Abstract: Comic books are important cultural artifacts. Like other forms of literature, comic books reveal the values and worldview of the culture from which they were produced. They also serve as an apologetic bridge to culture. Comic book stories attract readers and fans from across differing backgrounds, philosophical perspectives, and religious temperaments. Therefore, comic books serve as an interesting common ground for religious and philosophical interaction. This proposal argues for the apologetic potential of comic books and graphic novels for Christian mission. Because story is a powerful device in articulating truth in contemporary culture, comic books offer a unique opportunity to articulate the Christian message. Drawing on principles from what David Cullen labels as C. S. Lewis’s “imaginative apologetic,” this paper outlines how comic books stories offer two important tools for Christian mission. First, comic book stories appeal to our longing for eternity. These stories invite readers into an imaginary world that affirms our recognition of ‘otherness’ extending beyond space and time. Second, comic book stories engage readers in deep philosophical and religious reflection free from the initial resistance to these topics instigated by recognizable religious ideas, forms, and expressions. Comic book stories, therefore, offer a fresh approach to communicating the familiar message of the gospel.

Keywords: EVANGELISM, APOLOGETICS, C.S. LEWIS, IMAGINATION, NARRATIVE, STORY, POSTMODERNISM, COMIC BOOKS, POP CULTURE

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Thesis

Comic books, graphic novels, and sequential art both indicate and influence cultural values. Therefore, studying comic books is an increasingly important task for anyone seeking to interact with the values and history of contemporary culture. This paper presents an apologetic case for studying and leveraging comic books, graphic novels, and sequential art for the cause of Christian mission, particularly in literate cultures moving in postmodern directions. First, drawing from C. S. Lewis’s work in apologetics, this paper argues his “imaginative apologetic” is an innovative and effective approach to communicating Christian truth to postmoderns. Second, this paper demonstrates how the comic book medium provides a contemporary example of Lewis’s “imaginative apologetic” and the unique contextual bridges comic books, graphic novels, and sequential art provides for communicating the gospel. In conclusion, this paper will reveal the strategic importance comic books play for Christian mission.

Imaginative Apologetics

C. S. Lewis offers an unique approach for leveraging story to communicate Christian truth. This approach, labelled “imaginative apologetics” by David Cullen, uses “literary forms such as myth and the modern novel, and of means other than the strictly objective (such as symbols and images), by which the presence of Christ, in seen and unseen worlds, may be acknowledged” (Cullen 2008, 163-64). Cullen continues, “The intention of imaginative apologetics is ‘to reflect the Christian story in its objective sense and trigger conscious acceptance of it,’ but not by beginning with the objective or scientific” (164).

Imaginative apologetics enabled Lewis to operate within a postmodern worldview without wholesale acceptance of it. Instead of affirming the subjectivity and inevitable epistemological skepticism postmodernism disintegrates into, Lewis used postmodernism to achieve evangelistic ends. As Gene Edward Veith observes, Lewis was “in synch with the postmodern imagination” and he did “some of the same things as postmodern writers, although for completely different reasons” (Veith 1997, 381). Lewis was able to agree with the postmodern complaints against modernist illusions of materialism and scientific progress. He could even, as Veith explains, “agree that reality is an imaginative construction,” but as Veith goes on to clarify, reality from Lewis’s perspective “is a construction not of individuals, cultures, or even authors; rather, it is an imaginative construction of God” (381). This concentration upon the Christian God as the explanatory principle of life moderated Lewis’s interaction with postmodernism.

Although Lewis used fantasy, myth, and fiction in his apologetic method, Veith argues these were simply tools to evoke enchantment and “open the reader’s mind to supernatural possibilities” (382). In Veith’s estimation, “Lewis knows that evangelism can never be grounded in subjective experience, however mystical. His fantasies go on to present, in propositional through imaginatively
realized terms, the extra-fictional truth of God’s Word” (382). In other words, Lewis aimed to convince people why God is objectively real by encouraging them to consider a fictional world in which He is real. By entering this world, the reader receives through the imagination the benefits of experiencing what a world in which God exists would be like and then through comparison the reader is invited to wrestle with the implications for the world in which they actually exist. Veith clarifies, however,

Theologically, of course, what converts sinners from unbelief to faith is never either a rational argument nor an imaginative experience, but the Word of God, which in Law and Gospel is “living and active” (Hebrews 4:12). This efficacious Word can be conveyed in human language, whether in a sermon, a rational discourse, or a story. The trick is to command the hearer’s attention, to navigate through the barriers, and to gain a hearing for this Word, which can be used by the Holy Spirit to kindle faith. (Veith 1997, 382)

According to Veith, it is one thing to simply declare religious truths, its another thing to make this declaration compelling. Veith reminds us only the Holy Spirit can ultimately convince someone of the truth of God’s Word. C. S. Lewis’s “imaginative apologetic” model, however, provides an example of what it is “to command the hearer’s attention, to navigate through the barriers, and to gain a hearing for this Word.”

Comic Books and the Imaginative Apologetic

Lewis provides two principles that comic books can intentionally employ to be a contemporary platform for “imaginative apologetics.” First, as a genre of story, comic books appeal to our internal, common sense of eternity (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:11). In his essay, “On Stories,” Lewis argues that good stories introduce the reader to the spirit and supernatural worlds; and therefore, by pointing to these realities which exist beyond this world, stories provoke within the reader a longing for either a world beyond this one or an experience of eternity. For example, in explaining how to convey ‘otherness’ in a story, Lewis writes that experiences of “physical strangeness” or “spatial distances” do not satisfy what the author is trying to communicate, rather the author “must go into another dimension. To construct plausible and moving ‘other worlds’ you must draw on the only real ‘other world’ we know, that of the spirit” (Lewis 1982, 12). Lewis continues, “Good stories often introduce the marvelous or supernatural, and nothing about Story has been so often misunderstood as this” (12). Lewis explains that once an author uses something that is considered ‘other’ but is recognizable, such as a distant planet or deep space, the reader does not experience ‘otherness’ but rather experiences our earthly reality simply set in a different environment. Lewis uses the illustration of traveling to the moon to make his point,
If some fatal progress of applied science ever enables us in fact to reach the Moon, that real journey will not at all satisfy the impulse which we now seek to gratify by writing such stories. The real Moon, if you could reach it and survive, would in a deep and deadly sense be just like anywhere else. After the first few hours they would be simply cold, hunger, hardship, and danger as you might have met them on Earth. And death would be simply death among those bleached craters as it is simply death in a nursing home at Sheffield. No man would find an abiding strangeness on the Moon unless he were the sort of man who could find it in his own back garden. (Lewis 1982, 12)

In other words, not even a real journey to the moon provokes the feeling of ‘otherness’ that a story of a journey to the moon incorporating fantastical, spiritual, or supernatural aspects will.

Lewis further explains it is not only the material of the story that provokes the sense of eternity in the reader, but the structure or plot of the story does as well. Lewis writes, “To be stories at all they must be series of events: but it must be understood that this series—the plot, as we call it—is only really a net whereby to catch something else” (17). Lewis goes on to contend that with the plot of a story, “we are always trying to catch in our net of successive moments something that is not successive” (19). In other words, through the temporal medium of story, we are trying to capture something beyond time, or something eternal.

In his book, The Gospel According to Superheroes, B. J. Oropeza arrives at a similar conclusion as Lewis in the way the superhero mythos evokes a longing for and anticipation of the eternal experience of heaven,

Oropeza argues that superheroes serve as kind of prototypical humanity—beings who are superior to us in their benevolence, power, and abilities, but also beings with faults and shortcomings with which we can identify (270). This description of superheroes serves a twofold purpose in that they draw us in as we recognize our humanity in them, while also propelling us beyond to who we were meant to be and to an eternal world we long for.

The second principle comic books can leverage as an “imaginative apologetic” is the ability to get behind people’s objections and resistance to spiritual truth. In his essay, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said,” Lewis explains that stories enable the author to lead the reader to a place
beyond their intellectual inhibitions. Reflecting on his purpose for writing fairy tales, Lewis demonstrates this principle,

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralyzed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? (Lewis 1982, 47)

Lewis contends that religious forms and traditions can be the very thing that hinders people from experiencing God. Stories have the unique capacity to bypass these hindrances by inviting the reader into a world in which what is being pointed to by religious forms and traditions is instead being described and offered as a kind of experience. Therefore, stories enable the author to bring the reader past their ‘watchful dragons’ that keep them from embracing spiritual truths so they can encounter these truths in a fresh and unhindered way, and thereby seriously consider them in ways they would not have if read in a religious tract or heard in a religious setting. As Veith reminds us above, the work remains for the Holy Spirit to convict the reader of the truth of these spiritual realities they have encountered, but this second principle offered by Lewis, however, is the ‘trick’ Veith is looking for which will ‘command the hearer’s attention, to navigate through the barriers, and to gain a hearing.’

Again, Oropeza agrees with Lewis in the way comic books embody these principles for an “imaginative apologetic.” Oropeza explains that comic book stories also invite readers to consider biblical truths they would resist if heard in a religious setting or read in religious literature. Comic book stories, Oropeza writes, “whisper of a human plight back to God and paradise through a medium that is able to reach audiences who might otherwise remain unable or unwilling to hear, see, or read the message and thoughts behind biblical texts” (Oropeza 2005, 270). Comic book stories have the advantage of throwing readers off their religious guard and introducing biblical concepts by means of the plot, characters, dialogue, and setting. The challenge for evangelicals then, if they embrace Oropeza’s suggestion, is to create comic book stories that communicate spiritual truths without clothing them in religious forms. It is not enough to present the Bible in the comic book genre or create characters based on Jesus and the twelve disciples. This approach, although not entirely wrong or ill-motivated, has the danger of missing an opportunity of engaging a reader in serious spiritual reflection because it arouses the ‘watchful dragons’ that resist any hint of religious content.
Conclusion

One could argue that Lewis’s idea of ‘watchful dragons’ is nothing more than human rebellion suppressing the innate knowledge of God (cf. Romans 1 and 2) and that we need to concentrate our efforts on faithfulness, not creativity in declaring biblical truths. Space does not allow for exploring the benefits and dangers of contextualization except to explain what Lewis is doing in using story as a vehicle for communicating biblical truth. Stephen M. Smith contends that what Lewis is doing with story and the “imaginative apologetic” is the same thing done with traditional apologetics: he is conducting both negative and positive argumentation, arguing that Non-Christian worldviews are inconsistent while at the same time making a case for Christianity (Smith 1998, 168-81). Smith calls Lewis’s approach in this regard a “pre-apologetic strategy” and explains how Lewis uses it in the Narnia stories to prepare his readers for considering the Gospel,

In The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Lewis is preparing his readers for the time when they will consider Christianity and decide for or against its apparently implausible claims. They will have to go through the same process with the gospel witness to Jesus Christ as incarnate Savior and risen lord as Peter and Susan (and the Professor) went through with Lucy’s witness to the reality of Narnia. Will they be open to this new reality, or will they keep the wardrobe door closed forever? (Smith 1998, 174)

The story, according to Smith’s interaction with Lewis, is a multi-faceted approach to apologetics. Lewis’s use of story prepares the reader to consider the Gospel by undermining the immediate objections through mental interaction with the fictional world, but also continues on by challenging the reader to consider the claims of the Gospel on that world and then to import the implications of those claims into his own world. The difference with Lewis’s approach from many contemporary apologetic approaches is that instead of presenting straightforward rational arguments and logical propositions, he is inviting us into a world built on these very arguments and propositions while providing the added advantage of challenging the reader to consider the deeper implications of how such a world works in comparison to one’s own—an aspect decidedly missing from the other major schools of apologetics. As Lewis explains, when readers enter into the world of a story, it “strengthens our relish for real life. This excursion into the preposterous sends us back with renewed pleasure to the actual” (Lewis 1982, 14). In this way, the “imaginative apologetic” serves as a legitimate, and potentially more relevant, school of apologetics in literate, postmodern contexts then the classical, evidentialist, presuppositionalist, fideist, and integrative approaches (Boa and Bowman 2005). Therefore, when comic books intentionally leverage Lewis’s “imaginative apologetic,” they can be for some what the works of Augustine, Aquinas, Anselm, Van Til, or Craig have been for others.

Bibliography


