C. S. Lewis: An Apologist for Education

Giants in the History of Education

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Series Editor: David Diener, PhD
For my friend and colleague
Matt Boyleston

For helping to keep alive the academic vision of
C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien
For every one pupil who needs to be guarded from a weak excess of sensibility there are three who need to be awakened from the slumber of cold vulgarity. The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts. The right defense against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments.

—C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*
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INTRODUCTION

It is well known and well accepted that C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) was the greatest Christian apologist of the twentieth century. What is less well known is that he was one of its greatest educators as well. Though he grew up in Belfast, Ireland, in a middle-class home, Lewis carved out an enduring niche for himself in England’s Oxford University. After achieving a triple first (first-class honors in three different major courses of study especially at Cambridge and Oxford universities), a rare feat then and now, he went on to be a fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford. Though he was never awarded a professorship at Oxford (Cambridge would make up for that oversight in 1954 by creating for Lewis the chair of medieval and Renaissance literature), Lewis was one of their most distinguished academics, publishing a number of books that are still considered seminal works: *The Allegory of Love* (1936), *A Preface to “Paradise Lost”* (1942), *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (1954), and *The Discarded Image* (1964).

Just as importantly, Lewis proved to be an effective tutor and lecturer with a gift for diving into a sea of primary material and coming up with a handful of aesthetic and philosophical pearls to share with his eager students. Though Oxford tended to scorn professors who reached out to the general public, Lewis felt it was part of his calling to spread the knowledge of the university to the wider public. As such, he was not ashamed to write in layman’s terms and to avoid academic jargon. He built bridges between the university and the surrounding world and helped to revive the reputation of genres, such as fantasy, that had fallen out of favor amongst the literati. His love for reading and learning was contagious, and he even wrote a popular work of lit-
erary criticism, *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961), in which he assessed what exactly it is that impels people to read literature in the first place.

In this book, I have set myself three tasks. First, to offer a mini-biography of Lewis that sheds light on the key incidents and people in his life that shaped him into a great and influential educator. Second, to survey some of Lewis’s major pedagogical contributions, particularly his call for educators to learn from the past rather than standing in judgment over it. Third, to suggest ways in which modern educators can learn from Lewis and carry on his legacy. It is my hope that if I am even partially successful in these tasks, more thoughtful educators will be inspired by Lewis and subsequently more students will be inspired as well.
Although Clive Staples Lewis (1898–1963; known to his friends as “Jack”) may appear to be the quintessential Englishman, he was actually born and raised in Belfast, Ireland, in the days before Ireland was split into north and south. The son of Albert Lewis, a solicitor of Welsh descent, and Florence Hamilton Lewis, a clergyman’s daughter who earned a bachelor’s degree in math, Lewis was baptized and raised in the Church of England. He led a happy childhood filled with an overabundance of books and a rich imagination that gravitated toward fantasy and fairy tales. Lewis and his brother Warren (1895–1973) even created their own magical land called Boxen. They did much of that creating while sitting together in an old wardroom located in one of the long corridors that ran through the upper floor of their large, drafty home.

Throughout his childhood, Lewis experienced moments of intense longing that he came to refer to as joy (he would later title his spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy*). These moments would be set off by seemingly mundane objects—a toy garden made by his brother, a picture in a tale by Beatrix Potter, a few lines of poetry about the Norse god Balder—but they would provide him with a glimpse of something supernatural, something that transcended the physical, material world.

These early childhood longings would play a significant role in Lewis’s later books on Christianity. He would come to identify them as indicators that we are not mere products of natural processes destined for extinction but are creatures made for heaven. Just as the fact that we hunger and thirst proves we are creatures made for eating and drinking, he would later reason, so the fact that we yearn for something that our
natural, physical world cannot supply (or even know anything about) proves we were made for another, metaphysical world.

*Lewis always left room in his educational thought and practice for wonder, mystery, and intuition.*

Though the adult Lewis would advocate for a traditional curriculum grounded in the study of old languages and old books, his experiences with joy opened him up to more Romantic, less classical notions of human development and maturation. Indeed, just as William Wordsworth, in his poetic autobiography, *The Prelude*, attributed the growth of his poetic mind to mystical moments of intercourse with the natural world that he experienced in early childhood (he called them spots of time), so Lewis’s moments of joy helped to balance his love of books with a lifelong love of nature. Both Wordsworth and Plato believed that we come to our earthly bodies with memories of heaven and that education therefore rests in part on recollection. Though he never expressed a belief in the preexistence of the soul, Lewis always left room in his educational thought and practice for wonder, mystery, and intuition.

*Surprised by Joy* (1955) actually represents Lewis’s second attempt at autobiography. Two decades earlier he wrote an allegorical version of his journey to faith (*The Pilgrim’s Regress*, 1933) that bears a peculiar subtitle: *An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism*. Both as a believer and an educator, Lewis would hold together in creative tension reason and imagination. Though his pedagogical methods were strongly classical, they were ever infused with a romantic spark of longing and desire. A student struggles to learn Greek, he would come to believe, not as an end in itself but so that some day he can truly enjoy Homer and Aeschylus and Sophocles. In a similar manner, J. R. R. Tolkien, his friend and cocombatant in the fight to preserve Oxford’s linguistic-based curriculum, would admonish his fellow Anglo-Saxon scholars that *Beowulf* must be studied not only as a historical and linguistic artifact but as a great work of the poetic imagination that speaks
at once to the adult’s interest in form and genre and to the child’s love of adventure, romance, and dragons.

**The Loss of Joy and the Inner Ring**

Sadly, Lewis’s joy-filled childhood came to a sudden and painful end when his beloved mother succumbed to cancer. Though Lewis prayed earnestly for her recovery, she died in 1908, three months shy of Lewis’s tenth birthday. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis compares the loss of his mother to the sinking of Atlantis. After her death, he writes, he still experienced occasional stabs of joy, but the old certainty and security had been washed away by the great wave of her death.

To make matters worse, one month after his mother’s death Lewis was shipped off by his father to a boarding school in England he utterly despised. It was run by a man who would later be declared insane and incarcerated for his sadistic treatment of the boys in his care. Lewis found his only relief in books and in his longing for the holidays. Unfortunately, Lewis would attend a series of such boarding schools, none of which he cared for. During these years, his early faith slowly faded as the unhappy boy went into a kind of survival mode. He felt that the schools taught him very little, and he particularly hated the overfocus on athletics and the vanity it produced in the upper-class athletes who expected the younger boys to serve and fawn on them.

American college students who want to join a fraternity often have to endure a “hell week” during which the brothers submit them to ritual humiliation. In the boarding schools Lewis attended, hell week was more like hell year. Although Warren, who was more athletic than his clumsy brother and who would later take up a career in the military, felt that this system (what the British call the “fagging system”) helped toughen him up and mature him into a man, Lewis discerned in it a great and perennial evil that he would later dub “the inner ring.”
Equally endemic to schools, churches, and businesses, the inner ring is a self-appointed secret society whose arrogant wardens consider themselves to be superior to the lesser mortals outside their sphere. The ring corrupts not only those within it, whose group mentality shields them from feelings of guilt and remorse, but also those who desperately desire to get into it and are willing to abase and degrade themselves in any way in order to win admittance.

The inner ring marks a perversion of the family, of true friendship, and of the Church (the Body of Christ). Whereas the family is built on mutual duties and affections that respect the unique skills and spheres of each individual within it, the inner ring presses all its members into a single, ultimately dehumanizing mold. Whereas friendship is built on shared passions and mutual edification, strengthening its members to affect those outside the group for good, the inner ring breeds pride and self-righteousness and cuts its members off from real human fellowship. Whereas the Church is meant to be salt and light in the world, the inner ring turns away those within it from spiritual growth in wisdom and humility, thus increasing depravity in the world.

In the opening of *The Silver Chair*, our child heroes, Eustace and Jill, are chased down by a group of bullies who are threatened by Eustace and Jill’s refusal to kowtow to their cruel practices and mob mentality. Lewis places the blame for this state of affairs on a headmistress who, rather than breaking up the inner ring, enjoys studying the members as interesting psychological specimens. Lewis seems here to suggest that schools that allow such inner rings to develop are guilty of abdicating their responsibility to foster virtue and honor in their charges.

The inner ring takes on an even more virulent form in Lewis’s dystopian novel *That Hideous Strength*, the third book in a trilogy of sci-fi fantasy novels that includes *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra*. This time the inner ring takes the guise of a secret totalitarian society prepared to use any means to establish an efficient, scientific, omni-competent state that will “perfect” the human race. In reality, the ring is
nihilistic, reductionist, and profoundly antihumanistic. Significantly, it is attached to and fed by an academic institution run by its own inner ring of chancellors and faculty members, who themselves no doubt cut their Machiavellian teeth on the fagging system.

Lewis was certainly not a foe of healthy competition among students and academic colleagues, but, based on his negative childhood experiences in British boarding schools, he sounds a prophetic warning against the fallen human tendency to form groups that foster contempt of self and others rather than inspire courage, wisdom, temperance, and justice. It was certainly his hope that a proper education in virtue would produce knights spurred on by honor rather than marauding bands that preyed on the weak.

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THREE NEW MENTORS

Again and again, Lewis pleaded with his father to rescue him from the boarding schools he so hated. Finally, when Lewis was sixteen, his father, in accordance with his son’s pleas and with their shared dream of getting Lewis into Oxford, removed his unhappy son from boarding school and placed him under the private tutelage of William T. Kirkpatrick. Kirkpatrick lived in Surrey, England, and Lewis, eager to make a good first impression, decided to greet his new master with some small talk on the countryside of Surrey.

“Sir,” said the eager young Lewis as he first shook hands with Kirkpatrick, “Surrey is less wild than I had expected.” Lewis expected that Kirkpatrick would answer back with an equally innocuous bit of small
talk, but he couldn’t be more wrong. In keeping with his nickname “the Great Knock,” Kirkpatrick was a foe of all sloppy, emotional, and inexact thinking. Shocked by the flimsy nature of Lewis’s statement, he thundered back in a Scottish brogue, “On what did you base your expectation that Surrey would be wild? Have you consulted any almanacs on the subjects? On what criteria do your base your definition of the word *wild*? Have you anything logical, rational, or factual to say on the subject?”¹

Most young (and old) people would have been intimidated by this treatment into perpetual silence, but Lewis quickly came to love Kirkpatrick’s methods and techniques. As Kirkpatrick taught him not only logic but ancient languages and literature, Lewis honed his mind to razor sharpness. While perfecting his Greek and Latin, he learned to define terms, to weigh evidence, and to master the rules of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Under Kirkpatrick’s vigorous tutelage, Lewis grew into a ferocious debater and insisted that all conclusions be traced back to their foundational assumptions and presuppositions.

Now, Kirkpatrick was a modern-day David Hume, an empiricist of the highest order who refused to acknowledge the importance (or even the real existence) of anything supernatural or metaphysical. During his two-year sojourn with Kirkpatrick, Lewis surrendered any residual faith he had left, relegating religion, miracles, and fantasy to the same fictional woodpile. Christianity was reduced in his mind to a mere myth, and theology to a pseudodiscipline about which nothing could be known or posited.

But life has its little ironies. When Lewis eventually converted (or perhaps we should say reconverted) to Christianity at the age of thirty-two, he did not forget the logic he had been taught by Kirkpatrick. Rather he used it to become the twentieth century’s foremost apologist. A Christian apologist, far from “apologizing” for the faith, offers a logical, rational defense of the Christian worldview. Just as Socrates offered an apology (or defense) of his life and teachings before the assembly of Athens, so the

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Christian apologist seeks to marshal evidence for the existence of God, the authenticity of the Bible, and the miracles of Jesus (especially the resurrection). He seeks as well to uphold the power, wisdom, and love of God in the midst of human suffering, to defend such key Christian doctrines as the Trinity, the Incarnation, Original Sin, and the Atonement, and to reconcile the findings of science with the teachings of Scripture.

It is vital to Lewis’s later views on education, as well as to his own educational practices, that he never forsaken the methods of reasoned discourse taught him by Kirkpatrick. As an educator, Lewis instilled in his own students the same logical rigor, the same attention to detail, and the same demand for precision that had been instilled in him by the Great Knock. Unlike Kirkpatrick, Lewis integrated the foundational principles of the Judeo-Christian worldview into his teaching and scholarship; however, that does not mean that he “preached religion” in his classroom. Rather, he balanced reason and logic with revelation, intuition, and imagination, seeking to equip his students with both knowledge and wisdom, both skill and virtue. He acknowledged the claims of science as well as literature, history as well as myth, philosophical statements as well as fairy tales, without forcing either into hermetically sealed compartments. Whereas Kirkpatrick relegated Christianity to the sphere of emotion and sentiment, Lewis allowed the biblical worldview a central place in the education of students and the interpretation of literature, history, and philosophy.

During the period of Kirkpatrick’s tutelage, Lewis quite serendipitously fell upon a book that reengaged his waning sense of joy and his early love of fantasy. Before boarding a train for the coast of England (and thence a boat to Ireland), Lewis purchased an inexpensive paperback from a bookstall to read during his journey. The book he chose was Phantastes by George MacDonald. As strange as it is plotless, Phantastes (1858) recounts the story of a man who stumbles into an enchanted world where all of nature is alive and where magical doorways and passages abound. During his adventures in the realm of faerie, the man is
nearly killed by a wicked ash tree but is saved by a gentle beech, uncovers and then is pursued by his own dark shadow, and discovers a magic library that allows readers to enter directly into the world of books. In the final episode, he is killed, and his soul leaves the physical restraints of his body to become one with all of nature.

MacDonald (1824–1905), a Scottish minister whose numerous children’s stories and fairy tales, all of which are infused with a deep Christian faith, include *At the Back of the North Wind*, *Lilith*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, *The Princess and Curdie*, and *The Light Princess*, quickly became one of Lewis’s mentors. Indeed, Lewis not only chose MacDonald to be his Virgil-like guide through heaven in his *The Great Divorce* (1946) and published a devotional anthology of his writings, but he also claimed that he never wrote a book in which he did not, in some way, quote MacDonald. Of his first reading of *Phantastes* on the train, Lewis later wrote that it baptized his imagination, opening up his logic-barricaded mind to a sense of wonder and otherness that had been excluded from the teachings of Kirkpatrick.2 In *Phantastes*, Lewis came face to face with the power of holiness and caught a glimpse of a higher spiritual level that allowed him to reaccess his childhood experiences of joy.

A few years later, Lewis encountered a third mentor who would help him combine the logic of Kirkpatrick with the holiness of MacDonald: G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936). An accomplished Christian apologist (*Orthodoxy*, *The Everlasting Man*) who publicly debated with George Bernard Shaw, Chesterton was a prolific journalist and author who commented on the social, political, and religious issues of his day while publishing in the genres of fiction (*The Man Who Was Thursday*, the Father Brown detective stories), poetry (*The Ballad of the White Horse*), literary criticism (*Charles Dickens, Robert Browning*), and biography (*Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Thomas Aquinas*). From Chesterton, Lewis learned to use irony to deflate modern arrogance, sudden twists of thought to jolt readers into rethinking accepted norms and opinions,
and a kind of narrative logic that relentlessly pushes arguments back to their unstated, and often unconscious, presuppositions.

Equipped with the methods of Kirkpatrick, the imagination of MacDonald, and the paradoxes of Chesterton, Lewis forged an identity for himself as author, apologist, and educator that engaged the full person, that was not afraid to explore all avenues of thought, and that could appeal equally to mind, heart, and soul.

THE GREAT WAR

In the same year that Lewis began his studies under Kirkpatrick, World War I broke out across Europe. Though he might have been able to avoid the draft due to his Irish citizenship, the unathletic Lewis chose to join the war effort. He served in Arras, France, where he saw firsthand the horrors of trench warfare. Tolkien, who fought in the Battle of the Somme, also witnessed the carnage of what Europeans still refer to as the Great War. It should come as no surprise that Lewis’s Narnia and Tolkien’s Middle-earth show a constant awareness of how lust, greed, and the desire for possession and control can corrupt even the most beautiful of fairy lands.

During his basic training, Lewis befriended a fellow Irishman named Paddy Moore. The two friends made a pact that if one of them died, the other would care for the dead man’s parent. As it turned out, Paddy was the one who was killed, and for the next thirty-three years Lewis took care of Mrs. Moore and her daughter, Maureen. Some have speculated that Lewis and Mrs. Moore, who became a surrogate mother for Lewis, had a sexual relationship. If that is true, it did not last long, and it took place in the years when Lewis was an atheist. Lewis the Christian tended to her needs, though she ridiculed his faith and became increasingly irritable, and he did not consider marriage until after she died. In 1930, Mrs. Moore, Lewis, and his retired bachelor brother bought a home together in Oxford called the Kilns, and though their home life was
decidedly odd, it kept Lewis grounded and helped him to learn the niceties of society that he might otherwise have overlooked.3

While serving in France, Lewis was injured by friendly fire, an injury that likely saved his life. Because of his veteran status, Lewis was released by Oxford from taking the required math entrance test. Though brilliant in letters, Lewis was terrible in math and would never have been able to pass the test. He thus achieved his lifelong dream of attending Oxford. Lewis was a student of prodigious ability, and he won firsts (first-class honors) in all three of his subjects: ancient languages and literature, English literature, and philosophy. This rare distinction helped him secure a job as fellow and tutor at Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1925.

Though grounded in ancient languages (Greek, Latin, Anglo-Saxon), Lewis’s education took in the full range of literature, history, philosophy, and literary theory from Homer to the Victorians. Lewis’s education helped him to avoid the pitfalls of narrow specialization (which was all the rage in Oxford) and to achieve instead a depth and breadth of knowledge that made him one of the most accomplished generalists (“renaissance men”) of his day. Indeed, the greater one’s familiarity with the Great Books of the Western intellectual tradition, the more one will respect Lewis’s genius. Those who accuse Lewis of being outdated or old-fashioned are generally ignorant of the tradition or, possessing but a little of it, hold it in scorn. In his preface to The Problem of Pain, Lewis makes it clear that he has made no attempt to be “original’, in the sense of being novel or unorthodox”; rather his goal is to restate “ancient and orthodox doctrines” and “as a layman of the Church of England . . . to assume nothing that is not professed by all baptised and communicating Christians.”4 What Lewis says here is ultimately true of all his work: nothing in it is “original” in the sense of being radically new and breaking with tradition. Indeed, nearly

everything Lewis wrote can be traced back to ideas in Plato or Aristotle, Cicero or Boethius, Augustine or Aquinas. As a true defender of the tradition, Lewis, like T. S. Eliot, carried the past in his bones, and he has helped tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of people to appreciate the glories of our ancient, medieval, and Renaissance heritage.

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As tutor, it was Lewis’s job to meet individually, or sometimes in twos or threes, with students making their way through the Oxford curriculum. For each hour-long meeting, the student would read the assigned texts and write a reflective essay. After the student read his essay aloud to the tutor, the tutor would attack “the essay’s argument or lack of one, and the undergraduate [would do] his best to defend his work.”5 Like Kirkpatrick, Lewis expected precision and clarity of thought. He taught his students to love literature, but he would not permit them to substitute sloppy, “emotional” thinking for careful explication.

In addition to tutorials, Lewis often gave lectures on medieval and Renaissance literature. Oxford students are not required to attend lectures, but Lewis’s lectures were always packed. Students knew that Lewis would break down complex themes, genres, and subjects and make them accessible and compelling. They knew as well that he would do the hard work of mining lengthy romances for nuggets of literary gold. Many of Lewis’s lectures found their way into such seminal works of literary history and criticism as The Allegory of Love (on the nature of courtly love and the origins and conventions of medieval allegory), A Preface to “Paradise Lost” (still one of the best studies of epic and of Milton), English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama


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(part of the prestigious Oxford History of English Literature series), and *The Discarded Image* (in which he lays out in all its splendor the medieval cosmological model that undergirds Dante’s *Divine Comedy*).

Throughout his career as a student and his early years as a tutor, Lewis remained a committed atheist and materialist. But that was not to last. To his shock and surprise, Lewis discovered that, although he himself considered Christianity to be nothing more than a fable, all the authors he most loved (Dante, Chaucer, Spenser, Donne, Herbert, Johnson, Chesterton) were Christians, and the ancients he most admired (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Plato, Virgil) were the ones whose writings most foreshadowed the coming of Christ. Meanwhile, those authors he considered to be hollow and lacking in depth (Voltaire, Gibbon, John Stuart Mill, D. H. Lawrence, H. G. Wells, Shaw) shared his skepticism and his naturalism. “A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist,” Lewis discovered, “cannot be too careful of his reading.”

Nor, as it turned out, of his friends. Owen Barfield (1898–1997) and Lewis met at Oxford and spent long nights discussing and debating language and literature. When the “rational” Barfield accepted Christianity, it was a great blow to Lewis and led to even more debates over theism and the supernatural. Lewis referred to these spiritual debates as “the Great War.” Barfield further challenged Lewis to abandon his chronological snobbery: his modernist tendency to dismiss all earlier thought as unenlightened and misguided and to take for granted that if something (such as miracles) was no longer believed by academics, it must have been disproved.

With the help of Barfield, Lewis, at roughly the age of thirty, accepted the existence of God, though he as yet did not believe that Christ was the Son of God. Barfield’s influence not only moved the skeptical Lewis toward faith but also radically altered his understanding and appreciation of the past. Lewis later became a great advocate for

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7. Ibid., 114.
medieval literature, philosophy, and cosmology. Over the next three
decades he not only defended the Middle Ages in his academic work but
also incarnated its ideals and its pageantry in his Chronicles of Narnia.

**Tolkien and the Myth Made Fact**

Although with the help of Barfield and the books he most loved
Lewis had accepted theism, he continued to distance himself from the
doctrines of Christianity. His main reason for doing so was his inability
to understand how the death of an obscure Jewish rabbi two thousand
years ago could have any impact on his life. Lewis was a great lover of
myth and a devotee of Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. From this
influential book of comparative anthropology (Frazer was the Joseph
Campbell of his day), Lewis learned that every ancient culture had its
own version of the Corn King myth: of a divine or semidivine figure
whose seasonal death and return to life bridged the gap between forlorn
mortals and the distant gods. The name of the Corn King varied from
culture to culture (Adonis, Bacchus, Osiris, Tammuz, Mithras, Balder),
but his function as divine/human mediator remained the same. In
keeping with Frazer, Lewis concluded that Jesus Christ represented the
Hebrew version of the Corn King myth.

A long night walk with Tolkien (1892–1973) would change all that. Tolkien, who was named professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford at the remark-
ably young age of thirty-three, met Lewis in 1926. Though Lewis was six
years Tolkien’s junior, the two shared a deep love for all things Norse and
quickly became friends. Impressed by Lewis’s knowledge and facility with
languages, Tolkien invited Lewis to join the Coalbiters, a group he formed
for the express purpose of reading through the Sagas and Eddas in Old
Norse. As stated earlier in this chapter, Lewis and Tolkien went on to fight
side by side to preserve Oxford’s classical curriculum with its heavy emphasis
on Greek, Latin, and Old English and its grounding in the classics.
Tolkien was a committed Catholic and often discussed religion with Lewis. One night, while taking a stroll along Addison’s Walk at Magdalen College, Lewis shared with Tolkien his inability to take seriously the myth of Christ’s death and resurrection. Tolkien countered with a suggestion that changed Lewis’s faith forever: perhaps the reason the gospel story sounded so much like a myth was that Jesus was the myth that became fact. If we were all created by the same God, then it would make sense that we would all possess a cross-cultural yearning for that God to come to earth and rescue us from guilt and depravity. It further would make sense that that inbred yearning would manifest itself in the Corn King myths traced by Frazer. Finally, if that God were ever to enact our rescue, it would make sense that He would do so in a way that would mimic those myths. So, Christ did follow the pattern of Adonis, Osiris, and Balder, but He did so literally and historically, in a real time and a real place with real consequences.8

Tolkien’s argument not only helped Lewis to move from theism to Christianity; it opened his eyes to literary dimensions he had not seen before. When Lewis, at the age of thirty-two, put Christ at the center of his faith, he also put Him at the center of his aesthetic, philosophical, and pedagogical beliefs and practices. With Christ as the purposeful end (telos in Greek) of man’s deepest yearnings and desires, all of literature gained a second level of meaning. Just as the Law and Prophets of the Old Testament found their fulfillment in Christ (Greek for “Messiah”), so the myths, epics, tragedies, and philosophies of Greece and Rome found their own telos in the historical Corn King.

Unlike many of his colleagues at Oxford, and in European and American academia in general, Lewis sought for and found real and enduring truths in the books he read and taught. While still an atheist, Lewis was discussing Plato, a thinker who always stood close to his heart, with one of his students (Dom Bede Griffiths), who would soon become a believer,

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and Barfield. As Lewis listened, it struck him that there was something odd about their approach to Plato. Then, in a burst of insight, he realized what it was: Barfield and Griffiths were discussing Plato as if what he wrote really mattered, as if the study of Plato might change one’s beliefs and actions. Philosophy, Barfield explained, “wasn’t a subject to Plato . . . it was a way.”

Lewis’s night stroll with Tolkien and his conversion to Christianity convinced him of the real existence of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful and, as a result, of the potential for literature (especially poetry) to point back to and even contain goodness, truth, and beauty in something of their original purity. I would suggest, and I think Lewis would agree, that the reason he was so effective as a tutor, lecturer, and literary critic is that he firmly believed that wrestling with Virgil or Dante or Milton would open doorways into transcendent truths not accessible through the natural or social sciences.

All of Lewis’s academic works were written after his conversion, and all are undergirded by a Judeo-Christian worldview. That is not to say that his studies of medieval and Renaissance literature and thought repeat the arguments of his great apologetical works: *Mere Christianity*, *The Problem of Pain*, and *Miracles*. Rather, because his academic works rest on a belief that truth exists and is knowable and that the gospel story is the metanarrative that gives meaning to all other stories, they soar above modern and postmodern literary studies that are mired in a cynical, self-defeating belief that language is meaningless, metaphors are arbitrary, and stories are merely self-referential.

Having encountered and dedicated his life to a God who spoke the world into being and whose Son bears the title of Word (*logos*) of God, Lewis could not help but find meaning in the literature he read and taught. For passing on that meaning to a world hungry for goodness, truth, and beauty, Lewis the educator deserves his niche in the pedagogical hall of fame.

Chapter One: The Education of C. S. Lewis

Broadcast Talks, Oxford Socratic, and Inklings

Lewis’s years as a tutor at Oxford were rich and productive ones. In addition to the apologetic, academic, sci-fi/fantasy, and autobiographical works already noted in this book, Lewis published two stunning works of the imagination that are *sui generis*: *The Screwtape Letters* (a catalog of letters sent by a senior devil to a junior devil to instruct him in the fine art of temptation) and *The Great Divorce* (which questions what might happen if damned souls could take a bus ride to heaven and be offered, once again, the gift of salvation). In the 1950s he published his Chronicles of Narnia along with *Reflections on the Psalms* and the haunting *Till We Have Faces*. *The Four Loves, Studies in Words, A Grief Observed, An Experiment in Criticism, and Letters to Malcolm* would follow in the 1960s.

Lewis would gain growing popular (if not always academic) fame from his works; however, it was World War II that brought Lewis’s ideas and lecturing skills before a wider audience. As the Germans bombed London from the sky, the BBC turned to Lewis to share with the British radio audience the nature of that “Christian civilization” that Winston Churchill had told them they were fighting to preserve. Lewis’s *Problem of Pain* (1940) had demonstrated his ability to explain difficult theological concepts in layman’s terms, so the BBC hoped that he could do the same over the radio. Between 1941 and 1944, Lewis gave a series of broadcast talks in which he laid out rational foundations for the existence of God, discussed the implications of Christ’s claims to divinity, explained the nature of Christian moral teachings, and clarified the meaning of such seemingly arcane theological concepts as the Trinity and the Incarnation. The talks made Lewis a household name and were later collected under the title *Mere Christianity*.

Speaking for the BBC proved a rigorous classroom for the Oxford don, teaching him how to express his ideas in short, highly lucid sentences and with a minimum of academic and theological jargon.
Although Lewis knew that by agreeing to address people through the popular medium of radio he was jeopardizing his career at Oxford, he believed that it was his role as a Christian and an educator to bring a message of faith, hope, and love to a nation under siege. Lewis was not one to keep the wisdom of the past locked up in the ivory tower of academia; he felt a calling to share that wisdom no matter the cost to his career.

Another potentially costly move that Lewis made during World War II was accepting the presidency of the Oxford Socratic Club, a post he held from 1942 until 1954. The purpose of the club was to provide an open forum for debating the relevance and intellectual soundness of Christianity in a modern, “scientific” age. Opposing papers would be read on a given topic (for example, miracles or naturalism) by a Christian and an atheist—if one could be found who had the courage to take the podium. After the formal debate ended, the floor would be thrown open for discussion. Invariably, Lewis himself would rise and refute the atheist.

Only once, in 1948, was Lewis bested by an opponent. Ironically, that opponent was not an atheist but a committed Catholic philosopher named Elizabeth Anscombe. She took Lewis to task for some of the terminology he used in chapter 3 of *Miracles*; in response, Lewis revised and expanded the chapter to the satisfaction of Anscombe. A legend has sprung up that Lewis’s “defeat” caused him to abandon logical apologetics for fiction, but the claim is a false one. Before his face-off with Anscombe, Lewis had written his sci-fi/fantasy trilogy (1938, 1943, 1945), and after it he published *Mere Christianity* (1952).¹⁰

Part of the reason Lewis accepted the presidency of the Oxford Socratic Club was that he believed, along with Socrates himself, in the importance of following an argument wherever it leads. He brought this passion for seeking after wisdom into his tutorials and his lectures as well. Despite his Christian faith—indeed, because of it—he never avoided studying and wrestling with the work of atheists, agnostics, and relativists. To the

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contrary, he engaged himself, and invited his students to engage, in a sparring match with both the defenders and the critics of the Judeo-Christian worldview. All was open for discussion, though Lewis himself looked to the Bible and the Christian creeds as touchstones for measuring truth claims.

**Despite his Christian faith—indeed, because of it—he never avoided studying and wrestling with the work of atheists, agnostics, and relativists.**

If Lewis did not damage his chances for academic promotion enough by his involvement with the BBC and the Socratic Club, he went one step further and embraced a genre that was not looked upon favorably by Oxford professors: the fairy tale. Although the late Victorian and Edwardian periods marked a golden age for children’s literature (*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Jungle Book*, *The Water-Babies*, the tales of Beatrix Potter, and the novels of George MacDonald and E. Nesbit), after World War I a more cynical and “realistic” Europe relegated such fantasy stories to the nursery. Lewis’s Chronicles of Narnia, together with Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, helped to revive the fairy tale as a genre worthy of serious consideration.

Partly to protect themselves emotionally and spiritually from the skeptics and naysayers who dismissed fairy tales as “escapist,” Lewis and Tolkien formed the Inklings. Begun in 1933 and reaching its peak during World War II, the regular members of the Inklings included Lewis, Tolkien, Barfield, Warren Lewis, Hugo Dyson, Nevill Coghill, R. E. Havard, and Charles Williams, whose deeply mystical, powerfully spiritual, esoterically Christian novels delighted and challenged Lewis. (*That Hideous Strength* was written in the mode of a Williams novel.)

Though all the Inklings members were Christian, and though Christianity sprang up often in their discussions, the group was literary rather than theological in focus. The Inklings generally met twice a week—once at a local pub (The Eagle and Child, nicknamed “The Bird and Baby”)

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and once in Lewis’s rooms at Magdalen College—during which time each of them would read aloud one of his works in progress. The Inklings were tough critics of each other’s work, but they also provided the kind of support they needed to persevere in writing “suspect” works of fiction. It is no exaggeration to say that Tolkien would never have finished and published *The Lord of the Rings* were it not for the support of Lewis.

That a highly respected Oxford don steeped in classical languages and literature would take the time not only to promote fantastical literature as a legitimate genre for adult reading but also to write his own fairy tales proved a boon for the moribund reputation of children’s literature. As an educator, Lewis did not look down his nose at seemingly simplistic genres. Rather he dove into them with the same passion for uncovering goodness, truth, and beauty that he brought to his readings of Homer, Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and Swift. Indeed, he had a gift for discerning in the work of such canonical writers the same mythopoeic power he found in *The Wind in the Willows* or the fairy tales of Hans Christian Anderson.

Interestingly, at the same time Lewis made waves by his embrace of out-of-fashion genres, he made further waves by his refusal to accept free verse: poetry that abandons rhyme and fixed metrical schemes. Though free verse was on the ascendant, Lewis continued to write his own poetry in formal stanzas that employed both meter and rhyme. In fact, though Lewis later became friends with T. S. Eliot (that other great Christian academic of the first half of the twentieth century), he considered Eliot something of an antagonist in matters of poetry.

**CAMBRIDGE TO THE RESCUE AND THE RETURN OF JOY**

Despite the fact that Lewis was the author of several highly respected works of literary history and criticism, and despite the fact
that his lectures were among the most attended in Oxford, the university never awarded him a professorship. This meant that Magdalen’s brightest star was forced to slave away at time-consuming tutorials while many of his less brilliant colleagues were expected only to give lectures, thus freeing them up for research and publication. Still, this did not deter Lewis from producing a steady stream of popular and academic works as well as giving public lectures at numerous venues.

Though it is true that Lewis’s refusal to hide his Christian faith under a bushel hurt his chances for promotion, this was not the only reason he was passed over for professorships. From the point of view of many of his colleagues, Lewis had committed the unpardonable sin of being popular and reaching out to nonacademic readers. To make matters worse, he had spoken and published on subjects (like theology) that were outside his discipline. To be a generalist, and a popular one at that, was to fall foul of the rules of the club (dare I say inner ring?). Despite the advocacy of Tolkien, Lewis was unable to secure a professorship at Oxford.\footnote{McGrath, \textit{C. S. Lewis: A Life}, 242–44, 247–249.}

Then, when Lewis had all but given up hope, Cambridge University came to the rescue and offered Lewis a professorship that they had created specifically to honor his work: chair of medieval and Renaissance literature. After some hesitation, Lewis accepted the chair and held it from 1954 until his death in 1963. (Ironically, the college he worked for at Cambridge was called Magdalene.) Lewis enjoyed his promotion, but his love for the city of Oxford was so great that he continued to live at home in the Kilns on weekends.

To kick off his professorship, Lewis gave a lecture at Cambridge titled “\textit{De Descriptione Temporum}.” In it, he bravely took on “chronological snobbery,” arguing that the so-called divide between a dark and ignorant Middle Ages and an enlightened Renaissance is mostly fictitious, invented by modern thinkers eager to discredit medieval faith and thought. No, Lewis asserted with panache, “the Renaissance never
happened.” What Lewis meant by this somewhat cryptic saying was that the basic view of God, man, and the universe did not change radically from Dante to Milton. The real divide came with the Enlightenment, when Christendom gave way to post-Christian Europe.

To put it another way, any given Renaissance figure from Shakespeare to Galileo to Michelangelo has more in common with a medieval thinker such as Dante or Chaucer or even a virtuous pagan such as Plato or Virgil than he does with Kant or Hume, Darwin or Marx, Freud or Sartre, Shaw or Wells, Joyce or Kafka. As Lewis argued, “Christians and Pagans had much more in common with each other than either has with a post-Christian. The gap between those who worship different gods is not so wide as that between those who worship and those who do not.”

Unlike Oxford, Cambridge was willing to entertain such “radical” notions and to give Lewis a platform for teaching them. And radical is just the right word for Lewis’s teaching, for he always went back to the root (radix in Latin) in his lifelong search for the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Although Lewis loved his job, it was never simply a game for him. The reading and teaching of literature was serious business: properly executed it should lead to changed hearts and lives.

Lewis’s life was rich indeed, but it held one last surprise in store. When Lewis was in his early fifties, he struck up a correspondence with a woman named Helen Joy Davidman Gresham (1915–1960). Though Joy, a nonpracticing Jew from the Bronx, had been both an atheist and a communist, her reading of Lewis’s apologetical works had helped lead her to faith in Christ. She visited Lewis in Oxford in 1952, and their friendship blossomed. Two years later, Joy was back in England with her two sons; she was now divorced from her alcoholic, serially unfaithful husband and was getting by as best she could.

In 1956, with her visa about to expire, Joy appealed to Lewis for help. The confirmed old bachelor agreed to marry her in a civil ceremony and thus extend his British citizenship to her and her boys. The marriage was held in secret, and Joy and Lewis continued to live apart. That might have been the end of the story were it not for the fact that Joy contracted cancer, the very disease that had killed Lewis’s mother so many years before. As he tended to her in her illness, Lewis realized he was deeply in love with her, and the two were married in 1957 in an ecclesiastical ceremony held in the hospital.

No one expected Joy to survive, but miraculously her cancer went into remission, and she and Lewis spent three happy years as man and wife, even managing to take a trip to Greece together. In the end, however, the cancer returned, and Joy died in 1960. Grief stricken, Lewis began to keep a journal; in it he recorded his struggles with God, faith, and his own despair. In 1961 he published it (anonymously) under the title *A Grief Observed*. Partly because of Lewis’s naked honesty, the book remains one of the finest studies of grief ever written and continues to bring consolation to thousands of readers who have lost loved ones.

It is no surprise that Lewis chose to deal with his grief by putting it into words. Throughout his life, Lewis, both as teacher and author, believed strongly in the power of words to record, to express, to heal, and to transform.

Clive Staples Lewis died on November 22, 1963, the same day that John F. Kennedy was assassinated as he drove through the streets of Dallas, Texas.