

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 7: C. S. Lewis: His Life, Thought, & Theology

C.S. Lewis: From the Publisher

A man can't be always defending the truth; There must be a time to feed on it."

-C.S. Lewis

Reflections on the Psalms

This issue of Christian History Magazine is the first we have done on a 20th century figure. It is our intention to treat 20th Century persons only occasionally within these pages.

The selection of Lewis coincided with a commitment to make a major dramatic film biography on his life. The film is a co-production by the BBC, Gateway Films and The Episcopal Radio-TV Foundation. Your publisher served as associate producer to the project.

Several factors made Lewis a fascinating and appropriate subject for the film production and this issue. He was a layman, not an ordained clergyman. Yet, he was one of the most effective apologists for Christianity in this century (perhaps any century), and his apologetical writings were not even his main professional activity but more of an avocation. Equally interesting is the fact that he wrote so effectively for small children as well as for intellectuals.

His secure and comfortable academic life was shattered through the death of his wife, whom he married late in life. The ravages and pain of her cancer and his devastating grief in the wake of her loss tested Lewis and his faith to its very core.

His gifted mind could not comprehend the purposes of God behind it all. Perhaps it never occurred to him that his ordeal enabled many who before could only stand at a safe distance and admire him as mentor to now move closer and love him as a brother.

Lewis left us a legacy whose importance is yet to be fully assessed. He died on November 22, 1963, the same day President John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

We trust you will enjoy this issue. The next edition of this magazine will treat Jonathan Edwards.

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C.S. Lewis: Did You Know?

Facts about C.S. Lewis

As a child, C.S. Lewis entertained himself by writing and illustrating stories about animals and he **wrote his first novel at the age of 12.**

Lewis served in France during World War I and was **wounded in action** by a bursting shell.

The first book Lewis published was a volume of poetry titled "**Spirits in Bondage**," for which he used the **pseudonym Clive Hamilton.**

Lewis was a member of the Coalbiters, an Oxford club that read aloud Icelandic sagas and myths in the original language. The **club was founded by J.R.R. Tolkien.**

Due to his preference for male society, Lewis gained a reputation at Oxford as a misogynist and it was **rumored that he avoided women** whenever possible.

Lewis was an **atheist from his youth and did not confess Christ until his early thirties.**

Lewis's friend **J.R.R. Tolkien disliked the Narnian Chronicles**, complaining that they were hastily written and unrealistic.

Lewis undertook **annual walking tours of up to 50 miles** through the English countryside, accompanied by his brother and friends.

Lewis's marriage at nearly 60 years of age to a divorced former Communist of Jewish heritage upset many of his friends.

The Lewis brothers' tombstone reads, "Men must endure their going hence," the Shakespeare quotation on their father's calendar the day their mother died.

J.B. Phillips in his book "**The Ring of Truth**" **claimed that Lewis visited him from beyond the grave** on two separate occasions.

An **animated television special** based on Lewis's "**The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe**" has been viewed by over 35 million people and **won an Emmy award.**

Upon publication of his book "**Miracles: A Preliminary Study**" TIME magazine devoted a cover story to Lewis, Sept. 8, 1947, and marveled at how this scholar would risk **the heresy of affirming supernatural Christianity** in the midst of academia.

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C.S. Lewis: A Profile of His Life

LYLE DORSETT Lyle W. Dorsett is curator of the Marion E. Wade Collection, which houses C.S. Lewis's original manuscripts, letters, and papers at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois. He is the author of *And God Came In: The Extraordinary Story of Joy Davidman, Her Life and Marriage to C.S. Lewis*, and co-editor of *C.S. Lewis. Letters to Children*

"I'm tall, fat, rather bald, red-faced, double-chinned, black-haired, have a deep voice, and wear glasses for reading," C.S. Lewis wrote to a young admirer in 1954. If the famous author had been prone to notice clothing, he might have added that his trousers were usually in dire need of pressing, his jackets threadbare and blemished by snags and food spots, and his shoes scuffed and worn at the heels.

But Jack, as C.S. Lewis's friends knew him, was not bothered by fashion. It is not that he was slovenly. On the contrary, he was meticulous about the precise use of words, the quality of evidence presented in arguments, and the meter in verse. Nevertheless, the style and condition of personal attire was near the bottom of his list of concerns, whereas books and ideas were among his top priorities.

Early Influences

Lewis was born into a bookish family of Protestants in Belfast, Ireland, November 29, 1898. His father, Albert, and his mother, Florence Augusta Hamilton, possessed first-rate minds, and they were members of the Church of Ireland. Eclectic in their reading tastes, they purchased and read many books, and their love for the printed word was passed on to their children. Jack and Warren (his only sibling, three years his senior) were not only read to aloud and taught to read, they were encouraged to use the large family library.

In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis recalled early memories of "endless books." "There were books in the study, books in the dining room, books in the cloakroom, books (two deep) in the great bookcase on the landing, books in a bedroom, books piled as high as my shoulder in the cistern attic, books of all kinds," he remembered, and none were off limits to him. On rainy days—and there were many in northern Ireland—he pulled volumes off the shelves and entered into worlds created by authors such as Conan Doyle, E. Nesbit, Mark Twain, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

After brother Warnie was sent off to boarding school in England, Jack became somewhat reclusive. He spent more time in books and an imaginary world of "dressed animals" and "knights in armor." But he did more than read books, he wrote and illustrated his own stories as well.

If Warren Lewis's exile across the Irish Sea to school in 1905 drove Jack further into himself and books, his mother's death from cancer in 1908 made him even more withdrawn. Mrs. Lewis's death came just three months prior to Jack's tenth birthday, and the young man was hurt deeply by her passing. Not only did he lose a mother, his father never fully recovered from her death. For many years thereafter, both boys felt estranged from their father, and home life was never warm and satisfying again.

The death of Mrs. Lewis convinced young Jack that the God he encountered in church and in the Bible his mother gave him was, if not cruel, at least a vague abstraction. Four or five years later, by 1911 or 1912, and with the additional influence of a spiritually unorthodox boarding school matron, Lewis forsook Christianity and became an avowed atheist.

By autumn 1914 C.S. Lewis was somewhat adrift. He had lost his faith and his mother, and he felt alienated from his father. He was extremely close to his brother, but they saw one another only on holidays. A new friendship was beginning with a fellow student, Arthur Greeves, but it was interrupted in September when C. S. Lewis was sent to Great Bookham, Surrey, to be privately tutored by W.T. Kirkpatrick, a brilliant teacher and friend of Lewis's father.

"The Great Knock," as the Lewis family dubbed Mr. Kirkpatrick, had a profound effect upon the teenaged youth. He introduced him to the classics in Greek, Latin, and Italian literature, and helped him make a beginning in German. Kirkpatrick not only led Lewis to great books, he pushed him to understand them in the original languages. A most demanding tutor, Kirkpatrick helped Jack learn how to criticize and analyze, and he taught him how to think, speak, and write logically. Consequently, after nearly three years with Kirkpatrick, C.S. Lewis was tough-minded and widely read. Many years later, Lewis wrote in *Surprised by Joy* that "My debt to him is very great, my reverence to this day undiminished."

The debt was large indeed. Kirkpatrick helped the young man prepare for scholarship examinations at Oxford, and the demanding mentor played no small role in Lewis's outstanding performance at University College, where he took highest honors in honour moderations, greats, and English in 1920, 1922, and 1923 respectively.

If Kirkpatrick taught Lewis to think critically—to demand evidence for even the most casual assertions—Oxford introduced him to a wide horizon of ideas. Whereas Lewis's hard-pressing mentor had helped him reinforce his atheism, a few associates at Oxford forced him to re-examine his belief in a universe without God.

Oxford Years

Lewis entered the world of Oxford in 1917 as a student, and he never really left. Despite an interruption to fight in World War I and his professorship at Cambridge beginning in 1955, he always maintained his home and friends in Oxford. He loved the bookshops, the pubs, and the Bodleian Library, and he revelled in the company of local men who loved to read, write, and discuss books. His attachment to Oxford was so strong that when he taught at Cambridge from 1955 to 1963 he commuted back to Oxford on weekends so that he could be close to familiar places and beloved friends.

It was in Oxford that Lewis pursued things of the mind with fervor. Ideas, books, and debates were ordinary fare in this heady environment. With no particular purpose in life beyond stimulating his imagination, feeding his intellectual curiosity, and writing for publication and posterity, he thoroughly enjoyed academic life. In 1919 he published his first book, a cycle of lyrics titled *Spirits in Bondage*, which he wrote under the pseudonym Clive Hamilton. In 1924 he became a philosophy tutor at University College. Then in 1925 he was elected a Fellow of Magdalen College, where he tutored in English language and literature. The next year his second volume of poetry, *Dymer*, was published under the name Clive Hamilton.

Alongside the generally self-centered life Lewis was leading, he demonstrated a loyal and generous nature. When his college roommate, Paddy Moore, was killed in World War I, Jack befriended Paddy's mother, Mrs. Janie King Moore, and her adolescent daughter Maureen. Then in 1920, after completing his first degree, Lewis decided to share lodgings with them so that he could more carefully look out for their needs.

Spiritual Awakening

This gesture of kindness did more than help Mrs. Moore and Maureen; it got C.S. Lewis outside of himself and taught him patience. The association with the Moores also introduced him to Mrs. Moore's brother, a combat veteran who suffered from a severe war-inflicted nervous disorder. This personal encounter

apparently shook Lewis's confidence in materialism, because a letter he wrote in 1923 to his friend Arthur Greeves suggests a slight spiritual awakening. It seems that the "Doc," as the Moores and Lewis referred to him, came to stay with the trio for three weeks. During the visit "Doc" underwent an ordeal of extreme mental torture. After the attack, when the poor wretch was hospitalized, Lewis wrote to his friend that "Doc" had believed he was in Hell. He wore out his body in the "awful mental tortures," and then died from heart failure "unconscious at the end thank God." Lewis concluded his observation by suggesting it is "a damned world—and we once thought we could be happy with books and music!"

The spiritual awakening continued, enhanced by reading books by George MacDonald and G.K. Chesterton. One MacDonald volume called *Phantastes* had a powerful impact on his thinking. "What it actually did to me," wrote Lewis, "was to convert, even to baptize ... my imagination." At Oxford Lewis continued to read MacDonald, and he imbibed G.K. Chesterton as well. The latter author's books, especially *The Everlasting Man*, raised serious questions about the young intellectual's materialism.

While MacDonald and Chesterton were stirring Lewis's thoughts, a close friend, Owen Barfield, with whom he spent much time during and after their student years, pounced on the logic of Jack Lewis's atheism. Barfield became a theist, and then a Christian, and he frequently badgered Lewis about his materialism. So did Nevill Coghill, a fellow student and lifelong friend who was brilliant, yet was, to Lewis's amazement, "a Christian and a thoroughgoing supernaturalist."

Soon after joining the English faculty at Magdalen College, Lewis met two more Christians, Hugo Dyson and J.R.R. Tolkien. These men became close friends of Lewis. He admired their brilliance and their logic. Soon Lewis recognized that most of his friends, like his favorite authors—MacDonald, Chesterton, Johnson, Spenser, and Milton—held to this Christian angle of vision which threatened his whole world view.

Gradually during the 1920s, two paths were converging in Lewis's mind: one was reason, the other intuition. In 1929 these roads met, and C.S. Lewis surrendered and admitted that "God was God, and knelt and prayed." Within two years the reluctant convert admitted that Jesus Christ is the Son of God—God Incarnate. With this revelation the Oxford don became a communicant in the Church of England.

A New Life

Christian history shows that when men and women meet Jesus, recognize His Nature, and then decide to trust and follow Him, they become strikingly different people. Those who convert—who turn around and obey Christ's command to "follow me" are clearly people with changed lives.

If evidence of conversion is a new life, C.S. Lewis was obviously a believer after 1931. Many changes were apparent. His life now had a purpose—to know and obey God. This came to fruition most demonstrably in his writing. Earlier efforts to become a poet were laid to rest. The new Christian devoted his talent and energy to writing prose that reflected his recently found faith. Within two years of his conversion Lewis published *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism*. This little volume opened a thirty-year stream of books on Christian apologetics and discipleship that became a lifelong avocation. Between 1933 and his death in 1963, C.S. Lewis wrote books including the seven volume *Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, and *Mere Christianity*, that nudged atheists and agnostics toward the faith, and encouraged and nurtured believers.

As a good steward and responsible professional, Lewis did not ignore his academic discipline. He wrote literary history and criticism such as *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition*, *Rehabilitations and Other Essays*, and *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*. These books are still widely read and highly regarded.

Despite the large quantity and high quality of his academic publications, Lewis became known as a literary evangelist. The tone and impact of his theological and apologetical books help account for this reputation, as did his own assertion in a rejoinder to his critic, Dr. W.N. Pittenger, published in *The Christian Century* November 26, 1958, where Lewis admitted that most of what he wrote "is evangelistic."

A Growing Reputation

If Christianity altered Lewis's writing habits, the publication of those books had a palpable effect on his personal life. First of all, the change was manifested in the mail. Once Lewis's books became popular, which they did by the 1940s, he was inundated by letters. Because the famous author believed it was God's will for him to answer most of this mail himself, and because he was convinced, as he said in "The Weight of Glory," that there are "no ordinary people," he took time to write with care to each correspondent regardless of age, education, or place in society. This enterprise consumed many hours each week.

Furthermore, life with fame was laden with other pressures. There were numerous invitations to entertain guests, grant interviews, give lectures, and preach sermons. Writing, to be sure, is a lonely enterprise. This Lewis understood. And even though he felt called by God to write, he likewise felt it was required of him to counsel those who made the pilgrimage to The Kilns, his home on the edge of Oxford. Frequently he believed it was his calling to explain the Christian faith to people over BBC radio, and to the airmen at the RAF bases during World War II.

Preaching sermons, giving talks, and expressing his theological views over the radio throughout the United Kingdom bolstered Lewis's reputation and increased his book sales. With these new circumstances came other changes—not the least being a marked upswing in annual income. Throughout the 1920s Lewis had been getting by on little money. During his student years his father provided an allowance, and Jack supplemented that in various ways. Nevertheless, money was always scarce. And when the young academician took on the responsibility for Mrs. Moore and her daughter, finances were always tight even with the regular tutorial stipend.

As book royalties mounted during the late 1940s, and continued to spiral upward thereafter, C.S. Lewis refused to upgrade his standard of living. Partly out of disdain for conspicuous living, but mostly out of commitment to Jesus Christ, he established a charitable fund for his royalty earnings.

Neither the extent nor the recipients of C.S. Lewis's charity are fully known. Indeed, he made valiant efforts to conceal this information. It is known that he supported numerous impoverished families, underwrote education fees for orphans and poor seminarians, and put monies into scores of charities and church ministries.

A Late Marriage

The outreach of Lewis's books and the impact of his charity conspired to make still another significant change in his lifestyle. During the last decade of his earthly pilgrimage, Lewis's world was invaded by an American woman and her two children. In autumn 1952 Joy Davidman Gresham, who had become a Christian partly because she read *The Great Divorce* and *The Screwtape Letters*, visited her spiritual mentor in England. Soon thereafter her husband abandoned her for another woman. In the meantime the divorcee, a writer in her own right, moved to London with her two adolescent boys, David and Douglas.

Joy Davidman Gresham gradually fell into financial trouble. Her acquaintance with C.S. Lewis led to his underwriting the boarding school education of David and Douglas. From charity and common literary interests grew a deep friendship, and eventually agape became eros. They were married in 1956.

Joy was sixteen years Lewis's junior, but that did not prevent a happy marriage. A savage case of cancer, however, cut short their life together. After several years of reprieve from an earlier and nearly fatal bout with cancer, Joy Lewis passed away in Oxford July 13, 1960.

Joy's entry into Jack's life brought much happiness. As he wrote to one friend soon after their marriage, "It's funny having at 59 the sort of happiness most men have in their twenties ... 'Thou hast kept the good wine till now.'" Joy brought C.S. Lewis love, companionship, and two stepsons, complete with all of the delights and problems that naturally come in such circumstances. Furthermore, Mrs. Lewis brought insights, ideas, and a new angle of vision. Raised in a Jewish home, and having written a book on the Ten Commandments, *Smoke on the Mountain*, she encouraged him to renew his writing of apologetics, in particular *Reflections on the Psalms*. Her influence on what Jack considered his best book, *Till We Have Faces*, was so profound that he told one close friend she was actually his co-author.

Critics Emerge

C.S. Lewis's marriage to Joy Davidman did not enhance his reputation in Great Britain. Long assumed to be a confirmed bachelor, the esteemed professor not only married late in life, he married an American who was at once Jewish, divorced, and personally rather abrasive. In brief, the marriage did not set well with most of Mr. Lewis's friends and acquaintances. The critics notwithstanding, Jack's faithful brother Warren—who lived at The Kilns with Jack before, during, and after the years with Joy—supported him, as did a few other close friends.

C.S. Lewis was hurt by the disapproval of his old friends and colleagues, but it was by no means a new experience for him. Although he enjoyed the conviviality of weekly get-togethers with fellow Inklings (intellectuals and writers who met regularly to exchange ideas and share in good conversation), and the prodigious successes of his books, Lewis was frequently under attack for his decidedly Christian lifestyle. Close friends, among them Owen Barfield and J.R.R. Tolkien, openly disapproved of Lewis's evangelistic speaking and writing. And if the opprobrium of fellow believers was unpleasant, it was mild compared with the attacks from colleagues and strangers who did not share the Oxford author's faith.

It is common knowledge that Lewis's "Christian" books caused so much disapproval that he was more than once passed over for a professorship at Oxford, with the honors going to men of lesser reputation. It was Magdalene College at Cambridge University that finally honored Lewis with a chair in 1955 and thereby recognized his original and important contributions to English literary history and criticism.

Along with Lewis's international reputation, ever-growing royalties, and thousands of fans throughout the English-speaking world, came increasing alienation. Did Lewis take comfort in his Lord's warning in the Sermon on the Mount that his disciples would indeed be insulted and persecuted? We do not know.

Lewis died at The Kilns on November 22, 1963. He is buried beside his brother, who lived ten more years, in the cemetery of Holy Trinity Church, Headington Quarry, Oxford. His letters and books, and the lives these writings touch, are his legacy.

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C.S. Lewis: Christian History Timeline

Born in Belfast, Ireland November 29, 1898

1905 Moves to "Little Lea."

1913 Enters Malvern College, England.

1917 April: Begins studies at University College, Oxford.

September: Commissioned as second lieutenant in Somerset Light Infantry.

November: Leaves for front lines.

1918 Wounded in action. Returns to hospital in England.

1919 Returns to University College. Publishes first book, ***Spirits in Bondage***, a small volume of lyric poems, under the name Clive Hamilton.

1925 Elected to a fellowship in English language and literature at Magdalen College, Oxford.

1929 Confesses that "God is God."

1930 Purchases and moves into The Kilns.

1931 Comes to faith in Christ.

1939 Publishes ***Out of the Silent Planet***, first book of the Space Trilogy.

1940 First weekly meeting of the Inklings. Publishes ***The Problem of Pain***.

1941 Begins a series of radio talks over the BBC.

1942 Publishes ***The Screwtape Letters***.

1945 Publishes ***The Great Divorce***.

1950 Receives first letter from Joy Davidman Gresham. Publishes ***The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe***, the first of the Narnian stories. Writes the first of more than 100 letters to "an American lady."

1952 Meets Joy Davidman Gresham. Publishes ***Mere Christianity***.

1955 Leaves Oxford for professorship of Medieval and Renaissance literature at Magdalen College, Cambridge.

1956 Publishes ***Till We Have Faces***, the book Lewis considers his best fictional work. Publishes ***The Last Battle***, last of the Narnian series.

April: Marries Joy Davidman Gresham in a legal ceremony.

November: Marries Joy in ecclesiastical ceremony at her bedside.

1960 Joy Lewis dies, July 13.

1963 C.S. Lewis dies November 22, 1963 (***The same day President John F. Kennedy is assassinated.***)

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The Inklings

Without doubt, Lewis's creative and theological genius was stimulated by his weekly meetings with the "Inklings," a collection of thinkers and friends who gathered regularly to critique each other's writing and to discuss current events and life in general.

The name of the group was transferred from a defunct Oxford literary society, in which Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien had been members, to a group of friends who gathered in Lewis's rooms at Magdalen College every Thursday night.

Usually present were C.S. Lewis, Warren Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Dr. R.E. Havard, and Charles Williams. Other attenders included Nevill Coghill, Hugo Dyson, Owen Barfield, and Adam Fox.

A focus of the meetings was the reading aloud of works in progress for criticism. Inklings heard and discussed first drafts of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, and Warren Lewis's book on Louis XIV. In addition, they read and critiqued their own poetry and that of others. Lively discussions ensued on such topics as education, pain, horror comics, and who was the most important man in various countries. Much disagreement is reported to have occurred, and members sometimes expressed intense dislike for each other's work.

The Inklings began meeting in Lewis's rooms around 1933 and continued that Thursday evening tradition until 1950. Tuesday morning gatherings at the Eagle and Child public house (known as the Bird and Baby) continued until Lewis's death.

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C.S. Lewis: A Gallery of Family and Friends

A Gallery of thumbnail sketches of close and influential family and friends of C.S. Lewis

Albert Lewis (1863–1929)

C.S. Lewis's father, Albert Lewis, was the son of a Welsh immigrant who found success as a partner in a firm that manufactured boilers and ships. Albert attended college and began a practice as a solicitor in Belfast in 1885.

Lewis believed his father's quick mind, eloquence and love of oratory would have suited him for a career in politics if he had had the means. Albert's favorite pastime was spending an afternoon swapping anecdotes with his brothers, acting them out with great flourish.

C.S. Lewis described his father's side of the family as "true Welshmen, sentimental, passionate, and rhetorical, easily moved both to anger and to tenderness." Albert never fully recovered from grief following his wife's death, and his erratic and sometimes cruel subsequent behavior alienated his sons.

Albert filled the Lewis home with books, but his son's interest in fantasy literature was not shared by his parents. "If I am a romantic," he wrote, "my parents bear no responsibility for it."

Florence Hamilton Lewis (1862–1908)

Flora Lewis, C.S. Lewis's mother, was the daughter of the Rev. Thomas Hamilton, rector of the church attended by the Lewises. Flora's talent for mathematics won her a first in the subject at Queen's College, Belfast, where she earned a B.A.

Flora's cool temperament was the antithesis of her husband's emotionality. When she agreed to marry Albert after an eight-year courtship, she wrote to him, "I wonder do I love you? I am not quite sure. I'll know that at least I am very fond of you, and that I should never think of loving anyone else."

C.S. Lewis wrote of her family, "their minds were critical and ironic and they had the talent for happiness to a high degree." Flora was a voracious reader and wrote magazine articles. She died of cancer when C.S. Lewis was only nine. "With my mother's death," he wrote, "all that was tranquil and reliable disappeared from my life."

Major Warren Hamilton Lewis (1895–1973)

C.S. Lewis referred to his older brother, Warren ("Warnie"), as "my dearest and closest friend." The lifelong bond formed as the boys played together, writing and illustrating stories, in their country home. When their mother's death devastated their father, they were left with only each other for comfort and support.

Although their careers took widely different turns, the two lived together much of their lives. Warren was a career army officer in the Royal Army Service Corps and served in such posts as Sierra Leone and China. After retiring from 18 years of active service in 1932, he took up residence at the Kilns, where he lived until after his brother's death.

Upon retirement, Warren took on the task of editing the Lewis family papers. He was recalled to active service in World War II. During his final retirement he wrote seven books on the history of 17th Century France.

Warren Lewis returned to belief in Christianity five months before his brother's conversion. He was a frequent participant in weekly meetings of the Inklings. The Lewis brothers undertook many annual walking tours of up to 50 miles. His 40-year battle with alcoholism was a source of great concern to his brother.

Arthur Greeves (1895–1966)

C.S. Lewis described Arthur Greeves as, "after my brother, my oldest and most intimate friend." Lewis met Greeves when the neighbor boy, bedridden with the bad heart that kept him an invalid most of his life, requested a visit. The two boys discovered a common love for books, and Lewis found in Greeves an "alter ego, the man who first reveals to you that you are not alone in the world by turning out (beyond hope) to share all your most secret delights."

Although Lewis did not consider Greeves his intellectual equal, he learned much from Greeves' insight into the realm of feelings. The two began a correspondence that lasted for the rest of Lewis's life, and he wrote his friend nearly 300 letters. Greeves was also a consistent influence for Christ in his friend's life, and it was to Greeves that Lewis first revealed his own conversion.

Greeves' heart ailment prevented him from holding steady employment. Independently wealthy, he never needed it. He earned a certificate of art at a London school, and was considered a good painter. Although he also wrote, Greeves was never published. Lewis sent Greeves some of his manuscripts for critique.

Owen Barfield (1898–)

C.S. Lewis and Owen Barfield were drawn together during their undergraduate days at Oxford by a common interest in poetry. As they read and critiqued each other's work, Lewis found in Barfield a second great friend. The two men shared interests, but not points of view; Lewis described Barfield as his "anti-self," "the man who disagrees with you about everything."

After Oxford, Barfield worked as a free-lance writer until financial demands forced him to enter his father's legal firm as a solicitor. He maintained his friendship with Lewis for the rest of their lives, and was influential in shaping Lewis's views about the importance of myth in language, literature, and the history of thinking. Barfield resumed his writing career after retiring from law.

Raised an agnostic, Barfield became a Christian in his late twenties; nevertheless, he was never comfortable with Lewis's apologetics or his evangelism. He later embraced and wrote about anthroposophy, a form of religious philosophy which he believed complemented rather than detracted from Christianity.

J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973)

Although they initially took opposite sides in a faculty dispute over English literature curriculum, Tolkien and Lewis were eventually united by an interest in myth and legend. Tolkien introduced Lewis to the Coalbiters, a club he had formed which read and translated Icelandic myths. Their mutual interest led to many late-night discussions and long walks. Lewis wrote to Greeves that Tolkien was "the one man absolutely fitted, if fate had allowed, to be a third in our friendship in the old days."

Their shared belief in the importance of myth led to a discussion about Christianity that Lewis regarded an

important factor leading to his conversion. Lewis encouraged Tolkien in his work on *The Silmarillion*, a cycle of myth and legend, and read *The Lord of the Rings* as Tolkien wrote it. Tolkien was extremely critical of Lewis's Narnian chronicles, charging that they were hastily written, inconsistent, and that they failed to create a "real" setting. Tolkien was also critical of Lewis's marriage to Joy, partly because of his views on divorce and remarriage.

Tolkien was professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford from 1925 to 1945, when he became professor of English language and literature until retirement in 1959.

Charles Williams (1886–1945)

The son of a clerk who instilled in him his love of literature and belief in understanding all sides of an argument, Charles Williams was largely self-educated. Williams began his career as a proofreader in the London office of Oxford University Press, where he worked his way up to the position of editor. Williams wrote poetry from his early days, and became a prolific writer of novels, drama, theology, and criticism as well.

Williams met Lewis when the latter wrote him a letter praising his novel, *The Place of the Lion*. At the same time, Williams was admiring Lewis's *Allegory of Love*. The two met occasionally until Williams moved to Oxford in 1939, where he became a regular member of the Inklings.

Although Lewis described Williams as "ugly as a chimpanzee," Williams' personal magnetism won him a wide following. He developed the idea of romantic theology, which considers the theological implications of romantic experiences, and *The Way of Affirmation*, in which earthly pleasures are seen as a door to Christian vision rather than a barrier.

Lewis was impressed by Williams' selfless character, and described him as offering himself wholly to others without expecting anything in return. Although Lewis said he was never consciously influenced by Williams' work, many students of the two see Williams' influence in Lewis's writing, especially in using ordinary people as the characters in the Space Trilogy.

R.E. Havard (1901–)

The son of an Anglican clergyman, R.E. Havard studied chemistry at Oxford before becoming a medical doctor. Havard took his practice to Oxford in 1934, where he became the physician for Lewis and the Tolkien family. Lewis enjoyed Havard, who was as willing to discuss philosophical problems as medical ones. After Lewis invited him to read a paper on the effects of pain at a Thursday evening meeting of the Inklings, Havard became a regular member of the group.

Tolkien said Havard, unlike most doctors, "thinks of people as people, not as collections of 'works.'" Lewis named the doctor in *Perelandra* "Humphrey," Havard's nickname, in tribute to his friend.

Dorothy Sayers (1893–1957)

Dorothy Sayers, one of the first woman graduates of Oxford, studied the classics and won honors in modern language studies. She worked as an advertising copywriter for 11 years. Sayers first won recognition as the writer of detective thrillers featuring Lord Peter Wimsey. She later wrote religious plays for radio, as well as numerous books and essays on Christian apologetics and theology. Sayers kept up correspondence, primarily concerning literature, with Lewis and his contemporaries. Lewis considered her "the first person of importance who ever wrote me a fan letter," and he called her "one of the great English letter writers." It may have been Sayers who spurred Lewis to write *Miracles*—he began work on the book just weeks after receiving her letter lamenting no good modern works on the subject.

Sayers was a member of Oxford's Socratic Club, a forum for discussing intellectual challenges in religion and Christianity, of which Lewis was president for 22 years. Lewis appreciated Sayers in person as well as by post; he praised "the extraordinary zest and edge of her conversation."

Joy Davidman (1915–1960)

Helen Joy Davidman, of Jewish descent, was raised in the Bronx, New York, where she readily adopted her father's materialistic philosophy. Extraordinarily bright, she entered college at 14. By the age of 25 she had earned a master's degree and published a novel and two books of poetry. After a failed try at screenwriting in Hollywood, she settled in New York to continue her work with the Communist Party. There she met and married William Gresham, a fellow writer.

Joy found faith in God in her early thirties, and became a Christian a year later, partly through the influence of Lewis's books. She began correspondence with him that led to a visit and a growing friendship. When her husband left her for another woman, she moved to Oxford with her two sons.

Lewis described Joy's mind as "lithe and quick and muscular as a leopard." Many of his friends disapproved of the match; some found Joy too harsh and outspoken; others objected to her status as a divorcee. Nevertheless, their brief marriage, which ended in her death from cancer, brought some of the greatest joy to his life. Joy encouraged Lewis to write *Reflections on the Psalms* and her influence can be seen in *Till We Have Faces* and *The Four Loves*. Her own book, *Smoke on the Mountain*, is still in print.

G.K. Chesterton (1874–1936)

One of Lewis's primary mentors in apologetics, and an influence even in his conversion, was G.K. Chesterton. Novelist, poet, essayist, and journalist, Chesterton was perhaps best known for his Father Brown detective stories. He produced more than 100 volumes in his lifetime, including biographies of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Thomas Aquinas. His *The Everlasting Man*, which set out a Christian outline of history, was one of the factors that wore down Lewis's resistance to Christianity.

Chesterton was one of the first defenders of orthodoxy to use humor as a weapon. Perhaps more important was his use of reason to defend faith. Chesterton wrote that the universe can only be understood as a creation; that man's sense of right and wrong and his conflict when he becomes aware that he is not what he was made to be points to a Creator. Though they never met, Lewis called Chesterton "the most sensible man alive."

George MacDonald (1824–1905)

The man C.S. Lewis regarded as his master barely made a living as a poet, novelist, lecturer, and writer of children's books. Yet Lewis said of the retired minister, "I know hardly any other writer who seems to be closer, or more continually close, to the Spirit of Christ Himself." In his teens, Lewis was profoundly changed by reading MacDonald's *Phantastes, a Faerie Romance*, an experience Lewis considered the "baptism" of his imagination. Lewis considered MacDonald the best writer of fantasy alive, and he found a sense of holiness in all MacDonald's writings. Lewis was touched by MacDonald's devotional writings as well. He wrote, "My own debt to (*Unspoken Sermons*) is almost as great as one man can owe to another," and he recommended the book with success to many seekers.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 7: C. S. Lewis: His Life, Thought, & Theology

Into the Land of Imagination

Lewis defined reason as the natural organ of truth and imagination as the organ of meaning.

Clyde Kilby

Every normal person is blessed with imagination. Imagination operates ceaselessly and is capable of tying together even grotesque elements of matter and spirit. The apple which is said to have fallen on Isaac Newton's head launched him into a set of meanings which culminated in his laws of gravitation and motion. In his theory of relativity Einstein combined complicated mathematical equations with images of trains rushing into distant space. The best scientists know that great discoveries are not made simply by experiment and reason but sometimes in mental gyrations as great, even as delightfully humorous, as Alice's adventures down the rabbit hole.

There is hardly one of Lewis's expository works in which he fails to allude to the imagination. Lewis defined reason as the natural organ of truth and imagination as the organ of meaning.

The whole enterprise of art—music, sculpture, literature, even architecture—is particularly dependent upon consistent imagination. And is not life itself also, at least in the portions of it which seem really to live? Owing to the Great Mistake of Eden, life tends habitually to settle into the prosaic and ordinary. Indeed, is it not symbolic of fallen man that a steady smell of roses leaves them odorless? Imagination is necessary to the worthwhile life.

Imagination in the Bible

Some devout Christians fear imagination is inevitably evil, yet the Bible is almost embarrassingly imaginative. Lewis insists that the reader of the Bible, without losing sight of its primary value, must always remember that it is literature. "Most emphatically," he says, "the Psalms must be read as poetry." We remember such highly imaginative passages as "Let the floods clap their hands, let the hills be joyful together," and Christ as a great storyteller describing a man who built his house upon sand and a sower who went forth to sow. He compared the kingdom of heaven to a grain of mustard seed and described Himself as "the true vine." God, the greatest of imaginers, gives all men power to imagine, just as he gives them free will. Either can lead to steady and joyful devotion to Him or else to everlasting misery.

Lewis believed that the modern imagination has fostered more than the usual quota of villainy. Having too often searched out the devious and febrile in all the little corners where sin lurks. In the final chapter of *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis describes hell's view of our times. At the Tempters' Training College for Young Devils, Screwtape speaks his gratitude for the abundance of souls now entering hell but bemoans their quality, souls "hardly worth damning," and harks back to periods of more substantial sinners such as Henry VIII, Farinata, or even Hitler. Lewis also believes that people in our time have, for whatever cause, tended to avoid the great positive potentials of love and holiness. "How little people know who think that holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing ... it is irresistible."

The "Christian Novelist"

In the one meeting I had with C.S. Lewis, we discussed the Christian novelist. When I mentioned the term, Lewis instantly responded with a comparison to the Christian carpenter. Each is simply a Christian doing his particular work, doing it well or badly. "If a man who cannot draw horses is illustrating a book,

the pictures that involve horses will be the bad pictures, let his spiritual condition be what it may," he said. Of course the Christian writer should avoid "mendacity, cruelty, blasphemy, pornography" and "aim at edification insofar as edification is proper to the kind of work in hand." If the story is about Jack and the beanstalk he dare not allow Jack to stop on the way up and recommend high-growing bean seeds. A story must be true to the known rules for successful composition: content from one sentence to another requires not trickery but honesty and wisdom.

Take an instance from the beginning of the Narnian adventure, *The Silver Chair*. Jill Pole has played the egotist and gotten her friend Eustace Scrubb into trouble. Shortly afterwards she comes upon a Lion (the capital is Lewis's) which turns and moves slowly back into the forest. Jill then hears running water and finds herself very thirsty, whereupon she plucks up her courage and steals carefully from tree to tree in its direction. She comes upon an open glade from which the sight of the enticing water ahead mightily increases her thirst. Ready to rush forward, she suddenly checks herself because there, between her and the stream, is the Lion lying quietly with its head raised and its paws out in front. It is looking straight at Jill. The two face each other for a long time.

Jill's thirst is now so persistent that she must have water even if the Lion catches her. In a "heavy, golden voice" the Lion finally asks, "Are you thirsty?"

"I'm dying of thirst," Jill promptly responds.

"Then drink," said the Lion.

Hesitantly Jill suggests that the Lion go away while she drinks, to which a low growl is the only response. Then she says, "I daren't come and drink."

"Then you will die of thirst."

Taking a step nearer, Jill says, "I suppose I must go and look for another stream then."

"There is no other stream."

Now frantic with thirst, Jill proceeds to the sparkling stream and drinks "the coldest, most refreshing water she has ever tasted."

Apart from "no other stream," this whole episode is simply good narrative. Yet we can imagine the many Scriptures which ran through Lewis's mind as he wrote: "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink ... none other name under heaven whereby we must be saved ... whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst ... Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him ... The wages of sin is death," and more.

We must not of course suppose that the manner in which Lewis presents this episode is the only possible way. What it does infer beyond question is that *The Silver Chair* is a story and therefore must above all keep literary faith. At the same time the record is abundantly clear that Lewis's Narnian stories have conveyed the Christian way to millions of children and adults. One of my friends wrote me at some length of how, over a period of some ten years, he had slowly lost total contact with God, and how one day while reading *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to his children he was suddenly overcome with remorse and tearfully recommitted himself to the Savior.

Meaning and Myth

Even one consummate value may redeem an otherwise poor writer. Lewis joyfully spoke of George MacDonald as his literary "master" despite a whole array of faults he found in him. One such fault was the quite common one of unnecessary sermonizing. What Lewis found valuable in MacDonald was "fantasy—fantasy that hovers between the allegorical and the mythopoeic." Lewis believed that ultimate meanings tend to fall into metaphor, allegory, and myth, types in which a Christian writer should feel he is on "home ground." Lewis calls myth at its best "a real though unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination." He had such an ideal in view in all his creative works, particularly in what he considered his best story, *Till We Have Faces*. Myth, he says, "deals with the permanent and inevitable."

The scope of Lewis's imagination, if not as profound, is as wide as that of Dante and Milton. He tells how happy he was, after dwelling imaginatively on the infernal motives and intrigues of hell in *The Screwtape Letters*, to return to normalcy. Not only does he present for us these supernatural characters but also devilish-minded, even devil-possessed ones, right here on earth. In *That Hideous Strength* Belbury's destructive might is set against the quiet Christianity of St. Anne's, one feverish with bustle and trickery and the other calmly, even in the threat of world insurrection, awaiting the will of God. In *The Great Divorce* people are allowed to go up from the murkiness of hell and stand warmly welcomed into the permeating glory of heaven and yet, with only one exception, they refuse heaven and return to hell. The thing they will never let go is their "proper pride." They continue, even after the pains of hell, to choose self over God. The painter urged to come inside rejects heaven when he learns it is without coteries and the worship of Big Names. Even the bishop, who has grown to love questions better than answers, rejects heaven in the interest of his little theological society in hell where he is admired for his papers on the speculative aspects of religion.

The Imaginative Process

Though many have tried, no one has ever been able to explain the imaginative process, no doubt because successful creativity is as large as life itself. Lewis gives a fragmentary sketch of how *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, one of his Narnian stories, came to be. It began, as his stories generally did, with a mental image, this time of "a Faun carrying an umbrella and parcels in a snowy wood." This initial bit first lodged in Lewis's imagination when he was about sixteen, long before he became a Christian. Years later, he says, he sat down to see if he could make a story out of it. Had he not in the meantime given himself completely to God, it would probably have become a good story as such, but now "Aslan came bounding into it." Not only that, Aslan "pulled the whole story together." Would the story become a Christian tract? Amazingly, Lewis in this book tied narrative interest and profound theology together and we experience not only a multitude of details related to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ but note that He died on a stone table representing the Law of Moses.

Lewis accepted imagination as one of the great and varied gifts of God. As a Christian he saw it a worthy avenue of spiritual witness. He believed, however, that it should never become a "device" or frame on which to hang a sermon. For Lewis, the principle on which we must daily operate is a simple honesty which takes its life and its liberty from a living experience of the triune God.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 7: C. S. Lewis: His Life, Thought, & Theology

Teacher, Historian, Critic, Apologist

The output of Lewis's research and writing extends far beyond those works for which he is best known.

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Readers who meet Lewis first through the Narnian chronicles or *Mere Christianity* might never suspect that he is recognized in English-speaking countries as one of the greatest literary historians and critics of this century. His first major work of scholarship, *The Allegory of Love*, was acclaimed by a scholarly reviewer in a national newspaper (as quoted on the dust jacket): "Out of the multitude of volumes on literary criticism there arises once or twice in a generation a truly great work. Such, I believe, is this study by Mr. C.S. Lewis." Nearly fifty years later, this study in medieval tradition is unsurpassed in its wealth of historical information and brilliance of critical insights. One of the ironies of Lewis's career is that most of his admirers throughout the world know him only as a gifted and inspired amateur; few readers outside his own field ever knew him as a professional and an expert.

As a young Oxford don, Lewis followed a familiar path. By his early thirties, he had published four book reviews, two literary letters, and two slim volumes of poetry. He had one essay rejected by T.S. Eliot, editor of *Criterion*, and another (on Chaucer) published in *Essays and Studies*. Finally in 1935, the Oxford University Press accepted *The Allegory of Love* and contracted him to write the volume on the sixteenth century in the *Oxford History of English Literature* series. He won immediate academic praise and the Gollancz prize for his first book, and by the time *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century (Excluding Drama)* came out in 1954, he was famous for books of very different kinds. A version of the essay Eliot had rejected, "Psycho-Analysis and Literary Criticism," appeared in *Essays and Studies* in 1942, the year *The Screwtape Letters* came out as a book (following serialization in the *Guardian* in 1941). For the rest of his life, Lewis published historical and critical works as regularly as the Christian apologetics and fiction on which his present fame is principally based.

Lewis the Teacher

One explanation of Lewis's productivity, as well as his mastery, is the close relationship between his teaching and his scholarship. All of the scholarly books after *The Allegory of Love* were based either on regular university courses of lectures or on special series. *A Preface to Paradise Lost* is a revised and enlarged version of a lecture series at University College, North Wales, in 1941; *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* is the completion of a lecture series at Cambridge in 1944; *Studies in Words* is based on lectures at Cambridge in the late 1950s, as well as on years of tutorial experience with Anglo-Saxon and Middle English texts; and *The Discarded Image*, as Lewis says in the preface, "is based on a course of lectures given more than once at Oxford. Some who attended it have expressed a wish that its substance might be given a more permanent form." He refers with characteristic modesty to his "Prolegomena to Medieval Studies" course, which with its companion "Prolegomena to Renaissance Studies" attracted crowds of undergraduates for years. This last book was already in the press when Lewis died. He was planning another book based on the notes for his Cambridge lectures on Spenser. His friend and colleague Alastair Fowler used this material to produce *Spenser's Images of Life*, of which the editor says, "if Lewis himself had lived to write the book it might have stood out among his works as a critical new departure."

In addition to these major works, Lewis published many essays and critical articles originally delivered as lectures or talks. In contrast to many American academics, who write scholarly papers and then

read them to conference audiences, Lewis usually spoke from copious notes and afterwards revised them for publication.

The significance of this foundation of teaching and lecturing experience is twofold. Most obviously, Lewis's style as historian and critic is never dull or ponderously academic. He uses plain rather than pretentious language and explains sophisticated vocabulary when necessary. Many sentences are remarkably short, and the long sentences are remarkably rhythmical and clear. It is possible to open his most erudite book, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, at random and find examples of his directness. Speaking of comic prose of the early sixteenth century, Lewis says: "The hero is hardly a character and it is a little over-solemn to inquire into his motives. The author's motive is to make readers laugh and the hero is his obedient puppet. The jokes are hoaxes and over-reaching, usually coprophilous and sometimes macabre, for Tyll Howleglass continues to provide (or solicit) laughter even on his bier and in his coffin. Hence a modern reader might even find the book sinister."

Every teacher recognizes Lewis's characteristic rhetorical devices: homely and contemporary metaphors used "to approximate the remote and familiarize the wonderful"; striking visual imagery; arguments from analogy (sometimes obvious, sometimes wittily farfetched); classification; *reductio ad absurdum*. The first paragraph of *A Preface to Paradise Lost* illustrates several of these techniques:

The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know *what* it is—what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used. After that has been discovered the temperance reformer may decide that the corkscrew was made for a bad purpose, and the communist may think the same about the cathedral. But such questions come later. The first thing is to understand the object before you: as long as you think the corkscrew was meant for opening tins or the cathedral for entertaining tourists you can say nothing to the purpose about them. The first thing the reader needs to know about *Paradise Lost* is what Milton meant it to be.

Even more significant than these obvious pedagogical tricks is Lewis's colloquial tone, which involves the reader intimately in a critical discussion remote from his usual thinking. For instance, one of the greatest differences between the medieval and the modern writer is the attitude toward source material:

Some books ... must be regarded more as we regard those cathedrals where work of many different periods is mixed and produces a total effect, admirable indeed but never foreseen nor intended by any one of the successive builders. Many generations, each in its own spirit and its own style, have contributed to the story of Arthur. It is misleading to think of Malory as an author in our modern sense and throw all the earlier work into the category of 'sources.' He is merely the last builder, doing a few demolitions here and adding a few features there. They cannot make the work his as *Vanity Fair* is Thackeray's (*Discarded Image*).

Lewis's style is colloquial but never commonplace. He shares his immense learning with ease and with elegance. The key to the charm of Lewis's scholarly writing is his viewpoint as a teacher. He writes not to impress, stimulate, or provoke his colleagues, but to share his knowledge and experience with undergraduate students or general readers. He consistently assumes that his readers can enjoy the literature of the past if they understand the authors' language, frame of reference, and intentions. He clarifies these points, but he does not dictate. He demands careful attention, inspires rereading, and challenges personal judgments.

Historian and Critic

In Lewis's scholarship, the teacher, historian, and critic are united. He declares that the only genuine critical question is "How and why should we read this book?" The historian's task is to show **how** and the critic's to suggest **why**. The relative emphasis on these two functions varies in different books, but both are always important. The literary historian's responsibilities range from tracing language changes to outlining the world view of the original audience. In many instances these two topics have a common focus. The historian must also distinguish between features characteristic of the form of a work and features indicative of the author's individual purpose. Each of Lewis's major scholarly books concentrates on these ways of removing the barriers between readers of the present and writers of the past.

In *The Allegory of Love*, Lewis identifies the relationship between the conventions of courtly love and the doctrines of a Christian society, showing how allegory influenced and was influenced by these complementary features of medieval thought. In *A Preface to Paradise Lost* he analyzes the characteristics of epic form as rules of the game Milton chose to play. In *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, he puts the major writers in their setting and views them from the perspective of their numerous and now generally unknown contemporaries. In *Studies in Words*, he follows eight words from their Greek, Latin, or Anglo-Saxon roots through their mutations in literature and on to current usage, linking their careers with cultural history. Finally in *The Discarded Image*, returning to medieval literature, he constructs in meticulous detail the model of the universe on which medieval thought and imagery were based.

These books, primarily and explicitly works of literary history, are at the same time filled with implicit criticism, suggesting the reasons for reading some books and not others. For Lewis, there are basically two reasons: pleasure and enlargement of experience. One of his most intriguing books is *An Experiment in Criticism*, neither historical nor critical itself but the development of a critical theory. Lewis points out that academic critics have been accustomed to evaluating books and then judging readers on whether or not they liked the good books. He proceeds to reverse the process, to identify the characteristics of good readers and then consider the books they enjoy to be good. The ultimate question of why anyone should read literature is answered in the conclusion, in terms that sum up the underlying purpose of all Lewis's scholarly guidance.

The nearest I have yet got to an answer is that we seek an enlargement of our being.... We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own.... In coming to understand anything we are rejecting the facts as they are for us in favour of the facts as they are. The primary impulse of each is to maintain and aggrandise himself. The secondary impulse is to go out of the self, to correct its provincialism and heal its loneliness. In love, in virtue, in the pursuit of knowledge, and in the reception of the arts, we are doing this. Obviously this process can be described either as an enlargement or as a temporary annihilation of the self. But that is an old paradox; 'he that loseth his life shall save it.'

Such teaching has now reached far beyond the college walls of Oxford and Cambridge, not only through Lewis's scholarly books but also through his influence on teachers.

In addition to these major works, Lewis wrote numerous essays, reviews, letters, introductions, and prefaces. Allowing for the frequent overlapping of his writing as scholar and as religious apologist, he published at least 100 short pieces of literary criticism, ranging from brief letters to substantial essays, on topics from Malory and Shakespeare to Orwell and Tolkien. Some of the essays have been made more easily accessible in such collections as *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* and *C.S. Lewis On Stories*. Many of the essays are addressed to fellow professionals, but the book

reviews, like his books, are for a general audience. In reviewing the second volume of Tolkien's ***Lord of the Rings***, Lewis explains that some readers had misunderstood the first book in trying to interpret it as allegory. He describes Tolkien's saga as myth, which he calls a master key. This is one of the dominant themes stressed throughout Lewis's critical writing.

The Importance of Myth

The first principle of all literature, according to Lewis, is myth, which is an expression of universal truth in terms of story. The stories of the dying and reviving god, the questing or avenging hero, the disobedience of Eve or Psyche or Orpheus or even Peter Rabbit are examples (cited by Lewis in various contexts) of the great myths that transcend any individual experience of life. The myth as a narrative of what happens is more meaningful than the factual history of what has happened. The supreme historical moment was when myth became fact in the Incarnation: the Word made flesh. Lewis's emphasis on the primacy of myth is in the old tradition of Christian Neo-Platonism and in the newer tradition of Jungian archetypes. Already talking about mythopoetic theory in the 1930s, Lewis was a forerunner of Joseph Campbell and Northrop Frye.

The touchstone of myth is responsible for the apparent eclecticism of Lewis's critical judgments. He recommended Rider Haggard's novels for simple pleasure, and in the last weeks of his life he reread the *Iliad* and enjoyed ***Les Liaisons Dangereuses***. The two greatest influences on his own fiction were George MacDonald and Charles Williams, both of whom have been republished recently in paperback in response to demand from readers of Lewis.

So far there has been no corresponding revival of the writer whom Lewis admired and loved most: Edmund Spenser. ***The Faerie Queene*** stands out in Lewis's scholarly writing as the essence and epitome of great literature. The concluding chapter of ***The Allegory of Love***, the fullest treatment in ***English Literature in the Sixteenth Century***, and his only book-length literary criticism, ***Spenser's Images of Life***, are all about ***The Faerie Queene***. Lewis finds in Spenser's great poem a synthesis of epic and romance, of pagan and Christian themes, of the Arthurian myths and the folklore of elves and witches of allegory and symbol, of all that he loved best in literature. In contrast to the realism or naturalism of Lewis's contemporaries, Spenser's narrative is life-like in a different sense:

The things we read about in it are not like life, but the experience of reading it is like living. The clashing antitheses which meet and resolve themselves into higher unities, the lights streaming out from the great allegorical foci to turn into a hundred different colours as they reach the lower levels of complex adventure, ... the constant reappearance of certain basic ideas, ... the unwearied variety and seamless continuity of the whole—all this is Spenser's true likeness to life (***Allegory of Love***).

What Lewis says of Spenser applies in general to the experience of reading myth.

The appeal of myth is to the imagination, which Lewis considers the primary organ for the perception of truth. Man made in the image of his Maker has the power to perceive the Creator through His creation and in turn to make his own images in order to share his perceptions with other human beings. Thus the receptive and the creative functions of the imagination are as closely linked for Lewis as for Wordsworth, source of the title ***Surprised By Joy***, whose subtitle is ***The Shape of My Early Life***. In this spiritual autobiography Lewis pays tribute to his philosopher-tutor, who nurtured his powers of reason, but he highlights his first reading of MacDonald's ***Phantastes*** as the experience that "baptized" his imagination. This often quoted phrase is rightly seen as central to an understanding of Lewis as writer and as literary critic. He became receptive to the spell of the supernatural long before his reason accepted the doctrine. The enjoyment of literature is valuable nurture and exercise for the imagination, keeping it responsive to revelation of truth.

Imaginative perception of universal truth is the best corrective to what Lewis calls "chronological snobbery," the attitude that views the past through a distorting lens of present assumptions. *The Allegory of Love* is dedicated to Owen Barfield (lifelong friend and student of the development of metaphoric language) who, Lewis says, "has taught me not to patronize the past, and has trained me to see the present as itself a 'period.'" Lewis's illumination of literary history reveals features of the past from an unexpected perspective. His first collection of essays is titled *Rehabilitation* because his purpose in each is to restore or revive a literary reputation, such as Shelly's. Most notable is the organizing principle of the monumental *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*. The main sections of this historical survey are Late Medieval, 'Drab,' and 'Golden.' Lewis claims that 'Drab' is used not disparagingly but descriptively, for poetry with "little richness either of sound or images," while 'Golden' poetry is "the strong, simple music of the uncontorted line," with the innocent exuberance of a Golden Age. According to these definitions, the platitude of a Renaissance flowering of literature is reversed. The classical learning of the humanists is associated with and indeed responsible for the 'Drab' Age of the mid-century, and the great Elizabethan poets recaptured the artistic freedom of the Middle Ages. Thus the third volume of the *Oxford History of English Literature* series puts the sixteenth century in a new perspective anticipated at the end of *The Allegory of Love*.

There is a history of great literature which has a slower rhythm than that of literature in general, and which goes on in a higher region.... It is only after centuries that Spenser's position becomes apparent; and then he appears as the great mediator between the Middle Ages and the modern poets, the man who saved us from the catastrophe of too thorough a renaissance (*Allegory of Love*).

In the epilogue to *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, the final paragraph ends on a note of humility intended as the antithesis to the snobbery of the majority of modern literary historians and critics:

The sixteenth century illustrates well enough the usual complex, unpatterned historical process; in which, while men often throw away irreplaceable wealth, they not infrequently escape what seemed inevitable dangers, not knowing that they have done either nor how they did it.

The key factor for Lewis as literary historian and critic was his conviction that the workings and the works of the imagination were subordinate to the Word. He warned against taking literature too seriously, as an end in itself, against making literature a substitute for religion. In summing up his description of the Discarded Image, Lewis sets forth the priorities that govern his scholarship.

I hope no one will think I am recommending a return to the Medieval Model. I am only suggesting considerations that may induce us to regard all Models in the right way, respecting each and idolizing none. We are all, very properly, familiar with the idea that in every age the human mind is deeply influenced by the accepted Model of the universe. But there is a two-way traffic; the Model is also influenced by the prevailing temper of mind.... We can no longer dismiss the change of Models as a simple progress from error to truth. No Model is a catalogue of ultimate realities, and none is a mere fantasy.

Lewis insists that just as no models should be idolized, no theories should be regarded as sacrosanct. A quotation from an early reviewer on the dust jacket of *The Allegory of Love* applies to all of Lewis's literary history and criticism: "No one could read it without seeing all literature a little differently

for ever after." He would doubtless add that no good and imaginative reader could ever read or reread any good book without adjusting in some way his former perceptions of truth. For now we see through a glass darkly, even with Lewis to help us focus.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 7: C. S. Lewis: His Life, Thought, & Theology

Western Civilization at the Crossroads

What kind of future awaits us? What are our choices? Peter Kreeft looks at Lewis's view of the kind of history we are creating...

PETER KREEFT Peter Kreeft is professor of philosophy at Boston College and the author of 10 books, including *C.S. Lewis, Heaven, the Heart's Deepest Longing*; *Between Heaven and Hell*; and *Yes or No?*

Cars have windshields as well as rearview mirrors. So do civilizations. For the latter, however, windshields are often muddy, and drivers who can peer intelligently through the grime and obscurity are rare. We rightly call them prophets. C. S. Lewis was able to look both ways, forward and back. His imaginative gifts have given readers insight into the past, and at the same time, glimpses into the future.

A Look at History

How did this uniquely gifted writer sift and sort the past in order to preview the future?

First, Lewis was desperately critical of any so-called philosophy of history. Unlike the many historians who presumed to be able to isolate a "meaning" or "spirit" of a particular age, Lewis thought such attempts to be futile.

"I cannot convince myself that such 'spirits' or 'meanings' have much more reality than the pictures we see in the fire," he wrote in the *Oxford History*. "The 'canals' on Mars vanished when we got stronger lenses." To discern the meaning of history, Lewis argued, one would have to step outside of history, and this no man can do, just as a driver cannot at the same time study the details in the rearview mirror and read a textbook on the principles of reflected light. We simply cannot step out of history to give it an objective look; we cannot examine time and events in a laboratory.

Guidelines to History

Though Lewis rejected the "grand theories" approach to history, he did hold to certain beliefs about the past— about history and human nature—that make him a prophet worth hearing today.

In the last two centuries, most intellectuals have abandoned any notion of unchanging truth, especially in any description of the human person. Human nature is variable, they say, as variable in "spirit" as it is in "body," responsive to the environment and largely determined by it.

Lewis affirmed that our accidental qualities (height, weight, color, etc.) may change through history, but our **essence** never changes. Modern man therefore continues to make the same essential mistakes, is subject to the same addictions, sins the same sins and reaps the same whirlwinds as his ancestors. The only changes in man's essence were the Fall and the Redemption. No other development has or will change our nature. "When poisons become fashionable they do not cease to kill" was Lewis's warning that we are not so much advanced or different from our predecessors. A moral link connects all people of all ages. On the first page of *The Allegory of Love* Lewis writes:

Humanity does not pass through phases as a train passes through stations; being alive it has the privilege of always moving yet never leaving anything behind.

Whatever we have been, in some sort we are still.

And from Letter 146, written in 1931: "I find nothing obsolete. The silly things the great men said were as silly then as they are now; the wise ones are as wise now as they were then."

Moral Perfectionism

Just as Lewis denied change in the **essence** of the human person, he also denied the popular belief in **accidental** change for the better, sometimes called Progressivism or Universal Evolutionism. It was simply a mistake, he taught, to believe that our century is spiritually superior to previous centuries.

The mistake was commonly made by comparing technology to people. In the current century, telephone service has improved and electricity has replaced steam power, but such technical progress does not mean that people are morally improved. Nor does it mean that old moral rules are by their mere age inferior. If water stands too long it stinks. To infer thence that whatever stands long must be unwholesome is to be the victim of metaphor. Space does not stink because it has preserved its three dimensions from the beginning. The square of the hypotenuse has not gone moldy by continuing to equal the sum of the squares of the other two sides. Love is not dishonored by constancy.

Paradoxically, Lewis's Christianity gives him a much more radically progressive outlook than evolutionism, for it calls on us to become not just better people but to participate in divine life: an infinitely greater transformation than any current secular fad!

What Have We Lost?

If the Enlightenment helped the modern world discard notions of original sin and moral absolutes, it also uprooted the foundations of truth and goodness. Unlike the Medieval era, all we have left are vague political and psychological notions of what works efficiently. Technology has replaced religion as our civilization's **summum bonum**. Naturalism has replaced supernaturalism. Subjectivism has defined a new age of moral relativity.

The Abolition of Man contains the most important and enlightening single statement about our civilization that I have ever read:

There is something which unites magic and applied science while separating both from the 'wisdom' of earlier ages: for the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue; for magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men [and] the solution is a technique.

Aristotle listed technique, technical knowledge, know-how, third on the hierarchy of values after contemplation of truth and practical knowledge or knowledge for acting. Modernity simply turns this ancient hierarchy upside down.

The Future

From this bleak vantage point, where are we going? What does the future hold?

Lewis claims no crystal ball, and is highly suspicious of all who do. But he surely believes that the spirit of Reductionism will continue to deconstruct the reality of heaven and hell, as humans continue

to aggrandize themselves as the source and end of all meaning.

"There is much rash idealizations of past ages," Lewis wrote, "and I do not wish to encourage more of it. Our ancestors were cruel, lecherous, greedy and stupid—like ourselves ... but was civilization often in serious danger of disappearing?" No, he answered, but now it is. Civilization to be safe must be "put second" to the higher values of God's kingdom. As long as civilization is supreme, it is supremely vulnerable.

Lewis was equally suspicious of mid-century collectivism, especially the mob psychology of the fascists in Europe. It seemed to him that this strange submergency of the individual into the masses was a kind of death-wish, a suicide of the person. In such a condition, who could feel the joy, the inconsolable longing after God to which Augustine gave classic expression ("Thou has made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.") In place of this genuine longing for God, the modern person has sought pleasure in violence and lust.

Like the Biblical prophets, Lewis is no doomsayer, for that would make him a pessimistic determinist akin to his modern progressivist opponents. Like the Biblical prophets Lewis draws us a road map, points us to a crossroads, a hope, and offers us a choice: to struggle for the truth in all its fullness, or to surrender the pursuit of truth to modern versions of nihilism.

Lewis reminds us that the choice is more than academic. Spiritual and physical destruction both loom large, and only minutes away. To those concerned with peace in our world, with survival, with life, Lewis would give the following advice:

Perhaps the world will turn to God. Perhaps a few Abrahams will appear to intercede with God for our modern Sodoms and Gomorrahs, and perhaps God will find enough righteous men in them to spare them. They almost made it last time—if there had been only ten good men in them, God would have spared two cities! The most important thing for each of us to do to save the world ... is to practice righteousness, to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and our neighbor as ourself. You the individual can make the difference.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 7: C. S. Lewis: His Life, Thought, & Theology

Following that Bright Blur

Embracing the supernatural elements of Christianity while committed to its rationalism, Lewis brought an orthodox view of a transcendent, immanent God to the common man.

REV. JERRY ROOT The Rev. Jerry Root is college pastor of College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, and teaches philosophy at College of Dupage

In a 1982 interview in *Discipleship Journal*, Elisabeth Elliot was asked, "How could a person deepen his theology and become a clearer thinker?" She answered, "Study the Bible. And study C.S. Lewis. People are always saying C.S. Lewis was not a theologian—and Lewis himself would say that—but he was. He covered the whole field of theology in popular, understandable language. The fact that he could put it in simple language is proof to me that he understood it better than many theologians."

This prescription is helpful. Lewis may not have considered himself a theologian, but his writing on theological subjects has stretched the minds, broadened the hearts, and challenged the thinking of many.

What was the core of C.S. Lewis's theology? A hint is found in the caption that appeared below his picture on the cover of the September 8, 1947, *Time* magazine. It simply read, "His heresy: Christianity." Both in written word and BBC broadcasts, Lewis sought to present historic Christian faith to the common man. Perhaps because his work is imaginative as well as analytical, some have criticized him for softness on issues that modern conservatives consider pivotal, for example, biblical authority. But the cornerstones of his theology are clearly orthodox: he called it "mere Christianity" not to diminish the truth-claims, but to suggest that the truth of God incarnate was so shockingly simple that people of all cultures and pedigrees might be stunned and joyful at its clarity and grace.

The Supernatural

C.S. Lewis was a committed supernaturalist. In his essay "On Ethics" he commented: "I am myself a Christian, and even a dogmatic Christian untinged with modernist reservations and committed to supernaturalism in its full rigor." Remove the supernatural and the first principles of Christian orthodoxy are gone. Because God is high and holy, every doctrine of Christian faith has a sense of awe and wonder, and the miracles that demonstrate those doctrines are simply the retelling in capital letters of "the same message which nature writes in her crabbed cursive hand," he wrote. Lewis was fully committed to a Christianity with the supernatural elements intact.

Study of Literature

Lewis's lifetime study of medieval and renaissance literature helped him understand the importance of written texts as a source of authority. He likened the doctrinal texts of Christian orthodoxy to a series of maps drawn by men of knowledge and legitimized over time. Ministering to RAF pilots during the war, Lewis urged away from the elementary "thrills you and I are likely to get on our own" and toward the grand themes of authority, essential maps "if you want to get further."

Literary sources also helped him with the insights that truth is one and that good thinking should unify all generations. Authority was weakened by modern emphasis on individual autonomy. Authority rests in the cumulative wisdom of the ages, a demanding jury for all new ideas. Clearly Lewis knew the importance of history; and his theology was bound to the church's historic statements.

Rationalism

Lewis's theology was further influenced by his commitment to logic and reason. Truth was not made for man; man was made for truth, and his chief purpose in life was to glorify Him forever. Lewis wrote, "In coming to understand anything we are rejecting the facts as they are for us in favor of the facts as they are. The primary impulse of each is to maintain and aggrandise himself. The secondary impulse is to go out of the self, to correct its provincialism and heal its loneliness."

If pursuit of truth is like climbing a ladder, Lewis both mastered the steps and turned a floodlight on the ladder itself, illuminating the way so that others not wishing to remain in the lonely darkness of subjectivism might follow.

Illumined Subjectivism

As dark subjectivism was a pitfall, illumined subjectivism—he often called it romanticism—could awaken the desire for truth. Lewis would often refer to this desire as joy. Just as hunger says, "I want food" and thirst says, "I want water," so informed joy pleads within a man saying, "I want God." Theology for C.S. Lewis was more than rational activity; it was the very burning of the soul not merely to define and explain God but to know Him, to enjoy Him, and yet to remain constantly in awe of Him. He comments, "This hunger is better than any other fullness; this poverty better than all other wealth." Lewis not only sought to explain Christianity to others, he also sought to practice it himself. At the heart of this practice was his own personal devotion to God.

A comprehensive presentation of C.S. Lewis's theology would take a book—perhaps several volumes. Here we can briefly explore two cornerstones of Lewis's theological thought: the transcendence of God, and the immanence of God.

God's Transcendence

The idea of God's transcendence is simply this, God is great. He is omnipresent, infinite and eternal. Though He made the universe, God himself cannot be fully contained in the universe. Where creation leaves off, God goes on and on and on to infinity. In this sense, God is incomprehensible.

Because God is transcendent, mere men, said Lewis, cannot define Him. The infinite cannot be reduced to finite definition. In *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, Lewis refers to God as the "bright blur," admitting it is not a very good description. "In fact," he writes, "you cannot have a good description of anything so vague. If the description became good it would become false." As Walter Elwell has stated, "All theological formulations are, at best, approximate."

The best theology, then, is theology which makes the best approximations. It is necessary, therefore, to choose language equal to the task, and Lewis urges that the best language for this task is poetic. The language of literature is less limiting, is not concerned merely with quantity (as is scientific language) but with quality. Lewis wrote, "To be incommunicable by scientific language is, so far as I can judge, the normal state of experience."

The temptation of the theologian is to adopt language that will be suitable to the scientific mind. However, this kind of language only makes faith less credible. Such language may be suitable to the scientific mind, but it certainly cannot describe God. Lewis insisted that propositional statements about God are necessary. The idea of God, to be understood, must take form in our minds and thought, but if we are to understand the meaning of the propositions, we must go to the language of the poet. Much of the Scriptures are written in poetic form.

God's Immanence

The second cornerstone of Lewis's orthodoxy is his commitment to the immanence of God. The infinite, eternal, omnipresent God can and does make His presence known. God can be talked about because God has made Himself known to rational creatures capable of reasonable communication. When Lewis was a theist and no more, he thought it was impossible to actually know God personally and intimately. He understood the concept of transcendence, but had not yet balanced it in his thinking with the idea of God's immanence. He commented that he did not think, at that time, that a person could know God any more than Hamlet could know Shakespeare. Later Lewis came to realize that Hamlet could have known Shakespeare, but it would depend not on Hamlet but on Shakespeare. As the author, he could write himself into the play and make his presence known. Through this analogy, Lewis describes what actually took place in the incarnation. God has made His presence known. Because God has communicated Himself to man, man can know and talk about the immanent God. Lewis wrote, "Christianity is not merely what a man does with his solitude. It is not even what God does with His solitude. It tells of God descending into the coarse publicity of history and there enacting what can—and must—be talked about."

What a discovery! The mysterious God "brighter and less blurry." Lewis wrote, "We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere incognito."

C.S. Lewis has left a rich theological legacy. He has become the theologian for every man, every man who hopes to take bearings on the "bright blur."

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 7: C. S. Lewis: His Life, Thought, & Theology

Beyond the Double Bolted Door

The death of his wife severely tested Lewis's faith as well as his theology

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In assessing Lewis's significance as a Christian apologist, the key is chronology. He is, of course, best known for his writings of the '40s, and it is as the author of such celebrated books as *Mere Christianity*, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, *Surprised by Joy*, *The Problem of Pain*, and *Miracles* that he is revered by many readers. But these early books are neither the whole nor even the most important part of the story. There is another more disconcerting side to the C.S. Lewis phenomenon—namely, the dark legacy of his later years. If we ignore or minimize it, we will be left with a very one-sided and highly misleading picture of Lewis and end up valuing him for the wrong reasons.

There is, of course, no denying the fact that, so far as the prospect for Christian apologetics is concerned, the Lewis of the '40s is a far more encouraging figure. In these early books he fairly leaps from the page as the 20th century's foremost defender of the faith, "the Apostle to the Sceptics" confronting his unbelieving or lukewarm contemporaries with the "case for Christianity." Seldom has an apologist succeeded so completely in conveying the impression that Reason is on the side of Faith and that it is not the believer but the unbeliever for whom philosophical discussion poses problems. No issue is too difficult for him, no opponent too formidable. His effortless brilliance and confident finality irresistibly suggest that it is the intellectuals who have made simple things difficult and that it is high time to call a halt to these proceedings. If the real theologians had done their job, "there would have been no place for me," he ruefully observes. But they have not and so there is. He will make things simple again.

Everything is eminently sensible and straightforward. He is "not asking anyone to accept Christianity if his best reasoning tells him that the weight of the evidence is against it." But surely it is not, and if we are willing to think clearly and hard, we can establish a great deal "on our own steam." Not only does he offer us "overwhelmingly probable" arguments for the existence of an infinite Object of desire, a Power behind the Moral Law, and a cosmic Mind; he is equally prepared to take on all comers, dispose of their objections, and put the embarrassed opposition to flight. He has heard it all before. Opposing positions are not only false but ludicrous, and crumble like sandcastles at the slightest nudge: atheism is "too simple," naturalism is "self-contradictory," and materialism is "a philosophy for the nursery" to say nothing of ethical relativism, which reduces moral judgments to "mere subjective preference" like a "fondness for pancakes or a dislike for spam," or theological liberalism, whose denial that Jesus was God logically commits its exponents to saying that he was a lunatic "on the same level with the man who says he is a poached egg."

Clearly this is the stuff of which legends are made. At first glance, it is a dazzling performance by a philosophical virtuoso at the height of his powers.

But a closer look dispels this initial impression. Lewis's defense of Christianity relies heavily on three major proofs for the existence of God: the Argument from Desire, the Moral Argument, and the Argument from Reason. He never claimed that these arguments were original and, of course, they are not. They are, in fact, highly-compressed and simplified reformulations of technical philosophical arguments. And they are seriously flawed. Since it is on these arguments that his case for Christianity depends, the case fails.

There are other problems. Lewis's arguments against opposing positions are often based on serious misunderstandings. Surely the inductive method of science is not based on the principle that "if you make the same guess often enough, it ceases to be a guess and becomes a Scientific Fact." Nor are anthropologists usefully defined as debunkers of morality who try to undermine traditional values by travelling to "backward villages" in order to collect the "odd stories" that "country people" tell. Similarly, ethical subjectivists do not regard moral judgments as expressive of mere subjective preference, naturalists do not reduce human reasoning to an involuntary response "like a hiccup, yawn, or vomit," and theological liberals are not logically compelled to say that Jesus was a lunatic. In short, Lewis's favorite polemical targets are often little more than straw men.

Some will, of course, dispute these contentions. But if we view Lewis's writings in chronological perspective, such protests are beside the point. Whatever we may think of his arguments and polemical tactics, the fact remains that Lewis himself came to have serious doubts about many of them.

It is precisely here that his later work provides an indispensable corrective. In both content and tone, these writings bear permanent witness to the remarkable change that had come over him. The buoyant confidence had gradually given way, first, to a subdued tentativeness and, toward the end, agonizingly exploratory groping. By his twilight years the transformation was so complete that he is all but unrecognizable—hardly the sort of writer to be hailed as "the Apostle to the Skeptics."

What had happened? Idle psychological speculation aside, two contributing factors can be cited: one with reasonable certainty; the other incontrovertibly.

First, over the years Lewis had more than his share of critics. Although many of them can be summarily dismissed, others are not so easily disposed of, and a handful had a lasting impact. Of these one warrants specific mention—the British philosopher G.E.M. Anscombe who in 1948 read a paper to the Oxford Socratic Club in which she launched a devastating critique on Lewis's recently published *Miracles*, subjecting his argument against naturalism to powerful criticism and demonstrating that his alleged proof for theism was fallacious. Lewis responded and an exchange followed. Although hardcore loyalists disagree, the unanimous consensus of those actually present was that Anscombe had won hands down, and that "a conclusive blow" had been dealt to one of Lewis's most fundamental arguments. Lewis reportedly concurred, and was not only "deeply disturbed," "miserable," and "in very low spirits" after the encounter but continued to describe it "with real horror." One biographer, in fact, claims that this bitter experience marked a turning point in Lewis's career after which he had "learnt his lesson" and published no more books on the subject of Christian apologetics.

The second way of accounting for Lewis's dramatic change of heart involves such intimately personal matters that they can only be discussed with a certain reticence. Had not Lewis immortalized them in one of his last books, they could not with propriety be discussed at all.

With his apologetic books behind him, Lewis's subsequent writings on religion took on a different character. The ambitious scope and extrovert manner of the old days is replaced by a noticeably smaller-scaled and more piecemeal approach together with a correspondingly quieter tone and tree-ripened meditateness. If there was any single problem that preoccupied (and finally haunted) him, it was the problem of contrary evidence—evidence that casts doubt on Christianity and calls Christian belief into question. And if there was any single event that unleashed this problem in its full fury, it was the death of his wife.

Lewis's worries about contrary evidence were already apparent in his 1955 essay "On Obstacity in Belief." Although he had tackled this problem in *The Problem of Pain*, the arguments and assurances of that book are conspicuously absent. So is the earlier strategy of *Mere Christianity* in which religious doubts were traced to "mere moods" and religious doubters banished to the ranks of those who "dither to and fro" with their beliefs dependent "on the weather and the state of [their] digestion." Here Lewis is no

longer amused but uncommonly sober, on the defensive, and willing to make unheard-of concessions. It is no longer atheism but his own previous position that is "too simple." The honest inquirer must now candidly acknowledge that the evidence for theism is, at best, "mixed" and that considerable ingenuity is required if the believer's position is even to be "rendered tolerable." The "philosophies for the nursery" have proved to be more troublesome and resilient than anyone would have ever guessed and, in waging his polemical warfare against them, the apologist must employ heavier artillery than in bygone years. Throughout the essay, it is noteworthy how far Lewis has retreated and how meagerly his apologetic arsenal is now stocked.

But the worst was yet to come. A few years later Lewis was plunged into sorrow and overtaken by religious doubts of such paralyzing magnitude that he experienced a crisis of faith. Although he recovered, he was never the same again.

In 1956 at the age of 58, Lewis married Joy Davidman. It had been clear from the beginning that she was suffering from bone cancer and that her days were apparently numbered, but their hopes had been revived by an unprecedented event that Lewis described as the closest thing to a miracle that he had ever seen. His wife's condition began to improve. She progressed from being bedridden to being able to get around in a wheelchair to walking with a cane. And the person who had taken the X-rays marvelled that her bones were as solid as rock. Lewis's touching expression of his heartfelt gratitude can be found in "The Efficacy of Prayer." A holiday to Greece was arranged, one of her lifelong dreams and a trip that provided Lewis with "the last great days of perfect happiness." The essay on the efficacy of prayer appeared in 1959. Less than a year later Joy Davidman Lewis was dead—a victim of the very cancer they thought had been miraculously cured. And Lewis's faith came crashing down "like a house of cards." As a "safety valve against total collapse," he wrote ***A Grief Observed***.

There is no case for Christianity in this book. Gone are the persuasive arguments, the apt analogies, the sustaining consolations. Gone, too, is the already ebbing confidence of the essay on obstinacy. The apologetic arsenal is now empty and the apologist himself has been stripped naked. What remains is only a lonely and grief-stricken widower jotting down his thoughts and second thoughts in occasional notebooks.

A Grief Observed is an unflinching book, a book of many moods, the case history of a bereavement. No one—whether friend or foe—has penetrated to the bedrock Lewis who ignores or trivializes its disturbing revelations. First of all, there is undisguised grief in this book. Lewis had no patience with "pious jaw" about God's way being the best way, and he recoiled from "all that stuff" about reunions on that other shore. His wife had died and he mourned for her. But there are also doubt and rage in this book. Seldom has a religious writer assumed such freedom in refusing to pull punches. Others have undergone similar experiences, but few have been bold enough to contradict Psalm 91, as Lewis did when he bitterly demanded to know why God is so very absent in time of trouble. This little book is a remarkable document in which a morally outraged believer storms the heavens for an answer to the problem of suffering.

But there is something else in this book—the loss, if not of faith, then at least of a belief in faith's intelligibility. Lewis did not cease to believe in God, but he found it very hard to believe that God is good. What disquieted him most of all was not just his wife's death, but the circumstances that had preceded it: the false hopes, the "miraculous" cure, the sense of having been toyed with. Unlike the evils discussed in ***The Problem of Pain***, those which had brought his faith down like a house of cards were of a kind in which God seemed directly implicated: trickery, deceit, even cruelty.

Throughout his apologetic writings Lewis had insisted that God's goodness must be understood in terms of our ordinary moral standards. God must be regarded as good "in our sense," for only then will it be a goodness that we can recognize. Christianity does not require us to reverse our moral standards and resign ourselves to the fact that our "black" may be God's "white." Yet when in his hour of need Lewis applied

these same moral standards to God, he found him wanting. Thus the Apostle to the Skeptics became a skeptic himself—if not about God’s existence, at least about his nature.

In the end, Lewis extricated himself from this skepticism. Having registered his protest against God, another possibility occurred to him. Perhaps his faith had been imaginary all along. If so, God could not allow him to labor under the delusion that it was true faith. He had to knock Lewis’s house down in order to bring about this terrible but necessary realization. So God is good after all.

This, of course, is no solution. To exchange one view for another simply because it enables you to retain a belief that you want desperately to retain is a sure indication that rationality has been sidestepped. Lewis did not show us that God is good in spite of appearances to the contrary and then conclude that his faith had been imaginary. He did exactly the opposite. He assumed that his faith had been imaginary and then concluded that God is good for having driven this point home. That is not an argument but a case of special pleading. At the same time, it is not hard to understand why Lewis grasped at this unlikely straw. Any other assessment would have required him to say that his faith had been real but unfounded—that the God he had believed to be good is really evil. The later Lewis had lost not only his wife, but with her, his composure and the will to argue. Our last glimpse of him is that of a man determined to believe in spite of himself and whose commitment to divine goodness had outrun his comprehension of it. By this time there were no longer battles to be won but promises to be claimed and hopes to be kept alive like the precariously flickering embers of a dying fire. Lewis claimed that his faith somehow survived. I am sure that it did. But it no longer invited the assent of the rational man.

I am touched by C.S. Lewis in his twilight years. Chad Walsh reports that when he visited Lewis for the last time, he found him “subdued and at loose ends.” The apologist who had launched his career by declaring that he was not asking anyone to accept Christianity if his best reasoning tells him that the weight of the evidence is against it finally arrived at precisely this impasse. And in order to move beyond it, he felt compelled to confess publicly that his faith had been imaginary.

A Grief Observed reveals many things about Lewis but none more important than that he was ultimately undone by the problem of contrary evidence and left with a deity of dubious moral character. After reading it, we can no longer read Lewis’s earlier books as we once read them. We now know that he came to have grave doubts about many of the views that he had so confidently and joyously defended in them—doubts out of which he could not find his way. This fact casts an eerie retrospective light over his entire career as an apologist.

Although there have been Christian apologists of far greater philosophical stature than Lewis, I know of no apologist of any age who struggled with the difficulties involved in Christian belief in so grippingly visible a way and at such personal cost. Read Lewis’s books desultorily and you will readily discover why his critics find them so facile and cavalier. But read them chronologically and attentively, and you will also understand why they continue to attract so vast an audience. A mentality is at work in these books that is more than the sum of its often troublesome parts. Yet toward the end it becomes a divided mentality, a mentality at odds with itself. The later Lewis had felt the full impact of religious doubt and although he could not abandon his faith, neither could he claim a greater certainty than he had attained. His perplexities remained, and he acknowledged them with a degree of intellectual integrity that is as remarkable as it is rare. The Lewis of the ’60s is no longer the Apostle to the Skeptics, acutely surveying the present state of the evidence, but the Reminder to the Forgetful, humbly searching for just enough light to face the day that lies ahead. Yet this is the Lewis of greatest personal stature, the Lewis who survives the collapse of his own arguments, and the Lewis who remains worthy of our highest and unqualified respect.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 7: C. S. Lewis: His Life, Thought, & Theology

The Great Divide

When I fail as a critic I may yet be useful as a specimen.

Lewis delivered a radio adaptation of his inaugural lecture as Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature given, at Cambridge on November 29, 1954. Here are some excerpts from that radio message.

“To study the past does indeed liberate us from the present, from the idols of our own marketplace, but I think it liberates us from the past too.”

I don't think we need fear that the study of a day and period, however prolonged, however sympathetic, need be an indulgence in nostalgia or an enslavement to the past. In the individual life as the psychologists have taught us, it's not the remembered past, it's the forgotten past that enslaves us. And I think that's true of society. To study the past does indeed liberate us from the present, from the idols of our own marketplace, but I think it liberates us from the past too. I think no class of men are less enslaved to the past than historians. It is the unhistorical who are usually without knowing it enslaved to a very recent past....

The christening of Europe seemed to all our ancestors—whether as themselves Christians they welcomed it, or like Gibbon deplored it as humanistic unbelievers—a unique, irresistible, irreversible event. But we've seen the opposite process. Of course, the unchristening of Europe in our time is not quite complete. Neither was her christening in the Dark Ages. But roughly speaking we may say, that while as all history was for our ancestors divided into two periods, the pre-Christian and the Christian, for us it falls into three, the pre-Christian, the Christian, and what may reasonably be called the post-Christian.

This surely must make a momentous difference. I'm not here considering either the christening or the un-christening at all from a theological point of view. I'm thinking of them simply as cultural changes. And when I do that, it seems to me that the un-christening is an even more radical change than the christening. Christians and pagans had much more in common with each other than either has with the post-Christian. The gap between those who worshipped different gods is not so wide as that between those who worship and those who don't....

I find it a bit hard to have patience with all those Jeremiahs in press or pulpit who warn us that we are relapsing into paganism. What lurks behind such prophecies, if they are anything but careless language, is the false idea that the historical process allows simple reversal, that Europe can come out of Christianity by the same doors she went in, and find herself back where she was. That isn't the sort of thing that happens. A post-Christian man is not a pagan. You might as well think that a married woman recovers her virginity by divorce. The post-Christian is cut off from the Christian past and therefore doubly from the pagan past....

I've said that the vast change which separates you from old western has been gradual and isn't yet complete. The chasm is wide, but people born on opposite sides of it can still meet. Of course, that's quite normal in times of great change. I myself belong far more to that old western order than to yours. I'm going to claim that this, which in one way is a

disqualification, is yet in another a qualification. The disqualification of course is obvious. You don't want to be lectured on Neanderthal man by a Neanderthaler, still less on dinosaurs by a dinosaur. And yet, is that the whole story? If a live dinosaur really dragged its slow length into the laboratory, shouldn't we all look back as we fled? What a chance! To know at last how it really moved and looked and smelled, what noises it made. And if the Neanderthaler could talk, then though I'm sure his lecturing technique would leave a lot to be desired, shouldn't we almost certainly learn from him some things about him which the best modern anthropologist could never have told us? Of course he'd tell us without knowing he was telling. One thing I know, I'd give a great deal to hear any ancient Athenian, even a stupid one, talking about Greek tragedy. He would know in his bones so much that we seek in vain. At any moment some chance phrase, unknown to him, might just show us where modern scholarship had been on the wrong track for years. Well, some of us oldsters already stand before the modern world much as that Athenian might stand. I read as a native text that you must read as foreigners. It is my settled conviction that in order to read old western literature aright, you must learn to suspend most of the responses and unlearn most of the habits you have acquired in reading modern literature. And because this is the judgment of a native, an old westerner, I claim that even if the defense of my conviction proves to be weak, the fact of my conviction is an historical datum to which you should give due weight. That way, when I fail as a critic I may yet be useful as a specimen. I would even dare to go further. Speaking not for myself but for all other old western men whom you may meet, I would say use your specimens while you can. There aren't going to be very many more dinosaurs.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 7: C. S. Lewis: His Life, Thought, & Theology

Have We No Right to Happiness?

The last published article by Lewis before his death asked this question.

"After all," said Clare. "they had a right to happiness."

We were discussing something that once happened in our own neighborhood. Mr. A. had deserted Mrs. A. and got his divorce in order to marry Mrs. B., who had likewise got her divorce in order to marry Mr. A. And there was certainly no doubt that Mr. A. and Mrs. B. were very much in love with one another. If they continued to be in love, and if nothing went wrong with their health or their income, they might reasonable expect to be very happy.

It was equally clear that they were not happy with their old partners. Mrs. B. had adored her husband at the outset. But then he got smashed up in the war. It was thought he had lost his virility, and it was known that he had lost his job. Life with him was no longer what Mrs. B. had bargained for. Poor Mrs. A., too. She had lost her looks—and all her liveliness. It might be true, as some said, that she consumed herself by bearing his children and nursing him through the long illness that overshadowed their earlier married life.

You mustn't, by the way, imagine that A. was the sort of man who nonchalantly threw a wife away like the peel of an orange he'd sucked dry. Her suicide was a terrible shock to him. We all knew this, for he told us so himself. "But what could I do?" he said. "A man has a right to happiness. I had to take my one chance when it came."

I went away thinking about the concept of a "right to happiness."

At first this sounds to me as odd as a right to good luck. For I believe—whatever one school of moralists may say—that we depend for a very great deal of our happiness or misery on circumstances outside all human control. A right to happiness doesn't, for me, make much more sense than a right to be six feet tall, or have a millionaire for your father, or to get good weather whenever you want to have a picnic.

I can understand a right as a freedom guaranteed me by the laws of the society I live in. Thus, I have a right to travel along the public roads because society gives me that freedom; that's what we mean by calling the roads "public." I can also understand a right as a claim guaranteed me by the laws, and correlative to an obligation on someone else's part. If I have a right to receive \$100 from you, this is another way of saying that you have a duty to pay me \$100. If the laws allow Mr. A. to desert his wife and seduce his neighbor's wife, then, by definition, Mr. A. has a legal right to do so, and we need bring in no talk about happiness.

But of course that was not what Clare meant. She meant that he had not only a legal but a moral right to act as he did. In other words, Clare is—or would be if she thought it out—a classical moralist after the style of Thomas Aquinas, Grotius, Hooker and Locke. She believes that behind the laws of the state there is a Natural Law.

I agree with her. I hold this conception to be basic to all civilization. Without it, the actual laws of the state become an absolute, as in Hegel. They cannot be criticized because there is no norm against which they should be judged.

The ancestry of Clare's maxim. "They have a right to happiness," is august. In words that are cherished by all civilized men, but especially by Americans, it has been laid down that one of the rights of man is a right to "the pursuit of happiness." And now we get to the real point.

What did the writers of that august declaration mean?

It is quite certain what they did not mean. They did not mean that man was entitled to pursue happiness by any and every means—including, say, murder, rape, robbery, treason and fraud. No society could be built on such a basis.

They meant "to pursue happiness by all lawful means"; that is, by all means which the Law of Nature eternally sanctions and which the laws of the nation shall sanction.

Admittedly this seems at first to reduce their maxim to the tautology that men (in pursuit of happiness) have a right to do whatever they have a right to do. But tautologies, seen against their proper historical context, are not always barren tautologies. The declaration is primarily a denial of the political principles which long governed Europe; a challenge flung down to the Austrian and Russian empires, to England before the Reform Bills, to Bourbon France. It demands that whatever means of pursuing happiness are lawful for any should be lawful for all that "man," not men of some particular cast, class, status or religion, should be free to use them. In a century when this is being unsaid by nation after nation and party after party, let us not call it a barren tautology.

But the question as to what means are "lawful"—what methods of pursuing happiness are either morally permissible by the Law of Nature or should be declared legally permissible by the legislature of a particular nation—remains exactly where it did. And on that question I disagree with Clare. I don't think it is obvious that people have the unlimited "right to happiness" which she suggests.

For one thing, I believe that Clare, when she says "happiness," means simply and solely "sexual happiness." Partly because women like Clare never use the word "happiness" in any other sense. But also because I never heard Clare talk about the "right" to any other kind. She was rather leftist in her politics, and would have been scandalized if anyone had defended the actions of a ruthless man-eating tycoon on the ground that his happiness consisted in making money and he was pursuing his happiness. She was also a rabid teetotaler; I never heard her excuse an alcoholic because he was happy when he was drunk.

A good many of Clare's friends, and especially her female friends, often felt—I've heard them say so—that their own happiness would be perceptibly increased by boxing her ears. I very much doubt if this would have brought her theory of a right to happiness into play.

Clare, in fact, is doing what the whole western world seems to me to have been doing for the last 40-odd years. When I was a youngster, all the progressive people were saying, "Why all this prudery? Let us treat sex just as we treat all our other impulses." I was simple-minded enough to believe they meant what they said. I have since discovered that they meant exactly the opposite. They meant that sex was to be treated as no other impulse in our nature has ever been treated by civilized people. All the others, we admit, have to be bridled. Absolute obedience to your instinct for self-preservation is what we call cowardice; to your acquisitive impulse, avarice. Even sleep must be resisted if you're a sentry. But every unkindness and breach of faith seems to be condoned provided that the object aimed at is "four bare legs in a bed."

It is like having a morality in which stealing fruit is considered wrong—unless you steal nectarines.

And if you protest against this view you are usually met with chatter about the legitimacy and beauty and sanctity of "sex" and accused of harboring some Puritan prejudice against it as something disreputable or

shameful. I deny the charge. Foam-born Venus ... golden Aphrodite ... Our Lady of Cyprus... I never breathed a word against you. If I object to boys who steal my nectarines, must I be supposed to disapprove of nectarines in general? Or even of boys in general? It might, you know, be stealing that I disapproved of.

The real situation is skillfully concealed by saying that the question of Mr. A's "right" to desert his wife is one of "sexual morality." Robbing an orchard is not an offense against some special morality called "fruit morality." It is an offense against honesty. Mr. A's action is an offense against good faith (to solemn promises), against gratitude (toward one to whom he was deeply indebted) and against common humanity.

Our sexual impulses are thus being put in a position of preposterous privilege. The sexual motive is taken to condone all sorts of behavior which, if it had any other end in view, would be condemned as merciless, treacherous and unjust.

Now though I see no good reason for giving sex this privilege, I think I see a strong cause. It is this.

It is part of the nature of a strong erotic passion—as distinct from a transient fit of appetite—that makes more towering promises than any other emotion. No doubt all our desires makes promises, but not so impressively. To be in love involves the almost irresistible conviction that one will go on being in love until one dies, and that possession of the beloved will confer, not merely frequent ecstasies, but settled, fruitful, deep-rooted, lifelong happiness. Hence all seems to be at stake. If we miss this chance we shall have lived in vain. At the very thought of such a doom we sink into fathomless depths of self-pity.

Unfortunately these promises are found often to be quite untrue. Every experienced adult knows this to be so as regards all erotic passions (except the one he himself is feeling at the moment). We discount the world-without-end pretensions of our friends' amours easily enough. We know that such things sometimes last—and sometimes don't. And when they do last, this is not because they promised at the outset to do so. When two people achieve lasting happiness, this is not solely because they are great lovers but because they are also—I must put it crudely—good people; controlled, loyal, fair-minded, mutually adaptable people.

If we establish a "right to (sexual) happiness" which supersedes all the ordinary rules of behavior, we do so not because of what our passion shows itself to be in experience but because of what it professes to be while we are in the grip of it. Hence, while the bad behavior is real and works miseries and degradations, the happiness which was the object of the behavior turns out again and again to be illusory. Everyone (except Mr. A. and Mrs. B.) knows that Mr. A. in a year or so may have the same reason for deserting his new wife as for deserting his old. He will feel again that all is at stake. He will see himself again as the great lover, and his pity for himself will exclude all pity for the woman.

Why Women Suffer More

Two further points remain.

One is this. A society in which conjugal infidelity is tolerated must always be in the long run a society adverse to women. Women, whatever a few male songs and satires may say to the contrary, are more naturally monogamous than men; it is a biological necessity. Where promiscuity prevails, they will therefore always be more often the victims than the culprits. Also, domestic happiness is more necessary to them than to us. And the quality by which they most easily hold a man, their beauty, decreases every year after they have come to maturity, but this does not happen to those qualities of personality — women don't really care two cents about our looks—by which we hold women. Thus in the ruthless war of promiscuity women are at a double disadvantage. They play for higher stakes and are also more likely to lose. I have no sympathy with moralists who frown at the increasing crudity of female

provocativeness. These signs of desperate competition fill me with pity.

Secondly, though the "right to happiness" is chiefly claimed for the sexual impulse, it seems to be impossible that the matter should stay there. The fatal principle, once allowed in that department, must sooner or later seep through our whole lives. We thus advance toward a state of society in which not only each man but every impulse in each man claims *carte blanche*. And then, though our technological skill may help us survive a little longer, our civilization will have died at heart, and will—one dare not even add "unfortunately"—be swept away.

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The Kilns

Lewis's Oxford home is being restored as a center for research into Lewis and other Christian authors. Visitors are welcome.

In Oxford contact Michael Apicella, The Kilns, Headington Quarry, Oxford. Telephone 8656 78 89. Or write The Kilns Association, Box 1872, Rancho Santa Fe, CA 92067.

In 1996, the garage of the Kilns was being converted into a library and meeting room for visiting scholars.

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C.S. Lewis: Recommended Resources

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