



Fantasy as Escapism and Ethical Instruction in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*

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Abstract

*Fantasy literature has long functioned as both a means of imaginative escape and a powerful medium for ethical instruction, particularly in children's and young adult narratives. This paper offers a comparative analysis of C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* to examine how fantasy operates simultaneously as escapism and moral pedagogy. Through the creation of alternative magical worlds—Narnia and Hogwarts—the novels provide readers with a temporary release from ordinary reality while embedding strong ethical frameworks that guide character development and reader interpretation. Lewis's narrative employs explicit moral symbolism and Christian allegory to convey themes of sacrifice, redemption, and obedience, whereas Rowling adopts a more secular and experiential ethical model grounded in choice, friendship, courage, and responsibility. By comparing narrative structures, character arcs, and moral conflicts, the study highlights how both texts balance enchantment with instruction. The paper argues that while escapism attracts young readers, it is ethical instruction that gives these fantasy narratives lasting educational and cultural significance. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that fantasy literature serves not merely as entertainment but as a formative space for ethical imagination and moral awareness.*

Keywords: Fantasy literature; Escapism; Ethical instruction; Children's literature; C. S. Lewis; J. K. Rowling; Moral education

I. Introduction

Fantasy literature is a literary genre that constructs imaginative worlds beyond the limits of ordinary reality, often governed by magical laws, mythical beings, and extraordinary events. As J. R. R. Tolkien explains in his seminal essay *On Fairy-Stories*, fantasy enables the creation of a “Secondary World” into which the reader enters with imaginative belief, experiencing wonder, enchantment, and meaning beyond the real world (Tolkien 37). Such literature is not merely escapist fiction but a serious artistic mode that reshapes reality through imagination. One of the central functions of fantasy literature is escapism, which allows readers, especially children—to temporarily withdraw from the pressures, anxieties, and constraints of everyday life. Tolkien defends escapism as a legitimate and necessary function of fantasy, arguing that it offers “recovery, escape, and consolation” rather than mere avoidance of reality (Tolkien 37).

67). However, alongside escapism, fantasy also operates as a powerful tool for ethical instruction, embedding moral values within symbolic narratives. Northrop Frye notes that myth and romance, the foundations of fantasy, are deeply connected to moral imagination, shaping readers' perceptions of good, evil, responsibility, and justice (Frye 186).

Children's fantasy literature holds particular importance in moral and psychological development. According to Bruno Bettelheim, fantasy narratives help children confront inner fears, moral dilemmas, and emotional conflicts in symbolic form, thereby contributing to psychological growth and ethical understanding (*The Uses of Enchantment* 5). Through identification with young protagonists, readers learn values such as courage, loyalty, sacrifice, and the consequences of moral choices. Thus, fantasy becomes a formative space where imagination and ethics intersect.

The purpose of this comparative research paper is to examine how fantasy functions simultaneously as escapism and ethical instruction in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950) and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997). Though written in different cultural and historical contexts, both novels introduce child protagonists who enter magical worlds that test their moral integrity and personal responsibility. The study seeks to explore similarities and differences in their ethical frameworks and narrative strategies.

C. S. Lewis, a prominent British writer and Christian apologist, employs fantasy as a medium for moral and spiritual instruction. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the first published novel of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, presents a richly allegorical world where themes of sacrifice, redemption, and obedience are central. In contrast, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, the first novel in the *Harry Potter* series, offers a more secular and experiential moral vision, emphasizing choice, friendship, courage, and resistance to evil. Together, these works demonstrate how fantasy literature can entertain young readers while simultaneously shaping ethical consciousness.

II. Fantasy as Escapism

Fantasy literature primarily functions as a means of temporary escape from worldly and psychological constraints, allowing readers to move beyond the limitations of everyday reality marked by social pressures, fear, and uncertainty. J. R. R. Tolkien strongly defends escapism in fantasy, arguing that it is not an act of evasion but a legitimate response to the confines of the modern world. He asserts that fantasy offers "escape from death and the fear of death," as well as from injustice and limitation (Tolkien 67). For child readers in particular, such escape provides imaginative relief and emotional freedom.

A defining feature of escapist fantasy is the entry into a magical world through a symbolic threshold. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the wardrobe serves as a portal that transports the Pevensie children from war-torn England into the enchanted land of Narnia. This sudden transition from an ordinary domestic space to a snow-covered magical kingdom exemplifies the escapist power of fantasy, as it allows readers to cross effortlessly from reality into wonder. Lewis deliberately uses a familiar object to emphasize the accessibility of imagination and escape, suggesting that magic may exist just beyond the visible world.

Similarly, in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Platform 9 ¾ functions as a concealed gateway between the non-magical and magical worlds. Harry's passage through the barrier at King's Cross station symbolizes his escape from neglect, emotional isolation, and a restrictive upbringing into a space of belonging and possibility. Rowling's magical threshold reinforces the idea that fantasy provides not only physical escape but also psychological liberation, offering identity, recognition, and hope to the marginalized child protagonist.

Both novels construct alternative realities that are governed by their own rules, moral systems, and magical logic. Narnia and Hogwarts represent imaginative spaces where the ordinary laws

of reality are suspended, enabling readers to experience freedom, empowerment, and transformation. According to Farah Mendlesohn, fantasy worlds invite readers into “secondary realities” that create immersion and imaginative participation, a key component of escapist pleasure (Mendlesohn 59). These worlds allow young readers to imagine possibilities beyond their immediate circumstances.

The role of wonder, magic, and adventure is central to sustaining reader engagement. Magical creatures, spells, quests, and heroic challenges stimulate curiosity and excitement, making ethical engagement enjoyable rather than didactic. Adventure narratives in both texts sustain narrative momentum while fostering emotional investment. As Maria Nikolajeva observes, children’s fantasy captivates readers by blending excitement with emotional security, allowing them to explore danger within a safe imaginative framework (Nikolajeva 32). Thus, escapism in fantasy is not passive withdrawal but an active imaginative experience that prepares readers for deeper moral reflection.

III. Ethical Frameworks in the Two Texts

Both *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* are structured around clear moral binaries, particularly the opposition between good and evil. In Lewis’s Narnia, the ethical universe is sharply polarized: Aslan embodies goodness, truth, and moral order, while the White Witch represents tyranny, deception, and moral corruption. Evil is externalized and personified, making moral distinctions easily recognizable for young readers. Similarly, Rowling’s novel establishes a conflict between good and evil through the opposition of Harry and Lord Voldemort, though Voldemort remains largely absent in the first novel, functioning as a looming moral threat rather than a constant presence.

A significant aspect of the ethical framework in both texts is the representation of authority and moral order. In *Narnia*, Aslan functions as a moral and spiritual guide whose authority is unquestioned and rooted in sacrifice and compassion. His role reflects a transcendent moral order, where ethical laws are absolute and universal. Lewis presents morality as something to be obeyed rather than negotiated, reinforcing a stable ethical structure (Lewis).

In contrast, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* presents Albus Dumbledore as a moral mentor rather than a divine authority. Dumbledore encourages ethical reflection, personal choice, and moral reasoning. His assertion that “it is our choices... that show what we truly are” foregrounds individual agency as the foundation of ethical behavior (Rowling 245). Thus, Rowling’s ethical framework is more dialogic and human-centered.

Both texts also explore justice, punishment, and forgiveness. In *Narnia*, justice is restorative and redemptive; punishment is often accompanied by forgiveness, as seen in Edmund’s reintegration into the group. In *Harry Potter*, justice is institutional and procedural, mediated through school rules, house points, and social accountability. Forgiveness exists but is earned through moral courage and loyalty. Together, these frameworks demonstrate differing yet complementary approaches to ethical instruction.

IV. Ethical Instruction in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

Ethical instruction in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is deeply rooted in Christian allegory and moral symbolism. Lewis uses fantasy to translate complex theological ideas into accessible narrative forms for children. Aslan’s willing sacrifice on the Stone Table mirrors the Christian concept of atonement, reinforcing themes of selflessness and redemptive suffering. According to Lewis, moral truths are best conveyed through story, where values are “caught” rather than formally taught (*Of Other Worlds*).

Central to the novel are the themes of sacrifice, redemption, and obedience. Aslan’s death and resurrection reaffirm the triumph of good over evil and the moral law that self-sacrifice leads to renewal. Obedience to moral authority is portrayed as necessary for harmony, while disobedience results in chaos and suffering.

The character of Edmund Pevensie serves as the primary vehicle for ethical instruction. His betrayal of his siblings for selfish desire aligns him with the White Witch, symbolizing moral fallenness. However, Edmund's repentance and subsequent forgiveness highlight Lewis's emphasis on moral regeneration rather than permanent condemnation. His transformation illustrates that ethical failure can be corrected through remorse and grace.

Additionally, the novel stresses collective responsibility and kingship. The Pevensie children are crowned kings and queens not merely as rulers but as moral guardians of Narnia. Leadership is portrayed as service-oriented and ethically bound, reinforcing Lewis's vision of morality as communal and hierarchical.

V. Ethical Instruction in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*

In contrast to Lewis's allegorical approach, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* promotes secular ethics and humanist values grounded in lived experience. Rowling's moral universe emphasizes personal choice, empathy, and social responsibility rather than divine command. Ethical growth occurs through interaction, friendship, and trial rather than symbolic sacrifice. Key virtues such as friendship, courage, loyalty, and choice shape the moral instruction of the novel. Harry, Ron, and Hermione's friendship becomes the foundation for ethical action, demonstrating that moral strength often arises from cooperation and trust. Courage is not portrayed as fearlessness but as the willingness to act despite fear.

Harry's ethical development is evident in his moral decisions and resistance to power. He repeatedly rejects the lure of ambition and dominance, choosing humility and fairness instead. His refusal to seek personal glory and his willingness to risk punishment for the greater good position him as a moral agent rather than a predestined savior.

The novel also presents Hogwarts as an institutional moral training space, where ethical values are learned through rules, mentorship, and social consequences. While imperfect, the institution encourages reflection, discipline, and accountability. As Maria Nikolajeva notes, such environments allow young readers to understand morality as situational and negotiated rather than absolute (Nikolajeva 141).

VI. Escapism versus Ethical Instruction: A Comparative Analysis

Both *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* share notable similarities in narrative structure and moral teaching, despite differences in tone and ideological orientation. Each novel follows a young protagonist's movement from an ordinary, restrictive world into a magical realm where ethical challenges replace mundane concerns. The use of portals, the wardrobe and Platform 9¾, signals a transition not only into fantasy but also into moral testing grounds. In both texts, escapism functions as an initial attraction, drawing readers into imaginative worlds that gradually reveal ethical responsibilities. Moral instruction is embedded within adventure, ensuring that lessons emerge organically rather than through overt didacticism.

However, the two works differ significantly in their ethical orientation, particularly in the contrast between allegorical morality and experiential morality. Lewis's *Narnia* operates through a clearly allegorical framework rooted in Christian ethics. Moral values are absolute and pre-determined, with Aslan representing divine goodness and the White Witch embodying evil. Ethical lessons are conveyed symbolically, and moral truths exist independently of individual choice. As Northrop Frye observes, allegorical narratives tend to externalize moral conflict, making ethical meanings transparent and authoritative (Frye 89).

In contrast, Rowling's *Harry Potter* presents a more experiential and situational ethical model, where morality is shaped by personal decisions, relationships, and consequences. Harry's moral growth is not guided by prophecy or divine command but by lived experience and conscious choice. Dumbledore's guidance emphasizes moral reasoning rather than obedience, reinforcing a humanist ethical vision. This experiential approach allows readers to engage with

ethical dilemmas that resemble real-life situations, making morality more negotiable and psychologically grounded.

Both authors maintain a careful balance between entertainment and instruction. Lewis integrates moral teaching through mythic symbolism, ensuring that ethical lessons do not disrupt narrative enchantment. Rowling, meanwhile, embeds moral values within school life, friendships, and conflicts, allowing instruction to emerge through action and dialogue. In both cases, escapism does not undermine ethics; rather, it enhances receptivity by creating emotional involvement. Tolkien argues that fantasy succeeds when moral insight arises naturally from story rather than from explicit moralizing (Tolkien 56), a principle evident in both novels.

Finally, reader engagement and ethical internalization differ in mode but not in impact. Lewis's clear moral binaries facilitate ethical clarity, particularly for younger readers, enabling straightforward internalization of values such as obedience, sacrifice, and forgiveness. Rowling's morally complex environment encourages reflection, empathy, and ethical self-awareness. As Maria Nikolajeva notes, children internalize ethical values more effectively when they identify with characters facing moral choices rather than abstract principles (Nikolajeva 147). Thus, while *Narnia* guides readers through symbolic certainty, *Harry Potter* invites them into ethical participation. Together, the novels demonstrate that fantasy can function simultaneously as escapist pleasure and a powerful medium of moral formation.

VII. Conclusion

This comparative study has examined *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* to understand how fantasy literature functions simultaneously as escapism and ethical instruction. The analysis has shown that both novels employ imaginative worlds and adventurous narratives to draw young readers away from the constraints of ordinary reality, while gradually immersing them in moral challenges that shape character and consciousness. Escapism in these texts serves not as an end in itself but as a narrative strategy that prepares readers for ethical engagement.

The study reasserts the dual function of fantasy as both imaginative liberation and moral formation. While the magical worlds of Narnia and Hogwarts offer wonder, excitement, and freedom, they are equally structured as ethical spaces where values such as courage, responsibility, loyalty, sacrifice, and justice are tested and affirmed. Lewis's narrative relies on allegorical clarity and a stable moral order, whereas Rowling's approach foregrounds experiential ethics grounded in choice and interpersonal relationships. Despite these differences, both authors successfully integrate ethical instruction within entertaining narratives.

C. S. Lewis and J. K. Rowling make significant contributions to children's ethical education through their distinct yet complementary approaches. Lewis introduces young readers to moral absolutes through symbolic storytelling, emphasizing redemption, obedience, and self-sacrifice. Rowling, on the other hand, presents morality as situational and evolving, encouraging readers to reflect on personal choice, empathy, and resistance to misuse of power. Together, their works demonstrate how fantasy can accommodate both traditional and contemporary ethical frameworks.

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