**DID THAT LIZARD JUST TURN INTO A HORSE?**

**--Josiah Peterson, King’s College**

Posted on [September 14, 2017](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/) by [Brenton Dickieson](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/author/brentondickieson/)

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The Scene

*“‘I cannot kill it against your will. It is impossible. Have I your permission?’*

*…the Lizard began chattering to the ghost so loud even I could hear what it said.*

*‘Be careful. He can do what he says. He can kill me. One fatal word from you and he*will*!’*

*‘Have I your permission?’ said the angel to the Ghost.*

*‘I know it will kill me.’*

*‘It won’t, but supposing it did?’*

*‘You’re right. It would be better to be dead than to live with this creature.’*

*‘Then I may?’*

*‘Damn and blast you! Go on, can’t you? Get it over. Do what you like,’ bellowed the Ghost: but ended, whimpering, ‘God help me. God help me.’”**[[1]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftn1)*

Before becoming a debate coach and rhetoric instructor at The King’s College, I was a customer service and database manager at the [Fellowship for Performing Arts](https://fpatheatre.com/about/) (FPA) while finishing up my graduate studies. FPA is “a theatrical production company delivering provocative, entertaining theatre from a Christian worldview that is engaging to a diverse audience.” Among my responsibilities was transcribing and cataloging the hand written audience surveys that came in after the lab performances of their latest stage production, a theatrical adaptation of C.S. Lewis’s [*The Great Divorce*](https://fpatheatre.com/production/the-great-divorce/). The scene that generated the most responses in the surveys was overwhelmingly “Man with lizard.”

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It’s not a very technically advanced scene. An actor in a grey suit, who up until this point in the play has been playing the narrator wearing a red cardigan and round spectacles like C.S. Lewis, sits on a rock in the middle of a brightly lit, grassy stage, manipulating a red lizard crafted origami-style from a red handkerchief. A sparkling, robed actress tries to convince him to let her kill it. As in the book version, it’s as if the audience is eavesdropping on a deeply intimate scene from a slight distance away. A recording of Max McLean’s iconic voice provides the lines for the lizard, which are lifted directly from Lewis’s text. When the man finally gives in, allowing the spirit to wring out the “lizard” and throw it off stage, the narrator describes and a projected silhouette shows the lizard transforming into a stallion and his once ghostly companion filling out into a bright and shining new-made man. Together, horse and rider take off at a gallop over the hills toward “deep Heaven.” They are the only ghosts from the Grey Town, Hell, that are shown to stay in Heaven and in the theatrical production it is one of the last scenes. The audience, on the edge of their seats from suspense, begins to relax and breath normally again but their eyes are still wide from the spectacle.

What makes this scene so especially powerful?

One might be tempted to identify the scene’s strength in its abstractedness. Unlike *The Great Divorce*’s other scenes which depict very specific sinful attitudes, the lizard can stand in for any sort of sin we carry that we are ashamed of but can’t seem to part with by our own strength. Who hasn’t felt embarrassed and vexed by some personal temptation?

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But the strength doesn’t lie in the abstraction but rather in the incarnation of the abstraction.

Lewis could have had characters talk abstractedly about mortifying the flesh or fighting temptations like lust, gluttony, or wrath. We’ve probably all heard that before.

What is new is the lizard “twitching its tail like a whip and whispering things in his ear,”[[2]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftn2) the burning sensation and the agony the man feels facing treatment, the many excuses made to avoid it, the last ditch efforts of the lizard to escape its fate. It’s the imaginative embodiment of the otherwise abstract concepts that make the scene so powerful.

It’s almost as startling as Jesus saying “If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off” and “if your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out.”[[3]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftn3)

The Method

The challenge of a good rhetor—in the old sense of a good person speaking well—is to go beyond clarifying terms and winning assent to inclining the soul to action. Intellectual assent is insufficient without impulse. In the persuasive process dialectic establishes the definition of terms and the logical validity of arguments. But when dialectic runs dry the rhetor must move from “logical to analogical,” and from definition to “figuration.” [[4]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftn4) He or she must move an audience with moving pictures.

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According to the Oxford English Dictionary, figuration is “the action of representing figuratively; an allegorical or figurative representation.”[[5]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftn5) Lewis took complex theological concepts and psychological experiences and translated them into figures even a child could enjoy. More importantly, the images he creates move the reader more than an academic encounter with the denuded concepts ever could.

This figuration of concepts is the strength of [*The Great Divorce*](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/06/09/the-deeper-meaning-of-the-great-divorce-feature-friday/), but is also pervasive in all of Lewis’s writings. It is said that Lewis uses more images in *Mere Christianity* than N.T. Wright’s *Simply Christian*, Tim Keller’s *The Reason for God*, and John Stott’s *Basic Christianity,* combined. Other times he skips the explicit dialectic completely (perhaps in order to “slip past the watchful dragons,”[[6]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftn6) our prejudices against spirituality) and we get the *Chronicles of Narnia*.

Using figuration to move an audience toward the truth is the preferred method of Lewis’s favorite philosopher, Plato. In his Socratic dialogues, Plato strategically deploys allegories and myths to convey his most important concepts, such as the Allegory of the Cave,***[[7]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftn7)*** the Myth of the Metals,[[8]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftn8) and the Myth of Er[[9]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftn9) in *The Republic.*In his study *C.S. Lewis and Joseph Campbell on the Veracity of Christianity,*James Menzies lists Plato as one of Lewis’s top three literary influences (next to [George MacDonald](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2013/03/04/be-careful-what-you-read-c-s-lewis-literary-encounter-with-george-macdonald/) and [Owen Barfield](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2013/12/02/a-peculiar-dedication/))[[10]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftn10) so it should come as no surprise that Lewis employs a similar rhetorical approach.

In the *Phaedrus*, a Socratic dialogue centered on the uses and abuses of rhetoric, Plato demonstrates the myth-making method while trying to incline the soul of his readers to the philosophic life. He employs the image of a soul in love with divine beauty, truth, and goodness, sprouting wings and ascending into the heavens.[[11]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftn11) The moving, almost lewd, images Socrates conjures make a striking contrast to an earlier, sterile speech by Lysias praising non-lovers and an impromptu speech by Socrates condemning the madness of love.

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The three speeches, in praise of non-lovers, condemning uncontrolled lovers, and praising philosophic love, parallel three approaches to rhetoric. The first idealizes a dispassionate approach to persuasion which is unfulfilling at best and disingenuous at worst. The second warns of the very real dangers of idolatrous passion that crushes the lover or consumes the beloved. The third, “Great speech,” demonstrates the power of rightly ordered love to transform both lover and beloved, raising them to the spheres of heaven. Socrates fills this final speech with moving images in order to move his audience toward the philosophic way of life.

Good rhetoric uses myths and stories to move the soul through figurations of heavenly truth, beauty, and goodness.

Lewis explains this phenomenon in his essay, “Myth Became Fact,” writing:

*Human intellect is incurably abstract… Yet the only realities we experience are concrete—this pain, this pleasure, this dog, this man… As thinkers we are cut off from what we think about; as tasting, touching, willing, loving, hating, we do not clearly understand. The more lucidly we think, the more we are cut off: the more deeply we enter into reality, the less we can think…*

Of this tragic dilemma myth is the partial solution. In the enjoyment of a great myth we come nearest to experiencing as a concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction…

You are not looking for an abstract ‘meaning’ to that myth. You were not knowing, but tasting; but what you were tasting turns out to be a universal principle. The moment we *state* the principle, we are admittedly back in the world of abstraction. It is only while receiving the myth as a story that you experience the principle concretely. [[12]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftn12)

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The Transformation

Suddenly the scene of anguish with the Ghost and crushed Lizard transforms into a scene of glory as the new-made man mounts his stallion and takes off into the foothills of heaven. It’s this image of the only Ghost from the bus that remains in Heaven, that offers the reader or theater-goer hope and generates longing for the time when we too will be so transformed.

In Narnia Eustace is redeemed by the painful experience of being “un-dragoned.”[[13]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftn13) The London cab-horse Strawberry sprouts wings to become Fledge, “the father of all flying horses,”[[14]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftn14) fitted for Aslan’s service. But in the horse and rider of *The Great Divorce*, we have not only an image of justification or the granting of a spiritual gift, but of a completely new man. This is what we can hope for at the end of the justification/sanctification process. This is a picture, or vision, of the indescribable heavenly bodies in which every thought and passion is taken captive to the will of God and the soul finds the law that gives freedom.

Even when approaching this topic in his non-fiction work, *Mere Christianity*, Lewis resorts to the imagery of transformation. Writing in the chapter “New Men” Lewis says:

*In the last chapter I compared Christ’s work of making New Men to the process of turning a horse into a winged creature. I used that extreme example in order to emphasise the point that it is not mere improvements but Transformation.**[[15]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftn15)*

The “Man with Lizard” powerfully conveys that transformation, and its strength comes from incarnating ideas. What else should we expect from the apologist who follows a God whose “Word became flesh?”

[[1]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftnref1) C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, (New York: Harper One, 1946), 109-110.

[[2]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftnref2) C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, (New York: Harper One, 1946), 106.

[[3]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftnref3) Matthew 5:30

[[4]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftnref4) Richard Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, (Battleboro, VT: Echo Point Books and Media, 1953), 18.

[[5]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftnref5) *Oxford English Dictionary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), accessed online <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/70074?redirectedFrom=figuration#eid>

[[6]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftnref6) C.S. Lewis, “Sometimes Faery Stories May Say Best What Needs to be Said,” *On Stories*, (Orlando: Harcourt, 1982), 47.

[[7]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftnref7) 7.514-517

[[8]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftnref8) 3.414

[[9]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftnref9) 10.614

[[10]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftnref10) James Menzies, *True Myth: C.S. Lewis and Joseph Campbell on the Veracity of Christianity*, (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2015), 50.

[[11]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftnref11) Plato, translated by Alexander Nehamas & Paul Woodruff, *Phaedrus*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995). 246A

[[12]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftnref12) C.S. Lewis, “Myth Became Fact,” *God in the Dock*, (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970) 65-66.

[[13]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftnref13) C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, (New York: Harper Trophy, 1983), 117.

[[14]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftnref14) C.S. Lewis, *The Magicians Nephew*, (New York: Harper Trophy, 1983), 170-171.

[[15]](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2017/09/14/did-that-lizard-just-turn-into-a-horse-guest-post-by-josiah-peterson/" \l "_ftnref15) C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity,* (New York: Harper One, 2001), 218.