

Emily Dickinson in Narnia: The Buzzing Fly in the Room.

Ivan Head

Now that a cinema has come to Narnia, at least to its outskirts, it is not surprising that visitors to Narnia pass through a curtain of advertising for franchised meals and drinks before the titles appear. Even a magical kingdom needs an economy. But I would like to comment on one aspect of the film itself.

In the film version of *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, some significance must be attached to the Fly that appears just before Lucy enters the wardrobe for the first time. The Fly is on-image for about three seconds, and we have to decide to notice it and not dismiss it as trivial. Three seconds is not much, but in the book, it gets even less.

The setting is also a little different. In the book, the children as a group are exploring the house together and as a group they enter the room that contains the wardrobe, coming across it collectively for the first time. Lewis wrote:

And shortly after that they looked into a room that was quite empty except for one big wardrobe; the sort that has a looking-glass in the door. There was nothing else in the room at all except a dead blue-bottle on the window sill. (*LWW*, p. 11)

The children leave—except Lucy—whose curiosity leads her to try the door of the wardrobe.

In the film, the children have been persuaded by Lucy to play hide and seek and she has entered the room first and alone and has tried the wardrobe as her preferred hiding place. There is also nothing at this point in the film about the wardrobe being the ‘sort that has a looking glass in the door’. On the contrary, much is made of the wardrobe being covered by a huge cloth or sheet, with deep folds and ripples in it, completely hiding it. The wardrobe is a mysterious object beneath it, hidden from sight. Lucy will enter behind something like a temple veil or curtain. But my point is the Fly.

As Lucy enters the room and, and in the act of first seeing the Wardrobe, she hears rather than sees this Fly. She (and the cinema audience), hears it buzzing and looks toward it, in the direction of the buzzing. It is not a dead but a dying blue-bottle. The Fly is seen in the window frame and it is also seen that it is (still) raining outside. The Fly falls, buzzing, squirms on the window ledge and dies.

In the next instant Lucy removes the large, veil-like cloth from the robe and enters into a realm where time behaves differently in comparison with earth-time and wartime England. She will seem to herself to have been gone all day in Narnia, but ‘in reality’ to have been gone for just a few moments of earth-time. Indeed Peter will not have finished counting to sixty prior to starting to seek in the game of hide and seek that they are playing. Lucy spoils the game since on her return from Narnia she thinks that they will have missed her hours ago and have been frantic to find her.

What has brought about this change from the one line reference to a dead blue-bottle in the book to a tightly crafted visual and auditory scene in the film? Why give the Fly a role?

I think it is likely that in the screen play, reference to Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) has been made to bring out more forcibly a theme that is scarcely touched on by Lewis at this point in his story. Perhaps it is done to bring out a motif that becomes apparent with the completion both of *LWW* and of the whole Narnia cycle. Dickinson’s poem has become the key to the scene in the Narnia film can be taken as emblematic. Here is the poem

“I heard a Fly buzz – when I died”

I heard a fly buzz – when I died –

The Stillness in the Room

Was like the Stillness in the Air –

Between the Heaven of Storm –

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry-
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed – in the Room –

I willed my Keepsakes –Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable – and then it was
There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
Between the light - and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see -

I maintain that the makers of *LWW* have found it useful to visualize elements of this poem rather than depict what Lewis wrote. They have made the Fly in the room more consequential than in the text and have made it emblematic of transition to the realm that is indeed for humans, young and old, along the pathway of dying and death. In the poem, Dickinson refers to the moment when the King be witnessed in the room. This is a motif endlessly repeated in the story cycle with reference to Aslan. By the end of his Narnia cycle, dying and death will be the experience of the children and their parents—in the train crash. Then, they will enter Narnia via the doorway which is death.

This scene at the start of *LWW* is now made to bring out the congruent themes of the artificiality of the passage of time and the transitional and incidental nature of death – as incidental as the buzzing death of this blue-bottle. Death can become the entrance point

for an eternity that begins now, or not, depending on one's perspective or even place in the universe. Lewis's mix of Einstein, Plato, Christianity and his own wartime experiences of loss, seems to me to be focused in this way and I think this is a motif to which we shall return in the later films.

That Lucy pays so much attention to the buzzing, dying fly renders it a primary symbolic moment. It dies and its death might be inconsequential – but it is noticed by a little girl. Death, even for humans and especially for the innocent, will be seen to have become inconsequential by the end of the story cycle when the children will have traveled a long way from the starting domain of residual innocence. Lucy is about to breach the doorway into another realm. It does not appear at the moment to be a death, for at first she seems to have entered an innocent place. By the end of the series, it will be seen to be the moment when the first passage towards the only real, eternal realm began, and to that extent, it is a child's innocent encounter with something beyond innocence.

It is clear by *The Last Battle*, that the children have in one way or another experienced their own deaths and entered the eternal now of a Narnia that is drawn up into a greater apocalypse. The real world of England is also caught up in that final transformation as the world of their parents is specifically included.

Time, always malleable in the Narnia stories, now expands into a vast openness and now contracts into the microcosm. Are we dealing with a day or with a thousand years? It is one and the same in Lewis's vision. This is clear by the end of *LWW* where the by now adult Narnians return to the house of origin and tumble from the wardrobe as the children who had departed - and once more no earth-time has passed. In my opinion, Emily Dickinson's poem makes a significant contribution to the film of *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

Rev Dr Ivan Head is Warden of St Paul's College at the University of Sydney.