

CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

in *THE VOYAGE OF THE DAWN TREADER* by C.S. Lewis:

Sehnsucht and Salvation

by Mark Pike



Undragoning: Longing to be Fully Human

In the first few chapters of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Eustace is bad-tempered, surly and conceited. He is almost the stereotype of the truculent teenager. He is selfish, deceitful, lazy, mean-spirited and sulky. When Edmund refers to his cousin Eustace as an ‘odious’ boy, he is not referring to his personal hygiene. It is his character that ‘stinks’. Eustace is indeed a ‘record stinker’.

Will Poulter plays Eustace brilliantly in the 2010 movie of the novel and it is worth watching some clips to see just how obnoxious he is. In fact, in the novel his behaviour is even worse than in the movie, as Eustace actually swings Reepicheep (who is about the size of a cat) around by his tail. The Pauline Baynes illustration of this in the novel, where Reepicheep is depicted with his legs splayed out as he is swung round, shows just how mean and cruel Eustace is.

Eustace is a liar and deceives himself into thinking he is in the right and that he is innocent, when he is not. He shows an almost total lack of integrity as he fails to admit the truth to himself, let alone to other people. He lies about attempting to steal water and does not even realise how good others are being to him. Eustace is a constant irritation as he is bad-tempered and constantly complaining. Rather than embracing adventure aboard the magnificent Dawn Treader, he is persistently ungrateful for the opportunities life brings.

When the ship anchors off a tropical island, everyone works hard to replenish and mend the ship, but Eustace—who hates hard work—sneaks off to enjoy a day off and have a rest. On Dragon Island, the sailors toil and work as a team to ensure the ship is seawor-

thy and well-stocked, while Eustace plans how to avoid hard work. We read that ‘his heart sank’ when he heard about ‘hard work’ and that he planned to ‘stroll’ casually away when nobody was looking, find a ‘cool, airy place up in the mountains’ and have a ‘good long sleep’ before joining the others when ‘the day’s work was over’. Hard work is a virtue and Eustace is lazy. He completely avoids any work and unfairly enjoys the fruits of everyone else’s hard labour.

As he lacks wisdom and is greedy, Eustace is attracted to a dragon’s hoard (the wrong sort of curiosity), puts on a gold bracelet he finds there, and wakes up transformed into a dragon. He was ‘beastly’ on the inside and now he is ‘beastly’ on the outside. Eustace is horrified at what he has become and this serves as a ‘wake-up call’ to him.

He realized that he was a monster cut off from the whole human race. An appalling loneliness came over him. He began to see the others had not really been fiends at all. He began to wonder if he himself had been such a nice person as he had always supposed. He longed for their voices. He would have been grateful for a kind word even from Reepicheep.

Eustace’s character improves a great deal. He starts to show kindness to others and stops just thinking about himself. As a dragon, he flies off to find a pine tree that makes a superb mast for the ship, provides food by bringing back a carcass for the men to roast, lights a fire (from his nostrils) and allows people to warm themselves against his back when the evenings are cold. Instead of hurting Reepicheep and being cruel to him, he appreciates his company and friendship.

NARNIAN VIRTUES: A Character Education Curriculum based on the novels of C.S. Lewis

Eustace is desperate to be a boy again—he yearns to be human once more, but he is incapable of achieving this on his own. Although he tries repeatedly to peel off his disgusting, vile, thick, knobby dragon skin, he cannot do it on his own. Aslan appears to him and does this for him, so he is ‘reborn’ and a boy once again.

Eustace’s gratitude at having his own arms again (rather than a dragon’s) is evident. Even though his arms are not muscular like Caspian’s, he is just grateful to have his own arms back and to be a boy again. Eustace has Aslan to thank; he could not ‘undragon’ himself. His arms were given to him, as was the breath he breathes, and the rest of the body he has and lives in. This is true for all of us; none of us created ourselves.

Being grateful for what we have sometimes happens only when we lose it. We may realise how much we love someone, for example, only after we no longer have them. Being grateful and counting our blessings every day have wisely been regarded as the secrets of happiness.

But while God gives grace, he also gives free will.

Eustace is grateful to Aslan and asks Edmund to forgive him for behaving so badly. Eustace admits, ‘I was hating everything . . . I’m afraid I’ve been pretty beastly’. He is clearly changed. Here we see the two boys together who have undergone the greatest personal character transformations in Narnia—Edmund in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* and Eustace in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Later on, when they are attacked by a sea serpent, Eustace performs his first courageous act by attacking it with his sword. This reminds us of Edmund attacking the Witch’s wand that led to the battle being won at the end of *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*.

Yet even after Eustace has met Aslan, the struggle for character continues. C.S. Lewis tells us,

. . . that although ‘the cure had begun’ and ‘he began to be a different boy’, ‘he had relapses’ and ‘there were still many days when he could be very tiresome’.

And so it is for all Christians. In our vulnerable moments, the ‘old self’ (what Lewis called ‘the rats in the cellar’) rises up. The life of virtue remains an ongoing battle against all the forces, within and without, that can lead us to be less than God wants us to be. The difference is we are not in the battle alone. If we cooperate with the redeeming grace now available to us, ‘the cure’ continues.

In Eustace’s undragoning, we see a symbolic presentation of the Christian understanding of salvation. Although, as a dragon, Eustace was full of remorse about his past, selfish behaviour as a boy, and he repented and did many kind and helpful things for others, he could not ‘save himself’ through his own efforts (Ephesians 2: 8-9). He could not turn himself into a boy. Aslan (God) had to do that for him by removing his sin (the skin of the dragon). Eustace is then immersed in a pool of water and in this we see Christian baptism.

Aslan cleanses and baptises Eustace (Colossians 2: 10-12), causing him to become a ‘new creation’ (2 Corinthians 5: 17). This is a work of grace, Aslan’s (God’s) free gift. But while God gives grace, he also gives free will. He doesn’t force us to be good; we are free to choose whether we cooperate with His grace. In fact, we choose how far we go and how fast we become more fully human.

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, as in the other Narnia novels, Lewis makes it clear that as human beings we are each responsible for our character—the kind of person we ultimately become. Over the course of our lives, we create our character by the choices we make. Eustace turned himself into an ugly, hideous dragon by repeatedly giving in to ugly, self-centred, and greedy dragonish thoughts and behaviours.

All of us have to do battle with our personal ‘dragons’, and it is wisely said that ‘we create our character by the choices we make’. As Lewis explains in *Mere Christianity*:

Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. All your life long, you are slowly turning this central thing into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war with God, with its fellow creatures, and with itself.

On the way to Aslan’s Country, even Caspian and Lucy, who have many virtues, learn a great deal. Caspian, who is passionately committed to justice, captures the imagination in his shining armour. He marches up the main street on the island of Narrowhaven, confronts Governor Gumpas and strides into the slave market to proclaim that every slave is free—yet he has to learn humility. Lucy, who is the most tolerant of Eustace grows in confidence, security and self-control.

Both Lucy and Caspian are helped by Aslan to practice virtue (Lucy in the Magician's house and Caspian in his cabin after he storms off). Caspian develops wisdom and humility and decides to do his duty rather than abdicating. Lucy learns self-control through her encounter with the Magician's Book and her experience eavesdropping. Even Edmund practices humility and admits to Eustace that he was a traitor when he first entered Narnia and forgives his cousin for being 'beastly'.

Longing (Sehnsucht)

A central theme in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* is 'longing'. Eustace longs to be human and yearns more than anything else to be who he was originally intended to be. Being the best we can be is the challenge facing every human being.

In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis uses the German word 'Sehnsucht' to describe a deep longing or yearning. The characters in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* yearn for Aslan's Country and go on a long voyage in a quest to reach it. When it comes to understanding C.S. Lewis, Sehnsucht is such an important word that there is a C.S. Lewis journal by that name. (See the article "C. S. Lewis: Christian educator for a Post-Christian Era" in *Sehnsucht*, Vols 7 and 8, 2013-2014.)

My wife is German and as the nuances of this word 'Sehnsucht' are important, I asked her about it. Sometimes it can be quite difficult for a native speaker to sum up all the associations and connotations of a word in another language, but she tells me that 'Sehnsucht' is comparable in some ways to 'homesickness', the way you might feel when you are away from home and long or yearn to be back there.

One of the strongest feelings of 'Sehnsucht' I have ever experienced was the longing to be with a person—where *she* was. I was a student at University and my (then) girlfriend (now wife) left England to go back to Germany to finish her MA at Tübingen University. I felt utterly bereft. That was about thirty years ago and I can still remember the way that loneliness and longing felt. She was far away in southern Germany. It would have taken me a long journey, one that was not easy or quick (getting to the south coast and then across the English Channel and then a night on a train) to see her.

Eustace longs to be human and yearns to be who he was originally intended to be.

I can also recall being in the US on November 5th (Guy Fawkes or Bonfire night back in England) and missing my wife and children terribly. Every year on that night, we go to some friends' farm on the Yorkshire Wolds and stand in the dark and cold (and are often wet) huddled around the bonfire. We enjoy the fireworks and the food and catching up with friends from church. Everything was going well in the U.S. The weather was beautiful in St Louis, Missouri in November, but I had that ache inside and wanted to be home.

Very often new students at University feel homesick; they miss their familiar friends and family as they have to make new friends in a new environment away from home. Sometimes younger students miss home when they go away on a trip.

Your True Home

The sort of longing (Sehnsucht) that Lewis describes is not to be at home but to be somewhere else that feels more like your *true* home, *the place where you really belong*.

In fact, this longing or yearning *feels as though you were made for somewhere else* and not for where you are now. In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis explains:

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probably explanation is that I was made for another world.

By this, he means Heaven, or, in the language of Narnia, 'Aslan's Country'.

At the opening of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lucy and Edmund show this longing or yearning to be back in Narnia (and Eustace makes fun of this).

In the final chapter of the book, Reepicheep longs to reach Aslan's Country and gain his 'heart's desire'. He has a higher hope, a spiritual one. To be in Aslan's Country is the fulfilment of his lifelong yearning. He is 'quivering with happiness' when he knows he has reached Aslan's Country.

The Voyage - From a Christian Perspective

From a Christian perspective, the great quest of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* is two-fold. Caspian's quest is to find the seven lost lords who left under Miraz's rule and tell them it is safe to return home to Narnia, but Reepicheep's ultimate quest is to find the End of the World, Aslan's Country.

In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis explains:

I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country which I shall not find until after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside: I must make it the main object of my life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same.

In Psalm 84: 2 we read of this yearning:

My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.

We read of this longing and yearning throughout *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, and it all becomes much more mystical and spiritual towards the end of the novel where the water is sweet and like 'light' and there is beautiful music.

In *The Book of Revelation* in the Bible, we read of the 'river of the water of life' that is 'as clear as crystal' and flows from the throne of God. The description of Aslan's country is reminiscent of the Bible's description of Heaven.

The children see an enormously high wave of 'wonderful rainbow colours', and beyond that are forests, waterfalls and mountains. In the Bible, the walls of the Heavenly City of God look like a rainbow of coloured jewels such as jasper, sapphire, emerald, topaz and amethyst (Revelation 21: 18-21).

When Edmund, Lucy and Eustace get to a vast area of grass where the sky comes down to the earth, they are greeted by a dazzling, white lamb who invites them to a breakfast of fish. This is redolent of Jesus meeting his disciples by the Sea of Galilee after his resurrection, and inviting them to a breakfast of fish that he had cooked for them. Then the lamb's dazzling white coat turns into gold and he is 'Aslan himself, towering above them'.

We read that one of Jesus' names is 'the Lion of Judah' (Revelation 5:5) and that he is also referred to as 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1: 29). ■

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