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## **“Where the Waves Grow Sweet”:**

**From Sea Adventure to Transcendence in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* by  
C. S. Lewis**

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### **Introduction**

*The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* is the third<sup>1</sup> in C. S. Lewis’s seven *Chronicles of Narnia* and the only one which takes place almost entirely at sea. In it, the two younger Pevensie siblings, Edmund and Lucy, are again drawn to Narnia by magic as in the previous tales. However, this time, the portal is not a wardrobe or a train platform but the painting of a Narnian ship which is hanging in the back bedroom of their aunt Alberta’s home. The picture comes to life and they are pulled through and plunged into the sea, along with their obnoxious cousin Eustace Scrubb. They are rescued from drowning by their old friend Caspian, who is now king of Narnia, and taken aboard the Dawn Treader. They learn that Caspian is on a quest: he has pledged to find the seven Narnian lords who were exiled by his uncle Miraz. The group sail from island to island, to uncharted territory, towards the east. One of the travellers especially, Reepicheep the talking mouse, is on a more mystical quest. He hopes to reach the end of the world (as Narnia is flat, this is possible) and Aslan’s country, to fulfil a prophecy spoken by a dryad over his cradle when he was a baby.

Although it was published in 1952, the novel was written over the winter of 1949-1950 in the space of less than three months. Walter Hooper reports that, in some preparatory notes, Lewis referred to “various islands (of Odyssey and St Brendan)”<sup>2</sup>. Just like *The Odyssey*, the Narnian story is one of island-hopping, complete with storms, mythical creatures, magicians and a homecoming at the end, at least for the human characters. However, as David C. Downing remarks, Lewis did not make “much use of Homer’s epic poem” and was more inspired by the medieval Irish immrama, especially *The Voyage of St. Brendan*<sup>3</sup>. The immram – or sea voyage – also involves travelling from island to island, meeting Otherworld wonders and usually returning to one’s native land, but it comprises a spiritual and even a Christian dimension as well. Brendan’s first incentive for travelling was to find an earthly paradise – the Promised

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring here to the order of publication rather than to the chronological order of the stories, because, like most scholars, I believe it is better to read them in this order. For arguments in favour of this, refer for example to Peter Schakel, *Imagination and the Arts in C. S. Lewis, Journeying to Narnia and Other Worlds*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2002, p. 40-52.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Companion and Guide*, San Francisco, Harper, 1996, p. 403.

<sup>3</sup> David C. Downing, *Into the Wardrobe: C. S. Lewis and the Narnia Chronicles*, San Francisco, John Wiley and Sons, Jossey-Bass, 2005, p. 43.

Land of the Saints – and the Narnians are motivated by reaching Aslan’s country. In Brendan’s narrative, they meet an angel in the form of a young man who prevents them from crossing the river – representing death – on the Promised Land of the Saints and he asks them to go back to their earthly lives. The fate of Caspian and the children is similar, as only Reepicheep is allowed to travel to Aslan’s country once they have reached the border.

*The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* testifies to Lewis’s life-long fascination with the sea. It can be read like any other sea adventure, in which the water, in its horizontal as well as vertical dimension, is linked to the unknown, a place of adventure and danger, of both freedom and fear, where nature unleashes its power and challenges the explorer. But the sea can likewise be envisaged as a portal to the world of imagination. Thus, travelling towards the unknown opens up the possibility of coming across strange islands, where ordinary rules do not prevail, and a fascinating underworld peopled with mythological monsters and other sea creatures. Finally, the sea can be considered a place of transcendence. In a letter, Lewis described the central idea of the novel as “the spiritual life (specially in Reepicheep)”<sup>4</sup>. The mysterious dimension of the marine space makes it numinous in itself, a part of Lewis’s *Sehnsucht* or longing for the divine. It also allows the travellers to reach the end of the world and the utter east, and hence works as a gateway to Narnia’s paradise.

### **The sea as a geographical space**

The sea presents few boundaries or physical limits. As such, it has traditionally been viewed as a place of adventure and discovery. It is a space of freedom and possibilities, a marginal reality far from organised society and official authority.

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the seven lords were sent off “to explore the unknown Eastern Seas beyond the Lone Islands”<sup>5</sup>. Since none of them ever came back, the travellers have no idea what awaits them after the Lone Islands and one of Caspian’s aims is to discover new territory. Adventure is even presented as a goal in itself. When faced with some of the crew’s reluctances, Reepicheep<sup>6</sup> answers: “So far as I know we did not sail to look for things useful but to seek honour and adventure”<sup>7</sup>.

The sea is frequently associated with fear and danger, because of its huge size, its perpetual movement, its crushing power and unfathomable depths. It is a space beyond the known and the secure, where nature prevails, a space where you lose your bearings. As Robert Foulke notes in “The Literature of Voyaging”:

[The thoughtful seafarer] lives on an unstable element that keeps his home in constant motion, sometimes soothing him with a false sense of security, sometimes threatening to destroy him. Although his vision is bounded by a horizon and contains a seascape of monotonous regularity, what he sees can change rapidly and unpredictably. His sense of space [...] contains in its restless motions lurking possibilities of total disorientation: in a knockdown walls become floors, doors become hatches<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Hooper (ed.), *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, volume 3*, New York, Harper Collins, 2007, p. 1245.

<sup>5</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, London, Collins, 1988 [1952], p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> On Reepicheep as an embodiment of the true Medieval knight for whom honour and adventure are paramount virtues, refer to “adventure”, “honour”, “Reepicheep” entries in Paul F. Ford, *Companion to Narnia*, San Francisco, HarperCollins Publishers, 1980.

<sup>7</sup> *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, op. cit., p. 137.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Foulke, “The Literature of Voyaging”, in Patricia Ann Carlson (ed.), *Literature and Lore of the Sea*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1986, p. 1-13, p. 4.

Once on the sea, people lose control of their bodies and of their destinies, so it prepares them for the possibility of change and can therefore be considered a place of initiation.

As Doris Myers comments, contrary to what happens in other Chronicles, the children are not really useful to the plot since they do not come to Narnia to help<sup>9</sup>. Reading into Aslan's hint at the end, it seems the reason they are called there is to learn through their adventures. Peter Schakel concurs that "learning" is one of the two "central themes" of the novel, the other one being "longing"<sup>10</sup>.

To agree to board a ship constitutes the first stage of learning. During the reign of Miraz, the evil usurper who was king before Caspian, "nearly all navigation had died out"<sup>11</sup> and when he decided to send the seven lords to sea, they had to get a ship and a crew from the nearby island of Galma, as none was available in Narnia itself. The Telmarines, who peopled Narnia in *Prince Caspian* and who drove all its inhabitants into hiding, were afraid of the sea and of the forest, two areas they avoided as much as possible. The reason is that these places represent nature as a free and powerful force which they cannot control or dominate and which they consequently fear and reject. Eustace starts off hating the sea for the same reason: he believes there is a storm when the weather is perfectly fair, he is seasick and demands "to be put ashore" at the first port in order to be able to "'lodge a disposition' against them all with the British Consul."<sup>12</sup>

In the second volume of *The Ransom Trilogy*, *Perelandra*<sup>13</sup>, which takes place on the planet Venus, loss of control is not subsequent to boarding a ship. Instead, Lewis imagines a sea strewn with floating islands, attached to the bottom like water lilies. In this re-enactment of the story of the biblical Fall on Venus, temptation does not consist in eating a forbidden fruit, but in spending a night on fixed land. Indeed, Tinidril, the Venusian Eve, lives on floating islands and must agree to not being in charge of her geographical position. In her temptation, fixed land represents the desire to control her own destiny rather than to depend on Maleldil – the name for God in the novel – and so echoes Adam and Eve's wish to "be like gods".

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the travellers are confronted with difficulties which put them in a position of powerlessness and hardship. They face a terrible storm which lasts for several days and half destroys their ship and they endure thirst, sleep deprivation and physical exhaustion. Several times, they sail for so long without meeting land that they fear having to turn back because of low stores. The idea of infinity creates dread: "it crept into their hearts that perhaps they might have come to a sea which went on for ever."<sup>14</sup> When they are caught in a very fast current which takes them towards the east, they wonder if they will ever be able to go back to Narnia and this nearly drives some of the crew to mutiny.

The sea is indeed a place of peril and of exploration. The dangers the adventurers face do not only originate from the water itself but also from the islands which they encounter and from the creatures hidden beneath the surface. Discovering islands, like in *Robinson Crusoe*, or fighting sea creatures, like in *Moby Dick*, are sea adventure topoi. But because of their essential link with the unknown, islands and marine depths have a strong propensity to trigger the imagination and are therefore frequently present in fabulous tales like *immrama*.

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<sup>9</sup> Doris T. Myers, *C. S. Lewis in Context*, Kent, Ohio, The Kent State University Press, 1994, p. 140.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Schakel, *The Way into Narnia: A Reader's Guide*, Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005, p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra*, New York, Scribner, 2003 [1944].

<sup>14</sup> *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

## The sea as a portal to fantasy

From the first chapter of the novel, the reader understands that the sea is more than a geographical space, as it serves as a means to travel from our world to the magic world of Narnia, when the water actually overflows from the painting and the children are drawn into it. Doris Myers observes that while the previous two novels were full of mythological creatures, there are none on board the ship, apart from the talking mouse Reepicheep. She explains this by stating that the characters must be as ordinary as possible to throw the extraordinary adventures into relief<sup>15</sup>.

The island motif offers a means of exploring idiosyncratic microcosms where ordinary rules do not apply. Apart from the first island the travellers visit, which still belongs to the known world and where their adventure of being captured by slave traders involves no supernatural aspect, all the places they go to are extraordinary. On one of them, they meet a dragon, on another, water that changes everything into gold, like in the Greek mythological story of Midas. A third one is peopled with invisible one-footed dwarves ruled by a Prospero-like magician called Coriakin. The fourth is a dark space where nightmares become real and on the fifth and last island, they encounter a retired star named Ramandu and his daughter.

St. Brendan's legend provided Lewis with inspiration for the adventures which take place on the various otherworldly islands. The many parallels include springs with magical powers, such as on Deathwater Island, a feast provided and prepared by invisible hands, and birds who speak with human voices, like the albatross who guides them out of the Dark Island.

When the explorers reach the "Island of the Voices", they seem at first to be in great danger as they are threatened by invisible enemies armed with weapons. However, the Dufflepuds turn out to be more silly than harmful. First mentioned by Pliny, who called them "monocoli"<sup>16</sup>, these one-legged creatures were famed for using their giant foot as a sunshade. Though they went by various names, they were common in Medieval tales in which they were treated as being both hideous and humorous<sup>17</sup>. Sir John Mandeville, for instance, refers to them as inhabitants of Ethiopia in his *Travels*.<sup>18</sup> Lewis makes them funny not only by means of their appearance, but also because of the way in which they express themselves, constantly stating the obvious – for example, "getting dark now. Always does at night"<sup>19</sup> – in a manner which is reminiscent of the old shepherd Corin in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*<sup>20</sup>. Their illogical

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<sup>15</sup> Myers, *op. cit.* p. 141. Lewis himself mentioned this necessity in an essay: "Every good writer knows that the more unusual the scenes and events of his story are, the more ordinary, and more typical his persons should be. Hence Gulliver is a commonplace little man [...]" ("On Science Fiction", *Essay Collection, Literature, Philosophy and Short Stories*, Lesley Walmsley (ed.), London, Harper Collins Publishers, 2002, p. 46).

<sup>16</sup> "Monocoli [...] have only one leg and hop with amazing speed. These people are also called the Umbrella-footed, because when the weather is hot, they lie on their backs stretched out on the ground and protect themselves by the shade of their feet." (Pliny, *Natural History: A Selection*, New York, Penguin, 2004, p. 78).

<sup>17</sup> Hannah Priest, "'Oh, the funnies, the funnies': The Medieval Monstrous Races in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* and *Baudolino*" in Sörcha Ní Fhlainn, *Our Monstrous (S)kin: Blurring the Boundaries Between Monsters and Humanity*, Oxford, Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> "In Ethiopia be many diverse folk; and Ethiopie is clept Cusis. In that country be folk that have but one foot, and they go so blyve that it is marvel. And the foot is so large, that it shadoweth all the body against the sun, when they will lie and rest them." *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, London, Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1900, ch. 17, p. 105.

<sup>19</sup> *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, op. cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>20</sup> "I know the more one sickens the worse at ease he is; and that he that wants money, means and content, is without three good friends; that the property of rain is to wet and fire to burn; that good pasture makes fat sheep, and a great cause of the night is lack of the sun". (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act 3, Scene 2, in *The Illustrated Stratford Shakespeare*, London, Chancellor Press, 1982, p. 225.)

behaviour when they want to boil potatoes before planting them or wash the dishes before meals to save time afterwards evokes the experiments of the scientists from Laputa island in *Gulliver's Travels*<sup>21</sup>. After the Dufflepuds are made visible again and persuaded by Lucy that they are not ugly at all, Reepicheep suggests that their giant foot could be transformed into a boat, and they end up paddling alongside the departing ship amidst great manifestations of joy on both sides. So the Island of the Voices, after initially creating fear, provides the protagonists with feelings of amused wonder.

Ramandu's Island stirs different emotions in the travellers. Lucy senses strong magic as soon as they land on it and they are all filled with awe when they discover the three remaining lords under a powerful sleeping spell, a magical feast, birds that provide the islanders with rejuvenating fire-berries from the valleys of the sun every morning and an old man and his daughter who reveal themselves to be of a celestial nature.

The fantastic nature of the sea manifests itself especially under the surface as the dwelling place of mythical monsters like "the Sea-Serpent and the Kraken"<sup>22</sup>. Sea monsters are a feature of the Irish immram and Lewis likewise has the voyagers fight "what so many people have foolishly wanted to see – the great Sea-Serpent"<sup>23</sup>. It is revealed to be as "enormous and strong and old and idiotic"<sup>24</sup> as the one which appears in Tolkien's story *Roverandom*, also following the pattern of an immram<sup>25</sup>, about the adventures of a little dog who travels to the moon and to the depths of the sea.

People who dwell under the water are another stock motif in immrama and they feature both in *Roverandom* and in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Lewis was fascinated by the idea that several sentient beings could share the same universe without ever meeting and he made use of this idea in *Perelandra* when Ransom comes across water-people on the planet Venus<sup>26</sup>. In Narnia, there are gnomes who live in the depths of the earth and whose existence is revealed in *The Silver Chair* and Sea People whom Lucy spots in the Last Sea in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. They are not to be confused with Mer People, who are amphibious and who appear in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* as they sing at the children's coronation. The Sea People, on the other hand, represent utter alterity and when Lucy observes their behaviour in the transparent water, she notices an "inversion of human experience in which the valleys are our havens and the mountains our challenges"<sup>27</sup> since, to them, the dangers and adventures lie in the sea valleys. Paul Ford calls this "another instance of Lewis's deliberate dislocation of our imaginations"<sup>28</sup>.

## Learning through the supernatural

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<sup>21</sup> For example, they try to extract sun beams out of cucumbers or to build a house by beginning at the roof and working downwards to the foundation. (Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, Oxford, OUP, 1988 [1726], p. 178-179.)

<sup>22</sup> *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, op. cit., p. 169.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>24</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *Roverandom*, Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull (ed.), London, HarperCollins, 1998, p. 76.

<sup>25</sup> Jennifer Marchant, "The Three Rovers in Tolkien", *Mythlore*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (135), Fall/Winter 2019, pp. 97-114.

<sup>26</sup> Ransom gets the impression "that they simply shared a planet with him as sheep and horses share a field, each species ignoring the other." C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra*, op. cit., p. 138.

<sup>27</sup> *Companion to Narnia*, op. cit., p. 365.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

Through its islands and its depths, the sea proves to be a place of wonder and amazement but just as in *immrama*, it is also a place of learning. Kris Swank notes: “The immram protagonist is frequently a penitent or a pilgrim, and the voyage is a metaphor for spiritual growth and redemption.”<sup>29</sup>. She contends that

Lewis [...] intentionally mimic[s] the style and substance of the medieval Irish *immrama* through [his] focus on voyages over water, encounters with otherworld islands, and use of stock *immrama* episodes and motifs. Yet, it is the use of the voyage as a means for personal transformation which truly marks *The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader”*<sup>30</sup>.

The dangers the travellers face are real but they usually reveal themselves less perilous than was at first feared. On Dragon Island, one dragon is old and dying while the other proves to be harmless. The Dufflepuds are not as fierce as they seem and Coriakin turns out to be, not an evil magician, but a friend of Aslan’s. The Sea People look threatening yet nothing comes of it and even the terrible Sea-Serpent is stupid. As D. G. Kehl remarks, “ultimately the most formidable opposition in the quest could be said to come from conflictive forces within the characters themselves”<sup>31</sup>.

Dragon Island is the place where Eustace’s initiatory journey, the most important in the narrative, reaches a turning point. The first sentence of the story, arguably one of the best openings for a novel<sup>32</sup>, sets the tone: “There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.”<sup>33</sup> The combination of names conveys at once “a sense of conceited self-satisfaction”<sup>34</sup> and the rest of the chapter confirms that Eustace is selfish and arrogant. During the first part of the trip, he keeps complaining about everything, he tries to steal water at night and he is not even grateful when Lucy secretly gives him a share of her ration. However, he goes through a transformative experience on Dragon Island. It begins with him becoming a dragon, when he falls asleep on his predecessor’s treasure with “greedy, dragonish thoughts”<sup>35</sup>. This makes him long for human company and he is touched by the compassionate reactions he gets from the other travellers once they understand who he is. Then one night, he meets Aslan, who takes him to an Edenic garden, takes off his dragon skin by clawing through it, bathes him in a fountain and dresses him in new clothes, all three actions referring to some of the biblical imagery associated with the process of being “born again”<sup>36</sup>. From then on, Eustace is a changed person. He does not become perfect on the spot, but everyone notices a difference, including his mother who remarks at the end of the novel that he has “become very commonplace and tiresome and it must have been the influence of those Pevensie children”<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Kris Swank, “The Child’s Voyage and the Immram Tradition in Lewis, Tolkien, and Pullman”, *Mythlore*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (135), Fall/Winter 2019, p. 73-96, p. 74.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>31</sup> D. G. Kehl, “Adventures Dipped in Myth”, *Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal*, 2010, Vol. 4, p. 3-18, p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> Devin Brown writes that it is “a line that *American Book review* has ranked as number forty-seven in its list of “The 100 Best First Lines from Novels” (Devin Brown, *Inside the Voyage of the Dawn Treader: A Guide to Exploring the Journey Beyond Narnia*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 2)

<sup>33</sup> *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce Edwards, *Not a Tame Lion*, Wheaton, Tyndale, 2005, p. 93.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>36</sup> The prophet Jeremiah resorts to the image of a leopard and its spots to express the need for divine help to get rid of one’s sin in Jeremiah 13, 23. The second action evokes baptism and the third one is a common biblical symbol of regeneration (Isaiah 61, 10, Zechariah 3, 4, Luke 15, 22, Revelation 6, 11, etc.)

<sup>37</sup> *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

On Deathwater Island, Edmund and Caspian have to fight against greed once they realise they could become the possessors of unlimited quantities of gold. On Coriakin's Island, Lucy is tempted by vanity when she feels like reading the spell which would change her into the most beautiful girl in the world. The whole crew have to face their innermost fears on Dark Island. As Peter Schakel writes, it is "fear of darkness itself – inner darkness as well as eternal darkness, the darkness of the subconscious even more than the darkness of night or death."<sup>38</sup> When they reach the end of the world, Caspian needs to learn to put his duty as a king before everything else. He is very much tempted to go on with Reepicheep but "he is prevented from abdicating and reminded of his duty to serve his subjects rather than his own personal interests"<sup>39</sup>. He reacts angrily at first but later, Aslan appears to him through a portrait on the wall of his cabin and helps him come to his senses. It could be argued that the seven deadly sins (pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth) are all present to a certain degree in the various trials the travellers face and, for most of them, eventually overcome<sup>40</sup>.

The fantastic experiences the travellers go through make them stronger and wiser people. However, they do not stay on the human plane, but draw towards the divine: the sea has a spiritual dimension as well.

### **The sea as a numinous place**

Even as a small boy, Lewis felt a spiritual longing which was first triggered by the "unattainable" hills he could see from the window of his nursery<sup>41</sup>. One of the aspects of Lewis's *Sehnsucht* "took the symbolic form of a fascination with the sea ("the sea-longing", in Tolkien's phrase) and unknown lands beyond it."<sup>42</sup> In the novel, *Sehnsucht* is experienced by Lucy, who is "almost too happy to speak"<sup>43</sup> when she first finds herself at sea and who feels "a mixture of joy and fear"<sup>44</sup> when she spies new constellations that she suspects no living eye has ever seen. However, Reepicheep is the one who has the strongest longing, as his heart's desire has always been to go into the utter east and never return to the world.

In biblical symbolism, the sea represents chaos, dark forces to be overcome, the home of Leviathan<sup>45</sup> and of the apocalyptic monster<sup>46</sup>. In Narnia, though this aspect is present, the sea is also associated with the divine from the outset. Aslan is the son of "the great emperor beyond the sea", who represents God the Father in Narnia. The reason why Reepicheep believes they will eventually reach Aslan's country is because "it is always from the east, *across the sea*, that the great Lion comes to us" (emphasis mine)<sup>47</sup>. Contrary to Tolkien, who follows the traditional immram by situating his Undying lands towards the West in *The Lord of the Rings*, Lewis

<sup>38</sup> Peter Schakel, *Imagination and the Arts in C. S. Lewis*, op. cit., p. 56.

<sup>39</sup> Alan Jacobs, "The Narnia Chronicles", in Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*, Cambridge, CUP, 2011, [2010], p. 265-280, p. 275.

<sup>40</sup> "Adventures Dipped in Myth", op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>41</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, Glasgow, Fount Paperbacks, 1990, [1955], p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> Charles A. Huttar, "'Deep Lies the Sea-Longing': Inklings of Home," *Mythlore*, 2007, Vol. 26, No. 1, Article 2, p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>45</sup> "In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea." Isaiah 27, 1. (All the biblical verses are quoted from the ESV Bible translation.)

<sup>46</sup> "And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads". Revelation 13, 1.

<sup>47</sup> *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, op. cit., p. 20.



chooses the east for the location of Aslan's country. This comes from a Judeo-Christian tradition which associates the east with the location of the earthly paradise, the garden of Eden, in the Mesopotamian area. It is likewise the place of the rising sun, a symbol of Christ and the resurrection. At the beginning of the novel, the sea serves as a medium to the world of fantasy but then within this world, it becomes the medium to the divine itself.

Ramandu's island, referred to as "the beginning of the End of the World"<sup>48</sup>, works as a preparation for the last part of the journey. The table where the three remaining lords sit in an enchanted sleep is laden with an extraordinary feast but there is more to it than just a banquet. The crimson tablecloth and the Knife of Stone on it – the one used by the White Witch to kill Aslan long ago – evoke the Lion's sacrificial death and the blood he shed and so could be compared to the Eucharist. As Peter Schakel remarks, it is a table of remembrance, of physical and spiritual nourishment and it is a magic table, set by Aslan's bidding "as a reward for those who have come this far in their pilgrimage" and as "a source of strength for those who desire to journey further"<sup>49</sup>.

In her article on Christian iconography in Lewis's novel, Salwa Khoddam reflects on the name of the ship, the "Dawn Treader". The word "treader" suggests the act of "treading on" or "stepping over" as a way to show power and control. As it travels towards the east, the Dawn Treader will control the dark, demonic waters, like when Moses parted the Red Sea or when Jesus walked on the sea of Galilee and calmed the storm. The more the travellers approach Aslan's country, the more the sea is tamed: it becomes very calm and smooth, shallow, and the "waves grow sweet", just as the dryad had prophesied to Reepicheep<sup>50</sup>.

Several critics have compared the travels of the Dawn Treader to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The concluding part of the voyage in particular, once they leave Ramandu's island and sail on the Last Sea, bears a lot of resemblance to the *Paradiso*. Just like in Dante's poem, the light becomes stronger and stronger, yet their eyes get used to it and "grow as strong as eagles"<sup>51</sup> thanks to the water they drink every day. Reepicheep describes it as 'drinkable light', a concept which may have been inspired from *Paradise Lost*<sup>52</sup>. The water allows them to go without food or sleep and the older sailors start to grow young again. The taste of the water is "dazzling", "stronger than wine and somewhat wetter, more liquid than ordinary water"<sup>53</sup>. This expression, which does not make sense from a material point of view, suggests that they have found real water at last and that everything they ever tasted was just an imitation of this. It refers to Lewis's idea that in heaven, everything will be more real than on earth, which he developed in *The Great Divorce* and which is inspired from Plato's theory of the forms. Before the voyagers reach the utter east, they cross the Silver Sea, so called because it is covered in white lilies. This flower evokes purity and is often associated with the virgin Mary but it also recalls the white rose Dante discovers when he reaches the last part of *Paradiso*. The poem ends with a vision of Christ; similarly, in the novel, Aslan appears to the travellers in the form of a lamb who then changes into a Lion, two symbolic representations of Christ in the New Testament.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>49</sup> Schakel, *op. cit.* p. 67.

<sup>50</sup> Salwa Khoddam, "'Where Sky and Water Meet': Christian Iconography in C. S. Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*", *Mythlore*, Spring 2001, Vol. 23, No. 2 (88), p. 36-52, p. 47-48.

<sup>51</sup> *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, *op. cit.*, p. 180. According to Aristotle, eagles could look straight into the sun.

<sup>52</sup> Milton writes of "potable gold" (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 3, 608, p. 68).

<sup>53</sup> *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

He serves them breakfast on the beach, in a scene which is reminiscent of John's gospel where the resurrected Jesus does the same for his disciples<sup>54</sup>.

Lewis had not planned on writing seven Chronicles when he started. He wrote the first, then the second, and thought the third one would be the last. That is why the novel ends with such an epiphany and why Aslan sends the children back to their own world with the following words:

But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little you may know me better there.<sup>55</sup>

Just like in the traditional immram, after their mystical experience, the travellers are supposed to go back to where they came from and live a more fulfilled life because of it.

## Conclusion

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the sea could almost be said to be the main protagonist, since it intervenes on multiple levels. It is linked with magic from the start: through it, the children are literally plunged into the world of Narnia and thus the sea serves as a portal to a fantasy world. Within this world, it provides the setting for the extraordinary adventures they experience while also being the reason for them since it is at the centre of both quests. As the story unfolds, the sea becomes a gateway to another dimension which leads the children to a plane of reality which transcends all worlds. At this stage, the initiation is complete and the journey is over. They are ready to leave the sea and they do not need to use the same way to go back home: this time, Aslan opens a door in the sky for them.

Originally written for children, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* can be enjoyed as any sea adventure would be, featuring a mixture of natural and supernatural events, creating feelings of fear, merriment, and wonder. However, like any great work of art, it also has multiple layers of meaning. Testifying to Lewis's immense erudition, it is peppered with references to previous literary works which deal with the sea as a place of demonic chaos, of enchanted adventures or of spiritual growth. Yet the Oxford don did not simply copy or borrow from these works. "In Lewis", Mervyn Nicholson writes, "the process [of absorbing, transmuting and recreating literary materials] was unusually rich because of his respect for literary tradition and his own fascination with the process of story creation."<sup>56</sup> This is one reason among others why *The Chronicles of Narnia* have reached the status of classics in the category of children's fantasy literature, whilst achieving a much wider readership.

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<sup>54</sup> John 21, 9-14.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>56</sup> M. Nicholson, "C. S. Lewis and the Scholarship of Imagination in E. Nesbit and Rider Haggard", *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*, Marquette University Press, 1998, p. 43.

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