

# REHABILITATING BEAUTY: HOW C. S. LEWIS FOUGHT THE CULT OF THE UGLY IN HIS FICTION

*by Louis Markos, Houston Baptist University*

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The founding mission and vision of most, if not all, classical Christian schools includes a commitment to Goodness, Truth, and Beauty—not the man-made, relativistic goodness, truth, and beauty taught in most public and many private schools, but the eternal, absolute Goodness, Truth, and Beauty sought after by creedal Christians of all ages and by such “virtuous pagans” as Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero.

Sadly, a growing number of evangelicals who will at least pay lip service to Goodness and Truth have become unwilling to acknowledge that Beauty, too, is one of the Platonic and Christian universals. What Christians who have bought into the post-Romantic notion that beauty is inherently subjective and resides *only* in the eye of the beholder fail to realize is that Goodness, Truth, and Beauty are a package deal. If we allow one to die, the other two will eventually atrophy.

Goodness, Truth, and Beauty embody a kind of balance or harmony that reflects the divine balance and harmony that exists within the triune God. We live in an ordered cosmos created by a good God, not a random universe evolved out of undirected time and chance, and that order is imprinted in our conscience

(goodness), our reason (truth), and our sense of beauty. Granted, as fallen creatures, we are unable to grasp the fullness of divine Goodness, Truth, and Beauty, but that does not mean that they do not exist or that we should not strive after them.

Our modern and postmodern world has decreed that no universal propositional statements can be made in the realms of morality-ethics (the good), philosophy-theology (the true), or aesthetics (the beautiful). If we as believers, out of fear of being labeled “unfair” or “elitist” or “hurtful,” collapse all standards of beauty, we will hasten the triumph of ethical and philosophical relativism in our schools, media, and, eventually, churches.

Would anyone buy season tickets to the symphony if his city chose its musicians on the basis of egalitarian principles that made no distinction between levels of skill and discipline? Certainly not, and yet, otherwise discerning Christians think they are being kind and charitable to less physically attractive women by willfully deconstructing one of God’s greatest gifts: beauty. Is the esteem and self-image of physically weak men raised one iota by people who attack sports as empty and

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meaningless? Of course not! Rather, all people are lifted up by the proper celebration of beauty in all its forms.

I grew up in the 1970s, and I, along with my peers, wore clothes that most of us look back on today as truly ugly. But that was not what we were seeking. We really thought we were Adonises in polyester. Not so for many young, and not-so-young, people today. Across our country, a cult of the ugly has been spreading that rejects beauty out of hand to embrace its opposite. I do applaud those who refuse to allow Madison Avenue to sell them its many unnatural forms of beauty, but that does not sanction the explosion of tattoos, body piercings, and deliberately ugly hair and clothing styles that come perilously close to embodying a Gnostic hatred of the body in its masculine and feminine form.

Thankfully, a half decade before the cult of the ugly began in earnest, God raised up a British academic and lover of fairy stories named C. S. Lewis. While boldly championing Goodness and Truth in his apologetical works, Lewis mounted a spirited defense of Beauty in his fiction. That defense is perhaps best captured in an exchange near the end of *The Great Divorce*, a *sui generis* fantasy novel in which the damned are allowed to take a bus to heaven, where they are met by saints who try to convince them, even now, to give up their sin and embrace God's mercy. All but one freely choose to return to hell.

When Lewis asks his guide, George MacDonald, how the people in heaven can be happy when there are people suffering in hell, MacDonald warns him away from such foolish thinking. If heaven were to allow in unrepentant sinners who cling to their misery, envy, resentment, and ugliness, the love, purity, and beauty of heaven would be infected. A day must come, MacDonald explains, when the makers of misery—key advocates of the cult of the ugly—are either cast out or permitted to spoil forever the joy of the saints.

Such insights into the true nature of beauty and ugliness abound in Lewis's three science-fiction novels

and seven Chronicles of Narnia. The church today would do well to heed the advice that Lewis gives in the fictional worlds that he created.

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*Out of the Silent Planet*, the first novel in Lewis's Space (or Cosmic, or Ransom) Trilogy, introduces us to a hero (Ransom) who has fully absorbed the modernist worldview in which he was raised. Space to him is cold and dead, something to be studied objectively and dispassionately as one might study a dissected animal under a microscope. The notion that the heavens above might be a realm of life and beauty to be wondered at and enjoyed never strikes him, until he looks out the window of the spaceship that is carrying him to Mars and sees a field throbbing with warmth and radiance. Far from a barren, yawning vacuum, it is the womb of creation.

As his eyes are opened to the beauty of God's cosmos, so are his eyes opened to the beauty of God-given hierarchy. On Mars (or Malacandra), there are three races of hnau (rational creatures): the Sorns, who are philosopher kings, the Hrossa, a Homeric warrior class, and the Pfflittriggi, the blue collar craftsmen of the planet. All three live together in peace and harmony under the rule of an angelic guardian known as the Oyarsa.

As hard it may be to accept for most Americans, including and especially low-church evangelicals like myself, beauty goes hand in hand with hierarchy. Without difference and distinction there can be no beauty; a purely egalitarian world, like the ones that the Soviets, Maoists, and Khmer Rouge rebels tried to build, is a purely ugly one—as banal as it is anti-human.

Beauty rests upon distinction and hierarchy, as it does upon the essential, God-given complementarity of masculine and feminine. This great truth, another one the church desperately needs to learn, is impressed upon Ransom in the second novel, *Perelandra*. As he gazes

with awe and wonder upon the Oyarsa of Malacandra (Mars) and Perelandra (Venus), he realizes for the first time that masculinity and femininity are fundamental realities that run far deeper than our sexual differences or our gendered language.

Egalitarianism is the enemy of beauty, for, in seeking to collapse all distinctions between cultures, classes, and genders, it robs individuals of their unique worth and value. We are, or at least should be, equal before the law and equal bearers of the image of God. Any type of forced equality beyond those two leads in the end to a society mangled and reduced into a colorless, classless, sexless, soul-crippling conformity. Everything Lewis wrote stands in opposition to such a crushing uglification of the human person.

Indeed, he renders that crushing concrete in his third novel, *That Hideous Strength*. Returned to earth, Ransom heads a resistance group to the encroachment of a would-be utopian group (N.I.C.E.) who plans to build a brave new world wiped clean of all inefficiency, individual dignity, and, finally, organic life. One of the key players in this war between God-given distinction and enforced sameness, procreation and sterility, beauty and ugliness, is Mark Studdock, a sociologist who wants to become an executive member of N.I.C.E. and so be empowered to be a shaper and conditioner of the future.

The final step that will secure his initiation into the inner ring of N.I.C.E. involves being locked in a lop-sided room filled with surrealist paintings meant to disrupt and deconstruct all ethical, spiritual, and aesthetic standards. Only once Mark has let go of his bourgeois notions of Goodness, Truth, and Beauty will he be able to serve the totalitarian goals of N.I.C.E. He almost gives in, when, at the last moment, the perverse ugliness of the room sparks in him a deeper desire for that which is straight and normal. He breaks out of the room and throws off the dark delusion that man needs to be remolded in accordance with progressives, scientific ideals that reject the innate and essential order that God

has written into our conscience, our reason, and our sense of beauty.

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Rather than try to cover all seven Chronicles of Narnia in a brief essay, I will focus here on four of the novels that expand on the themes discussed above.

In *the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, four children from our world (Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy) are magically transported to the land of Narnia. While there, three of them are given gifts by Father Christmas. Although Peter is given a sword, Susan a bow, and Lucy a dagger, Father Christmas tells the girls that he does not intend for them to fight in the battle. When Lucy says that she thinks she is brave enough to fight, he tells her that that is not the point. The issue is not that she lacks courage but that “battles are ugly when women fight” (chapter 10).

Modern readers tend to balk at these words, but they capture a great truth. Most women would not hesitate to shoot or stab a man who threatened the life of their child, but there is something deeply wrong with having women charge, armed, into battle. Wars are fought, or at least should be fought, to protect one’s home and family. When women are dragged on to the battlefield, the conflict becomes an ugly one, for the action collapses masculine courage and feminine nurture. It signals that the sanctity of the home has been violated and that a potential life giver has been corrupted into an instrument of death.

In *Prince Caspian*, Lewis conjures a beautiful picture of masculine-feminine complementarity by having the four children work in tandem to rescue Narnia from a group of human usurpers known as the Telmarines. While the boys (Peter and Edmund, together with Caspian) fight directly in the battle, the girls (Susan and Lucy) ride on the back of Aslan and help him set free the countryside. Lewis honors both missions equally,

presenting the gifts of masculine courage and feminine nurture as equally necessary.

The Telmarines, incidentally, have done far more than subject Narnia to their military might. They have stripped her bare of her talking animals, living streams, and walking trees. They allow no room for the supernatural in their materialistic kingdom, just as the postmodern promoters of the cult of the ugly allow neither hierarchy nor distinction nor transcendence in their progressive utopia. Both squeeze out the Good, the True, and the Beautiful and then prevent anyone from having a real encounter with any of them.

Of course, in doing so, they willfully blind themselves to any kind of sacramental beauty that might elicit from them wonder, awe, or humility. In *The Magician's Nephew*, Lewis allows his readers to witness the creation of Narnia, which is sung into being by the Great Lion Aslan. When the good characters hear the song, they are filled with joy and consider it the most beautiful music they have ever heard. One listener, an adult, even comments that he would have been a more moral man had he known such beauty existed.

Not so the two evil characters. When the music starts, they cover their ears and think only of how they can kill the Lion and squelch the song. Rather than recognize in the music a force of beauty that could transform them into better people, they sense in it a magic stronger than their own. The music exposes their inner ugliness, their rebellious pride and devouring lust for power, and fills them with destructive rage. For true beauty is like the Word of God; it is a two-edged sword that divides darkness from light, lies from truth.

In *The Silver Chair*, the villain, a Green Witch, has created her own underground lair safe from the exposing light and transformative music of Aslan. There she rules as the queen of a passionless, anti-humanistic anthill, served by gnomes whose personalities she has erased and whose wills she has conformed to her own. She has even made Prince Rilian, son of King Caspian,

forget his true self—that is, until he is set free by two earth children and a Narnian Marshwiggle named Puddleglum whom Aslan sent to rescue him.

When the Witch realizes that Rilian has been restored to his proper nature, she attempts to fool all four of them into believing that her underground world is the only world that is. When they say that they know Narnia is real for they have seen the sun and the Lion Aslan, she convinces them that there are no such things as lions or suns, that they made those things up by looking at cats and torches and imagining what they would be like if they were bigger. No, she insists, there is no reality greater than her dark, drab kingdom.

All seems lost when Puddleglum bravely puts his foot in the fire to clear his mind from the lies of the Witch. Then he boldly proclaims what every believer who refuses to buy in to the colorless, classless, sexless world of the cult of the ugly must be willing to shout from the rooftops of our homes and our churches, our schools and our universities:

*“Suppose we have only dreamed, or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours is the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that’s a funny thing, when you come to think of it. We’re just babies making up a game, if you’re right. But four babies playing a game can make a play-world which licks your real world hollow. That’s why I’m going to stand by the play world. I’m on Aslan’s side even if there isn’t any Aslan to lead it. I’m going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn’t any Narnia” (chapter 12).*

No matter how hard society tries to press out every distinction that gives life its beauty and its value, no matter how loudly they deny the mystical, God-given complementarity of the sexes, no matter how

vociferously they insist that the Great Books be thrown out of our schools to be replaced with progressive values and politically correct ideologies, we must nevertheless insist that we will live like Narnians.

We have in our possession an ineradicable vision of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, and we must cling to it in the face of all depravity, all lies, and all ugliness.



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