

MEDIEVAL WORLD IN CLIVE STAPLES LEWIS' WORK

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RESUMEN

Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963) fue un apologista del Cristianismo y un escritor de obras fantásticas que siempre mostró un gran interés en aspectos como la fe racional y los elementos artísticos y filosóficos del periodo medieval. Este trabajo analiza estos conceptos, además de otros como el romance, la leyenda y la naturaleza en la producción literaria que mejor refleja su particular visión de la Edad Media: *Las crónicas de Narnia* (1948-1956), *Perelandra* (1938-1945), y *The Allegory of Love. A Study in Medieval Tradition* (1936).

ABSTRACT

Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963) was a Christian apologist and a writer of fantasy novels who always showed a great interest in matters like Rational Faith and the artistic and philosophical elements in the Medieval period. This study analyzes these concepts, along with others like romance, legend and nature in the literary production which best reflects Lewis' particular view of the Middle Ages: *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1948-1956), *Perelandra* (1938-45), and *The Allegory of Love. A Study in Medieval Tradition* (1936).

INTRODUCTION

Clive Staples Lewis (Belfast 1898-1963) was professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Oxford and Cambridge University for more than twenty five years. This occupation was not a matter of chance as he always showed, firstly, curiosity and, later, enthusiasm for this period that covers from the fifth to the fifteenth century.

From his early years he read profusely books of every genre and in his teens he already showed his interest in this period. So much so that in his university studies he defended the necessity of “reconstructing” the medieval “state of mind”, as he called it, to escape being distorted by the outlook one already has. He was so convinced of this necessity that, around 1927, he decided to specialize in Medieval studies.

Huttar (see Schultz 1998, 267, 268) claims that Lewis warned against three pitfalls in Medieval studies that can be summarized in (1) the consideration of treating the ideas as unique; (2) the danger of seeing as monolithic a world that embraced many centuries, much variety, and some great changes; and (3) the temptation to think of the Medieval world as inferior. Lewis understood very well he couldn't fall on these mistakes and his writings are a good proof of that.

The aim of this paper is to highlight those Lewis' works in which the Medieval world appears and to analyze his particular vision of this period, in which he mostly emphasizes the artistic and philosophical features. This is not straightforward as Lewis mixes several sources in his writings. As Walker (1969, 626) says:

What he [Lewis] did was to regress to his childhood, fall back on his imagination, and let his word pictures and baptized images tumble onto the pages with almost reckless abandon. Everything from Neo-Platonism, paristic theology, Norse legend—even Father Christmas—is thrown in to the mix.

LEWIS' WORKS RELATED TO THE MIDDLE AGES

The Medieval world appears in Lewis' fiction and poetry in various ways. Its general features—e. g., castles, weapons, transportation, social structure, clashes between alien cultures— provide the setting for the Chronicles of

Narnia. These are seven stories written for children from 1948 to 1955 with two main objectives; on the one hand, to make children enjoy with their reading and, on the other hand, to establish a Christian base upon which their adult spirituality will rise.

In these stories there is a profusion of mythological beings and other characters: centaurs, gnomes, Baco, nymphs, fauns, princes and princesses in medieval castles, dragons, and a wide mixture of the classical with the medieval period, as Lewis defended the consideration of the Medieval period as the step between Classical period and Renaissance and, although he based his career in the Medieval period, he was an enthusiastic of the Classics since his early years.

To name some examples of this influence in the Chronicles of Narnia we can remember in *The Horse and his Boy* that it is the only tale in which all the story is developed in these imaginary worlds, one of whose countries is Narnia, the place in which all the stories are settled. This is an independent tale, although it contains two references to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*; the character Tumnus, the faun of the previous story, also appears. According to Ford (1994, 235), one of the clues for the success of this story is the relationship established between the horses, Bree and Hwin, and the children, Shasta and Aravis. The animal is a complex symbol and represents the personification of the best of our natural wishes. On the other hand, Shasta, who gradually reflects a better skill in riding, symbolizes the fusion of the spirit with nature but Aravis, less skilled, symbolizes people in no harmony with nature. It is evident the underlying equestrian metaphor, the sense of the natural order and the relationship between nature and humanity.

The knight that appears in the first chapter with the intention of buying to Shasta, contrary to the medieval noblemen, is bad and heartless. In this case, although the author makes use of the knowledge he has acquired of the medieval settings and environments, the nobles, on the contrary, do not appear like almost immortal beings that offer an alternative to the real world, but they appear like cruel people (Rabkin 1978, 8). Virtue finds many obstacles to follow its principles in the first chapters as the environment around the characters is materialistic and unfair. But, as Barron (1990, 11) states:

Medieval literature and art tend to express underlying patterns of truth, to present narrative or pictorial exemplifications of abstract ideas rather than explore “character” or describe everyday physical reality. Elements of fantasy, therefore, occur in almost every genre and specific work of medieval literature.

Added to this, we can also find the oral tale of different stories, where the author expresses his opinion to this:

For in Calormen, story-telling (whether the stories are true or made-up) is a thing you're taught, just as English boys and girls are taught essay-writing. The difference is that people want to hear the stories, whereas I never heard of anyone who wanted to read the essays (*HB*, p. 35).

In the case of *Prince Caspian*, Reepicheep is introduced in chapter six; he is the most famous mouse in the stories and one of the favourite characters for Lewis; he will appear again in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* and *The Last Battle*. He is the personification of braveness and loyalty (1980, 73). He speaks like a knight of old periods to whom the honour is more important than life itself (1980, 159). This attitude is surprising even to Aslan, the ruler (1980, 177). This character has also some flashy interventions in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* like the following: “The creature is no friend of mine but he is of the Queen’s blood, and while he is one of our fellowship it concerns our honour to find him and to avenge him if he is dead” (1996, 71). In this, loyalty is manifested over the own opinion.

According to Myers (1984, 152), Clive Staples Lewis tries to describe with this character the Renaissance knight when she states: “Reepicheep defends his honor, maintains a courteous demeanour even when punishing Eustace with his rapier, and demonstrates his courage at every opportunity”.

In the case of *The Silver Chair*, we also find some characteristics of the Medieval period. In chapter six we can find a knight and a mistress who explain the children how to get to the castle. The path looks like having been gone through hundreds of times of chivalry, as the description shows medieval landscapes, being their general features the castles, weapons, transportation, social structure, clashes between alien cultures, elements of faery and some terms, like “Doctor Cornelius”. In the castle

there are no knights, as it would be obvious in this context, but giants, although life in palace is developed as it would happen in a royal court of human beings. These giants have got a king and a queen, their suite and service, all of them being very nice and kind until the children discover that they were invited to the Autumn Feast as they were going to be eaten (ch.9). Swinfen (1984, 158) says that “each book in *The Chronicles* has its own web of sensations: the Spenserian and slightly *pseudo-medieval* quality of *The Silver Chair* combined with elements from very primitive folk-tale and from George MacDonald's *Princess* books”.

The chapter entitled “The Land of Bisms” in *The Silver Chair* is also a clear example of this medieval influence. It is a country situated under *The Shallow Lands*, where the witch lives. In the journey through the first of the countries, our young adventurers have to walk through valleys, cliffs and rivers handing torches and riding a horse. They are afraid but they don't show it as they know there is somebody who is guiding them (1980, 168).

Another example of this track of the Medieval world is found in prince Caspian's castle, when he dies: the flag waves at half mast, the music is mournful, all the knights, the gnomes and the characters take off their hats in the decease: elements, all of them, that remind us of films like *El Cid Campeador* and others from the same period.

In the case of *The Last Battle*, we can find aspects expressed in a way to establish no question about the Natural Law, that Lewis defended; for this Natural Law, stars are governed with their natural order, from which Aslan is part: “The stars never lie but Men and Beasts do. If Aslan were really coming to Narnia the sky would have foretold it” (1990, 21).

The topic of Nature is also constant in the trilogy entitled *Perelandra*, that constitutes a call in favour to the back to the natural. In *Voyage to Venus* Lewis draws an appropriate attitude towards the created things, about which we must not forget they are created, that is, a present to be received, enjoyed and, at the same time, kept (Meilaender 1998, 18). Lewis said that “what we call Man's power over Nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as an instrument” (1984, 34).

In *The Last Battle* there is also an important element in the stories that happens just in this single occasion: there is a battle hand to hand with

the citizens from Calormen in which Eustace is done prisoner; the characters' lives depend on the courage they exhibit in the fight because they can really die. It is felt in the environment that important events are happening and that they determine an unforeseeable end.

Some other characteristics would be the order that exists among the citizens in the sense that everyone knows the place they occupy and nobody tries to rebel against it; the harmonious relationship of humanity with nature; at last, and respecting the influence of the medieval romance, we must say again, nevertheless, that the characters in this period are not heroes, but cruel beings.

MEDIEVAL IDEAS

Romance, constant topic in medieval literature, constitutes the favourite period for Lewis and one of his most important influences. It is a sign that is not manifested in the characters in the same way as they are expressed in knighthood novels because they are not heroes, nor perfect, or strong; it is in the presence of unreal elements, in the action –that is developed in more or less exotic lands– and, lastly, in the aim of this sort of literature, that is, to give a moral lesson, as Lewis recognizes that Modern Ages does not pursue originality but transmit, realice ans synthesize (Huttar, see Schultz 1998, 267-268).

Another influence is that of legend as, and very specially in the last two stories of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the author makes use of the oral tale of legendary facts, as the origin of Narnia and the qualities of Aslan. As an example we can remember that most of the citizens have never sen Aslan, they just know them for the stories told about him.

The book written by Lewis that best expresses his concept of the Middle Ages is *The Allegory of Love. A Study in Medieval Tradition* (1936), book on medieval allegory which represented a tremendous success at its publication –it won the Hawthornden Prize for 1936– it continued for many years to be the standard text on medieval allegory. As Edwards says (1998, 74).

The Allegory of Love [...] may be read as an ingenious detective story in which Lewis, clue by clue, explicated the nature of allegorical form and its

relationship to the paradoxical Medieval love tradition –or as Lewis described its main themes when he submitted the manuscript for publication in 1935, “the birth of allegory and its growth from what it is in Prudentious to what it is in Spenser” and “the birth of the romantic conception of love and the long struggle between its earlier form (the romance of adultery) and its later form (the romance of marriage). [...] In reading the Middle Ages, Lewis called allegory “the subjectivism of an objective age”, by which he means its poets frequently used allegory to present inner conflict of spiritual reality in picture form.

But the main literary activity of Lewis was as an apologist and after his conversion to Christianity in 1931 he dedicated all his life in explaining his discovery. For this reason, he also found the Middle Ages a good period to express these ideas as in *The Allegory of Love* Lewis elaborates a romantic love theory and shows its relevance to Christianity. According to this, Menuge (1997, 214) points out that the period known as the Middle Ages has been called the age of faith or the age of belief and recognizes that our worldview is not the medieval worldview. Lewis realized this was true and considered that the world we live in has lost the unity of mind and heart achieved by the medievals, and has been bifurcated in its reason and imagination.

So, Lewis's interest in medieval love feeds into his work both as a Christian apologist and as a fantasist. Certain images which occur in the stories constitute the tissue if not the bone of the medieval worldview. The science fiction trilogy, for example, expresses the medieval cosmology in which everything above the moon is beneficent and well ordered and guarded by angels, while the world below the moon is torn by war, threatened by tyranny, and assaulted by evil spirits. And such concepts as the cosmic dance recur again and again as Lewis reiterates the medieval view of the divine ordering of nature. Related to nature and from Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* he learned to appreciate in George MacDonald's (1824-1905) phrase, “the Quiet Fulness of Ordinary Nature.” What this means is that, from the Christian point of view, nature is not at all ordinary.

As we can see, the topic of nature is also very important in Lewis' work as he considered it the channel by which we receive hints of the beauty, glory and majesty of god. But this is not the only sense he gave to nature because he defined it as “all that is out there” in his *Miracles*

(1947), that is, the complete material universe. We must remember that he loved walking across the English countryside with a group of his friends and that is why in his fantastic production he dedicates so many lines to the description of the land.

CONCLUSIONS

The main aspects Lewis collects from the Middle Ages in his fantastic production are, on one hand, the reflection of nature and the natural order; this is linked to his knowledge of the environment, setting and characteristics of that period shown in different episodes. But this is not reflected in the characters, as they don't possess the common qualities in the knights of this period and, when reflected as in the case of Reepicheep, they are exaggerated.

On the other hand, what Lewis most liked of this period is the epistemology of the Middle Ages, that is, rational faith because for the Middle Ages the proper study of humankind was God, and humankind was equipped by the Creator for that study.

To end with and in reference to the concept of allegory that has been so much discussed, Lewis stated in *The Allegory of Love* (1992, 44) that "allegory, in some sense, belongs not to medieval man but to man, or even to mind, in general. It is of the very nature of thought and language to represent what is immaterial in picturable terms".

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