

A Formalist Approach to Religious Imagery in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis

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ABSTRACT

One of the most popular novels written for children is *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis (2005). However, this novel is controversial amongst critics because it contains religious symbols. This research argues that *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* has its way of presenting religious symbols implicitly therefore children can enjoy reading it. Thus, this research aims to examine the effective presentation of religious symbols in the novel. This research uses the Formalism approach. To support the analysis, the researcher uses library research as the method with the religious symbols found in the novel as the primary data and the books and journals written by experts as the secondary data. The result of this research is *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* presented religious symbols through the characters of children, role models, central subjects and important events of the story of the novel.

Keywords: *Children's Literature, religious symbols, The Chronicles of Narnia.*

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature encompasses high-quality books aimed at supporting the development of young readers from infancy through their growing years. It includes a diverse range of subjects appropriate for children at different stages of their lives, presented through various forms such as prose and poetry, fiction and non-fiction (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2005). Children's literature has its characteristics that distinguish them from adult fiction. One of the characteristics is didactic, meaning that the story contains moral values which are represented in the characters of the story in order to guide children who read the book (Nodelman, 2008).

In addition to imparting moral lessons, children's literature serves as a versatile tool for educating children on a wide array of topics. Engaging children in discussions about a beloved story can enhance the impact of the narrative on their perceptions of character behavior. Consequently, such dialogues can lead to positively transformed views regarding the actions and attitudes of their peers, enriching children's social understanding and empathy (Cole, 2013).

One of the most popular books written for children is *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis (2005), originally published in 1950. According to *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *WorldCat*, this book has been voted by 4,000 people aged 16 to 65 as the best

children's book of all time according to British readers and also the most widely held in libraries among all C. S. Lewis's works. This book also receives a lot of positive responses from the reviewers. One of the reviewers, Sarah stated that *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis (2005) allows the readers to explore their imagination because the story is filled with fantasy and adventure. Moreover, the book possesses a classic story that brilliantly mixes the elements of fairy tales and fantasy in order to bring an engaging wonderful adventure.

In spite of the good responses, this book is controversial amongst critics because it contains religious symbols. *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis contains a strange blend of magic, myth, and Christianity. The story is brilliantly fantastical and richly imaginative. However, some parts of the story are cringingly awful and represent everything that is most hateful about religion (Toynbee, 2005). In the article published in the New Zealand Herald ("Narnia Film Stirs Controversy over Christianity", 2005), Philip Pullman said that the story of Narnia is about racism and implicitly contains religious propaganda which will corrupt the young readers rather than inspire them.

Within the context of this debate, the researcher posits that foundational children's literature is infused with religious values, serving to instill moral and ethical principles in young readers (Anderson, 2013). Hence, it is deemed appropriate to incorporate religious symbols within children's books. Earlier books, between the 16th and 17th centuries, written for children were almost entirely religious and possessed explicit religious content which made children experience religious values. However, it is opposite to *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis. This book includes religious values implicitly, so children enjoy reading it without realizing the religious symbols. Moreover, Lewis also added in article published in the New Zealand Herald ("Narnia Film Stirs Controversy over Christianity", 2005) that he hoped the book would soften up religious content to make it easier for children to accept Christianity. It is interesting to know that even though the book is considered a religious book by some critics because of the religious symbols,

children still enjoy reading it and getting moral values. In relation to this discussion, the researcher intends to examine how religious symbols are effectively presented in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*.

As mentioned earlier, this research covers the discussion of the effective presentation of religious symbols in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. Therefore, the present research attempts to meet the following objectives:

- 1) To analyze Christian symbols presented in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis (2005),
- 2) To examine the representation of religious symbols that fit the features of children's literature in the novel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been several studies examining C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*.

The first is Syahrullah's (2012) study of the aspects of fantasy in C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. The study examined the characteristics of fantasy and the functions of fantasy represented in the novel. It analyzed all elements related to fantasy found within the novel, examining words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. Additionally, it employed descriptive qualitative research methods to analyze the data, utilizing triangulation and discussion as the primary methods. However, it did not use any specific theory to analyze the data.

Another research by Pambudijaji (2008) analyzed themes and sub-themes that appear in the novel *The Chronicles of Narnia (The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe)*. He used an intrinsic approach as the method. The result of the research is a prophecy of the savior to release some magical land from a tyranny that makes the citizens suffer as the big theme and supported by three sub-themes, which are prophecy, belief and struggling.

Eretova (2009) examined the connection between the Bible and the novel *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis. She used the

biography approach as well as Lewis' symbolism theory. Her research focused more on the parallel between the Bible and the novel by analyzing the two contrasting forces in the novel. Overall, her research focuses on the intrinsic elements of the novel, and she connects it with biblical quotations.

Besides these studies, there are two other studies on a similar topic. Johnsson (2014) investigated the similarities between *Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* and the Bible. He focused more on several characters that represent Christian values. He stated that the characters represent Christian messages of betrayal, resurrection, and self-sacrifice. In the end, he argues that Lewis intentionally included Christian messages and moral values.

Similarly, Soji (2016) also analyzed Christian values represented in the novel. However, she pays more attention to its movie adaptations instead of the novel. She examined *Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* from a theoretical perspective and suggested the film and the book are an example of religion in popular culture. Moreover, she focused on comparing the movie and the book. In conclusion, she stated that *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* depicts various theological Christian themes in its plots, such as crucifixion, resurrection, betrayal, good versus evil and the supernatural.

From all these studies, it can be concluded that the previous studies focused on intrinsic elements and religious values in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. However, none of them discussed the representation of religious symbols in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, especially from the perspective of children's literature.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research analyses the representation of religious symbols in children's books. To support the analysis of this research, formalism approach is applied. Formalism is an approach that focuses on the text itself, meaning that the readers experience the narration from its formal features rather than by being presented through extrinsic elements (Abrams,

2008). Moreover, formal features or intrinsic elements are images, symbols, metaphors, rhyme, meter, point of view, setting, characterization, plot, character, and theme (Tyson, 2006). The formalism approach, as delineated in the statement, refrains from considering the author's background in its analysis. Instead, it concentrates solely on the text, prioritizing the story's intrinsic elements as the central focus of research.

Tyson (2006) also emphasized that, in the 19th century, the analysis of literary works frequently employed biographical and historical approaches, underscoring the significance of contextualizing literary creations within the life experiences of the author and the prevailing historical conditions. The study of autobiographies, biographies, and the author's history is essential to understanding the intended purpose behind their literary work. In contrast, formalists advocate for a distinct approach to literary analysis. They argue that authors may not always be aware of the richness and complexity within their own works. Therefore, formalism emphasizes the importance of analyzing the text itself, without considering the author's background.

As stated before, a symbol is one of the intrinsic elements of the story and can be analyzed using the formalism approach. Wellek and Warren (1956) stated that symbols are included in the intrinsic aspect of the novel. They also stated that the natural and capable starting point for a work of literary learning is the analysis of the works of literature themselves. Only the works themselves could confirm the truth about all of the researcher's interests in the life of the writer, his social background, and the whole process of literature. They define a symbol as "if it persistently recurs, both as presentation and representation, it becomes a symbol" (Wellek and Warren, 1956, p. 189).

Symbols can be seen in characters, things, places, events, situations, and concepts. In this research, religious symbols are seen in the events and characters. Those elements are covered in the plot, characters and characterization. Furthermore, they contain the characteristics of children's literature as proposed by Nodelman (2008). Nodelman's theory was employed to support the analysis of this research. There are thirteen characteristics suggested by Nodelman. However, the researcher only adopts four

out of thirteen characteristics suggested by Nodelman because those four characteristics are linked to the symbols presented in the novel. Those four characteristics include the protagonists of the story whether they are children, childlike animals or childlike adults. The text should contain innocent characters, the text should contain positive role models, and the text should try to encourage children appropriately.

Therefore, we adopted the formalism approach, the theory of children's literature and the theory of symbol to analyze the religious symbols which are found in the plot, characters, and characterization in order to explore the presentation of religious symbols that fit the features of children's literature.

METHODS

The method used in this study is library research and close reading of the novel. The data were taken from *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis (2005). There are two categories of data: primary data and secondary data. The primary data of the research is the religious symbols found in the novel. The secondary data are taken from books and journals written by experts. The books and journals that are used are *Essentials of Children's Literature* written by Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson (2005), Hunt's (2004) *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, Anderson's (2013) *Introduction to the World of Children's Literature*, Abrams' (2008) *Mirror and the Lamp and A Glossary of Literary Terms 9th ed.* Those books help the researcher to give information about children's literature. The formalism approach and the intrinsic elements theory are also applied.

The method of analyzing data for this research is the descriptive analysis presented by analyzing whether the effective presentation of religious symbols in children's literature is found in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis. As mentioned earlier in the scope of the study, the researcher only adopts four out of thirteen characteristics suggested by Nodelman because those four characteristics are linked to the symbols presented in the novel.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first characteristic of children's literature is the protagonists of the story are either children, childlike animals or childlike adults (Nodelman, 2008). Nodelman (2008) added that the involvement of animals and children as characters supports young readers in connecting with them in order to gain moral messages and lessons from the novel. *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* as a children's literature uses children as the protagonists of the story. They are Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy. Those characters draw the young readers' attention because their thoughts are connected with them. Therefore, it is easier for them to learn moral values from those characters. The effective presentation of religious symbols is presenting prominent figures in the Bible through the characters of children. Edmund, with his rebellious character, represents Judas. Peter, with his leadership, represents Saint Peter. Meanwhile, Lucy and Susan represent the Two Marys through their action in witnessing Aslan's torture. By presenting the figures of the Bible through the characters of children, young readers will learn religious figures implicitly.

The second characteristic of children's literature is the text should contain positive role models (Nodelman, 2008). Children's literature gives children moral values through the characters in the story. Children's Literature delivers moral values by showing the errors made by the characters and how they learn from them (p. 81). The characters realize their mistakes after they meet the role models of the story. In the narrative, Aslan embodies the quintessence of a positive role model, distinguished by his exemplary traits of leadership, patience, intelligence, and forgiveness. His wisdom frequently shines through as he offers guidance to the four children, encouraging them to cultivate their virtues. This mentorship plays a crucial role, as the children are inspired to emulate Aslan's commendable behaviors, thereby internalizing the moral values he represents. Here, the effective presentation of religious symbols includes Jesus as a role model in the story. As explained before, Aslan is the representation of Jesus Christ. Lewis introduces the figure of Jesus Christ to the children through Aslan's behavior. By presenting a character which represents

Jesus as a role model, children can learn His figure implicitly.

The third defining characteristic of children's literature is the portrayal of innocence as intrinsic to childhood, which forms the central theme across such narratives (Nodelman, 2008). In essence, children's literature characteristically presents protagonists epitomizing innocence, often depicted through their inadvertent errors, stemming from an inherent lack of worldly knowledge. These protagonists, pivotal to the narrative's progression, subsequently engage in conflicts that not only drive the plot but also serve as conduits for imparting moral values to the readers. This thematic element underscores the didactic underpinnings of children's literature, highlighting its role in the cognitive and ethical development of young readers. Those innocent children are the subjects of the story who later become a source of conflict, giving the reader moral values from their development. In Narnia, that child is Edmund. This is portrayed at the beginning of the story, where he recklessly eats the Turkish Delight given by the White Witch. That mistake results from children's lack of knowledge (Nodelman, 2008). Edmund is the reader's center of attention as he creates a conflict at the beginning of the story. However, as the story goes on, he begins to realize his misbehaving, regrets what he had done and is willing to be better. It is presented when he helps Peter, his brother, in the war. Through the observation of Edmund's character development, readers are imparted with significant moral lessons, as he serves as a primary focus within the text. The adept portrayal of religious symbols, particularly through the allegory of Judas, is central to understanding Edmund's character arc. C.S. Lewis mirrors the behavior of Judas in Edmund, showcasing traits of rebellion and subsequent remorse, thereby highlighting the transformative journey of redemption and the complexities of human nature. By presenting a Judas character, children can learn about one of the prominent characters in the Bible. By paralleling Edmund's character with that of Judas, C.S. Lewis not only introduces young readers to the concept of betrayal

and redemption found in the character of Judas but also delves into deeper moral teachings. This narrative strategy emphasizes the importance of forgiveness, the possibility of personal transformation, and the power of redemption. Through Edmund's journey from betrayal to becoming a loyal and courageous character, readers learn that making mistakes does not define one's entire character and that it is possible to amend past wrongs through actions and sincerity. Additionally, the story teaches the value of empathy and understanding, as the characters around Edmund respond to his actions with compassion rather than condemnation, reinforcing the message that everyone is capable of change and deserving of a second chance.

The final characteristic emphasizes that texts in children's literature aim to guide children appropriately during their formative years—a period marked by significant developmental changes as they transition toward adulthood (Nodelman, 2008). This assertion suggests that children's literature serves to nurture and encourage young readers towards ethical conduct, thereby equipping them with the attitudes and values necessary for responsible adulthood. Such moral grounding is derived from the narrative's exploration of characters' mistakes, pivotal events, and the guidance provided by figures within the story who assume adult roles. Nodelman further elaborates that the moral lessons embedded in these stories are conveyed through the experiences and developments of the characters, the significant turning points within the narrative, and the perspectives of those characters who embody adult principles (Nodelman, 2008). In the plot of *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, the children learn moral values through important events of the story such as.... From the aforementioned explanation, children can learn moral values from the three main events of the novel, which are Edmund's betrayal, Aslan's sacrifice and revival. Through Edmund's betrayal, the children can learn not to accept random gifts from strangers and not to act recklessly, while Aslan's sacrifice and revival teach the children to have a good personality by helping each other.

CONCLUSION

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe presents religious symbols through the characters and events of the story. The novel uses effective presentation by including the characteristics of children's literature to the religious symbols in order to present it softly so that young readers can enjoy reading the book as well as learning religious values implicitly. Children's literature, as exemplified in the novel, is marked by characteristics that resonate with its presentation of religious symbols. Central to these narratives are protagonists who embody youthfulness, whether they are children, animals with childlike qualities, or adults retaining a sense of childlike wonder. The presence of innocent characters serves as a canvas for exploring themes of purity and moral clarity. Furthermore, these stories are enriched with positive role models, guiding readers through exemplars of virtue and integrity. Importantly, the narratives are designed to nurture and guide young readers toward ethical conduct, subtly weaving religious symbols into the fabric of the story to impart moral values in a manner that is both engaging and instructive. This approach not only entertains but also educates, encouraging children to grow in wisdom and character.

The first characteristics which is used by the novel is the protagonists of the story are either children, childlike animals or childlike adults. The book created children as the characters of the story therefore the young readers who read the book can learn the moral values through them. The effective presentation of religious symbols is presenting prominent figures of the Bible through the characters of children in the story. They are Judas Iscariot, St. Peter, and the two Marys.

The second characteristics is the text should contain positive role models. The novel made the characters of Aslan to be the role model of the story. The effective presentation of religious symbols is presenting the figure of Jesus Christ through the character of Aslan. The novel used the characters of Jesus Christ as the role model of the story. it synchronizes Aslan personalities and action with Jesus'.

The third characteristics is innocence is the characteristic of childhood and become the central subject of the texts. The novel picked the characters of Edmund as the central subject of the text since he is an innocent character and the one who needs to be guided. The effective presentation of religious symbols is presenting the characters of Judas through Edmund. The novel presented Judas's characters through Edmund because Edmund is the central subject of the text.

The last characteristics is the texts try to encourage children in the appropriate way because childhood is the time when they undergo changes in order to be adults. In order to make children behave in appropriate way, they must learn the moral values of the text. Children learn moral values through important events of the story. There are three important events of the novel which are Edmund's treason, Aslan's sacrifice and revival. The effective presentation of religious symbols is inserting prominent events of the Bible through three important events of the novel which are Judas' betrayal, Jesus' sacrifice and revival.

The representation of religious symbols in *The Chronicles of Narnia The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* utilizes characters and pivotal events to mirror prominent Biblical figures and narratives, enhancing the story's thematic depth. The novel introduces children to these elements through the portrayal of characters who embody qualities similar to those found in Biblical stories, such as courage and sacrifice. These characters are central to the storyline and their experiences align with key events from the Bible, which helps to contextualize the moral and ethical dilemmas presented in the narrative. This approach allows young readers to explore complex themes through a familiar yet profound lens, which contributes to a richer reading experience.

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