# C.S. Lewis on Torture

Dialogue on our current attitudes toward torture appears ongoing and irresolvable. Although formulating my thoughts when we were more intensely debating the McCain amendment, passage of which I thought would at least firm up the illegality of the use of torture, I succumbed to procrastination while trying to put them to paper. Now, obviously, King George does not seem bound by legalities.

In anticipation of the movie "The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe," I thought I ought to read C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*. Sadly, I did not read any of his stories as a child. Sadly, too, I still have not yet finished the entire series nor have I seen the movie.

However, certain excerpts from *Narnia* strike me as influential and pertinent.

Yes, Lewis wrote his tales primarily for children, but that's the point. What formative notions do children take away from them? And yes, Lewis began writing his tales some twenty years after converting at age 32 from atheism to Christianity, so do they reflect (his) evolving Christian views on torture?

These excerpts are from "The Horse and His Boy," originally published in 1954, when Lewis was about 56, and well after he'd written several of his Christian apologies like *The Problem of Pain*, *The Screwtape Letters*, and *Mere Christianity*. So, here goes. Readers can draw their own conclusions.

After the "good guys," those on the side of the Chist-lion Aslan, have been victorious in battle against evil Prince Rabadash and his forces, the good King Lune declares to Rabadash:

> . . . you have proved yourself no knight, but a traitor, and one rather to be whipped by the hangman than to be suffered to cross swords with any person of honor. Take him down, bind him, and carry him within till our pleasure is further known.
>
> Strong hands wrenched Rabadash's sword from him and he was carried away into the castle, shouting, threatening, cursing, and even crying. For though he could have faced torture he couldn't bear being made ridiculous. In Tashbaan everyone had always taken him seriously. (295-96)

The next day, during deliberations, the good King Lune receives this Alberto Gonzales-like advice: "Your majesty would have a perfect right to strike off his head. Such an assault as he made puts him on a level with assassins" (305).

The good King Lune then directly addresses evil Rabadash: "Your royal Highness needs not to be told that by the law of nations as well as by all reasons of prudent policy, we have as good right to your head as ever one mortal man had against another" (306).

Soon the Christ-lion Aslan steps in with his own (torturous?) solution. He turns Rabadash into a donkey to the joy and laughter of King Lune and his subjects. Aslan further confines Rabadash, somewhat like the concept of an electronic pet fence, to a radius of ten miles

around "the great temple of Tashbaan." Aslan then reveals that at the temple Rabadash will be embarrassingly – in the presence of all his subjects – healed and transformed back into a prince. He will remain a prince except were he to violate his ten-mile boundary. (307-08)

Has Lewis given torture a green light, or has he mitigated it somewhat with the Christ-lion's resolution? Does the subtle approval of the use of torture by the victors resonate with children? Might these children later grow up to become King, Vice-King, and Secretary of War?

While reading *Narnia*, I can't help also thinking about several references to George Orwell's quote: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" (123). Lewis echoes Orwell's Animalism evolution from Seven Commandments to One Commandment, from equality to division, from those animals with rights to those with lesser or even no rights. Interestingly, both authors metaphorically use animals to illustrate differing attitudes toward discrimination. Is it perhaps because we human beings think of ourselves on a level higher than all other animals? Does the use of animals emphasize, with subtle disguise, the authors' messages?

Orwell's writing jolts us into recognizing the inappropriateness and evil of unwarranted, undeserved discrimination. Lewis's fairytales, in stark contrast, slyly (or is it unwittingly?) instantiate accepted differences between animals that talk – those that apparently share human qualities of intelligence, consciousness, and soul – and animals that remain mute, either through choice or some inherent (intelligent) design. In several passages, Lewis subtly suggests blind acceptance of discrimination, or at least of profoundly questionable unequal treatment.

For example, a sage hermit notes to a talking Horse who was feeling a bit disgraced: "You're not quite the great Horse you had come to think from living among poor dumb horses. Of course you were braver and cleverer than *them*. You could hardly help being that" (275). The hermit's "student" was originally a talking Horse from Narnia who had been displaced and ridden in battle along with lesser horses. The riding of Horses by Narnian Animals (and human beings), or similarly "using" other Animals, does not occur unless necessary for battle in defense of Narnia, i.e., Holy War.

Now, consider this Narnia breakfast menu for a Dwarf, his two brothers, a Hedgehog, a Stag, and a boy: "And immediately, mixed with a sizzling sound, there came to Shasta a simply delightful smell. It was one he had never smelt in his life before, but I hope you have. It was, in fact, the smell of *bacon and eggs* and mushrooms all frying in a pan" (286, my italics).

Or consider another shared meal, a lunch buffet of "*cold birds and game pie* and wine and bread and *cheese*" (305, again my italics).

Lewis continuously suggests acceptable differences between Animal (i.e, Human) and animal (i.e., human?) rights, as in the following case of Prince Cor.

> That was how he got his name of Corin Thunder-Fist; and how he performed his great exploit against the Lapsed Bear of Stormness, which was really a Talking Bear but had gone back to Wild Bear habits. (310)

Besides the talk of fists and bears, is Lewis even being subtle with his allusion to the oft-used phrase "lapsed Catholic" (of which I am certainly one)?

So, what do children take away from such tales? Where do our concepts of torture originate and how are they influenced? And does anyone wonder at constant uproars about content of and access to children's books?

At least Lewis offers this proscriptive slice of wisdom for King George, or rather, I mean for Kings in general: "No. The King's under the law, for it's the law makes him a king" (309).

For the sake of balance, I should add that I recently encountered a quote from Lewis's *Space Trilogy* which attributes to the "bad guys" what we might consider a properly repulsive attitude towards torture. I have not personally read *Space Trilogy* yet, so I do not know the complete context nor what to make of Lewis's personal attitude towards torture, especially now that I have noted his "bad guys" abhor torture and "good guys" seem perfectly agreeable to it. One might argue that these books are fantasies, and attitudes toward torture merely go to developing storybook characters. If nothing else, however, these contrary attitudes indicate a level of inconsistency with the Christian author. Certainly, at least, the attitudes expressed in these fantasies may subtly influence children's perception of torture. Our duty becomes one of making time for a serious dialogue regarding torture in the real world.