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## What C. S. Lewis Took From E. Nesbit

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

## What C. S. Lewis Took From E. Nesbit

*Mervyn Nicholson (bio)*

For anyone who knows the Narnia books of C. S. Lewis, there is a story by E. Nesbit in her collection *The Magic World* that immediately stands out. It is called "The Aunt and Amabel"; it tells of a girl who damages a special

flower-bed without meaning to. Her aunt punishes her by confining her to a "bedroom, the one with the wardrobe with a looking-glass in it" (228). The only furnishings described are a bed—and a wardrobe. Then Amabel finds a railway timetable that lists a peculiar destination: "the extraordinary name 'Whereyouwantogoto.'" Its nearest "station was 'Bigwardrobeinspareroom'" (224). Intrigued, she opens the wardrobe door and steps inside, like Lucy in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. And like Lucy, Amabel discovers something in it besides coats—in her case a crystal cave. Lucy finds snowy woods, not a cave—but the faun Lucy meets immediately takes her to a cave. In Nesbit, Amabel finds a sumptuous place where she is lovingly welcomed by "The People Who Understand" (231). With their help she and her aunt are reconciled, exchanging forgiveness in a manner characteristic of Nesbit. The motif of *human* reconciliation is crucial. But the obvious point is that the motifs found in "The Aunt and Amabel" are also found in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Lewis was deeply indebted to E. Nesbit, not only in matters of plot, character and image, but even in small details of phrasing. When he set out to write his *Chronicles of Narnia*, he thought of them as being Nesbit books: as belonging to a type or genre practised by E. Nesbit.<sup>1</sup> In many respects the Narnia books begin where the Nesbit books leave off: *The Magician's Nephew*, the first of the series, begins with an allusion to Nesbit. Much has been said about Lewis's place in the tradition of Christian romance and apologetic and of his links to Christian writers like MacDonald and Williams, but this emphasis has obscured his debt to non-Christian and even anti-Christian writers. Of these, E. Nesbit is the most important. What is striking is that Lewis, a belligerently orthodox Christian, who saw his imaginative writing as performing a quasi-evangelistic function, should have so much in common with a writer like Nesbit, [End Page 16] who was a Fabian Socialist with occult interests.<sup>2</sup>

In both writers, a division between two kinds of world is evident: the ordinary one of adult and childhood experience (the so-called "real" world), and an extraordinary world where impossible things happen—impossible by the standards of the "real" world at any rate. For

convenience we may refer to them as, respectively, "This World," and the "Other World." This World is the realm of plausibility or actuality: the social context, normally the society of the author's time. The Other World is a realm of expanded possibilities: the place where anything may happen. Lewis uses the wardrobe as a threshold symbol to link This World with the Other World: the English countryside in 1940 with Narnia under Queen Jadis. E. Nesbit employs the wardrobe image in the same way, to link This World with the Other World, where This World is the realistic place of misunderstanding and punishment in turn-of-the-century England. By contrast the Other World is where such misunderstandings can be dissolved: here the desirable is the obtainable. The brevity of the short story form, however, dictates a very different use of the wardrobe image in Nesbit from what we find in Lewis, where the structure is far bigger and more elaborate. But that Lewis had "The Aunt and Amabel" in mind (however unconsciously) seems clear.

The links are too important to ignore. Both girls, separated from parents before the action begins, find a magic wardrobe. Lucy, under the stress of a competitive game, and Amabel, under the stress of punishment, go through the wardrobe into a world associated with desire (Narnia in one, "*Where you want to go to*" in the other). Lewis adopts not only the image of the magic wardrobe but even the phraseology used by his predecessor. In...

sunlight bright in his white hair" (199). The sun, and the not, see the light, as the masculine authority sits at the center of all value systems in the book.

Suzan Cooper herself defined fantasy as "the merging through which we discover ourselves."

Our writing is haunted by those parts of our experience which we do not understand. As you, child or adult, are drawn to our work, your response comes from that same shadowed land, like us you are escaping into a private one. (22)

That "same shadowed land," as embodied in "The Dark is Rising" sequence, however, appears too precisely a map of the binary opposition between male and female, the territory of patriarchal authority, where not only the females but also (occasional) males are marginal. Cooper's fantasy sequence is not an exploration of the possibilities of human identity but rather a definition of the limitations adult value systems place on children's characters and actions.

We need, as critics of children's literature, to begin the process of looking closely at the houses which binary divisions of the world work upon: the characterizations and value systems of novels means to teach young readers "escaping into yourselves." Nancy Vegdala's recent article suggests that the gender identity of male characters in fantasy can help both male and female readers to understand the recognized and recognized sides of the novel's nature. When, however, the female's nature is represented only in its weakest/nichest version, such a mutually liberating exercise is not possible. "The figures of the Dark usually show us what one female writer fears in men, but comparable balance in the portrayal of females, good or bad, is lacking." "The Dark is Rising" sequence, despite its promising moments, disappears, not because light and Dark are polar but because male and female are polarized, late in the sequence. Will Stanton remembers a piece of "carrion from the Civil War. Though it coagulates the willow tree, its conventionally gendered images and casting situation characterize all too aptly Cooper's fantasy work."

"Sitting on a young tree, phantoms of a loving woman, and bitter to the taste, as all enchantments in the end must be" (*Silver on the Tree*, 55).

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- Mary Harris Vander is an Associate Professor of English at Indiana University Northwest. She has published articles on medieval tales for children, children's literature, and juvenile texts. She is a frequent book reviewer for the *Chicago Tribune*.

## What C. S. Lewis Took From E. Nesbit

by Andrew Nicholson

For anyone who knows the Narnia books of C. S. Lewis, there is a story by E. Nesbit in her collection *The Magic World that I read when I was six*. It is called "The Aunt and Amabel," it tells of a girl who damages a special four-bed without meaning to. Her aunt punishes her by confining her to a "bedroom, the one with the wardrobe with a looking glass in it" (228). The only furnishings described are a bed—and a wardrobe. Then Amabel finds a "neatly made table with a peculiar destination: 'the extra bed name 'Whispering-unicorn.'" Its nearest "status" was "Bignimbobobopoom" (229). Inquisitive, she opens the wardrobe door and steps inside, like Lucy in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. And like Lucy, Amabel discovers something in it best be kept "in her case or a crystal case. Lucy finds snowy woods, not a cave—but the four Lucy meets immediately, taken her to a cave. In Nesbit, Amabel finds a wondrous place where she is lovingly welcomed by "The People Who Chatter and" (231). With their help she and her aunt are reconciled, exchanging

forgiveness in a manner characteristic of Nesbit. The result of Amabel's reconciliation is great. But the obvious point is that the motifs found in "The Aunt and Amabel" are also found in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Lewis was deeply indebted to E. Nesbit, not only in matters of plot, character and image, but even in small details of phrasing. When he set out to write his *Chronicles of Narnia*, he thought of them as being Nesbit books as belonging to a type or genre practised by E. Nesbit.<sup>1</sup> In many respects the Narnia books begin where the Nesbit books leave off: *The Magician's Nephew*, the first of the series, begins with an allusion to Nesbit. Much has been said about Lewis's place in the tradition of Christian romance and apologetic and of his links to Christian writers like MacDonald and Williams, but this emphasis has obscured his debt to and affinity with early anti-CLARE writers. Of these, E. Nesbit is the most important. What best links is that Lewis, a self-proclaimed orthodox Christian, who saw his imaginative writing as performing a quasi-apologetic function, should have so much in common with a writer like Nesbit.



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