The Trivium of Narnia: Using *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* to Explain Classical Education

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One of the questions we frequently receive from parents at our school's information meetings is "how is classical education different from modern education?" Part of our answer to this question involves an attempt to illustrate two principles from Dorothy Sayers' essay "The Lost Tools of Learning": namely, that classical education employs language-based subjects in favor of discipline-based subjects, and that it emphasizes different mental faculties according to the developmental age of the child.

The three subjects of primary and secondary classical education are grammar, logic, and rhetoric (known collectively as the *trivium*), all of which contribute to the proper and eloquent use of language. Generally speaking, each subject corresponds to a different developmental stage, and each stage emphasizes different mental faculties and employs different pedagogical practices to foster them. Disciplinary subjects such as math, history, and science are still utilized in classical education, but rather than being pursued as ends in themselves, they are relatively subordinated in the service of these broader language-based subjects. That is, the subjects of classical education cut across traditional disciplines and use them as raw materials to be worked on by the mind in its different stages of development. To clarify this distinction we often use a gym metaphor. Think of traditional disciplinary subjects as the various fitness apparatuses in a gym and classical education as the systematic use of these apparatus to develop mental fitness: strength, flexibility, coordination, and stamina. Thus, we use these disciplinary "apparatuses" because they are available to us to help us achieve our educational goal; but this goal is mental fitness, not an instrumental mastery of the apparatus themselves.

But all of this is difficult to grasp without a coherent illustration to hang it all on. Thus, to illustrate these points we make use of the dearly loved book *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis. The story chronicles the adventures of four children who discover a magical portal to another world inhabited by talking beasts wherein they engage in a struggle to overthrow an oppressive witch and eventually become kings and queens in the service of the Great King, Aslan. While ostensibly a children's adventure book that falls under the generic heading of "juvenile fiction," a classical educator can utilize it differently for a variety of curricular ends, depending on his objective and the developmental age of his students.

The Grammar Stage

The easiest way to explain how this is done is to list several questions that could be asked of students at various developmental stages. During the grammar stage (often through about grade 4) it would be appropriate to ask questions such as the following (in approximate order of difficulty):

- What are the names of the four Pevensie children?
- Which of the Pevensie children gets into Narnia first?
- With whom does Lucy have tea during her first visit to Narnia?
- With whom do the four Pevensie children have dinner shortly after entering Narnia together?
- What sort of animal is Aslan?
- Who lives in Narnia?
- What is a faun?
- What is Narnia?
- What do Narnians call human boys and girls?
- What is the weather like in Narnia? Why is it like this?
- How did the children get into Narnia?
- What does the White Witch do to her enemies and subjects with whom she is angry?
- What enchanted food does Edmund receive from the White Witch? What effect does the enchantment produce?
- What happens to Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy when they chase the white stag into the thicket?
- Why does Edmund not receive a gift from Father Christmas?

Most readers who know this story could easily answer these questions. The reason this is so is that the answer to each of these questions is explicitly stated in the text. That is, for each of these questions there is a place in the book where a child can point and say, "here is the answer." So, to answer these questions a child need only to recall what he has read (or has had read to him). Thus, the mental faculty that is

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most necessary to answer these questions is memorization. This approach to instruction is not unlike a game in which a child is momentarily shown a complicated picture and, after the picture is hidden again is asked to recall or describe what objects, persons, or activities appeared in the picture. Or, similarly, it is like allowing a child to listen to a piece of music and afterwards asking him to hum the melody or to identify which instruments he heard. The grammar stage of the classical curriculum emphasizes the accumulation of facts and stories because that is the most natural proclivity of the human mind at this age. Thus, the questions asked during the grammar stage would involve naming, identifying, describing, or defining the persons, things, or events that appear in the story, as the list above illustrates.

The Logic Stage

The logic stage of the classical curriculum would involve a different set of questions in service to the changing developmental age of the child. Consider the following list (also in approximate order of difficulty):

- What happens as a result of Edmund's betrayal?
- Why does the White Witch employ spies?
- What does Mr. Beaver mean when he says that Aslan is a good lion, but not a safe or tame one?
- Why does hearing the name "Aslan" have different effects on each of the children?
- What is the deeper magic, and where does it come from?
- What might the lamppost, the stone table, and the act of passing through the wardrobe symbolize?
- Is this a true story? Why or why not?
- How does the prophecy of the four thrones at Cair Paravel affect the outcome of the story? In other words, does the whole story unfold because of the choices the children make, or because of some other reason?
- Was it just for Aslan to die?
- Why did Aslan christen King Edmund "the Just"?

This question set moves beyond simple recall and begins to require analysis, or the examining of the tale's constituent parts with a view to determining not just what the parts are called, but what the parts are for, how they work with the other parts, and what they might mean. Unlike in the grammar stage, the answers to these questions are not explicitly stated in the text, and may be open to multiple interpretations.

Admittedly, some of these questions involve subtleties that students at this age (roughly grades 5 through 8) might not appreciate. But this does not mean the questions are fully beyond them. In terms of difficulty these questions pick up where the grammar stage left off. The first question is an incremental step beyond simple memory, because it asks for cause and effect (i.e., what happened because of . . .) rather than just sequence (i.e., what happened after . . .). Other questions require abstract thinking, which children at the grammar stage are often not fully capable of. Other questions lend themselves to debate, so that students can engage the questions in this form to develop their reasoning and argumentation capabilities. Other questions touch on ethical issues and would require some integration with material learned at the grammar stage. For example, the question about the justice of Aslan's death requires that the child have an established basis for justice, such as the Decalogue or the Beatitudes. Finally, some questions require multiple mental faculties, such as the final question, which requires both abstract reasoning and cause and effect.

Other age-appropriate pedagogy for the logic stage might include an imitation or characterization speech, which builds upon simple recitation exercises at the grammar stage and anticipates the rhetoric stage of the curriculum. For example, a student might be asked to compose the speech Aslan could have given to Edmund explaining what Aslan had done for him, or the speech Peter might have given the Narnian army before engaging the hordes of the White Witch, or the speech Aslan might have given when he knighted Edmund on the field of battle.

The Rhetoric Stage

Finally, in the rhetoric stage of the trivium the questions change again in keeping with the ongoing development of children as they transition into early adulthood. Here is a sampling of possible questions:

- Is this story a myth, an allegory, or something else? How do you know? Give examples from other sources to corroborate your answer.
- How would a citizen of ancient Greece or medieval Europe have interpreted this tale?
- Why did Lewis write this story? In other words, what might this story tell us about Lewis's beliefs regarding the role of the

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imagination in the development of the spiritual life?

- Some of Lewis's friends and critics considered the inclusion of Father Christmas in this story a literary mistake. On what basis could this criticism be meaningfully levied against Lewis? On what grounds could it be refuted?
- How does this story reflect a medieval, pre-Copernican cosmology, and what important lessons did Lewis seem to think this view could teach the modern West?
- Philip Pullman, an outspoken critic of C.S. Lewis, has described the Narnia series as "dishonest," "propaganda," "blatantly racist," "monumentally disparaging of women," and "one of the most ugly and poisonous things I've ever read."[1] Prepare a rebuttal to Pullman's criticisms that includes comparison and contrast of the worldviews and cosmologies implicit in Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and in Pullman's The *Golden Compass*.

Unlike in previous stages, questions in the rhetoric stage require a full integration across multiple subjects. The above questions range across history, philosophy, science, theology, literature, and so on. Students are pressed to consider the significance of the story as an artifact in multiple historical, artistic, philosophical, and theological contexts. Furthermore, these questions are difficult: there are no fixed or prepared answers, and thoughtful responses to these questions would require an investiture of significant time and effort. In addition to the command of a wide body of knowledge, the preparation of answers (whether spoken or written) would also necessarily require advanced composition techniques.

The use of lists such as these tends to clarify for our prospective families the point that classical education is less about subject matter and more about how it is used in the service of broader curricular goals. This is further clarified when we point out that the subject matter in this case is only a children's story. The goal in this instance is not simply to know the story (although it is a good one), but to use it to create opportunities to challenge the mind and heart to grow.

Notes:

1. http://dedulysses.wordpress.com/2006/07/15/the-darkside-of-narnia-by-pullman/

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