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‘C.S. Lewis: How he Reflected and Influenced his Times’

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The acclaim and importance of C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia* are widely known; yet, perhaps even more significant are his apologetic works and the approach and unprecedented techniques Lewis exercised when writing these. They allowed him to explore sensitive topics in a manner that eluded most popular Christian writers before him. Lewis’ work appealed to a wide audience and explored a broad list of issues. Over the course of a lifelong struggle with his own Christianity, Lewis gained an intimate understanding of faith that helped him make controversial topics accessible to a very wide range of people in an attempt to help them with their own problems with faith. Although the *Chronicles of Narnia* may have brought Lewis the most fame, his greatest literary contributions came in the form of his many apologetic works.

Clive Staples Lewis was born in Belfast, Ireland, on 29 November 1898. His father, Albert, was a local solicitor who pursued his work with dogmatic devotion; while his mother, Florence, the daughter of an Anglican Reverend, was a beacon of love and care for Jack (the name Lewis gave himself after the death of the family dog) and his elder brother, Warren, during their early childhood. The Lewis boys were extremely fond of literature, with a taste for tales of fantasy in particular. They spent much of their free time creating their own fantasy world, many aspects of which would later be reflected in the structure of Narnia. Jack was particularly enamoured of Norse and Pagan mythology, an obsession that would help him pass the time while

away at boarding school and would play a considerable role in his eventual conversion to Christianity (Gormley 12).

However, the whirlwind of unfortunate events that began with the death of his mother when he was nine cut short the happiness of Jack's childhood. Two weeks after his mother's death, Albert Lewis sent Jack and Warren to Wynyard boarding school in England, which he would later refer to as a "concentration camp" in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*. Jack's anger with God over unanswered prayers to bring his mother back to him, coupled with the constant physical and verbal abuse of his new headmaster and other students led to his rejection of God and the Anglican Church at the age of fifteen (Gormley 15). All of these events were significant in Lewis' later development. The religious struggles set in motion early in his life guided him to a deeper appreciation of the faith he would eventually accept and afforded him an intimate knowledge of the predicaments that confronting religion forces one to face.

Many things influenced Jack's journey back to Christianity, which came full circle during his time as a professor at Oxford. During meetings with a literary group commonly referred to as "the Inklings", which included J.R.R. Tolkien, Lewis was exposed to ideas of faith that caused him to re-examine his beliefs. Lewis also began to see parallels between Christianity and the pagan myths he loved, particularly in those recurring cycles of "dying and reviving" gods (Myers 64). This led him to consider the extent to which these myths prefigured the person of Jesus Christ. He later claimed "my conversion very largely depended on recognising Christianity as the completion, the actualisation, the entelechy [bringing to perfection] of something that has never been wholly absent from the mind of man." (Macdonald). He described his final struggle in *Surprised by Joy*:

“Whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”(95).

After this conversion Jack reached out to others struggling with similar religious issues through a continuing series of apologetic works. *The Screwtape Letters* (1942) and *Mere Christianity* (1955) are exemplary examples of Lewis’ revolutionary approach to apologetic writing. In *Mere Christianity* Lewis explored morality, ethics, sin, sex, and Christian teaching on these issues. He also introduced, in simple terms, why he believed Jesus to be God’s son. When proclaiming he was the son of God, Jesus could only be lying, telling the truth, or delusional. He clearly was not delusional or lying because these things are not consistent with the multiple accounts of his life, leaving only the possibility that he was in fact God’s son. This, obviously, was not the first time apologists explored these issues, but Lewis’ approach differed in that he was able to illustrate these complex Christian concepts through examples and comparisons to worldly issues and concepts that were easy to understand. Yet, through this process Lewis’ did not allow his easily understood comparisons to detract from the point he was trying to make. For example, he stated “The law of gravity tells you what stones do if you drop them: but the Law of Human Nature tells you what human beings ought to do and do not.” (*Mere Christianity*, 17). In this passage Lewis explored how the inherent sense of morality within humans comes from within, not from worldly experiences. He effectively portrayed such issues in a manner that was understandable to those with only basic education, yet in a way that was not dull for intellectuals. In *The Screwtape Letters* Lewis changed the point of view from which

he was writing to stress the reality of evil's presence in the world. He wrote a series of 31 letters from a senior demon named Screwtape to his nephew, Wormwood, a demon-in-training. These dealt with how to best to lead Wormwood's first patient (human target) down a path toward Satan and away from God. Here again Lewis used a new approach to explain Christian issues for an extensive audience. Lewis applied themes of sex, love, pride, gluttony, and war through the correspondence between the demons. By showing the thought behind the tactics the demons were using, he showed, most effectively, why these things were wrong. He also illustrated differing motives between the two demons: Screwtape aimed to lead humans to Satan through blatant and dreadful sins; Wormwood's philosophy was that "the safest road to hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts." (*The Screwtape Letters*, 150). By portraying the demons as having differing means of leading humans to hell, Lewis showed the complexity and far reaching grasp of evil and how simple it was to fall into the devil's grasp throughout the course of daily life.

The Chronicles of Narnia are, undoubtedly, what have brought C.S. Lewis the most fame. His series of seven books, written between 1949 and 1951, were the recipients of widespread critical acclaim and continue today in their influence and popularity among children. Although the story of Narnia is a journey of fantasy that pits good against evil to entertain children, Lewis masterfully builds his story around characters and themes that run parallel to many Christian themes, in addition to including characters from the mythologies he had enjoyed since childhood. Just as he used new techniques in apologetic works to open the doors of Christianity to a wider range of people, so he melded fantasy with religious themes to prepare children for the larger themes of Christianity. Lewis portrays Aslan the lion as God/Christ when

he created Narnia out of darkness, much like the Christian creation story. He portrays Narnia in deep freeze as an ironic version of hell with the white witch Queen Jadis assuming the role of the devil presiding over her icy kingdom. But possibly the most obvious of Christian parallels lies in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* when Aslan lays down his life to save Edmund, one of the children who plays a main role in the book and who, along with his brother and two sisters, acts as a figure to which children can relate. This part of the epic tale mirrors the Christian story: Aslan laid down his life for Narnians just as Jesus Christ gave his life to save all mankind from sin. Aslan is gloriously resurrected after his sacrifice just as Christ rose from the dead after he laid down his life on the Cross. Although Lewis was not writing *The Chronicles of Narnia* as an apologetic work, Christian themes run throughout the books. And although the books did not seek directly to convert young readers Lewis certainly aimed to promote Christian ethics and morality. By examining the Christian themes that exist throughout the Narnia series, a better understanding can be gained of how C.S. Lewis was able to use new styles and techniques to appeal to a wider range of people and create greater interest for Christian values. Not only did Lewis effectively portray Christian morals through his widely popular and influential apologetic works; but he was also a diverse and talented author who championed his religious beliefs in many different genres and to many different audiences.

Through his apologetic works, Lewis opened many minds to a more approachable view of Christianity, in Britain and the world. In addition to his critically acclaimed *Chronicles of Narnia*, many of his apologetic works also received awards: *Christianity Today* named *Mere Christianity* as the best book of the twentieth century in 2000 (Gushee). Yet, Lewis' most important contribution to apologetics was how he was able to harness the changes of society around him to lead the apologetic genre

into a new era. Apologist writers who were active before and during Lewis' career, such as G.K. Chesterton, William Mitchell Ramsay, and Oswald T. Allis, prided themselves on an approach to religion, which was directly rooted in logic and philosophy and only appealed to a highly educated section of society. Lewis acknowledged the limitations of this communication gap and believed it was not the subject matter being rejected, but rather the vehicle being used to relay these messages. Just as Great Britain was emerging from the Victorian period and enduring its transition away from a society defined largely by class, Lewis formulated an writing style that no longer appealed to only the highly educated. He broke down barriers that many had previously faced when attempting to understand the teachings of Christianity. He combined humour with his easy-to-read style in order to soften and simplify theological questions. Lewis did not think he was performing a great task, stating "When I began, Christianity came before the great mass of my unbelieving fellow countrymen either in the highly emotional form offered by revivalists or in the unintelligible language of highly cultured clergymen. Most men were reached by neither. My task was, therefore, simply that of a translator - one of turning Christian doctrine into the vernacular." (Macdonald). Lewis also was able to use his ability as an author to encourage Christian values among children through the numerous characters and plot sequences that mirror characters and stories from Christian belief in his *The Chronicles of Narnia*. This also shows that the new techniques and strategies Lewis applied to his apologetic works were not merely stumbled upon by accident, but that he deliberately altered the apologetic genre and used similar techniques in his other works to further his mission to make Christianity more accessible.

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