

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe:
A Comparison of Two Film Adaptations

Student #2

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This paper will examine two different adaptations of C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. The first version was created for television in the United Kingdom by the BBC in 1988. The second version was produced by Disney in the US in 2005. The two different versions of C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* depict different perspectives on the same story. The BBC version of the film focuses on the Christian biblical allegory aspects, while the Disney version tends to be somewhat more secular, moving the focus to other aspects of the story, such as family dynamics and the ethics of war.

Both versions are based on a Book by C.S. Lewis. Lewis was raised a Christian, but became an atheist at age 15 after being sent away to a strict boarding school. Later, after returning from World War One, Lewis became an instructor at Oxford, and also became close friends with J.R.R. Tolkien. During that same time period, he also rediscovered his faith and became a devout Christian again (Harper Collins Publishers 2008). While it's easy to assume that Lewis originally intended for the book to be a religious allegory (at least after viewing the BBC adaptation), author Meghan O'Rourke points out in an article about the religiosity of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* that Lewis felt that individual details about the *environment* of a fantasy story were more critical than the overall plot (i.e. overarching Christian themes). However, that is not to say that Lewis kept his Christian ideology out of his Narnia books – it simply wasn't the primary goal behind their writing (O'Rourke 2005). Because of his strong Christian beliefs, those themes likely provided a model for him to design the archetypical characters in his stories.

In making film or television adaptations of a book, the producers have the ability to tailor their interpretation to the current climate and their targeted audience. In the BBC's adaptation of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, they adhered to a fairly tight interpretation of the

Christian religious allegory throughout the series. A number of points in the series equate to Christian teachings: a persecuted people waiting for the arrival of Aslan (a symbol for Christ), Peter's betrayal of Aslan as Judas betrayed the disciples and Christ (in exchange for Turkish delight instead of gold), Aslan's final feast after the children arrive (similar to the last supper), and Aslan sacrificing himself for his followers sins. The scenes surrounding the death of Aslan especially bring forth the religious allegory, including the taunting of Aslan, the witnessing of the death by Lucy and Susan (representing the two Marys), even a small earthquake followed by Aslan's resurrection, again first seen by Lucy and Susan.

According to the World Values Study and research by Norris and Inglehart, religiosity in the United Kingdom was substantially higher in the 1980s than in the 2000s when the Disney version of the film was released. In viewing the chart on page 90, the percentage of people in Britain expressing a belief in God remained fairly steady but in slight decline, with the percentage in 1990 being 72 percent. However, a substantial drop in belief occurred between 1990 and 2001, when only 61 percent expressed a belief in God at that time (Norris and Inglehart 2004). This increased religiosity would be consistent with the economic conditions in the UK during the 1980s – high inflation rates, high unemployment, high taxes and slow growth led to a sense of insecurity of the British people (Meltzer 1988). According to Norris and Inglehart, this sense of insecurity helped maintain the levels of religiosity during this time period. It would not have seemed at all unnatural for the BBC to maintain the religious character of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* for their audiences.

In contrast, the 2005 version of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by Disney had a much more secular appearance. Key portions of the plot remained, such as Aslan's sacrifice and resurrection and Peter's betrayal, but the film makers shifted the focus away from the strict

religious interpretation to other secular issues. Throughout the film, a major component is that of the Pevensies constantly fighting with each other, rather than uniting as a family. In addition, there is a strong focus on the morality of war, with Susan urging Edmund that he shouldn't be engaging in combat or war, chiding that they were sent to rural England because their mother wanted them to stay out of war, and Edmund's personal struggle to fight. This theme even carries into Father Christmas' distribution of weapons to the children, cautioning them that they are "tools" and not "toys", and that "battles are ugly." The film also explored other themes in greater depth, such as the difficulty and importance of leadership for Edmund. These themes tended to minimize the focus on the crucifixion/resurrection allegory so strongly present in the BBC version.

The Disney version also had a greater emphasis on what could be characterized as the "pagan" elements of Lewis' work, ranging from a greater focus on the mythological creatures, to the activities surrounding Aslan's execution, to the new-age music that dominated many parts of the soundtrack.

The differences between the two films is consistent with Norris and Inglehart's arguments regarding secularization in terms of worldwide secularization, but somewhat inconsistent with their evaluation of secularization in the US. It's possible that the film was made in a more secular fashion for a variety of reasons. For one, the overall trend in post-industrial countries worldwide is towards secularization. Second, at the time, the United States was deeply engulfed in two wars, and the country was led by George W. Bush. Neither of the wars (or the United States) were particularly popular around the world, and people tended to specifically identify George W. Bush with the Christian evangelical movement in the United States. Perhaps Disney anticipated worldwide distribution of the film, and wanted to maintain its

secularity. Another reason might be that the film industry is largely based on the west coast in a large urban center, far away from the evangelical “Bible belt” described as the stronghold of religiosity by Norris and Inglehart on page 94 of their text. Thus, they are not as inclined to include a strong religious focus, especially based on the political climate leaning away from Bush’s administration and the religious right. In fact if this was the case, it may provide an explanation for the inclusion of anti-war sentiments previously described in the 2005 film.

In comparing these two films, the decrease in overt religiosity is apparent between the 1988 and the 2005 version. This decrease is consistent with the evaluation by Norris and Inglehart of global secularization during that time period. While Norris and Inglehart identify that the United States did not generally follow that same trend of secularity, the “secularization” of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* can be explained by the political climate in the United States at the time, which was beginning to turn against both George Bush (identified as a member of the religious right and the Evangelical movement) and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. With the least religious geographic areas in the US having been identified by Norris and Inglehart as urban centers on the west coast, which also happens to be the center of the film industry, the reasons for the secularity of the 2005 version of the film become apparent.

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