



Biography of British writer C.S. Lewis

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Abstract: *C.S. Lewis (November 29, 1898 – November 22, 1963) was a British fantasy writer and scholar. Known for his imaginative fantasy world of Narnia and, later, his writings on Christianity, Lewis' life was informed by a search for higher meaning. He remains to this day one of most beloved children's authors in English.*

Key words: *fantasy, version, philosophical, conversation, work, poetry, lack*

C.S. Lewis (November 29, 1898 – November 22, 1963) was a British fantasy writer and scholar. Known for his imaginative fantasy world of Narnia and, later, his writings on Christianity, Lewis' life was informed by a search for higher meaning. He remains to this day one of most beloved children's authors in English. Clive Staples Lewis was born in Belfast, Ireland, to Albert James Lewis, a solicitor, and Florence Augusta Lewis, the daughter of a clergyman. He spent a happy, if prosaic, childhood in middle-class Belfast. Neither of his parents was interested much in poetry; as Lewis writes in his auto-biography, "Neither had ever listened for the horns of elfland." His early life in Belfast was marked by its lack of "otherworldly" features, including meager religious experience.

However, Lewis was born a romantic. He remarked later that he learned longing from the distant Castlereagh Hills, which he could see from his first home in Belfast. He was not alone in his latent romanticism; his elder brother and lifelong best friend, Warren, was similar in temperament. As children, the two would spend hours drawing and writing stories set in their respective fantasy worlds. Warnie had chosen an imagined version of industrialized India, complete with steam engines and battles, and Clive, known as Jack, founded "Animal-Land," where anthropomorphic animals



dwelt in a medieval world. The two decided Animal-Land had to be an earlier version of Warnie's India, and they named the world "Boxen." When Warnie went off to an English boarding school called Wynyard, Jack became a voracious reader, enjoying his father's large library. He also continued his own education in French and Latin lessons with his mother and mathematics with a governess, and while he was neither isolated nor quiet, Lewis' vivid imagination found him increasingly opting for solitude.

It was during this time that he began to experience, while reading the epics of the Norse, what he later called Joy, "which must be sharply distinguished from Happiness or Pleasure... It might almost equally well be called a particular type of unhappiness or grief." He spent much of his life in search of this mysterious, otherworldly feeling. When he was 9 years old, Lewis underwent two experiences that ended the tranquility of childhood. First, his mother died from cancer. His father never recovered from the loss, and grief's effect on him was a wild anger and instability which alienated his boys. Jack was then sent to the English boarding school that his older brother attended, Wynyard, a school of about 20 boys.

The school was run by an eccentric man, Robert "Oldie" Capron, who administered almost random corporal punishment and taught the boys almost nothing. While Lewis recalled his school days there as miserable, he also cited Wynyard with teaching him the value of friendship and of standing united against a common foe. The school soon shut down due to lack of students, with Oldie committing to a psychiatric hospital, and so Lewis moved to Campbell College in Belfast, about a mile from his home. He lasted less than a term at this school and was removed for health problems. Not long thereafter his father sent him to Cherbourg House, a school in the same town as his brother's Malvern College. It was at Cherbourg House that Lewis lost the Christian faith of his childhood, becoming interested instead in the occult. Lewis did very well at Cherbourg House and was granted a scholarship to



study at Malvern College, where he started in 1913 (which his brother had since left, matriculating as a military cadet at Sandhurst). Quickly he learned to hate the socially aggressive school in the elite British “public school” tradition. However, he advanced quickly in Latin and Greek, and it was there that Lewis discovered how deep his love went for “Northernness,” as he called it, Norse mythology, the Nordic sagas, and the artistic works they inspired, including Wagner’s “Ring Cycle.” He began experimenting with new ways of writing beyond *Animal-Land* and *Boxen*, composing epic poetry inspired by Norse mythology.

In 1914, Lewis withdrew from the hated Malvern College and was tutored by a friend of his father’s in Surrey, W.T. Kirkpatrick, known by his family as “The Great Knock.” Under Kirkpatrick’s tuition, Lewis entered into one of the happiest times of his life, studying all day and reading by night. Lewis gained admission into University College, Oxford, in 1917. He enlisted in the British army (the Irish were not required to conscript), and was trained at Keble College, Oxford, where he met a dear friend, Paddy Moore. The two promised if one died, the other would take care of his family.

Lewis arrived at the front line in the Somme Valley on his 19th birthday. Although he hated the army, he found the camaraderie made it better than the aggressive Malvern College. In early 1918, he was wounded by a shell and sent back to England to convalesce. He spent the rest of his time in the army in Andover, England, and was discharged in December 1919. Upon returning from the war, Lewis published, with Knock's encouragement, a book of poetry called *Spirits in Bondage*. However, the book received no reviews, to the chagrin of its 20-year-old author. Lewis studied at Oxford upon returning from the war till 1924. Once finished, he received a triple first, the highest honor in three degrees, including in Honour Moderations (Greek and Latin literature), in Greats (Philosophy and Ancient History), and in English. During this time, Lewis moved in with Jane Moore, the mother of his friend Paddy Moore, to whom he became so close that he would



introduce her as his mother. When Lewis finished his studies in 1924, he stayed in Oxford, becoming a philosophy tutor at University College, and the following year was elected a fellow at Magdalen College. He published *Dymer* in 1926, a long narrative poem.

In philosophical conversation with friends, including writer and philosopher Owen Barfield, Lewis became more and more convinced of the “Absolute” of Idealism, a universe or “wholeness” that contains all possibilities within it, although he refused to admit the similarity of this idea with that of God. In 1926, Lewis met J.R.R. Tolkien, a devout Roman Catholic philologist also studying at Oxford. In 1931, after a long discussion with his friends Tolkien and Hugo Dyson, Lewis converted to Christianity, which was to become a huge and lasting influence in his life. In the fall term of 1933, Lewis and his friends began weekly meetings of an informal group that became known as the “Inklings.” They met each Thursday night in Lewis’ rooms at Magdalen and Mondays or Fridays at the Eagle & Child pub in Oxford (known to the locals as “The Bird & Baby”). Members included J.R.R. Tolkien, Warren Lewis, Hugo Dyson, Charles Williams, Dr. Robert Havard, Owen Barfield, Weville Coghill, and others. The group’s primary purpose was to read aloud the unfinished writings of their members, including Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and Lewis’ work-in-progress *Out of the Silent Planet*. Meetings were friendly and fun, and were a lasting influence on both Tolkien and Lewis.

Lewis also published at this time an allegorical novel, *Pilgrim's Regress*, a reference to John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, though the novel was received to mixed reviews. Lewis was to serve as tutor in English Language and Literature at Magdalen College, Oxford, for 29 years. Much of his work in English revolved around the later Middle Ages. In 1935, he agreed to write a volume for the Oxford History of English Literature on 16th century English literature, which became a classic when it was published in 1954. He also received the Gollancz Memorial Prize for Literature for his *Allegory of Love* in 1937. His *Preface to Paradise Lost* remains



influential to this day. He tutored poet John Betjeman, mystic Bede Griffiths, and novelist Roger Lancelyn Green, among others. In 1954, he was invited to become the chair of the newly founded Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Magdalene College, Cambridge, though he kept a home in Oxford until his death, where he visited on weekends and holidays.

In 1930, the Lewis brothers and Jane Moore had bought a house, called “The Kilns,” in Risinghurst, just outside of Oxford. In 1932, Warren retired from the military and moved in with them. At the outbreak of the Second World War, the Lewises took in child evacuees from major cities, which Lewis suggested later gave him a greater appreciation for children and inspired the first novel of the Narnia universe, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Lewis was active in his fiction writing at this time. He finished his *Space Trilogy*, whose main character was partly based off Tolkien. The series deals with the question of sin and human redemption, as well as offering an alternative to the dehumanizing science fiction trends that Lewis and other Inklings saw developing at the time. In 1941, *The Guardian* (a religious paper that ceased publication in 1951) published 31 of Lewis’ “Screwtape Letters” in weekly installments. Each letter was from a senior demon, Screwtape, to his nephew Wormwood, a junior tempter. Later published as *The Screwtape Letters* in 1942, the satirical and humorous epistolary novel was dedicated to Tolkien.

Since he could not enlist at age 40, Lewis spoke on several BBC radio programs on Christian teachings, and provided what many called a public service that lent meaning to a hopeless time. These radio talks were published as *The Case for Christianity*, *Christian Behavior*, and *Beyond Personality*, and were later anthologized in *Mere Christianity*. In 1956, Lewis agreed to a civil marriage with Joy Davidman, an American writer. Davidman was born into a Jewish but atheist family and was quickly seen to be a child prodigy, and developed from an early age a love of fantasy novels. She met her first husband in the American Communist party, but divorced him after an unhappy and abusive marriage. She and Lewis had been



corresponding for a time, and Lewis originally saw her as an intellectual equal and a friend. He agreed to marry her so that she could stay in the United Kingdom. When she saw the doctor for a painful hip, she was diagnosed with bone cancer, and the two grew closer. Eventually the relationship developed to the point that they sought a Christian marriage in 1957, which was performed at Joy's bedside. When the cancer went into remission, the couple enjoyed several years together, continuing to live as a family with Warren Lewis. When her cancer returned, however, she died in 1960. Lewis anonymously published his journals at the time in a book called *A Grief Observed*, where he admitted to a grief so great that it saw him doubting God, but felt blessed to have experienced true love.

C.S. Lewis is seen as one of the founding fathers of the genre of fantasy. He continues to be considered one of Britain's most important writers, and has been the subject of several biographies. Lewis can be seen as a foundational influence in all modern fantasy literature, from *Harry Potter* to *Game of Thrones*. Philip Pullman, author of *His Dark Materials*, is seen as almost an anti-Lewis due to his stark atheism. Critique of Lewis ranges from sexism (focusing on the role of Susan in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*), racism (the Arab-inflected world of *The Horse and His Boy*), and hidden religious propaganda. While readers of Lewis often are surprised by the Christian underpinnings to much of his work, his *Narnia* series is one of the most beloved of all children's literature. Three of the books have been turned into Hollywood films, including *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Prince Caspian*, and *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. His marriage to Joy Davidman became the model for the BBC film, stage play, and theatrical film *Shadowlands*. In June 1961, Lewis fell ill with nephritis and took the autumn term off at Cambridge. By 1962, he felt well enough to continue teaching. When he fell ill again in 1963 and suffered a heart attack, he resigned his post at Cambridge. He was diagnosed with end-stage renal failure and died in November of 1963. He is buried in Headington, Oxford, alongside his brother Warren.



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ISSN (E): 2832-9791 | Volume 19, | December, 2023 page 106
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