

REASON FOR OUR HOPE: THE ROLE OF FAIRY STORIES IN CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS

Nicole Howe on Why Fairy Stories Matter

One of the objectives of Christian apologetics is to heed Peter's instruction to "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."¹ Much attention is often placed on the word "reason," bringing to mind ideas of philosophical arguments, logical explanations, and scientific claims. Thus, we might walk away from Peter's instruction assuming our primary duty is to build a case for the existence of Christ based on factual evidence alone. After all, the word "apologetics" comes from the word "apologia," which means "defense." This word

¹ 1 Pet 3:15

easily stirs up images of a courtroom and the stern face of a judge whose primary role is to deliver a verdict based on a presentation of facts.

However, in our effort to build a case for Christianity, we should not forget that what we are trying to communicate – what is really on trial here – is our *hope*. And the hope that is in each one of us involves an Event so enormous and mysterious it can scarcely be put into words. Communicating the historical evidence for the resurrection of Christ is important, but equally important is communicating why this evidence matters. The case we are making in this courtroom involves the greatest story ever told – a story of a God who lived as one of us, died as one of us, and rose again to make us like Himself. It is a story of courage, heroism, suffering, deliverance, death, resurrection, and final victory – a “true myth,”² as Lewis called it. We have much to learn from great thinkers such as Lewis, MacDonald, Chesterton, and Tolkien who knew how to harness the power of story in order to effectively communicate the truth, goodness, and beauty of the Christian faith. Bare facts are not enough; we must give these facts meaning.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 977.

Enter literary apologetics – the branch of apologetics that utilizes the power of story to communicate the Christian faith. The entire concept of literary apologetics can be a stumbling block for some, as the word itself can seem a bit oxymoronic. While the word “literary” points to the realm of the imagination, the word “apologetics” points to the realm of reason and evidence. This can trip us up, because in our post-Enlightenment era, we have (often subconsciously) bought into the idea that reason and imagination are two separate faculties that oppose one another. In his essay, “The Imagination: Its Function and its Culture,” George MacDonald describes the prevailing opinion that a high regard for the imagination supposedly results in a rejection of facts and what can be known for the acceptance of fancies and mere inventions.³ This false dichotomy has been the source of many ills, perhaps none as apparent as the assumed rift between science and religion. Too often, we regard the imagination as “the one faculty before all others to be suppressed,”⁴ and even well-meaning Christians have fallen into this trap. MacDonald

³. George MacDonald, *The Imagination: Its Function and its Culture*, accessed Sept. 9, 2016, http://www.george-macdonald.com/etexts/the_imagination.html.

⁴ Ibid.

opposes this idea, claiming that the imagination is itself an important region for discovery.⁵ Therefore, if we hope to properly understand the value of literary apologetics, we must first settle the issue on the value of the imagination and how it relates to reason.

The power of the imagination to absorb information is well demonstrated by the fact that many Christians have accepted the false dichotomy between reason and imagination without actually knowing from whence it came. As MacDonald asserts, “it is not the things we see the most clearly that influence us the most powerfully.”⁶ The imagination is not simply a faculty existing for the purpose of creating mere fancies or imaginary worlds, it is the foundation in which we begin our quest for reality and truth. It “gives form to thought,”⁷ MacDonald says. Many times the influence of the imagination is hidden and unnoticed, but whether or not we recognize its power, even science cannot get out from under it. MacDonald tells us that “a prudent question is half

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

the knowledge”⁸ Before the scientist goes about testing that which the eye can see, there is the “scaffolding of hypothesis,” the often unnoticed glimmer in his eye, without which the “house of science could never arise.”⁹ Or put another way, “the intellect must labour, workman-like under the direction of the architect, Imagination.”¹⁰ We should begin to see that to separate reason and imagination is all but impossible, for reason cannot exist without the imagination.

A correct understanding of the interdependence between reason and imagination sheds new light on the benefit of literary apologetics. Many people are unable to accept philosophical or reasoned arguments for Christianity until their minds have been supplied with foundational ideas that can give these arguments meaning. While “science may pull the snowdrop to shreds,” it “cannot find out the idea of suffering hope and pale confident submission.”¹¹ At the same time, we may absolutely exhaust ourselves providing historical evidence for the resurrection of Christ, never

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

realizing that these arguments are devoid of meaning to someone whose imagination has not first been engaged. Truth does not really exist until it *means* something. Lewis, Tolkien, MacDonald, and Chesterton all recognized that igniting the imagination allows us to communicate truth in a way that is deeply meaningful, engaging the person's mind, heart, and soul. By interacting with others through stories, we invite them to slow down and experience the truths of God's word. Ideas like redemption, honor, heroism, good, and evil are better understood when we can think, feel, and imagine how they play out in a created world. Fairy stories then, are not just for children.

The attempt to define the essence of a fairy story is challenging, and even Tolkien admits in *On Fairy Stories* that it cannot be caught "in a net of words."¹² Fairy stories do not depend on the "historical account of an elf or fairy," but upon "the nature of Faerie: The Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country."¹³ The nearest Tolkien can come to this idea with words is to offer us "Magic."¹⁴ The first thing we must leave behind

¹² Tolkien, J.R.R., *On Fairy-stories* (London: HarperCollins, 2014), 32.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

is the assumption that the magic of Faerie is only for children, for Tolkien tells us that “if a fairy-story as a kind is worth reading at all it is worthy to be written for and read by adults.”¹⁵ While many of us are tempted to assume that adulthood brings with it a maturity unfit for Faerie, Lewis asks, “who in his senses would not keep, if he could, that tireless curiosity, that intensity of imagination, that facility of suspending disbelief, that unspoiled appetite, that readiness to wonder, to pity, and to admire?”¹⁶ We should hope to hang onto this keen ability for the “process of growing up is to be valued for what we gain, not for what we lose.”¹⁷

The reason we must never outgrow our appreciation for fairy stories is because the story of God coming to earth, dying, and rising again could not be considered anything less than magical, should we discover it in the pages of a fairy tale. The hope of the Gospel message does not lie in a compilation of facts; rather it is a work of art, crafted by a creative God. Our very lives are a part of that story – a part of God’s magnum opus. The

¹⁵ Ibid, 58.

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 72.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Bible tells us that we are God's "poiema," His masterpiece.¹⁸ It makes sense then that we might better understand the meaning of our lives through works of art rather than philosophical arguments. God's creation, including both man and Nature, points to the glory of God through its beauty. It inspires awe and wonder, connecting us more easily to feelings of gratitude and worship. In the same way God has communicated His glory through His creation, we can communicate through our own "sub-creations."¹⁹ We ourselves write stories that elicit awe and wonder, because it is in His wisdom that "we move and live and have our being."²⁰ Fairy stories reflect God's character, not just through their magical plots and other-world adventures, but also by the very act of their creation.

Not only do fairy stories mirror the magical quality of the Gospel story, as well as point to the idea of a Creative God who is the author of world, even the reading of a fairy story can prepare us to rightly receive truth, as Lewis explains in *An Experiment in Criticism*. This suggests that there is a

¹⁸ Eph 2:10.

¹⁹ Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories*, 59.

²⁰ MacDonald, *The Imagination: Its Function and its Culture*.

correct way to read a fairy story. Sadly, because fairy stories have too often been “relegated to the nursery as shabby or old-fashioned furniture is relegated to the play-room,”²¹ many of us have lost the ability to read fairy stories well, if not for anything but a lack of practice. Our post-Enlightenment mindset might be a contributor to this underserved banishment, as Lewis describes the unliterary as having the kind of limited vision and narrowed focus that is not unlike what we discover when we isolate reason from imagination. If the rational person wants only the facts and no meaning, so the “unliterary reader wants only the Event.” He “ignores nearly all that the words before him are doing; he wants to know what happened next.”²² This is what Lewis refers to as “using” a story. We seek to get out of it what we want, discarding the rest like a “burnt-out match.”²³

In comparison, a literary person is one who surrenders to the work of art, willing to “receive” the story in its totality, appreciating it for the thing that it is rather than what it might do for him in the

²¹ Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories*, 50.

²² Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 30.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2.

moment.²⁴ Unlike the cold rationalism of the user, the receiver does not dismantle a work of art for the bits and pieces he can conquer and therefore put to use; rather, he allows the work to overtake him, surrendering himself to the journey of discovery and adventure, wherever the road may lead. Lewis emphasizes that “the first demand any work of any art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way.”²⁵ One could hardly read these words and not recognize the bridge Lewis builds between our ability to receive a fairy-story and our ability to receive the Gospel story. Surrender, vulnerability, and receptiveness are much needed ingredients to appreciate magic of any sort, including that which lies in the mystery of the Gospel. Is it any wonder we are told in Scripture that we must have a heart of a child to receive the kingdom? Let us never relegate humility, surrender, and patient wonder to the nursery. For we serve a God who “took delight to hide his works, to the end to have them found out; as if kings could not obtain a greater honour than to be God’s playfellows in that game.”²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., 19.

²⁵ Ibid., 19.

²⁶ MacDonald, *The Imagination: Its Function and its Culture*.

We would do well to acknowledge that this “game” is so often only half-apprehended by the mind of a skeptic and can present itself to the doubting man as a sinister game of cat and mouse, whereas we are not so much God’s playfellows as we are His playthings. The problem of evil and human suffering is perhaps one of the most significant stumbling blocks to the rationalist and poet alike and is quite often a preventative to the kind of humility and surrender needed for full receptivity of the Gospel. Fairy stories can work well to prepare the imagination and assist in the mind’s ability to conceive not only of dryads but also of orcs.

To a skeptic’s mind, the idea of a good God who is all-powerful creating a world consisting of both the beautiful as well as the ugly, is a “mathematical impossibility.”²⁷ It simply does not add up. The existence of suffering and evil in our world has been a source of great angst since it was birthed in the Garden of Eden. In fact, Tolkien explains that many fairy stories have appeared throughout the history of mankind for the very reason that they provide an Escape from “hunger, thirst, poverty,

²⁷ G.K. Chesterton, “The Ethics of Elfland” from *Orthodoxy*, accessed Sept. 9, 2016, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/chesterton/orthodoxy.vii.html>.

pain, sorrow, injustice, and death.”²⁸ The “Consolation of the Happy Ending” speaks to “the oldest and deepest desire - the Escape from Death.”²⁹ This kind of escape should not be confused with mere escapism, to be equated with the “flight of the deserter,”³⁰ It is more noble than that, similar to a man who finds himself in prison and longs to break free.³¹

What fairy stories offer us then is the chance to experience a world where magic, beauty and goodness indeed exist alongside evil – both rationally and imaginatively. In fact, a fairy story would not be a fairy story without orcs, trolls, and evil men. What shall the hero fight against? What would courage look like in the absence of danger? Should we ever hope to understand such concepts of health, vitality, and justice if not for the existence of their counterpart? Through fairy stories, we can see that it is logically coherent for beauty and evil to co-exist without evil having the final say. With all its imaginative undertakings, fairy stories still exhibit order, what Tolkien calls,

²⁸ Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories*, 73.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 74 - 75.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 69

³¹ *Ibid.*

“an inner consistency of reality.”³² It is for this reason Chesterton reveals in *Orthodoxy* that fairy tales always seemed to him to be “entirely reasonable things.”³³ For while they are filled with “bodily miracles,” they never contain “mathematical impossibilities.”³⁴ We will never be able to conceive of one and two making anything other than three, neither in our world nor in Faerie.³⁵ But we should be surprised at how much we are able to accept. This inner consistency of reality disarms us just enough to separate the truly impossible from what is merely difficult to imagine. But for a moment, we find ourselves believing in happy endings, even in the presence of evil.

This Consolation of a Happy Ending is what Tolkien asserts all “complete fairy stories must have.”³⁶ The name he gives to this is “Eucatastrophe.” It is a “sudden, joyous turn . . . a miraculous grace: never to be counted on to

³² *Ibid.*, 60.

³³ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories*, 75.

recur.”³⁷ We see through the fairy story that no amount of opposition can hold back the tide from turning. The Happy Ending is always delivered. Eucatastrophe “denies (in the face of much evidence if you will) universal and final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.”³⁸ Where else but in fairy tale can we “try on” this idea and see that it can be rationally embraced? To whisper under hopeful breath, “oh death where is thy sting?”³⁹ It is the cynic who claims stories such as these arise if only to escape. It is the hope rising up in those on the precipice of belief which dares to suggest that they arise out of the deeper Truth that our world is not unlike a fairy tale and that, “however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the ‘turn’ comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art and having a peculiar quality.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ 1 Cor 15:55.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 76.

This is perhaps the greatest value of fairy stories: to awaken the imagination and invite the reader to dare to believe that the lines between reason and imagination, science and religion, and even the Real World and Faerie lands are not as distinct as we think. Indeed, we see such stark division because we have lost the element of wonder in our own world. The sun still blazes on, yet we refuse to be dazzled. Cold rationality has chilled our fingers to the bone, making wonder impossible to grasp. Instead of marveling at the birth of a new life, we seek too often to destroy it. But wonder is “not a mere fancy derived from the fairy tales.”⁴¹ Chesterton reminds us that “all the fire of the fairy tales is derived from [wonder]. Just as we all like love tales because there is an instinct of sex, we all like astonishing tales because they touch the nerve of the ancient instinct of astonishment.”⁴² Our world is just as fantastic as any fairy tale, but we have “forgotten what we really are.”⁴³ And even more, “all that we call common sense and rationality and practicality and

⁴¹ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

positivism only means that for certain dead levels of our life we forget that we have forgotten.”⁴⁴

Fairy stories help us to remember. They point back to the beauty and magic and wonder that exists in our own world. They tell us “apples were golden only to refresh the forgotten moment when we found that they were green. They make rivers run with wine only to make us remember, for one wild moment, that they run with water.”⁴⁵ Is the magic of a hummingbird any less than the magic of a pixie?

In Peter’s admonition, he also tells Christians to give our answer with gentleness and respect. This means we must always respect the person we are speaking to but also the Person we are speaking about. Let us remember that the “Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy stories.”⁴⁶ God used a story to communicate truth to us. Why should we do otherwise? The reason for our hope is wrapped up in the greatest story ever told. And like any good fairy tale, ours contains within it “the greatest and most complete conceivable

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Tolkien, 78.

eucatastrophe,”⁴⁷ a miraculous, grace-filled turn of events in which Christ escaped death once and for all of us. The miracle is that this event truly happened - it is a true story born out of the Imagination of God. And our Creator “is the Lord, of angels, and of men – and of elves. Art has been verified.”⁴⁸ May we remember to keep the fantastic close by when we give a reason for our hope. There is no clear line between our world and Faerie, for “Legend and History have met and fused.”⁴⁹

Can there be anything more magical than that?

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Bibliography

Reason for Our Hope: The Role of Fairy Stories in Christian Apologetics

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