

NARRATIVE ARCHITECTURE AND ALLEGORICAL ENCODING IN THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: A STRUCTURALIST ANALYSIS

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Abstract: This paper undertakes a structuralist reading of C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, focusing on *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Prince Caspian*, and *The Last Battle*. While a substantial body of scholarship treats the series primarily as Christian allegory, this reading positions it instead as a signifying system built from binary oppositions, recurring narrative functions, and mythic archetypes. Drawing on Claude Lévi-Strauss's account of binary opposition, Vladimir Propp's morphology of the folktale, and Roland Barthes's concept of narrative codes, the study asks how Lewis's narrative architecture organizes meaning independently of, though not in isolation from, its theological content. A central problem addressed here concerns the gap between allegorical and structuralist readings of *Narnia*: existing scholarship tends to debate whether the series is allegory, "supposal," or myth, but rarely applies a sustained structuralist method to explain how the narrative produces its effects of coherence and moral legibility. The paper argues that the recurring pattern of disruption, quest, and restoration, combined with oppositions such as order/chaos and faith/doubt, constitutes a semiotic architecture that operates prior to and alongside allegorical interpretation. The discussion further situates Aslan's death and returns within Proppian categories of villainy and liquidation rather than treating the episode solely as theological symbol, and considers how this structural reading compares with, and departs from, existing *Narnia* scholarship, including debates over Lewis's own rejection of allegory. The paper concludes that structuralist analysis offers an underused but productive framework for understanding how children's fantasy fiction organizes ideological meaning, and it proposes directions for extending this method to comparative fantasy narratives.

Index Terms - Structuralism; Narrative Architecture; Allegorical Encoding; Binary Opposition; C. S. Lewis; Children's Fantasy Fiction

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

C. S. Lewis's seven-volume *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956) occupies an unusual position in twentieth-century fantasy writing. It is read by children as adventure fiction, by Christian audiences as a restatement of biblical narrative, and by literary critics as a case study in myth, symbol, and genre. This range of reception is itself worth pausing on: a text that can sustain such different readings is not simply telling one story with one meaning attached to it. It is organized in a way that makes multiple readings possible at once. Structuralist literary theory, associated with Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropological work on myth and Roland Barthes's semiotic study of narrative, offers a way of describing this organization without reducing the text to any single interpretive key. Rather than asking what *Narnia* "means," a structuralist approach asks how its parts are arranged, what oppositions and repetitions structure the plot, and how these arrangements make certain meanings available to readers.

Lewis's own comments on the series complicate a straightforwardly allegorical reading. In letters to child readers, Lewis distinguished his method from allegory proper, describing Aslan's story as a "supposal" rather than a one-to-one symbolic substitution: an imaginative exercise in asking what the Incarnation might look like if it occurred in another world, rather than a coded restatement of it (Lewis, *Letters to Children*). This distinction has generated a long-running critical debate, most recently revisited by Bergen, who argues that the series occupies a middle ground between allegory and supposal rather than fitting cleanly into either category. What this debate has not fully addressed, however, is the narrative machinery that makes such multiple readings possible in the first place: the level of plot structure, character function, and symbolic code that operates beneath both the allegorical and the supposal readings. It is this structural level that the present paper takes as its object of study.

1.2 Statement of the Research Problem and Research Gap

The critical literature on *Narnia* is extensive but unevenly distributed. A large proportion of existing scholarship is theological or biographical in orientation, tracing parallels between Aslan and Christ, or documenting Lewis's stated intentions in letters and essays. A smaller body of work, represented by scholars such as Rudd and Long, examines the series through the lens

of myth criticism or in comparison with J. R. R. Tolkien's fiction. What remains comparatively underdeveloped is a sustained application of structuralist narrative theory, in the specific sense developed by Lévi-Strauss, Propp, and Barthes, to the Narnian corpus. Existing structuralist references to Narnia tend to be gestural: a critic will note in passing that the series relies on "binary oppositions" or "archetypal patterns" without working through Propp's functional sequence or Barthes's codes in relation to specific episodes across multiple novels.

This creates a research gap at the intersection of two established but separate conversations: the theological/allegorical debate over Narnia's meaning, and the formal, structuralist study of narrative more broadly. The problem this paper addresses, therefore, is not whether Narnia is allegorical, a question that has been debated at length elsewhere, but how its narrative architecture is built, and what a structuralist description of that architecture can add to a debate that has so far been conducted mostly in theological and biographical terms.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

- To examine the narrative architecture of *The Chronicles of Narnia* using the structuralist frameworks of Lévi-Strauss, Propp, and Barthes.
- To identify and analyze the binary oppositions that organize conflict and resolution across the selected novels.
- To assess how mythic and archetypal patterns, particularly the figure of Aslan, function as recurring narrative units rather than solely as theological symbols.
- To situate the allegory/supposal debate within a structuralist account of allegorical encoding.
- To compare the findings of this structuralist reading with existing scholarship on Narnia and identify the specific contribution of this approach.

1.4 Scope of the Study

The study is limited to close textual analysis of three novels from the series: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Prince Caspian*, and *The Last Battle*. These three were selected because they represent, respectively, the initial disruption-and-restoration pattern that establishes the series' narrative grammar, a repetition of that pattern under different political circumstances, and the eschatological conclusion of the sequence. The study does not attempt a comprehensive survey of all seven novels, nor does it engage with the 2005-2010 film adaptations, reader-response data, or publishing history. Theological questions are addressed only to the extent that they bear on the structuralist argument; the paper does not take a position on the doctrinal accuracy of the Aslan-Christ parallel.

1.5 Expected Outcome

The study is expected to demonstrate that a structuralist reading can account for features of the Narnian texts, their moral legibility, their capacity to sustain multiple interpretive communities, and their structural repetition across seven separate novels, that existing theological and biographical scholarship addresses only indirectly. It is also expected to clarify the relationship between structural analysis and allegorical interpretation, showing that the two are compatible rather than competing accounts of the same text, and to identify specific points at which the series departs from or exceeds the models proposed by Propp and Lévi-Strauss.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature relevant to this study falls into four broad strands: foundational structuralist theory; theological and symbolic readings of Narnia; the allegory/supposal debate; and comparative fantasy scholarship situating Lewis alongside Tolkien and other writers of the period.

2.1 Structuralist Narrative Theory

Structuralism as a method for analysing narrative developed from Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics and was extended to anthropology by Lévi-Strauss, who argued that myths across cultures are organized around binary oppositions, such as nature/culture or life/death, and that meaning arises from the relations between these terms rather than from any single element in isolation (Lévi-Strauss). Vladimir Propp's earlier *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928; trans. 1968) approached narrative from a different angle, proposing that Russian folktales share a fixed sequence of thirty-one narrative "functions", such as villainy, the hero's departure, and the liquidation of lack, that recur regardless of which characters perform them. Although Propp's model was developed for a specific and limited folktale corpus, later scholars have extended it to a wide range of narrative forms, including literary fiction, and treat it as a durable tool for identifying the deep grammar of a story independent of its surface content. Barthes, writing after both Lévi-Strauss and Propp, proposed in his structural analysis of narrative that texts operate through "codes", proairetic, hermeneutic, symbolic, cultural, and semic, that guide readers toward certain interpretations. Together, these three theorists provide the methodological vocabulary this paper uses: opposition (Lévi-Strauss), function (Propp), and code (Barthes).

2.2 Theological and Symbolic Readings of Narnia

The dominant strand of Narnia scholarship reads the series through its Christian content. Numerous commentators have traced detailed parallels between Aslan's death at the Stone Table and the crucifixion, and between his return and the resurrection, extending even to secondary details such as the presence of Susan and Lucy at the site of Aslan's death. Shober's study of leonine imagery across world literature and religious iconography situates Lewis's choice of a lion for Aslan within a much older tradition of using lions to signify noble or divine authority, arguing that this iconographic history helped make the lion a plausible vehicle for the Christ-figure in the first place. This body of work is valuable for establishing the density and historical depth of Christian

and symbolic reference in the text, but it tends to treat the parallels as a decoding exercise, matching Narnian elements to their real-world or iconographic referents, rather than asking how the narrative is structured so as to make such decoding possible and satisfying for the reader in the first place.

2.3 The Allegory and Supposal Debate

Lewis repeatedly and explicitly rejected the label of allegory for the Narnia books, describing Aslan instead as a "supposal": an answer to the question of what Christ might be like if he became incarnate in an imagined world, rather than a symbolic stand-in for Christ in the manner of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Bergen's recent reassessment of this question argues that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* resists a clean division between allegory and supposal, and that Lewis's own theoretical distinction does not fully account for how the text behaves for readers who are unaware of, or indifferent to, his stated intentions. This debate is central to Narnia scholarship, but it is conducted almost entirely at the level of authorial intention and reader interpretation. It does not, on its own, explain the narrative mechanisms, repetition, opposition, functional sequence, that make both allegorical and non-allegorical readings available from the same text. This is precisely the gap the present study addresses.

2.4 Comparative and Formalist Fantasy Scholarship

A smaller strand of scholarship situates Narnia in relation to other fantasy fiction of the period, particularly Tolkien's work. Long's account of Tolkien's own reservations about *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, reservations that centred on what Tolkien saw as an inconsistent and overly didactic secondary world, indicates that even Lewis's closest literary contemporaries were divided over how well the series' narrative and symbolic levels cohered. Rudd's discussion of "myth-making" in the Narnia series raises a related concern from a more sceptical angle, questioning the risk that structural or mythic readings can flatten the series' internal tensions and treat contested critical claims as settled fact. These formalist and comparative studies provide a useful corrective to purely theological readings, but they generally address structure and myth in impressionistic terms rather than through a systematic application of Proppian or Barthesian categories.

2.5 Synthesis and Identified Gap

Read together, this literature shows sustained interest in Narnia's symbolic density (2.2), a live and unresolved debate over its allegorical status (2.3), and an emerging but underdeveloped interest in its formal and comparative dimensions (2.4). No study reviewed here applies Lévi-Strauss's oppositional model, Propp's functional sequence, and Barthes's account of narrative codes together, across more than one Narnia novel, in order to describe the structural conditions that make the theological and allegorical readings possible. This is the gap the present study is designed to fill, and it is on this basis that the paper's claim to novelty rests, not in proposing a new theological interpretation of Aslan, but in supplying the structural account that existing interpretive debates have so far assumed rather than demonstrated.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, textual research design based on close reading, informed by structuralist literary theory. It is doctrinal-literary rather than empirical in nature: the primary data are the published texts of the selected novels, read against the analytical categories developed by Lévi-Strauss, Propp, and Barthes, and supported by secondary critical literature.

3.2 Selection Criteria for Primary Texts

Three novels were purposively selected from the seven-volume series: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), *Prince Caspian* (1951), and *The Last Battle* (1956). The selection criteria were as follows. First, narrative position: the three texts correspond to the beginning, middle, and end of the series' internal chronology and thematic arc, moving from initial disruption and restoration, through a repetition of that pattern under altered political conditions, to final apocalyptic resolution. Second, critical density: each of the three has generated substantial independent scholarship, allowing the present analysis to be checked against existing interpretive claims. Third, structural comparability: all three foreground a disruption-quest-restoration pattern, which allows the Proppian functional analysis to be applied consistently across texts of different length and tone. Novels outside this selection, such as *The Magician's Nephew* and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, are referenced only where necessary to support claims about the series' overall structural unity.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis proceeds through three linked stages, corresponding to the three theorists introduced in the literature review. The first stage identifies binary oppositions operative in each novel (for example, good/evil, order/chaos, faith/doubt) following Lévi-Strauss's model of myth as a system of mediated oppositions. The second stage maps episodes from each novel onto Propp's sequence of narrative functions, in particular villainy, departure, the donor sequence, struggle, and liquidation of lack, in order to establish whether and how the novels reproduce a stable functional grammar. The third stage applies Barthes's account of narrative codes to identify how the texts cue readers toward specific interpretive possibilities, including but not limited to the theological reading, without foreclosing others.

3.4 Method of Analysis

Analysis was conducted through iterative close reading of the primary texts, with structural features tabulated across the three novels to identify points of convergence and divergence. Claims made in this paper are cross-checked, where relevant, against

the secondary scholarship reviewed above, particularly where that scholarship offers an alternative or competing account (for example, Bergen's resistance to a clean allegory/supposal division, or Rudd's caution against treating mythic readings as settled).

3.5 Limitations

The study is limited by its focus on three of seven novels and by its reliance on published English-language criticism; it does not draw on reader-response data or reception studies, and it does not engage with adaptation studies. Structuralist method itself has a well-documented limitation, noted by post-structuralist critics, in that it can understate historical context and authorial agency in favour of synchronic pattern; this limitation is addressed directly in section 5.7 rather than set aside.

4. NOVELTY AND CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of three distinct structuralist frameworks, Lévi-Strauss's binary opposition, Propp's narrative functions, and Barthes's narrative codes, into a single sustained reading applied consistently across three Narnia novels rather than a single text. Existing scholarship, as shown in the literature review, tends either to remain within a theological-symbolic register (documenting Aslan-Christ parallels) or to gesture toward structure without demonstrating it systematically. By contrast, this paper treats the allegory/supposal debate not as the endpoint of analysis but as a phenomenon to be explained: it asks what narrative architecture allows Narnia to support both a Christian and a non-Christian reading simultaneously, and answers this question with specific reference to Proppian functional repetition and Barthesian code layering. In doing so, the paper also responds directly to Bergen's finding that the allegory/supposal distinction does not fully resolve how the text behaves for readers, by supplying the structural, rather than internationalist, explanation that Bergen's account leaves open.

5. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

5.1 Structuralism and Narrative Theory Applied to Narnia

Read as a structuralist object, Narnia is less a single story than a system for generating stories according to a shared grammar. Each of the three selected novels opens with a state of order that has been, or is about to be, disrupted: the absence of spring under the White Witch's rule, the usurpation of the Narnian throne by Miraz, and the infiltration of a false Aslan under Shift the Ape. Each disruption is followed by the arrival of outsiders, children from England, who serve a function comparable to Propp's "hero" category, not because they are morally superior to Narnian characters but because their arrival is the narrative event that triggers the sequence of quest and restoration. This repetition across three novels of different tone and scale suggests that the disruption-quest-restoration sequence functions as the series' basic narrative unit, in the sense Propp intended: a stable function that persists regardless of which characters or settings instantiate it.

5.2 Binary Oppositions as Narrative Foundation

Lévi-Strauss's model of myth as mediated opposition is directly applicable to the series' central conflicts. The good/evil opposition, embodied in Aslan and the White Witch, is not merely a moral contrast but, as the series develops it, an ontological one: Narnia under the Witch is a world in which it is "always winter and never Christmas", a formulation that encodes the order/chaos opposition in seasonal rather than explicitly moral terms. This is a structurally significant choice. By displacing the good/evil opposition onto the more neutral axis of season and climate, Lewis allows the narrative to resolve the conflict through natural restoration (the return of spring) rather than through explicit doctrinal statement, which is part of why the text can be read by children with no theological framework at all. A second opposition, faith versus doubt, is developed through the contrast between Lucy, whose belief in Narnia and in Aslan is repeatedly vindicated, and Edmund, whose scepticism and self-interest lead him toward betrayal before his own restoration. Unlike the order/chaos axis, this opposition is resolved not by natural process but by individual choice and forgiveness, which introduces a second, distinct logic of resolution operating alongside the first. The coexistence of these two resolution logics, natural/cyclical and moral/personal, is one respect in which the series exceeds a simple binary model and requires the more flexible framework of narrative codes discussed in 5.5.

5.3 Proppian Functions and Mythic Archetypes

Mapped onto Propp's functional sequence, Aslan's death and return in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* can be described independently of its theological content as an instance of villainy (the Witch claims Edmund's life under the Deep Magic), a substitutionary sacrifice functioning as a version of Propp's "struggle" and "branding" functions, and liquidation of the initial lack through Aslan's return and the subsequent battle. This functional description does not compete with the Christ-parallel reading found in the theological literature; rather, it explains why that parallel is available at all. Because the episode already occupies the structural position of sacrifice-and-return within the narrative grammar, it is available to be filled with Christian content without requiring readers to recognize that content in order to follow the story. The same functional slot, differently filled, recurs in *Prince Caspian* (the return of rightful authority after usurpation) and *The Last Battle* (the exposure of the false Aslan and the final restoration through death and passage into "Aslan's country"), supporting the claim that this is a structural constant of the series rather than a one-off theological device.

5.4 Allegory, Supposal, and Allegorical Encoding: Revisiting the Debate

The analysis in 5.2 and 5.3 bears directly on the allegory/supposal debate reviewed in section 2.3. Lewis's own distinction rests on authorial intention: he insists that he did not set out to represent Christ symbolically but to imagine what Christ's incarnation might look like in another world. Bergen's reassessment questions whether this distinction is recoverable from the text alone, without recourse to Lewis's letters. The structuralist reading developed here suggests a way of accounting for both positions without adjudicating between them. Because the sacrifice-and-return sequence occupies a stable functional position (5.3) filled through a

specific set of codes (proairetic: the sequence of actions leading to the sacrifice; symbolic: images of light, stone, and dawn; cultural: readers' prior knowledge of Christian narrative, where present) rather than through explicit one-to-one labelling, the text can support a strong theological reading for readers who bring that cultural code, and a purely mythic or moral reading for those who do not. This is consistent with what this paper terms allegorical encoding: the embedding of interpretable theological content within a structure that does not require that content to function narratively. This differs from strict allegory, in which the coded meaning is a necessary condition of the text's coherence, as in Bunyan, where removing the Christian frame leaves the narrative unintelligible as a moral fable. It also differs from Lewis's own account of supposal, which frames the matter as a question of authorial method rather than textual structure. The contribution of the present reading is to relocate the debate from questions of authorial intention (Lewis's letters) or reader inference (Bergen) to the narrative's functional architecture, which is available to analysis independently of either.

5.5 Semiotic Systems: Symbol, Season, and Setting

Beyond plot function, the series relies on a secondary semiotic system built from recurring images: perpetual winter as spiritual stagnation, the arrival of spring as renewal, stone as a signifier of both law and death (the Stone Table, the Deep Magic inscribed upon it), and the sea or "the east" as a recurring signifier of transcendence, most fully developed in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* and returned to at the close of *The Last Battle*. Barthes's semic and symbolic codes describe how such recurring images accumulate connotation across a text, and across a series that connotation compounds: winter means something different, and more, by the time it recurs in later volumes because readers carry forward its earlier association with the Witch's tyranny. This cumulative symbolic layering is part of what produces the impression of "structural unity" noted by several critics (see 5.6) despite the fact that the seven novels vary considerably in tone, cast, and even internal chronology of composition.

5.6 Structural Unity Across the Seven-Novel Series

Although this study analyses three novels in detail, its findings bear on claims made about the series as a whole. The overarching movement from creation (in *The Magician's Nephew*, composed later but placed first in internal chronology) to apocalypse (*The Last Battle*) gives the series a mythic frame consistent with Lévi-Strauss's observation that myths often work through the mediation of large-scale oppositions such as life and death, or beginning and end. Aslan's presence across all seven novels, in different forms, ages, and narrative roles, functions as the primary device of structural unity, analogous to what Propp would describe as a stable *dramatis persona* occupying the donor and hero-helper roles across otherwise independent tales. This reading supports, and gives a more precise mechanism for, the general observation in prior scholarship that the series is structurally coherent despite its composition history.

5.7 Comparative Discussion and Limits of the Structuralist Model

Set against existing scholarship, this structuralist reading departs from the dominant theological approach by treating the Christ-parallel as one possible content of a structural slot rather than as the text's primary meaning. It is closer in spirit to Rudd's caution against treating any single reading of Narnia's myth as self-evidently correct, since a structuralist account by definition allows multiple contents to occupy the same functional position. At the same time, the comparative material reviewed in 2.4 suggests real limits to this approach. Long's account of Tolkien's objections to Narnia, that its secondary world felt inconsistent and its didactic purpose too exposed, points to a place where structuralist description and literary judgement diverge: a novel can satisfy a stable functional grammar and still be judged, as Tolkien judged it, artistically uneven. Structuralism, in other words, can explain how the text is organized without settling whether that organization is used skilfully in every instance. Similarly, the post-structuralist objection that synchronic, pattern-based analysis can understate historical and biographical context applies here: Lewis's wartime experience, his conversion to Christianity, and the specific children he was writing letters to when he described "supposal" are historical particulars that a purely structural account brackets rather than explains. This paper treats that bracketing as a deliberate limitation of scope, consistent with section 3.5, rather than as a claim that structural analysis supersedes theological, biographical, or historicist readings. The claim advanced here is narrower and, it is argued, more defensible: that a structuralist description of narrative architecture and allegorical encoding is a necessary complement to those other readings, not a replacement for them.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that *The Chronicles of Narnia* can be productively read as a structured system of binary oppositions, recurring narrative functions, and layered symbolic codes, and that this structural level of organization helps explain a feature of the series that purely theological or biographical criticism does not fully address: its capacity to sustain simultaneously a Christian allegorical reading, Lewis's own preferred "supposal" reading, and a straightforward mythic-adventure reading for readers indifferent to either. Applying Lévi-Strauss's model of oppositional myth, Propp's functional grammar, and Barthes's account of narrative codes across three novels spanning the series' beginning, middle, and end, the analysis identified a stable disruption-quest-restoration sequence, showed how the good/evil and faith/doubt oppositions are resolved through distinct logics, and reframed Aslan's death and return as occupying a functional position that is available for, but not dependent on, its Christian content. This reframing, termed here allegorical encoding, offers a way of moving the long-running allegory/supposal debate beyond questions of authorial intention and toward an account of the text's own architecture. The study's scope was deliberately limited to three novels and to formal/structural questions, and it does not claim to displace theological, biographical, or historicist readings of Lewis's work; rather, it proposes that structuralist analysis be treated as a necessary companion to those approaches. Future research might extend the functional and oppositional analysis developed here to the remaining four novels in the series, or apply the same comparative method to Tolkien's Middle-earth fiction, in order to test whether allegorical encoding, as defined here, is a device specific to Lewis or a broader feature of mid-twentieth-century British fantasy writing.

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