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Abstract

An appreciation of Lewis's work as an author of scholarly, fantastic, theological, and philosophical works.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Appreciation

C.S. LEWIS: AN APPRAISAL

by Corbin S. Carnell

On the day President Kennedy was shot, death took another important man from us, C.S. Lewis -- professor, novelist, essayist, theologian, literary critic, and patron saint of many teachers of English. He stood for some things we all value, rare things which threaten too readily to disappear. When he accepted the chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge in 1954, he described himself as one of the last dinosaurs. He was referring to his considerable training of classical learning, that majestic tradition whose second death we have lived to see. For being that sort of scholar alone, we would have valued him. Kenneth Tynan, who studied under him at Oxford, once said that Lewis had more knowledge at his finger tips than anyone he had even known and probably more than anyone else who has appeared on the cover of Time. And it was precisely the ability of someone so knowledgeable to communicate with the public which got him on Time and which I especially value in Lewis. There have been many encyclopedic dons and stiletto sharp specialists, but few who could make learning attractive to so many, who could write and speak with charm and wit, who could range over the fenced enclosures of modern departmentalized knowledge with such insight.

Lewis has had at least four separate groups of readers: the scholarly audience who regard his Allegory of Love, Preface to Paradise Lost, and his book on 16th century English literature as basic literary studies; the reader of his "popular" theological and philosophical works, which have been well received by a variety of critics, among them, Christopher Morley, W.H. Auden, Charles Hartshorne, and Etienne Gilson. Third, the lovers of "fantastic" fiction for whom Lewis' interplanetary trilogy and his Till We Have Faces are special things of their kind. (I notice that Out of The Silent Planet appears on more and more reading lists.) And fourth, he has had an ever-increasing audience as a writer of children's books. The Last Battle of his Narnia series won him the Carnegie Medal for the best children's book in 1956, and Roger Lancelyn Green, an authority on juvenile fiction, places Lewis among the half dozen best writers for children in this century.

Perhaps his wide interests and prolific talent have worked against him, for those who equate small output with merit have been baffled or made envious by him. One does wonder how he found time for long discussions over beer at the Eagle and Child in Oxford or how he was able to answer his voluminous correspondence. But probably those interdisciplinary pub discussions and those letters from readers all over the world helped his capacity to communicate. There are several lines in his thought which I would like to explore briefly here because they show his uniqueness for our time.

First, Lewis' work typifies so well a respect for "right reason" in Milton's sense. It was, in fact, this respect for reason which originally led Lewis on his spiritual quest. And when one turns from the nightmare neuroses of so much recent fiction to one of Lewis' novels, he encounters a wonderful sanity which does not, however, domesticate life or falsify it; indeed Lewis has written most convincingly of the demonic and the supra-rational. But there is an over-arching order and sense of ultimate meaning which links Lewis to the mainstream of Western literature and makes him a contrast to the alienated, dissonant voices of this age of anxiety.

Second, Lewis believed that literature should delight and he was weary of the grim, disillusioned tomes of contemporary art. He knew that there is always a case to be made for the Philistine and in his defense of enjoyment as an essential part

of esthetic experience, he makes a good case against those who would make fiction only agonized sensibility and stylistic tour de force. This does not subtract from the effectiveness of Lewis' own writing. I know of nothing in modern fiction more powerful than passages in That Hideous Strength and Till We Have Faces; but it is a power born of meaning and not primarily of psychological effect. Lewis wrote dozens of poems for Punch, most of them under the pseudonym, "N.W." His science fiction works are "thrillers" and his essays can be read and enjoyed by almost any half-educated man. (More than a million copies of his books have been published in paperbacks alone.) And for this Lewis would be glad, for he disliked the critical snobbery that preys upon us today, which seems to say that if writing is not complicated and ambiguously cerebral, if it does not require a literary high-priest to pronounce upon it, then it cannot be literature.

There is another form of snobbery Lewis fought, chronological snobbery, which sees our age as a kind of platform raised above all other ages, where things are seen more clearly and objectively than before. He strongly believed that we see some things less clearly than did earlier periods, that every age has its blind spots and that only by knowing the past well, can we assess our own time. Purely as a corrective, he said we should read two old books for every new one. His roots were in the classics, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, and if this at times put him out of touch with Existential theologians and the Theater of the Absurd, this was probably our gain. For he helped to give us some perspective in which to view contemporary developments. He not only revived the Middle Ages for countless Oxford and Cambridge students, as the unofficial teacher of many of us, he helped us to understand the limitations of our own Zeitgeist.

As a fourth contribution, I would say that Lewis made the popular theological essay an art form. Nothing since Gulliver's Travels is as good as his Screwtape Letters in their irony, their Swiftian wit and thrust. The Great Divorce, a combination of narrative and essay, is delightful and yet almost unbearable in the depth of its psychological insight. Stylistically, Mere Christianity is a disappointment, for it is really a collection of radio talks, which use too many monosyllables and abrupt sentences and which engage inevitably in oversimplification. (It is no mean feat, however, for a man of Lewis' learning to find such simple words to express his thought.) But in The Four Loves the brilliant style is back again and it is to be found in The Problem Pain, my favorite among his non-fiction works. The latter reflects Lewis' approach at its best -- careful reasoning, based on a deep philosophical and theological tradition, marked by memorable, concrete illustration, heightened at times by metaphors that are genuinely beautiful. Perhaps Lewis' greatest gift lay in his ability to say again what Augustine, Boethius, Kant, and Hume have said, and to say it so well. He excelled at gracefully getting to the heart of the matter, skimming the top of an argument without being superficial and exposing a fallacy in a few words.

Such a variety of influence helped to shape his outlook that it is impossible to pigeon-hole him. Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and the fathers, G.K. Chesterton, and George MacDonald were all highly significant in his development. His friend Charles Williams was also important in that he helped Lewis to escape the rationalistic straight-jacket to which his early skepticism had accustomed him and which shows in some of his post-conversion work. In Williams there was room for paradoxes, ironies, and tensions which the early Lewis had perhaps barely glimpsed. Reflections on the Psalms is a more temperate and charitable book than the early Pilgrim's Regress, and Till We Have Faces has a quality of mystery, a subtlety and richness not to be found in the earlier novels, haunting as they are.

Lewis' gift for savoring what he read, which helps us to savor books in new ways, was probably the secret of his excellence in the last contribution I want

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his literary criticism, There is a good deal of informal criticism of literature in things like his Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life and in The Pilgrim's Regress. And he wrote some dozen works which are clearly literary criticism, placing him among the several most important British critics of recent decades. If at times he was dogmatic, it was a positiveness bred by a sure knowledge of the text and the times. If he was preoccupied with philosophical context, I say all the better; the critic ought to be. Perhaps most interesting among his literary ideas is his concept of sehnsucht (nostalgic longing) or Joy as he call it in his autobiography. It involves a mystical sense of disorientation and though he gives no sustained analysis of it, it is significant that one who values reason so highly should pay attention to such an evanescent experience.

At the age of 64, Lewis retired from Cambridge only a few weeks before his death. Many of us hoped his retirement would allow for more writing. His death is a great loss, but he leaves us a rich legacy of the written word, the work of a man whose uniqueness will probably now be even better appreciated.



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