1986), p. 309.
19. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harvest, 1955), p. 225.
20. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, pp. 61–62.
21. G.K. Chesterton, *As I Was Saying: A Chesterton Reader*, ed. Robert Knille (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 267.
22. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 36–37.

The Voyage of the Dawn Treader (produced by Walden Media, distributed by 20th Century Fox, and directed by Michael Apted) opens in the United States on December 10, 2010.

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