The Power of "Happily Ever After": How Children's Stories Build Resilience & Optimism

Eedha Kaul

Laidlaw Research and Leadership Scholarship Programme 2025

Laidlaw Scholars Program
BARNARD COLLEGE

LAIDLAW FOUNDATION

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Abstract

C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is a seminal children's novel written in the aftermath of World War II, yet it culminates in a distinctly hopeful ending. This paper explores the psychological and literary significance of such endings in children's literature, focusing on their potential to cultivate optimism and resilience in young readers during their early developmental stages. Drawing on a combined literary and psychoanalytical framework, including the work of narrative psychology theorists such as John McLeod, the study examines how happy endings function similarly to therapeutic resolutions—providing emotional reassurance, moral clarity, and imaginative models of empowerment. Through a close reading of Lewis's novel and an analysis of character transformation, symbolic restoration, and narrative structure, this paper argues that happy endings do more than conclude a story—they equip children with tools to confront uncertainty, loss, and moral complexity in the real world.

Introduction

On the surface, C.S. Lewis's 1950 novel *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is a heroic fantasy. Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy—evacuated from London during the start of World War II and sent to a country house—stumble upon a magical wardrobe that transports them into the realm of Narnia. There, they join the noble lion Aslan to liberate the land from the evil White Witch's perpetual winter. However, the Pevensie children's journey—marked by sacrifice, courage, and love—reveals a far deeper function: the novel operates as a narrative training ground for resilience and optimism. This function is not merely theoretical; returning to the novel nearly a decade after first reading it, I realized I had internalized its lessons firsthand. The feeling of growing with the Pevensie siblings, gaining agency and hope through their journey, came flooding back. If a single story could impart such a powerful lesson, it prompted me to ask: What if happy endings were made a cornerstone of our educational system?

This question lies at the center of my research, which explores how happy endings in children's literature shape young readers' capacity for optimism and resilience. To focus this inquiry, I analyze *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, a foundational text in children's literature. Its rich narrative offers a lens through which to examine the emotional and psychological effects of the happy ending, as well as the narrative structure that leads to it.

In Lewis's novel, the happy ending follows the Pevensie siblings' safe return from Narnia and the thrilling promise of future adventures. While happy endings vary across texts written for children—shaped by historical context, authorial intent, and genre—my research concentrates on those that offer satisfying resolutions: endings that recognize a protagonist's hardship and transformation, then reward them with closure, joy, and renewal. Whether it's a prince marrying a princess or a once-fractured family reuniting, these are the endings at the heart of my

study—ones that serve not just the characters but the readers, offering hope, comfort, and a renewed belief in possibility.

To ground this inquiry, I connect the concept of the happy ending to psychotherapy, which similarly offers resolution and renewal. Psychotherapy is designed to provide a space where, as John McLeod asserts, "individuals [can] seek resolution and understanding" of problems they are facing (McLeod). I argue that stories offer children the same therapeutic space, but with a key advantage: a novel is far more accessible than a therapist. This research paper examines the impact of Lewis's novel's components—plot, characters, resolution—on young readers. By comparing this impact to the process of psychotherapy, I will illustrate how children's literature with happy endings can replicate the restorative function of therapy for adults, thereby providing a concrete framework for how such stories build optimism and resilience in children.

At the same time, while I suggest Lewis's novel offers an earned hope rooted in emotional complexity and resilience, critics like Jack Zipes caution against contemporary trends. As he observes, "No longer do the stories meaningfully confront the dark side of life—poverty, greed, abandonment, jealousy … blandly cheerful entertainment values prevail, and the traditional happily-ever-after ending … is now too easily and too predictably won" (Lanes). Zipes warns that such endings may simplify reality to the extent that they undercut emotional depth. My research suggests that Lewis's happy ending avoids this pitfall by validating suffering and moral growth, thereby reinforcing optimism rooted in struggle.

Historical Context and Creative Reimagining

Every story begins with an inciting incident, and while not every author is in a rush to jump immediately into the action, Lewis wastes no time in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.* He situates his readers within the inciting event in the novel's first paragraph—"This story is about something that happened to [Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy] when they were sent away from London during the war because of the air-raids" (Lewis 1). He continues, explaining that they've been "sent to the house of an old Professor who lived in the heart of the country, ten miles from the nearest railway station and two miles from the nearest post office" (Lewis 1). In just a few sentences, Lewis not only sets up the context for the children's following adventure but also frames the narrative within the shadow of war. By situating his fantasy against this backdrop, Lewis tints Narnia with the psychological landscape of fear and displacement that the Pevensie children fled. This framing briefly exposes his young readers to the reality of wartime evacuation, an experience that, beginning on September 1st, 1939, uprooted thousands of British children from their homes. It was the largest movement of people ever seen in Britain: for some, the countryside offered excitement and novelty, but for many, evacuation was marked by homesickness, isolation, and loss (Imperial War Museums).

Lewis thus begins the novel on a somber note, immediately anchoring it in the bleak reality of children evacuated during the war. Throughout it, he replaces the era's violence and gore with imaginative obstacles like the overthrow of the White Witch's reign, which allows him to, through this fantastical lens, illustrate an alternative ending for children of war—one where they are reunited with loved ones, make it back home safely, and live a happier childhood. Thus, the fantasy becomes more than mere escapism; it is a therapeutic reimagining of a traumatic event. For a generation of children marked by displacement, Lewis's manipulation of reality was

ultimately an act of profound optimism, offering his readers a story in which they could safely process their fears and envision a brighter future.

Although the novel is rooted in the experience of child evacuees, its layer of fantasy universalizes the narrative, allowing it to resonate beyond its immediate historical context. By transmuting one of history's bloodiest periods into a tale with a triumphant resolution, Lewis creates an allegory for overcoming adversity. The novel educates readers on conflict and setbacks, but its ultimate lesson is one of resolution—the necessity and possibility of a happy ending.

Happy Endings as Therapeutic "Storyworlds"

Lewis constructs Narnia not merely as a setting for adventure but as a narrative training ground for resilience, demonstrating through the Pevensies' choices how optimism functions as a practiced skill that actively dispels emotional despair. This function aligns with the concept of the therapeutic "storyworld" in psychotherapy, a client-constructed narrative space where they learn to "reauthor" crises into narratives of agency, thereby "[conveying] a sense of identity and [making] sense of problematic experiences" (McLeod).

This therapeutic process of "reauthoring" is immediately evident in the Pevensie children's response to their traumatic displacement. "'We've fallen on our feet and no mistake,' said Peter. 'This is going to be perfectly splendid. That old chap will let us do anything we like'" (Lewis 1). The war has torn them from their family and thrust them into the lonesome countryside. Still, Peter insists on approaching this experience with an optimistic mindset. His enthusiasm builds, and he asks his siblings, "Did you see those mountains as we came along? And the woods? There might be eagles. There might be stags. There'll be hawks" (Lewis 2). The

list of exciting possibilities exemplifies his cheerful attitude, and this use of active, goal-oriented language indicates that he's not just being happy; he's "projecting agency" onto an unknown situation—a key mechanism of resilience—and simultaneously setting an example for his younger siblings (McLeod). Following Peter's lead, they begin to animatedly talk about exploring the countryside, but a downpour of rain foils their plans. Edmund's excitement is instantly extinguished as he complains, "Of course it *would* be raining!" but Susan is quick to dismiss his pessimism: "Do stop grumbling, Ed… Ten to one it'll clear up in an hour or so. And in the meantime we're pretty well off. There's a wireless and lots of books" (Lewis 3). This conscious effort to "reauthor" their forced displacement as a thrilling adventure is a direct narrative demonstration of the psychotherapeutic process McLeod describes, showing readers how to actively reframe a situation they cannot control (McLeod).

Early in the novel, Lucy stumbles into Narnia through the wardrobe and meets Mr. Tumnus, a faun who initially welcomes her with warmth and hospitality. Lucy's encounter with him presents a more complex test of this optimism when he confesses he was tasked with capturing her for the White Witch. After his admission, he asks, "Can you ever forgive me?" to which Lucy graciously replies, "Why, of course I can… And I do hope you won't get into dreadful trouble on my account" (Lewis 11). In their conversation, Lucy offers Mr. Tumnus a level of kindness she was not afforded, marking her response as a radical act of emotional resilience that breaks the cycle of betrayal. This moment is a critical lesson in the narrative blueprint Lewis is constructing: resilience is not just internal fortitude, but the conscious, outward choice to respond to malice with empathy—a choice that actively begins to dismantle the Witch's reign of fear. Crucially, Lewis's model acknowledges that resilience is not an innate trait but an intentional choice, a point underscored by the counterexample of Edmund, whose

initial pessimism and betrayal ultimately lead to his own capture and misery. His eventual redemption, earned through experiencing the consequences of his actions and accepting Aslan's grace, adds a layer of complexity to the novel's psychological blueprint, showing that resilience can also be learned through failure and forgiveness.

Lewis codifies the payoff of resilience with a symbolic resolution. At the start of the novel, Mr. Tumnus explained the Witch's winter curse—"Always winter and never Christmas" (Lewis 3). When the siblings ultimately break the curse, ending the Witch's rule, Lewis describes the change overtaking Narnia: "the patches of green grew bigger and the patches of snow grew smaller" (Lewis 80). This transformation represents the narrative payoff for the siblings' practiced resilience—the land itself heals *because* of their choices, and thus, the external world reflects the internal victory.

Lewis uses these conversations and choices to establish Narnia as a narrative training ground for resilience. The children's small acts of optimism accumulate into a larger psychological lesson: adversity is not erased, but renegotiated through deliberate choices. Just as therapy guides clients to "reauthor" their stories, Narnia's narrative payoff codifies this principle. The Witch's curse externalizes the stagnation of hopelessness, while its reversal mirrors the emotional thaw that follows perseverance. Importantly, Lewis avoids portraying resilience as innate; it is practiced—whether through Peter's conscious optimism, Susan's adaptive refocusing, or Lucy's defiant kindness. For young readers, this narrative arc offers more than a happy ending; it provides a blueprint for engaging with real-world struggles. By witnessing the siblings' incremental victories, children internalize a template for resilience: agency is not the absence of pain, but the repeated decision to meet it with hope.

Agency Through Struggle

Edmund Pevensie's arc provides the most compelling evidence that Lewis's happy endings are not bestowed but are earned through a rigorous process of moral reckoning. His transformation from a spiteful and selfish boy to 'Edmund the Just' demonstrates that resilience and optimism aren't innate traits, but skills forged in the crucible of failure and atonement, rewarding active growth rather than simple luck—and providing readers with a template for that hard work.

Edmund's journey in Narnia begins with his unfortunate encounter with the Witch, and it isn't long before he falls prey to her cunning influence. Blinded by his own avarice and desire, he agrees to betray his siblings for the promise of endless Turkish Delight and a crown: "He thought about Turkish Delight and about being a King ('And I wonder how Peter will like that?' he asked himself) and horrible ideas came into his head" (Lewis 47).

His behavior also offers a stark contrast to Lucy's, a disparity that underscores Lucy's inherent goodness. While Lucy, Peter, and Susan befriend the Beavers and plan to save Mr. Tumnus, Edmund sneaks away to betray them, desperate to satisfy his craving for Turkish Delight and power. His plan backfires immediately. The Witch, enraged that he arrived alone, takes him captive. It's in her dungeon that his foolishness becomes painfully clear: "And oh, how miserable he was. It didn't look now as if the Witch intended to make him a King! All the things he had said to make himself believe that she was good and kind and that her side was really the right side sounded to him silly now" (Lewis 76). This moment of self-awareness becomes the catalyst for Edmund's transformation.

Edmund's newfound empathy is immediately tested when he witnesses the Witch prepare to turn a group of celebrating animals to stone. "'Oh don't, don't please don't,' shouted Edmund"

(Lewis 77). His dialogue is a desperate, emotional outburst—an instinctual response —and his impulsivity highlights the extent of his transformation. This was not a calculated move but a selfless one; he chose to protect the animals, fully aware his defiance would provoke the Witch's fury. This is a rupture in his character, as the selfish boy demonstrates he is capable of an unprompted, empathetic plea for others. Lewis deliberately interrupts the narrative to highlight this pivotal moment, ensuring the reader recognizes that Edmund's capacity for empathy is a revolutionary shift: "And Edmund," Lewis writes, "for the first time in this story felt sorry for someone besides himself" (Lewis 78). At this moment, the reader witnesses the first instance of Edmund's internal reckoning manifest externally.

Edmund's journey culminates not just in an apology but in a moment of pure selflessness that ensures the White Witch's defeat. "'It was all Edmund's doing, Aslan,' Peter was saying. 'We'd have been beaten if it hadn't been for him. The Witch was turning our troops into stone right and left. But nothing would stop him. He fought his way through three ogres to where she was just turning one of your leopards into a statue. And when he reached her he had the sense to bring his sword smashing down on her wand instead of trying to go for her directly and simply getting made a statue himself for his pains" (Lewis 121). Peter's explanation highlights Edmund's strategy and persistence. This isn't just bravery; it's applied intelligence and relentless will—the active behavior of someone who has truly transformed and is now fighting for something, not just himself.

Edmund's storyline exemplifies what Bohart describes as therapeutic "reckoning"—the complex but transformative process of confronting one's harmful choices and their consequences (McLeod). His initial spitefulness represents classic avoidance behavior, where immediate gratification takes precedence over moral reasoning. The turning point comes when he witnesses

the Witch's cruelty firsthand, creating what therapists call a “discrepancy experience”—the painful gap between one's self-image and actual behavior that sparks change (McLeod).

The narrative doesn't let Edmund off easily—his redemption requires active atonement in battle, paralleling therapy’s emphasis on behavior change over mere apology. Where Edmund was previously described as “becoming nastier every minute,” his transformation is later reflected in his title, “King Edmund the Just,” consequently demonstrating how confronting one's failures can rebuild one's identity at its core.

For young readers, this provides a powerful model of transformational accountability. Unlike simplistic moral tales where wrongdoers are merely punished, Edmund's character transformation demonstrates that even betrayals can become sources of strength when fully acknowledged—a cornerstone of resilience development in therapeutic practice. The happy ending thus becomes earned rather than bestowed. Despite the novel’s fantastical setting, it illustrates how Edmund's transformative ending wasn’t a result of magic, but of suffering and conscious effort.

Do Happy Endings Breed Naivete?

Critics like Jack Zipes and Bruno Bettelheim contend that happy endings risk oversimplifying conflict, shielding children from reality. Yet this raises an important question: when, exactly, is it appropriate for a child to confront the atrocities of war? Which parent would willingly expose their child to the unmediated horrors of the world? Lewis answers this dilemma with remarkable tact. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,* he replaces the trauma of the air raids with a conflict designed to mirror the problems of the real world—greed, desire, betrayal, and anger—while presenting them through the safe lens of fantasy. In doing so, he avoids

minimizing conflict; instead, he reframes it in a form young readers can engage with. Narnia's resolution thus allows children to grapple with harsh realities without extinguishing their innate hopefulness. It fosters optimism not by erasing pain, but by affirming struggle as a necessary step toward healing and resilience.

The battle against the White Witch results in devastating losses, including Aslan's death. Had the story ended here, Lewis's novel would have failed to deliver the restorative power of a happy ending. Yet when Aslan is brought back to life, Lewis deliberately resists framing it as luck or arbitrary magic. Instead, he grounds the resurrection in a moral principle: "when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards" (Lewis 109). By linking Aslan's revival directly to his act of selflessness, Lewis elevates sacrifice beyond a noble choice—it becomes a universal law that structures the world itself. This narrative decision does more than resolve the plot; it teaches young readers that compassion and empathy are not fragile or futile virtues, but forces with tangible, transformative power. In other words, Lewis embeds within the happy ending a moral equation: despair can be reversed, but only through acts of courage and care.

Psychological research reinforces Lewis's strategy of embedding hope within moral choice and consequence. Studies on "earned hope" suggest that optimism is most resilient when it arises from agency rather than luck (McLeod). The "Deeper Magic" operates in this exact way: Aslan's sacrifice generates renewal, not because fate intervenes, but because moral action has real, binding consequences (Lewis 109). This aligns with the principles of cognitive-behavioral therapy, which teaches that positive outcomes result from choices and patterns of thought rather than arbitrary external forces. For children, the narrative models how resilience can be

cultivated—not through denial of pain or passivity, but through acts of responsibility, empathy, and change.

Ultimately, Narnia's ending succeeds because it earns its joy through sacrifice and rule-bound magic, with Aslan's resurrection reflecting the fulfillment of a moral structure that validates both suffering and renewal. For children, this communicates a therapeutic lesson: despair, though real and painful, is not permanent, and hope can be reclaimed through meaningful choices. By linking optimism to moral growth rather than blind chance, Lewis provides young readers with a reality-grounded hope—one that acknowledges life's hardships yet insists on the possibility of recovery. In this way, the novel resists the oversimplification critics like Zipes fear. Instead, it offers a more nuanced vision of the happy ending: not naïve escapism, but a framework for resilience.

The Significance of the Happy Ending

Beyond character analysis or plot resolution, stories, and particularly happy endings, operate like informal therapeutic environments for children, supporting their emotional and cognitive development. In *Healing Plots: The Narrative Basis of Psychotherapy,* McLeod describes how therapy provides balance in an overwhelming modern world. I argue that children's stories, especially those with happy endings, can similarly function as spaces of resolution and renewal for their readers.

McLeod explains that "Therapy provided a place where individuals could seek resolution and understanding of the problems in living generated by an ever-expanding menu of choices" (McLeod). He further claims, "Therapy was the place to go to achieve some balance between reason and emotion, self and other, tradition and progress" (McLeod). In many respects, isn't this

exactly what stories do? Upon entering Narnia, the Pevensie siblings are faced with a range of choices and experiences, each of which holds a stake in their survival and success. These choices aren't just plot devices—they reflect deeper internal tensions that many readers, especially children, might recognize within themselves. Just as therapy offers a "balance between reason and emotion," Narnia, too, orchestrates the reconciliation of those very forces. When Peter and Susan learn how Mr. Tumnus risked his life to protect Lucy, they recognize that doing the right thing means saving Mr. Tumnus instead of retreating to the safety of the countryside. "We simply must try to rescue him," Lucy reasons, with Susan and Peter in agreement (Lewis 39). Similarly, McLeod also mentions grappling with the concept of the "self." As aforementioned, Edmund undergoes a significant character transformation when he realizes the consequences of his selfish actions. His journey in Narnia gives him a rude awakening about the need to, as McLeod argues about therapy, "achieve balance between self and other," and, upon Lucy's reflection at the end of the novel, Edmund "had become his real old self again" (Lewis 122). Through Edmund's arc, Lewis demonstrates how fantasy can externalize internal struggle, guiding children toward self-awareness without stripping away the safety of narrative distance. Taken together, the challenges the Pevensie siblings face compel them to make difficult decisions, carefully consider their actions and their respective consequences, and evaluate their own behavior. Narnia and the obstacles it poses do more than spur character growth—they stage an ongoing rehearsal for resilience. But beyond mere growth, what emerges is a quiet kind of resilience: the ability to face uncertainty, make mistakes, and still move forward with integrity. Within that resilience lies optimism: the hopeful belief that people can change, that goodness can be chosen, and that even in a world full of confusion and danger, it's possible to find clarity, courage, and redemption.

Applications and Future Directions

This research has the potential to bridge the gap between literature and lived experience, especially in community-based literacy programs for children. By curating stories that follow Narnia's pattern—where characters face real adversity but ultimately find resolution through resilience, empathy, and agency—educators can help young readers absorb two important lessons almost unconsciously: that challenges are part of life, and that solutions are possible.

For instance, guided reading sessions could pair books like *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* with facilitated discussions, prompting children to reflect on how characters navigate obstacles (e.g., "Why did Lucy forgive Mr. Tumnus? What would you have done?"). These conversations, grounded in reader-response theory, enable children to connect fictional struggles to their own experiences, thereby fostering empathy and developing problem-solving skills (Rosenblatt, 1995). The Refugee project exemplifies the power of this approach:

- Over the course of five weeks, fifth-grade students participated in weekly discussions about Alan Gratz's *Refugee*, a novel that intertwines three refugee narratives. After reading each section, students responded to targeted prompts designed to elicit empathetic reflection (e.g., "If you had to flee your home quickly, what is one item you would take?"). The results were tangible: one student, Tanner, later wrote a persuasive essay titled "*Refugee Unfairness*" for her English class, directly citing the book's influence. This demonstrates how literature can translate empathy into advocacy—a key goal of hope-centered literacy (Lucas et al., 2019).
- Scaffolded Learning: The project's success hinged on intentional scaffolding:
    - *Writing Prompts*: Students journaled before discussions to articulate their thoughts (priming critical thinking).

- *Facilitated Dialogue*: The teacher acted as a guide, using open-ended questions to deepen engagement (e.g., “How would you feel in this character’s position?”).
- *Student Agency*: Discussions evolved organically, allowing students to connect themes to their own values.

Crucially, the Refugee project worked because it honored students’ existing compassion while expanding their knowledge—proof that even older children can develop greater empathy through literature. For younger readers, who are even more impressionable, exposure to resilient narratives like *Narnia* could have a deeper, foundational effect, shaping their understanding of optimism and resilience before real-world challenges arise. To scale this model, literacy initiatives could:

1. *Curate Hope-Centered Libraries*: Prioritize books with earned resolutions
2. *Train Facilitators:* Teach educators to lead trauma-informed discussions (e.g., using *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe’s* themes of sacrifice to discuss real-world conflicts).
3. *Measure Outcomes:* Assess empathy and agency through student writing or peer discussions.

By combining *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe’s* narrative template with evidence-based methods, such as those employed in the Refugee project, we can equip children with the optimism and resilience to navigate an increasingly complex world.

Conclusion

In his research, McLeod explains that “the person seeking help is a narrator and actively tells and reauthors stories that enable him or her to convey a sense of identity and to make sense of problematic experiences by integrating them into a coherent and complete story” (McLeod).

Something similar happens when children read. Their "reauthoring" takes place not in a professional setting, but in the quiet space of a story. Books place them face-to-face with difficult experiences—Lewis, for instance, offers his readers glimpses of war, betrayal, and the heavy burden of responsibility through the Pevensies' struggles against the White Witch. Through conflict and resolution, children follow characters as they navigate hardship and reach an ending that brings closure and relief. Happy endings, then, are not merely decorative flourishes but crucial narrative moments that help young readers make sense of the problems they encounter on the page. Even with limited knowledge of the world, they begin to recognize that while challenges are real, solutions are possible. Over time, this recognition ripens into resilience—the capacity to endure difficulty without losing hope—and into optimism, the belief that obstacles can be overcome.

McLeod concludes his explanation by stating that "the aim of therapy was to find spaces and interstices in this dominant narrative through which alternative knowledges might be allowed to generate other stories" (McLeod). In Lewis's novel, the happy ending offers precisely this kind of opening. By presenting problems as surmountable and endings as hopeful, the novel teaches young readers to imagine alternative outcomes to difficult circumstances. For children reading during wartime, this was not a distant metaphor but a way of reframing the struggles they already knew—separation, danger, and uncertainty—within a narrative that promised the possibility of resolution. The effect is not reserved for adulthood; it shapes the child's perspective as they navigate such challenges, offering them resilience in the present as well as optimism for what lies ahead. In this sense, stories provide children with a narrative toolkit: not only do they encounter conflict, betrayal, and fear, but they also learn that such problems can lead to solutions, courage, and restoration. Much like McLeod's vision of therapy, children's literature,

with its patterns of conflict and resolution, generates “other stories” and offers more than temporary delight; it quietly teaches readers how to imagine a way forward.

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