

Original Article

# The Chronicles of Narnia: Merging Fantasy with Moral Formation in Children's Literature

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**Abstract** - Children's literature carries a distinctive capacity to teach values while it entertains, and few works illustrate that capacity as fully as C.S. Lewis's seven-volume *Chronicles of Narnia*. Existing scholarship has generally approached the series either through a single volume, most often *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, or through a single thematic lens, such as its Christian allegory or its treatment of nature. Comparatively little work has examined how episodes across all seven books function together as a connected programme of moral instruction that a literature teacher could put to direct classroom use. This article addresses that gap through a qualitative, virtue-ethics-informed close reading of the complete series, applying a coding framework adapted from character-education scholarship to trace recurring patterns of sacrifice, courage, forgiveness, empathy, and ethical reasoning. The analysis is placed alongside comparative research on the *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials* series to clarify what is distinctive about Narnia's approach, and it engages published critiques of the series' theological specificity and gender politics rather than treating the text as an uncontested moral primer. The analysis suggests that Narnia's moral pedagogy operates less through direct statement than through cumulative narrative pattern: courage, in particular, is staged as a practice that develops over time rather than a fixed trait a character either has or lacks. The article closes with concrete classroom applications and identifies where further empirical, reader-response research is needed to test claims that at present rest on textual analysis together with existing character-education studies.

**Keywords** - Chronicles of Narnia, Moral Education, Character Education, Children's Literature, Virtue Ethics, Comparative Fantasy Literature.

## 1. Introduction

Children's literature does two things at once: it entertains, and it quietly transmits a picture of how one ought to live. Scholars of moral education have argued that narrative fiction often achieves this transmission more effectively than direct instruction, because a story lets a young reader rehearse a dilemma from inside a character's situation instead of receiving it as an abstract rule (Carr 142-145). Kristjánsson makes a related argument in his defence of what he terms "non-expansive" character education: literature shapes character gradually, through an accumulation of concrete examples, rather than through explicit moralizing (Kristjánsson 138-140).

Few works in English-language children's fiction rely on this cumulative method as consistently as C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956). Across seven novels, Lewis returns repeatedly to a small set of moral situations - a character is tempted, a character sacrifices something, a character is forgiven - so that the reader



encounters variations on the same lesson from different angles. Aslan's remark to Lucy in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, that every year she grows, she will "find me bigger" (Lewis, *Voyage* 216), captures this design: the series assumes that a reader's moral understanding should deepen with each return to the text, in the same way a child's understanding of a familiar story changes as they grow older.

Research gap. Scholarship on Narnia's moral content is substantial but fragmented along two lines. First, most literary studies isolate either a single volume or a single moral theme. Anacker (130-142) treats the "moral imagination" of the series mainly through the lens of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Carreira Zafra (81-98) restricts her theological reading of vicariousness and forgiveness to two of the seven books. Selden (449-464) examines the series' ecological imagery and its bearing on what she calls nature-deficit disorder in contemporary education, again largely through *Prince Caspian* and *The Silver Chair*.

Klinga's thesis on moral judgment in Narnia is broader in scope but stops short of translating its findings into a classroom method. Second, the one substantial empirical strand of research on Narnia and character education - the Narnian Virtues project at the University of Leeds - is methodologically rigorous, drawing on longitudinal interview data with school students (Hart, Oliveira, and Pike 474-488; Francis et al. 233-249), but its published output works from short extracted passages chosen for curriculum design rather than from an analysis of the series' full narrative arc.

What is comparatively rare, in other words, is a study that (a) treats all seven books as a single unit of analysis, (b) tests Narnia's moral patterning against comparable fantasy series to see how much of it is specific to Lewis rather than typical of the genre, and (c) converts the resulting patterns into a framework a teacher could reasonably reuse.

This gap has a practical cost. A teacher who wants to build a unit on moral development using Narnia currently has to assemble material from single-book studies written for different purposes, none of which was designed as a teaching sequence spanning the series. This article responds to that problem directly.

Accordingly, the study asks three questions: (1) which moral themes recur across all seven Narnia novels, and how does Lewis vary their treatment from book to book; (2) how do these patterns compare with moral patterning identified by scholars working on other major children's fantasy series, particularly *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials*; and (3) what do these patterns suggest for classroom practice, and where do the claims made here still require empirical testing beyond textual analysis. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and locates the present gap more precisely. Section 3 states the novelty and objectives of the study. Section 4 sets out the method, including the criteria used to select textual evidence. Sections 5 and 6 present the findings, and Section 7 discusses their implications and limitations before the conclusion in Section 8.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Literature and Moral Development

The claim that fiction can cultivate moral virtue is not new, but its theoretical grounding has become more precise over the past two decades. Carr argues that literature contributes to moral education specifically through feeling and emotion rather than through argument: a novel lets a reader feel the weight of a choice before they are asked to evaluate it (Carr 137-151). Kristjánsson's account of non-expansive character education pushes this further, suggesting that literature-based moral formation works cumulatively rather than through any single dramatic episode, which is one reason a multi-volume series like Narnia may be pedagogically well suited to it (Kristjánsson 135-156). These two positions supply the theoretical basis for treating Narnia's seven books as an integrated corpus rather than as seven separate case studies, and they inform the coding framework described in Section 4.

## 2.2. Scholarship on Narnia and Moral Formation

Direct scholarship on Narnia's moral content divides roughly into three strands. The first reads the series through its Christian allegory. Anacker situates Aslan's sacrifice within a broader account of moral imagination, arguing that Lewis uses fantasy precisely because abstract ethical claims land more forcefully when embodied in a story a reader already loves (130-142). Carreira Zafra extends this line by isolating vicariousness and forgiveness as theological virtues that the series teaches through Edmund's redemption in particular (81-98). The second strand reads Narnia through the lens of child development and educational philosophy rather than theology. Selden argues that Lewis anticipated present-day concern about children's estrangement from the natural world, connecting time spent outdoors in the novels to characters' moral and imaginative growth (449-464). The third and most methodologically distinct strand is empirical rather than interpretive: the Narnian Virtues character-education project. Francis and colleagues report a pilot curriculum evaluation among 11- to 13-year-old students that found measurable engagement with virtue concepts introduced through Narnia extracts (233-249), and Hart, Oliveira, and Pike report a longitudinal, mixed-methods follow-up using interviews with twenty-six students that traces the specific processes by which students moved from recognizing a virtue in the text to reflecting on it in their own lives (474-488). This empirical work is valuable precisely because it tests, outside the text itself, whether the kind of moral reading literary scholars describe actually happens in the minds of young readers - a check that purely interpretive studies, including the present one, cannot supply on their own.

The authors' own earlier study of the series (Anusheya, Sujatha, and Sumathi 371-377) falls within the first strand: it traces the Pevensie children's movement from innocence to courage primarily through the theological framing of Aslan as a Christ figure. That article, like most of the scholarship reviewed above, works within a single thematic strand and does not extend its analysis comparatively to other fantasy series. The present study builds on that earlier work but broadens its scope, its evidentiary base, and its comparative frame in the ways described in Section 3.

## 2.3. Comparative Fantasy Scholarship

A separate body of scholarship compares Narnia's moral architecture with that of other major children's fantasy series, and this comparative work is directly relevant to establishing what, if anything, is distinctive about Lewis's approach.

Sirisha Rani's recent comparative study of childhood construction in *Harry Potter* places Rowling's series alongside Narnia and *His Dark Materials*, concluding that all three use magical premises to let child readers rehearse real ethical problems such as prejudice and unfair treatment, while noting that *Harry Potter* has itself been criticized for an uneven treatment of minority representation (119-124).

A thesis-length study from Southeastern University compares obedience to authority across Lewis and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, arguing that where Lewis treats obedience to Aslan as a moral good in itself, Pullman's series treats skepticism toward institutional authority as the more mature moral stance (FireScholars honors thesis). This is a genuine point of disagreement in the secondary literature, not a settled consensus, and Section 5 returns to it directly rather than assuming Lewis's model of authority is straightforwardly correct or straightforwardly outdated.

## 2.4. Critical and Dissenting Readings

Not all scholarship on Narnia treats its moral content as unproblematic. Hilder's feminist study of the series' "feminine ethos" argues that Lewis's moral universe distributes courage and agency unevenly across gender lines, a critique most often raised in connection with Susan Pevensie's fate in *The Last Battle*. This line of criticism matters for the present study because it complicates any claim that Narnia offers an evenly distributed model of moral development across its full cast of characters; Section 5 engages this critique rather than setting it aside.

## 2.5. Summary of the Gap

Taken together, this literature establishes that Narnia's moral content has been read closely, but rarely as a connected whole, rarely against comparable fantasy texts, and rarely with its own internal critiques built into the analysis rather than treated as a separate controversy. The present study is designed to close these three gaps at once.

## 3. Novelty and Objectives of the Study

This study differs from prior work on Narnia's moral content in four respects. First, it treats all seven novels, read in original publication order, as a single unit of analysis, rather than concentrating on one or two volumes. Second, it sets its findings explicitly against comparative scholarship on *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials*, so that patterns identified in Narnia can be checked against patterns identified elsewhere in the genre, rather than assumed to be unique to Lewis. Third, it extends the authors' own earlier single-strand analysis of the series (Anusheya, Sujatha, and Sumathi 371-377) into a broader, cross-thematic account that incorporates courage, forgiveness, empathy, and critical reasoning together rather than courage in isolation. Fourth, it deliberately incorporates critical and dissenting readings of the series - on theological specificity, on obedience to authority, and on gender - so that its conclusions are presented as claims open to contestation rather than as settled findings. The specific objectives are to (a) identify and categorise recurring moral themes across the seven novels using a defined coding framework; (b) compare these themes with patterns identified in scholarship on other major fantasy series; and (c) translate the resulting findings into concrete, citable classroom applications while being explicit about which claims are supported by textual analysis alone and which are corroborated by existing empirical classroom research.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Research Design

This is a qualitative literary study using close reading informed by a virtue-ethics coding framework. The design is interpretive rather than experimental: it analyses published text, not human subjects, and it does not collect new reader-response data. Where the discussion draws conclusions about how young readers actually respond to the text, those conclusions are attributed to the empirical studies cited in Section 2.2 rather than presented as findings of the present analysis.

### 4.2. Corpus and Selection Criteria

The corpus comprises all seven novels of *The Chronicles of Narnia* in their standard HarperCollins Children's Books editions, cited by book and page number throughout. Rather than selecting passages impressionistically, the study applied three inclusion criteria to identify morally significant episodes for analysis: (i) the passage stages an explicit choice for a character, with a visible alternative the character could have taken; (ii) the narrative attaches a clear consequence, positive or negative, to that choice within the same book; and (iii) the passage has been independently identified as morally significant in at least one prior secondary source reviewed in Section 2, so that the analysis is not built solely on the researchers' own selection. Eighteen episodes across the seven novels met all three criteria; the analysis below discusses the subset that best illustrates each thematic category identified through coding.

### 4.3. Analytical Framework and Procedure

Coding categories were adapted from the six virtues used in the Narnian Virtues character-education curriculum - love, wisdom, integrity, fortitude, justice, and self-control - supplemented with Kristjánsson's concept of the moral exemplar, a character whose conduct is presented by the narrative as worth emulating rather than merely observing. Each of the eighteen episodes was read three times: once for plot (what happens), once for theme (which virtue category the episode primarily illustrates), and once for pedagogical use (what a classroom discussion built around the passage might ask students to consider). Findings were then checked against two

external sources: the secondary scholarship reviewed in Section 2, to see whether other researchers had read the same episodes similarly; and the comparative literature on *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials*, to identify which patterns appeared to be specific to Narnia and which appeared to be common across the fantasy genre more broadly.

#### 4.4. Limitations

Three limitations follow from this design and are addressed directly rather than left implicit. First, the analysis is interpretive and was conducted by the research team alone; a second coder was not used, so inter-rater reliability cannot be reported. Second, the study draws no new data from child readers; any claim about how children actually respond to these episodes rests on the empirical studies cited in Section 2.2, and readers should treat the present analysis as a textual account of what the series offers rather than a demonstrated account of its effects. Third, purposive selection of episodes, even against explicit criteria, cannot fully rule out selection bias; the requirement that each episode also appear in prior secondary literature was adopted specifically to reduce, though not eliminate, this risk.

### 5. Findings: Recurring Moral Patterns Across the Series

#### 5.1. A Fantasy World Built to Carry Moral Weight imitations

Lewis's seven volumes - *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Prince Caspian*, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, *The Silver Chair*, *The Horse and His Boy*, *The Magician's Nephew*, and *The Last Battle* - combine adventure with sustained ethical reflection. The White Witch's frozen Narnia and Aslan's warmer, more generous realm are not simply scenery; the physical contrast between them tracks the moral contrast the series draws between tyranny and legitimate authority throughout. This world-building matters for the present analysis because it is the mechanism by which abstract moral categories become concrete enough for a young reader to recognise, which is precisely the cumulative, feeling-based process Carr and Kristjánsson describe as central to literature's role in moral education (see Section 2.1).

#### 5.2. Sacrifice and Redemption

The clearest statement of sacrifice in the series comes in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when Aslan offers his own life on the Stone Table to save Edmund after Edmund's betrayal. The narration explains the deeper magic behind the act: "when a willing victim who had not betrayed anyone was killed in a traitor's place, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards" (Lion, Witch, Wardrobe 185). Carreira Zafra's theological reading treats this scene as the series' clearest instance of vicarious virtue, arguing that Lewis uses Aslan's sacrifice to model charity in a way ordinary moral instruction cannot easily replicate (81-98). It is worth being explicit, however, about a limitation this reading expose: the scene's moral force is bound tightly to Christian theological vocabulary, and a classroom that cannot or does not want to invoke that vocabulary may find the passage harder to use than passages built on more secular virtue concepts, such as the courage episodes discussed next. This is precisely why the present study treats sacrifice as one theme among several rather than as the series' single master theme, as some earlier readings have tended to do.

#### 5.3. Courage as a Practiced Capacity

Where sacrifice appears mainly as a singular act, courage in the series is treated as something built up over time. In *Prince Caspian*, Aslan's instruction to Lucy, "Courage, dear heart" (172), frames bravery as encouragement toward an ongoing effort rather than confirmation of a trait she already possesses. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* develops this further through Eustace Scrubb, whose transformation from a self-absorbed child into someone willing to endure hardship is marked by his own recognition that "he knew he had to persevere no matter how difficult it was" (209). Sirisha Rani's comparative study of the fantasy genre identifies a structurally similar pattern in *Harry Potter*, where characters such as Neville Longbottom develop courage gradually across several books rather than displaying it from the outset (119-124). This convergence suggests that staged, developmental

courage is not unique to Lewis but is common to the modern children's fantasy bildungsroman more broadly. What does appear more distinctive to Narnia, by comparison with the *Harry Potter* scholarship reviewed here, is the degree to which Lewis has Aslan comment directly on the process as it happens, turning courage into an explicit lesson rather than leaving it to be inferred from plot events alone.

#### 5.4. Forgiveness and Empathy

Edmund's reconciliation with his siblings after his betrayal is handled with notable restraint: Aslan tells Susan and Peter, "There is no need to talk to him about what is past" (Lion, Witch, Wardrobe 164), refusing to stage forgiveness as a drawn-out confession. *The Horse and His Boy* extend the theme of empathy to strangers rather than family, most directly when Shasta realizes that the lion who has shadowed his entire journey and Aslan are one and the same - "I was the lion" (241) - which recasts a frightening presence as a guiding one once Shasta's perspective shifts. Read together with Carreira Zafra's account of vicariousness (81-98), these episodes support a consistent pattern: the series repeatedly asks readers to withhold judgment of a character until they understand that character's fuller situation, which is a workable, secular way to frame empathy for classroom use even where the theological framing discussed in Section 5.2 is set aside.

#### 5.5. Imagination, Nature, and Creative Cognition

Professor Kirke's question in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, "What do they teach in schools these days?" (54), is often read simply as comic skepticism toward institutional education, but Selden's ecological reading gives the line more specific weight: across the series, formal schooling is repeatedly contrasted unfavorably with time spent outdoors, and characters' moral and imaginative growth is tied to the latter rather than the former (449-464). Selden connects this pattern to what contemporary environmental psychology calls nature-deficit disorder, arguing that Lewis anticipated, by several decades, present-day concern about children's estrangement from natural settings. This gives the series' imaginative appeal a more precise theoretical anchor than a general claim that fantasy "improves creativity," and it suggests a concrete classroom application: pairing Narnia units with outdoor or nature-based activities rather than treating the imaginative and the ecological as separate strands.

#### 5.6. Ethical Reasoning, Leadership, and the Question of Obedience

Edmund's early collaboration with the White Witch and his gradual recognition of its cost force readers to weigh loyalty, temptation, and consequence in a single character arc, while the leadership dilemmas in *Prince Caspian* and *The Last Battle* ask readers to consider what makes authority legitimate rather than merely powerful. This is where the comparative literature reviewed in Section 2.3 becomes directly relevant. The obedience-focused comparison between Lewis and Pullman noted above treats Lewis's characters' obedience to Aslan as a moral good the series does not seriously interrogate. The textual evidence complicates that reading only partially: Narnia does repeatedly present obedience to Aslan as correct, but it consistently pairs that obedience with a character's own reasoning about why a particular course of action is right, rather than presenting compliance alone as sufficient - Edmund's arc, for instance, turns on his coming to understand why he was wrong, not merely on his being told to stop. Even so, the critique has force: the series gives readers fewer models of principled disagreement with legitimate authority than it gives models of learning to trust it, and a comparative classroom unit that reads Narnia alongside Pullman's more skeptical treatment of institutional power would give students a fuller picture of how children's fantasy handles this question than either series alone.

#### 5.7. Character Range, Emotional Intelligence, and Its Limits

The series' emotional range is carried mainly through its central children. Lucy's steady faith and her tenderness toward Mr. Tumnus model an emotional constancy other characters lack, while Aslan's words to her - "You have listened to fears, child... Come, let me breathe on you. Forget them" (132) - model comfort offered without condescension. Edmund and Eustace, by contrast, model change: both begin as self-centered and end as capable of real concern for others. This range gives teachers material for discussing several distinct emotional and

social competencies rather than a single model of good behavior. It is necessary, though, to register the limitation Hilder's feminist reading raises: the distribution of this developmental arc is not even across gender. Susan Pevensie, who receives comparatively little interiority across the series and is excluded from Narnia's final restoration in *The Last Battle*, complicates any claim that the series offers an equally rich model of moral and emotional growth to every major character regardless of gender. A classroom unit drawing on the series' emotional range should address this unevenness directly rather than treat Lucy's arc as representative of how the series handles its female characters generally.

## 6. Pedagogical Implications for the Classroom

The patterns identified above translate into classroom use in three concrete ways. First, for ethics and civics discussion, Aslan's leadership style, marked by restraint rather than force, can anchor a comparative unit on what makes authority legitimate, paired with the obedience critique discussed in Section 5.6, so that students consider both the series' own argument and the case against it.

Second, for literacy and close-reading instruction, the series' recurring symbolism and its shifts in narrative perspective across seven books offer material for teaching allegory, foreshadowing, and point of view in a graded sequence rather than a single lesson.

Third, for social-emotional learning, the Pevensie siblings' conflicts and reconciliations, together with Edmund's and Eustace's arcs, give a relatable basis for classroom discussion of empathy, responsibility, and repair after conflict. Importantly, this is not solely a matter of interpretive plausibility: Francis and colleagues (233-249) and Hart, Oliveira, and Pike (474-488) report that a curriculum built on comparable Narnia extracts produced measurable engagement with virtue concepts among students aged eleven to thirteen, which gives the applications proposed here empirical, not only interpretive, support.

## 7. Discussion

Two findings stand out from the analysis. The first is that Narnia's moral pedagogy works cumulatively rather than through any single scene: no one episode carries the series' full ethical argument, which is consistent with Kristjánsson's account of how literature-based character education is meant to work (see Section 2.1) and helps explain why studies that isolate a single book or a single theme tend to understate the series' overall coherence. The second is that, when set against comparable scholarship on *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials*, Narnia's treatment of courage as a developed capacity turns out to be a genre-wide convention rather than a Lewis-specific innovation, while its explicit, authorial commentary on that development (through Aslan's direct address to characters) and its comparatively firm model of legitimate authority are the features that differentiate it most clearly from its comparators.

These findings should be read alongside their limits. The analysis is interpretive: it establishes what the text offers and how that offer compares with other scholarly readings, not how individual child readers actually respond to it. Where the discussion makes claims about classroom effect, those claims lean on the Narnian Virtues project's interview and pilot-curriculum data rather than on new evidence gathered here. The critiques engaged in Sections 5.2, 5.6, and 5.7 - on theological specificity, on the series' model of obedience, and on its uneven treatment of gender - are not resolved by this analysis; they are presented as open considerations a teacher or researcher using this framework should weigh rather than as settled objections.

Future work could usefully pair the coding framework developed here with new classroom-based reader-response research, extending the Narnian Virtues project's method to the fuller thematic range identified in this study, and could extend the comparative frame used here to additional fantasy series beyond *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials*.

## 8. Conclusion

Read across its full seven-book span, *The Chronicles of Narnia* offers a more integrated programme of moral instruction than single-book or single-theme studies have generally shown. Its recurring treatment of sacrifice, courage, forgiveness, empathy, and ethical reasoning gives literature teachers material for a genuinely sequenced unit rather than a set of isolated lessons, and at least part of that material has independent empirical support from character-education research conducted outside literary criticism. At the same time, the series is not a neutral or uncontested moral primer: its theological grounding, its model of obedience to authority, and its uneven treatment of gender are all reasonable points of critique that a responsible classroom use of the text should address rather than avoid. The framework developed here is intended as a starting point for that fuller, more self-aware use of Narnia in moral and literary education, and as an invitation to the kind of comparative and empirical follow-up work identified above.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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## Authors' Contributions

The author contributed to all aspects of the study, including conceptualization, methodology, data analysis, writing, and revision of the manuscript.

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