

LEWIS'S DRAGONS AND MATERIALISM: A REFLECTION ON EUSTACE SCRUBB AND OTHER DRAGONS

Clark Weidner on the Need for Imagination

Dragons are known for many things, but their greed and disregard for human life make them iconic. If I were permitted to use dragon-like qualities as an adjective, I may call it “dragon-ness.” The greed of dragons, their dragon-ness, and the tendency of men to be dragonish is a common trope in the works of Lewis. Lewis had his concerns about man’s greed here, on this side of the wardrobe — in the modern world. It is the aim of this essay to demonstrate parallels between materialistic modernism and greedy dragons, exploring Lewis’s dragons in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* and *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. Furthermore, this essay will examine Lewis’s own conversion from materialism to belief in God and his transformed understanding of the imagination. Lewis’s dragons embody the spirit of modern materialism by living to fill their bellies and their caves while disregarding the reality of values, dignity, and self-sacrifice.

There are two dragons mentioned in Lewis's *The Pilgrim's Regress*: The Northern and the Southern Dragon. The Northern Dragon claimed he ate his dragon wife, and lives in constant paranoia that at any moment, "a man / might have come out of the cities, stealing, to get my gold."¹ Remembering his former wife, he feels regret only because he thought she might help him better guard his gold. Similarly, the Southern Dragon, according to one who slew her, "was bitter" and "She spat flame from her golden jaw."² This attitude of low regard for humanity and the loneliness brought about by greed is definitive of what I've called dragon-ness.

It would not be fair to say that Lewis's dragons are purely allegorical to modern man. By modern man, I mean the rationalist who views the material world as ultimately derivative of all things factual, and all values (such as goodness, truth, and beauty) as subjective to the individual. Lewis himself was a man of this sort prior to his conversion to Christianity. In his memoir, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis wrote, "The two hemispheres of my mind were in the sharpest contrast. On the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other side a glib and shallow "rationalism." Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless."³

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, ed. David C. Downing, Wade Annotated Edition (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1933; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), 198. Citations refer to the Eerdmans edition

² *Ibid.*, 201.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955; New York: Mariner Books, 2012), 170. Citations refer to the Mariner edition.

The rationalism of materialists such as Voltaire, Shaw, and Lucretius, pitted Lewis's love for literature against the cold logic of modern thought.

It is important to distinguish between the rationalist perspective as I have described it and the greediness of dragons; the two are not mutually exclusive. For example, one can be committed to the philosophy of materialism whilst not exuding greed toward others. But it seems that in the case of Eustace Scrubb, both his parents and the books he read fractured his understanding of friendship and agreeableness. Lewis introduces the story of *The Voyage of The Dawn Treader* with insight into the childhood of Eustace. We're told that Eustace "didn't call his Father and Mother 'Father' and 'Mother,' but Harold and Alberta. They were very up-to-date and advanced people. . . . He liked books if they were books of information and had pictures of grain elevators or of fat foreign children doing exercises in model schools."⁴ Eustace's view of the world was largely influenced by these "up-to-date" and "advanced" parents; a perhaps not so subtle nod toward the rationalists who champion progressive education. Also, Eustace's reading is noteworthy as he is more interested in "information" than stories. He enjoyed teasing the Pevensies about their adventures in Narnia by mocking the existence of such a world.

Furthermore, the philosophies of modernism and materialism pair well together. If by materialism, we mean the view that only the material world exists and is knowable, then it is quite easy to see materialism as an

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader: The Chronicles of Narnia* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952; New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 425. Citations refer to the HarperCollins edition.

outgrowth of modern thought. Nancy Pearcey describes modernism as “firmly entrenched in the fact realm — the hard sciences, finance, and industry.”⁵ Given the modernist perspective of the world, fairy tales and imaginative exercises may be seen as frivolous, or at least, less valuable than studying the physical world.

Lewis, discussing the tension between modernists and romantics writes, “the modern view seems to me to involve a false conception of growth. They accuse us of arrested development because we have not lost a taste we had in childhood. But surely arrested development consists not in refusing to lose old things but in failing to add new things?”⁶ Accordingly, there are values from the imaginative stories of our childhood that are typically abandoned by a materialistic worldview. For Lewis, his sense of wonder and longing for meaning eventually propelled his conversion to Christianity.

Lewis regularly alludes to the fact that Eustace was unprepared for the world of Narnia because of the books he read. In one instance, Eustace fails to sense the danger of the old dragon approaching him from a cave, partly because “Eustace had read none of the right books.”⁷ The books Eustace read, “had a lot to say about exports and imports and governments and drains, but they were weak on dragons.”⁸ Eustace then began to

⁵ Nancy Pearcey, *Saving Leonardo: A Call to Resist the Secular Assault on Mind, Morals, & Meaning* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2017), 28.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (New York: Harcourt Publishers, 1975), 25.

⁷ Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 463.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 463-464.

stuff his pockets with gold and soon fell asleep near the cave. Then the transformation occurred: "Sleeping on a dragon's hoard with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart, he had become a dragon himself."⁹ Similar to Lewis's Northern Dragon from *The Pilgrim's Regress*, Eustace eats most of the dead dragon which lay nearby. And according to the narrator of this tale, "There is nothing a dragon likes so well as fresh dragon."¹⁰ Thus the dragon-ness of Eustace Scrubb manifests itself as he became a scaly dragon feasting on one of his own kind. The idea of a creature feasting on one of its own hearkens back to Lewis's thoughts in *The Abolition of Man*, where he forewarns man's progress toward dominating the material world. Lewis warns, "what we call Man's power over Nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as its instrument."¹¹ Greedy men tend to dominate, and in worse cases, like dragons, destroy their own kind.

Another aspect of dragon-ness consistent in Lewis's literature is loneliness. Almost immediately as Eustace discovered he was a dragon, "He wanted to get back among humans and talk and laugh and share things. He realized he was a monster cut off from the whole human race. An appalling loneliness came over him."¹² Naturally, if a dragon is a fierce beast who would kill his own kind, friends are not to be expected. Even the Northern Dragon from Lewis's poetry regrets eating his

⁹ Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 466.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 467.

¹¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* in *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), 719.

¹² Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 466.

wife, yet he still says, “Worm grows not to dragon till he eat worm.”¹³ A part of a dragon’s growth is his ability to consume things, even if it is the consumption of his wife.

Prior to his conversion to Christianity, Lewis expressed the comfort of individualism as a committed materialist. In his memoir, he wrote, “But, of course, what mattered most of all was my deep-seated hatred of authority, my monstrous individualism, my lawlessness. No word in my vocabulary expressed deeper hatred than the word *Interference*. But Christianity placed at the center what then seemed to me a transcendental Interferer.”¹⁴ Lewis’s individualism was in direct conflict with a personal God who would be involved in his most private affairs. In fact, he goes on to add that he wanted, “some area, however small, of which I could say to all other beings, ‘This is my business and mine only.’”¹⁵ Like the dragon who hoards his gold in isolation, those most sacred aspects of Lewis’s life were off-limits. Of course, It wouldn’t be fair to characterize *all* modernists as individualists closed off to sharing the most sacred aspects of their being. However, as in Lewis’s case, a materialistic view of the world leaves little room for a God interested in the surrender of our individuality.

Also in the spirit of surrender is the undragoning of Eustace Scrubb. Just as Lewis was repulsed by the “interference” of a personal God, Eustace must allow Aslan to tear away the dragon scales he acquired — a

¹³ Lewis, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, 198.

¹⁴ Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 172.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 173.

painful process that is often read as a metaphor for baptism. Eustace's baptism wasn't a cure for modernism, it was a cure for sin. The sin most apparent is that of greed, which I've argued is a consequence of consistent materialism. Still, the process was physically painful for Eustace who said, "The very first tear he [Aslan] 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."¹⁶ This painful undragonning could only be completed by Aslan, even though Eustace has started the process himself. The comparison between Eustace's undragonning and the process of sanctification is quite obvious here. To truly shed our dragon-ness we need to allow God to interfere with our innermost being.

Lewis recounts a figurative baptism that reshaped his entire perspective on the value of fairy stories after reading George MacDonald's *Phantastes*. Upon reading this particular fairy tale, Lewis noted the effect it had on him, saying, "But I saw now the bright shadow coming out of the brook into the real world and resting there, transforming all common things and yet itself unchanged. Or, more accurately, I saw the common things drawn into the bright shadow."¹⁷ What Lewis stumbled upon in *Phantastes* reawakened his sense of wonder and imagination. It cast a bright light on the cold materialistic view he had held up until this point. Lewis added, "That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptised; the rest of me, not unnaturally,

¹⁶ Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 474-475.

¹⁷ Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 181.

took longer.”¹⁸ Lewis had not undergone a full transformation at this point, but like Eustace, he had begun to shed the scales of his prior worldview; complete transformation would take divine interference.

As we move further into the twenty-first century, Eustace’s transformation remains relevant for readers today because we must grapple with the proper roles of imagination and reason. Reflecting on the Enlightenment age, poet Malcolm Guite suggests,

The entire realm of objective truth was to be the exclusive terrain of *Reason* at its narrowest — analytic, reductive, atomising; and the faculties of *Imagination* and *Intuition*, those very faculties that alone were capable of integrating, synthesising and making sense of our atomised factual knowledge, were relegated to purely private and ‘subjective’ truth.¹⁹

In a manner of speaking, the truth was relegated to the laboratory and values and/or duties to the private sphere of individual thought. Critics of Post-Enlightenment thought have pointed out the danger in relegating values to the private sphere. If man becomes the moral arbiter of truth, what is to stop him from pursuing only his self-interest? In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis writes, “When all that says ‘it is good’ has been debunked, what says ‘I want’ remains.”²⁰ Perhaps not all

¹⁸ Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 181.

¹⁹ Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 4.

²⁰ Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, 723.

materialists are greedy, but if only the physical world exists, it leaves little room to explain the value of generosity as objective.

In the *Narnia* stories, Eustace was more interested in reading about how the world works. He left the fairy tales to his cousins whom he despised. Yet, the Pevensies were more gracious; they were more courageous and less inclined to fall into a dragon's lair because of greed. Again, that does not mean that Eustace became a dragon solely because of the books he read; however, Lewis, a proponent of liberal education and a critic of the rationalists of his day, seems to draw correlations between Eustace's temperament and his education.

In conclusion, Eustace had a skewed view of the imagination prior to his baptism. Even when he was physically immersed in Narnia he threatened to contact the "British Consul" and have Caspian arrested — a sure sign that he was skeptical of Narnia's existence even when plunged into one of its oceans. The books Eustace read, though boring, most likely contained useful, important information. The dilemma we all face is reasoning our way to truth without a healthy imagination. In order to understand the human condition, we need more than materialism. In *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, Holly Ordway writes, "Imagination is related to reason, and *necessarily* so . . . [Imagination is] related in the way that a building's foundation is related to the structure that is built upon it. Reason is dependent on imagination."²¹ Perhaps we

²¹ Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination* (Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2017), 17.

ought to have a healthy diet of imaginative stories and make room for books on how the physical world works. However if we are to avoid greed — if we are to shed our own dragon-ness — we must exercise our imagination.

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