

Reading Literature through the Eyes of C. S. Lewis

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Abstract

This thesis examines the reasons why Christians should read literature, how they should read, and what they should read through the perspective, literary vision, and imaginative genius of C. S. Lewis. Reading a variety of literature, particularly classic literature, not only does not contradict a biblical Christian worldview but also has the potential to enhance the Christian faith.

This thesis explores the unique approach of C. S. Lewis, one of the literary giants of the twentieth century. Through his perspective, this paper will examine the value of literature, the proper way to determine what constitutes a “good book,” and how such books ought to be read.

How to Read Literature through the Eyes of C. S. Lewis

A central concern for Christians regarding literature is what value, if any, literature holds for the reader. Although this is not a new consideration, it is one C. S. Lewis referred to as a “living question” for its continued importance for discussion. Literature is often accused of being useless, merely entertainment, irrelevant to life, or immoral (Ryken, *Windows to the World* 18). Does a biblical Christian worldview allow Christians to enjoy literature, and if so, how should Christians decide what books they should read? In answering these difficult questions, one author in particular should be respected and consulted for answers: C. S. Lewis. This prominent Oxford and Cambridge lecturer and imaginative writer provides a thorough response for how Christians should engage the humanities and culture, particularly in the area of literary art.

Background on the Life of C. S. Lewis

The boy who would become one of the most influential British writers ever was born in Belfast, Ireland, on November 29, 1898. Clive Staples Lewis, referred to as “Jack” by most of his friends, grew up in a Christian home with his parents Albert and Flora and older brother Warren. At the age of six, his family moved to a home he called “Little Tea” in Northern Ireland. His parents were avid readers, and encouraged young Lewis to make ample use of the family library. His father “bought all the hundreds of books which lined the study and the drawing-room and the cloakroom, and were stacked two deep in the landing bookcase, and filled the corridors and the bedrooms. Jack turned the pages of most of them in turn” (Carpenter 4). Thus, as a young boy, Lewis was already reading the classics.

When his mother died from cancer in 1908, Lewis “grew angry with God, [concluding] that God was either cruel or a vague abstraction” (Dorsett 4). By the year 1912, Lewis had become an atheist under the influence of a teacher at Campbell College, the preparatory school he attended at the time. Then, in 1914, Lewis spent three years under the tutelage of a brilliant headmaster and family friend named Kirkpatrick, whom he and his brother referred to as “The Great Knock.” Kirkpatrick pushed Lewis not only “to read great literature in its original languages” but also “to express himself logically and clearly” (Dorsett 5). Under Kirkpatrick’s instruction, Lewis “learned Greek, Latin, French, and Italian . . . He soon was reading the great classics of literature of those countries in their original languages, and he began to realize that he was gifted with a peculiar, rare, and valuable talent, one which he worked hard to develop fully: Jack never forgot anything he read” (Gresham 26). In 1916 Lewis came across the book that had the greatest impact upon his life: George MacDonald’s *Phantastes*. Lewis described his encounter with it in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, stating that it had “baptized” his imagination (181). *Phantastes* “left the deepest and most enduring impression both on his literary and his spiritual life” (Green and Hooper 27). Lewis claimed in the preface to his biography on MacDonald that he never wrote a book in which he did not quote from MacDonald (*George MacDonald: An Anthology*, xxxvii).

By the end of 1916, Lewis earned a scholarship to University College, Oxford (Carpenter 8), and when he was nineteen, attended Oxford University. He would later join the English faculty from 1925 to 1954 and befriend the famous writer J. R. R. Tolkien, who contributed to Lewis’s conversion from atheism to Christianity. His only departure from Oxford was during his brief World War I service in the British Army

from 1917 to 1919. Lewis published his first work, *Dymer*, in the year 1926. When his father died in 1929 Lewis became a theist, but not a Christian. Then, in 1931, he made a confession of faith and received salvation. In 1941 Lewis began a series of twenty radio broadcasts from the British Broadcasting Corporation radio. He was later voted first professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at the University of Cambridge in 1955 at Magdalene College. At the age of 59, Lewis married Joy Davidman, who died only four years later and who became the inspiration for his 1961 work, *A Grief Observed*. Lewis died on November 22, 1963 on the same day as Aldous Huxley and John F. Kennedy. Between the year 1933 and his death, Lewis published almost forty works and left behind a legacy that would forever affect Christian thought.

Lewis contributed to the development of Christian media in the areas of literature, radio, magazines, and drama. He contributed to literary media by producing nearly forty books and countless letters for publication. Lewis quickly became one of the best-selling authors of his time. He enriched a variety of genres, including science fiction, fantasy, Christian apologetics, poetry, philosophy, literary history and criticism, and autobiography. In the September 8, 1947 issue of *Time Magazine*, Lewis appeared on the cover, “focusing national attention on a British Christian who was ... already one of the most popular Christian authors in America and Great Britain” (Dorsett 3). His 1941 broadcasts as a “by-product of the war [made him] become a famous radio personality” (Jacobs 220). These broadcasts during wartime, which reinforced the central truths of Christianity, brought him widespread popularity. They also later became the basis for a number of his literary works, including *Mere Christianity*. In drama, playwrights reproduced his work, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in the form of skits or plays. Since his

death, he has been the influence and inspiration for innumerable books, including a vast number of biographies as well as a myriad of books in which his work and ideas are quoted.

C. S. Lewis contributes a unique Christian worldview to his audience of skeptics, Christians, and those who are simply curious about the faith. His generic variety as well as his distinctive perspective appeals to a wide range of audiences. Because he converted from atheism to Christianity, he can relate to the skeptics who choose to read his works. His rigorous academic training from a young age, as well as his work among other Oxford University scholars, gives him the opportunity to share Christian ideas with an intellectual audience. His various writings in apologetics and philosophy have caused even the profoundest skeptics to consider God's existence. Additionally, many contemporary writers and theologians pull from Lewis to build their own Christian worldview. Lewis accomplished more in his life than seems possible. Even after his death, Lewis is still a best-selling author, as his books continue to sell over one million copies each year.

Lewis's spiritual journey represents a conversion not only from atheism to salvation but also a growing awareness on his own part that imagination cannot be divorced from reason in our apprehension of reality. Unlike Romantic writers who used the imagination as an escape from reality, Lewis creatively uses it to reflect what is most real. In his own fiction, he creates worlds that captivate the imagination yet point the reader to a greater understanding of eternal truths in the real world.

Why Read Literature with Lewis

Lewis had the extraordinary privilege of teaching at the two most prestigious universities in the world for the humanities: Oxford and Cambridge. He first taught at Magdalen College, Oxford, from 1925 to 1954. He then earned the position of Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English at Magdalene College, Cambridge. In *Reading the Classics with C. S. Lewis*, Leland Ryken accordingly spells out some of the advantages of studying “with” such a learned scholar. First, Ryken notes that with Lewis’s literary criticism, readers are “in the presence of someone who simply assumed that the world of literature is a self-rewarding world of overwhelming importance” (24). Furthermore, he “had a knack for delineating the features of an author’s world” (24), and a way of attracting readers both to “individual works of authors” as well as immersing them into the “entire world of imaginative literature” (26). The key, according to Ryken, is Lewis’s vast array of reading experience: he states, “I know of no twentieth-century critic who refers to so many works and writers” (26). On a more personal level, Ryken observes, “To read literature with C. S. Lewis is to get to know Lewis himself, and this is part of the appeal of his criticism. Criticism as an impersonal scholarly inquiry did not occur as an option for Lewis. His own tastes and personality come through at nearly every turn” (28). Mark Noll considers the influence and importance of Lewis:

Lewis’s writing has constituted the single most important body of Christian thinking for American evangelicals in the twentieth century. His defense of supernatural Christianity, his ability to exploit learned culture, his example as a writer of fiction, his demonstration that the truths of the faith could be expressed in lively prose—all contributed an unusual

measure of intellectual stimulation to evangelicals on this side of the water. (218)

As one of the greatest literary scholars and critics in the twentieth century, Lewis's views on literature are vital for any Christian seeking answers to the questions of why one should read literature, what constitutes a good book, and how one should approach reading.

Truth and Worldview

The most tragic reality students face in the secular university today is the absence of belief in absolute truth. Literature is typically not studied from the perspective of what the author is trying to communicate; instead, students are encouraged to decipher their own meaning and apply it to the text. In a society entrenched in postmodern ideologies, the understanding of what principles govern the reading of good literature is often lost. With postmodernity came the false presupposition that there are no objective standards to which literature must adhere. The result is "art for art's sake," and the assumption that the reader, not the author, determines the meaning of the text. As postmodernists disregard absolutes, words, which form the foundation of literature, lose their essential meaning. Thus, words such as "Truth," "Love," "Wisdom," "Beauty," and "Justice" become mere abstractions which people subjectively understand. The loss of a stable language is detrimental to a student's entire education. When words lose their function of communicating universal truth and meaning, students lose the ability to come to a meaningful understanding of truth and reality.

Lewis, noticing the gravitation toward relativism in the contemporary worldview of his time, set forth concrete principles for interpreting literature. He believed in the

importance of understanding the worldview of an author, as well as how readers' worldviews affect the way that they interpret literature. Yet Lewis argues that readers should not allow their own worldview to frustrate or impede a story; instead, they must "receive" rather than "use" a story (*Experiment in Criticism* 93). Thus, Lewis strikes a balance between two polarized forms of literary criticism. On one end of the spectrum, readers simplify a literary text to force it into a uniform category to argue that it advocates a particular worldview or universal truth. The other extreme encompasses those who deny the existence of absolutes and thus force the text to fit whichever meaning subjectively wish to contend. Lewis's approach, as a middle ground, encourages readers to interact with a text and to enjoy it for what it is worth; yet not to impose their personal agendas on the text to determine its meaning.

Fiction is a unique vehicle for explaining and illuminating the reality of human life. Although a fictional story does not necessarily tell a true story, it is an instrument through which the reader can discover truth. Humans are, as beings created in the image of God, creators in their own right. Thus, a person who is crafting literature is creating a world. By entering the world of fiction, according to Lewis, the reader can later re-enter the real world with a refreshed perspective on reality. Emphasis on supernatural reality is one of the most common themes in Lewis's work, particularly in his fiction. In his essay, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," Lewis explains that he uses the genre of fantasy as a vehicle to convey his message because other genres attempting to express a moral or principle may inadvertently cause the reader to feel obligation. According to Lewis, "an obligation to feel can freeze things" (37). In other words, when entering the imaginary world, the reader typically does not feel that he is being told what to do.

Instead, while watching the story unfold, the reader can experience the abstract or concrete ideas evoked by the author in a natural, rather than forced, environment. Such an environment is most effective, for it allows the reader to decide for himself how to act upon the underlying message.

Lewis's Connection of Christianity, Literature, and Culture

Throughout Lewis's academic career, the question of what value literature held, whether Christian or non-Christian, seemed to interest him. He wrote on the topic early in his academic career through essays such as "Christianity and Literature" (written around 1939) and "Christianity and Culture" (1940). Lewis's seminal work on the question, *An Experiment in Criticism*, was published in 1961. Another significant work contributing to Lewis's literary theory, a collection of essays entitled *Of Other Worlds*, was published posthumously in 1966. Therefore, to more fully appreciate Lewis's opinion on the validity of literature, it is necessary to begin with an examination of his two primary essays on the issue in order to establish the foundation of the theory on which he built throughout his academic career as teacher and critic.

In the first essay, "Christianity and Literature," Lewis develops his view about what constitutes good literature. One of his central arguments regarding the creation of literature is that no literary art is produced in a vacuum; rather, it is contingent upon a prior tradition that intended to reflect eternal truths. He discusses the "theory of genius"—the trend of contemporary literary criticism to place value on being creative, original, and spontaneous ("Christianity and Literature" 5). In response to such theory, Lewis argues:

In the New Testament the art of life itself is an art of imagination: can we, believing this, believe that literature, which must derive from real life, is an aim at being 'creative', 'original', and 'spontaneous'[?] 'Originality' in the New Testament is quite plainly that prerogative of God alone ... The duty and happiness of every other being is placed in being derivative, in reflecting like a mirror. ("Christianity and Literature" 6)

In this passage, Lewis attacks both the contemporary criticism of his time as well as the mindset of authors who were striving for novelty and extemporaneity in their writings. He maintains that the root of all critical theory should be the "maxim that an author should never conceive himself as bringing into existence beauty or wisdom which did not exist before, but simply and solely as trying to embody in terms of his own art some reflection of eternal Beauty and Wisdom" ("Christianity and Literature" 7). Furthermore, Lewis contends that a Christian literary theory and criticism should not only oppose the theory of genius but also, the "idea that literature is self-expression" ("Christianity and Literature" 7). Critic Jerry L. Daniel observes Lewis's integrity in avoiding such self-expression in Lewis's own imaginative writing: "He wrote to communicate whatever vision was filling his imagination at the moment, not to reveal his inner self" ("A Basis for Literary Criticism" 23). Accordingly, good Christian literature and literary theory are established upon the assumption that all good art reflects the eternal wisdom and beauty of God, without attempting to take credit for bringing such similar truths into existence.

In his second essay, "Christianity and Culture," Lewis explores the question of what value culture has for the Christian, or even for the non-Christian, by focusing particularly upon literature as a product of culture. He captures the significance of the

question as he sets it forth early in the essay: “The glory of God, and, as our only means to glorifying Him, the salvation of human souls, is the real business of life. What, then, is the value of culture? It is, of course, no new question; but as a living question it was new to me” (“Christianity and Culture” 14). This essay analyzes a wide variety of literary critics, both Christian and non-Christian, who stake claim on this living question. Lewis investigates the philosophies or literary criticisms of Matthew Arnold, Croce, I. A. Richards, St. Jerome, John Keats, Thomas a Kempis, Pope Gregory, John Milton, John Henry Newman, Jeremy Bentham, and Sir Philip Sidney, among others. Noting some of their important contributions, he also often points out significant shortcomings or contradictions in their work. By confronting and thoroughly evaluating the theories of numerous critics and philosophers, Lewis enhances his credibility as a critic as he advances his own literary philosophy. In addition to these great thinkers, he looks to Scripture to build a constructive case for considering the relevance of culture and literature.

As he constructs a case for culture, which encompasses literature, Lewis examines how it has influenced his own life and how it may influence others. He starts by noting that insofar as there is a demand for teaching culture, and since it is good for a man to have a job, teaching literature is good. He then states, “But is culture even harmless? It certainly can be harmful and often is” (“Christianity and Culture” 20). It is with this acknowledgement that he then asks how culture has influenced himself personally, explaining that “it has given [him] quite an enormous amount of pleasure” (“Christianity and Culture” 21). After confessing his own experience of taking pleasure from cultural

artifacts, he makes an important analysis of whether pleasure should be considered a good:

I have no doubt at all that pleasure is in itself a good and pain in itself an evil; if not, then the whole Christian tradition about heaven and hell and the passion of our Lord seems to have no meaning. Pleasure, then, is good; a 'sinful' pleasure means a good offered, and accepted, under conditions which involve a breach of the moral law. The pleasures of culture are not intrinsically bound up with such conditions—though of course they can very easily be so enjoyed as to involve them. Often, as Newman saw, they are an excellent diversion from guilty pleasures. ("Christianity and Culture" 21)

In this analysis, Lewis shows that pleasure is a "good" insofar as it does not violate God's law. In fact, he shows, through the influence of Newman, that the pleasure found in literature can even be useful as a diversion from sinful pleasure. He concludes, "We may, therefore, enjoy [the pleasures of literature] ourselves, and lawfully, even charitably, teach others to enjoy them" ("Christianity and Culture" 21).

Lewis readily recognized that not all values in literature were Christian, but that they often encouraged a sub- or anti-Christian morality. He acknowledges, "The sub-Christian or anti-Christian values implicit in most literature [do] actually infect many readers" ("Christianity and Culture" 16). For example, Lewis lists some of the most common sub-Christian values in literature: honor, sexual love, material prosperity, pantheistic contemplation of nature, yearning for the past, and liberation of impulses ("Christianity and Culture" 21-2). Although he states that he cannot defend for the values

of sexual love or the liberation of the impulses, he can make a case for the other four values, which “are all two-edged” in that they “may symbolize what [he] think[s] of them all by the aphorism ‘Any road out of Jerusalem must also be a road into Jerusalem’” (“Christianity and Culture” 22). Thus, Lewis recognizes that some of these values may lead the reader away from God; at the same time, however, he also recognizes that the opposite is also possible, and even likely: that such values may lead the reader to a recognition of God and salvation.

To explain further this idea of sub-Christian values and the way they might lead a person to eventual salvation, Lewis offers an example of how the sub-Christian value of pantheistic contemplation of nature can be “two-edged.” Lewis explains, “There is an easy transition from Theism to Pantheism; but there is also a blessed transition in the other direction. For some souls I believe, for my own I remember, Wordsworthian contemplation can be the first and lowest form of recognition that there is something outside ourselves which demands reverence” (“Christianity and Culture” 22). Though it may ostensibly sound like a risk, considering he concedes that this “road to Jerusalem” goes both ways, the point Lewis makes has special significance for him personally. In fact, it was through the literature of George MacDonald, Christian fantasy writer, and Lewis’s love of myth, that Lewis was persuaded to embrace theism as a viable alternative to atheism (Veith 139). For him, literature was a step toward theism, and theism a step toward Christianity.

Lewis thus finds culture, and literature as one of its primary products, beneficial for both the Christian and the non-Christian reader. He states, “Culture, though not in itself meritorious, [is] innocent and pleasant, might be a vocation for some, [is] helpful in

bringing certain souls to Christ, and [can] be pursued to the glory of God” (“Christianity and Culture” 28). Furthermore, Lewis states, “I agree with Brother Every that our leisure, even our play, is a matter of serious concern. There is no neutral ground in the universe: every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counter-claimed by Satan” (“Christianity and Culture” 33). Therefore, Lewis both defends the merit of literature and recognizes the importance responsibility of the reader to protecting his mind and heart when reading.

Moreover, Lewis clarifies the relative importance the reader must place upon secular literature. He argues, “My whole contention is that in literature, in addition to the spiritual good and evil which it carries, there is also a good and evil of the second class, a properly cultural or literary good and evil, which must not be allowed to masquerade as good and evil of the first class” (33). To demonstrate, Lewis uses the following example: “I enjoyed my breakfast this morning, and I think that was a good thing and do not think it was condemned by God. But I do not think myself a good man for enjoying it. The distinction does not seem to me a very fine one” (36). In other words, literature itself, when it contains sub-Christian values, should not be looked to as a primary, or spiritual, good; rather, it should be considered as a secondary good, given as high a value as possible below a spiritual value.

Why Christians Should Read Non-Christian Literature

In reading literary works, readers are stretching their imagination to experience God’s creation in a novel manner. Literature allows readers to better empathize with others, as it often encourages selflessness and love. Literature also teaches mankind about human life and reality in a way that other disciplines cannot. In stories, abstract ideas are

fleshed out in concrete, real terms in a way that provides meaningful understanding for the reader. Most importantly, literature can assist readers in comprehending a variety of worldviews and in becoming more capable witnesses for Christ. Lewis advocated on the behalf of all such arguments for literature's value.

Ryken endorses Lewis's viewpoint when he argues in favor of confronting worldviews embedded in literature. He argues that the encounter with worldviews both "gives us a historical perspective on our own civilization and spares us the naïveté of beginning anew with each generation" (*Windows to the World*, 142). Furthermore, according to Ryken, an understanding of the worldviews

helps us understand people who live by them today . . . [and] gives us a knowledge of the alternatives from which to choose our own world view.

C.S. Lewis has written that "to judge between one *ethos* and another, it is necessary to have got inside both, and if literary history does not help us to do so it is a great waste of labor." (*Windows to the World* 142-3)

Therefore, through encountering worldviews in literature, the reader gains not only a deeper understanding of various historical perspectives on life but also an authentic understanding of his or her own worldview.

Lewis notes the significance of examining a worldview from the "inside," which is made possible through reading stories and observing how various worldviews are actually applied to the lives of those characters who adhere to them. Veith expands on this idea:

One of the greatest benefits of literature, as C. S. Lewis points out, is that it provides a way for us to enter into other people's minds for a while, to

allow us to understand what it feels like to live in a certain time or to hold to a certain worldview. Reading works by rationalists or naturalists or Marxists or existentialists can help us to understand these perspectives better from the inside and to identify the human needs they address (and fail to address). Such understanding is necessary whether we are attempting to refute these limiting worldviews or simply to communicate more effectively to the modern mind. (73)

Thus, Lewis reveals an important reason for why Christians should read literature: to step inside others' worldviews to gain understanding and connection them.

What Constitutes Good Literature

One of the standards Lewis gives to determine what constitutes good literature is whether a book has stood the test of time. He offers advice in his essay "On the Reading of Old Books." He recommends that, for every new book one reads, one should read an old book: "It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between" (201-2). He continually emphasizes the superiority of the classics and great books. Additionally, he advises the average reader that, if he needs to choose between a new or old book, he should choose the old because "he is an amateur and therefore much less protected than the expert against the dangers of an exclusively temporary diet" (Lewis, "On the Reading of Old Books" 201). The danger in new books, he explains, is that the book is still "on trial [and must still] be tested against the great body of Christian thought down the ages, and all its hidden implications (often unsuspected by the author himself) have to be brought to light" (Lewis, "On the Reading of Old Books" 201). Thus, the central reason Lewis offers for

reading old as opposed to modern books is that older ones have stood the test of time, whereas modern ones have not had adequate time to be judged and deemed worthy to be read.

Lewis offers further evidence for the value of old books: those that have stood the test of time are valuable because they reveal the mistakes of the era in which they were written. By learning from these past mistakes, readers are better equipped to avoid similar mistakes in their own age. He explains that, since each age contains a particular dominant view of life, a book from that era is particularly good at both “seeing certain truths and . . . liable to [make] certain mistakes (“On the Reading of Old Books” 202). Everyone needs “books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of [their] own period. And that means the old books” (“On the Reading of Old Books” 202). Old books often contain ideas that run counter to contemporary worldviews or issues and are beneficial for the way that they often reveal the possible flaws behind current ideas. Often writers, though seemingly “as completely opposed as two sides could be were all the time secretly united—united *with* each other and *against* earlier and later ages—by a great mass of common assumptions (“On the Reading of Old Books” 202). Therefore, reading old books is preferable to new ones because not only can they help readers identify mistakes of past ages but those same books will also enable them to better understand the problems of their own age.

In another essay, “On Stories,” Lewis further addresses what constitutes good literature, focusing more particularly on literature as an art form. He argues that the function of art is “to present what the narrow and desperately practical perspectives of real life exclude” (“On Stories” 10). One aspect of stories that Lewis was most fond of

was that, “to construct plausible and moving ‘other worlds,’ [writers and readers] must draw on the only real ‘other world’ [they] know, that of the spirit” (12). He explains further, “Good stories often introduce the marvelous or supernatural, and nothing about Story has been so often misunderstood as this” (13). This aspect of literature reveals Lewis’s earlier argument that literature can be a road both to and from heaven. Although he considers one negative possibility of escapism, the encouragement of “happiness under incompatible conditions” (14), Lewis also takes into account the potential benefit of the escape into literature: “[The] whole story, paradoxically enough, strengthens our relish for real life. This excursion into the preposterous sends us back with renewed pleasure to the actual” (15).

Moreover, Lewis’s essay “On Three Ways of Writing for Children” explores standards for determining the quality of children’s literature. He states, “I am almost inclined to set it up as a canon that a children’s story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children’s story” (“On Three Ways of Writing for Children” 24). Lewis touches again on the potential problem of escapism by differentiating between two types of longing: “The one is an *askesis*, a spiritual exercise, and the other is a disease” (30). His argument here is that, if a child “escapes” into literature, it is healthy and even beneficial, if the longing produced by entering into a fictional world is a spiritual longing. However, if the reader wishes to locate himself in an alternate world merely to escape the real one, then it can become destructive.

Additionally, Lewis argues that literature should not be overtly didactic. Its primary purpose is to entertain, and a “moral” should not be incorporated at the expense of entertainment. Lewis argues that, rather than asking what moral theme or principle

contemporary children need to hear, a writer ought to ask himself what moral he himself needs to learn. He advocates, “The only moral that is of any value is that which arises inevitably from the whole cast of the author’s mind;” for, “what does not concern us deeply will not deeply interest our readers, whatever their age” (“On Three Ways of Writing to Children” 33). Therefore, the moral must not be something superficially placed in front of the child, but something portrayed in a real sense and driven by the true concerns of the writer.

In his seminal work on literary theory, *An Experiment in Criticism*, Lewis describes what, in his opinion, constitutes good literature. Lewis argues that literature must be enjoyable: “Every book should be entertaining. A good book will be more; it must not be less. Entertainment, in this sense, is like a qualifying examination. If a fiction can’t provide even that, we may be excused from inquiry into its higher qualities” (*An Experiment in Criticism* 91-92). Thus, “Ideally, we should like to define a good book as one which ‘permits, invites, or compels’ good reading” (113). Lewis’s definition of a good book consists primarily in the book’s ability to entertain the reader.

Moreover, Lewis argues that a reader can only pass fair judgment on a book by first reading it with an open mind and positive attitude. He states, “We can find a book bad only by reading it as if it might, after all, be very good. We must empty our minds and lay ourselves open. There is no work in which holes can’t be picked; no work that can succeed without a preliminary act of good will on the part of the reader” (*An Experiment in Criticism* 116). Therefore, to determine whether a book constitutes good literature, readers must often first set aside their presuppositions and grant the book the benefit of the doubt.

Lewis's View on Fantasy Literature

In his study on C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, as well as Lewis's views of fantasy literature, Gregory Bassham argues that fantasy "broadens our perspective and enlarges our sense of what is possible" (246), and can "re-enchant the ordinary world" (247), "activate our moral imaginations" (248), and "baptize our imaginations" (254). Regarding the latter benefit of fantasy literature, Bassham points out two ways in which Lewis believed this possible: "First, they can stir and trouble us with a longing for we know not what, 'a dim sense of something' beyond our reach that, 'far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth'" (254). Second, "Lewis believed that fantasy literature can baptize our imaginations by making us more likely to accept Christian truth and respond to it fittingly" (Bassham 254). This argument reflects his earlier illustration of the potential benefit for "two-edged" values, which included longing. Fantasy literature can, through the nature of the genre, appeal to the imagination in a way that creates spiritual longing for the reader.

In forming his view on fantasy literature, Lewis drew heavily from Tolkien's essay, "On Fairy Stories." In Lewis's essay "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," he states, "I hope everyone has read Tolkien's essay on Fairy Tales, which is perhaps the most important contribution to the subject that anyone has yet made" (26). One point Lewis makes, crediting Tolkien, is that "in most places and times, the fairy tale has not been specially made for, nor exclusively enjoyed by, children" (26). Further, "The whole association of fairy tale and fantasy with childhood is local and accidental . . . It has gravitated to the nursery when it became unfashionable in literary circles, just as unfashionable furniture gravitated to the nursery in Victorian houses" ("On Three Ways

of Writing for Children” 26). Thus, Lewis points out that fantasy literature ought not to be associated merely with children, for it can also impact adult audiences.

One of the arguments most often used against fantasy literature is that it is escapist; in other words, it allows one to escape from reality by entering a world in which one can forget about real problems and instead journey into an unreal world. Thus, “many realist critics charge that fans of fantasy literature are (often) escapists in this pejorative sense” (Bassham 260). However, Lewis responds that the truth of such a claim depends on “whether fantasy fans are escaping ‘into the wrong things,’” and “on one’s metaphysical and theological worldview” (Bassham 260). In her analysis of Lewis’s argument on escapism, critic Margaret L. Carter observes Lewis’s reasoning: “Though literature is still mimetic—words, since they carry meaning, inevitably direct our attention to things beyond themselves” (“Sub-Creation and Lewis’s Theory of Literature” 134). Understanding that fantasy literature can capture certain aspects of reality and relate it to the reader in a manner that is both meaningful and comprehensible, Lewis believes that a healthy form of escape is quite beneficial to the reader.

Lewis offers a counter-argument against the claim that fantasy literature is escapist by first acknowledging that fantasy literature does indeed offer escape. However, he proposes the ways in which fantasy may offer a beneficial form of escape: “[It] can help to re-enchant the ordinary world, evoke stabs of ‘joy’ that point us heavenward, restore ‘potency’ to spiritual truths and, as Tolkien suggests, fulfill deep-seated desires to participate in the properly human function of ‘subcreation.’” (Bassham 260). Finally, “for Lewis, there could be no real conflict among imagination, intellect and spirit, any more than among truth, goodness and beauty” (Bassham 260). Thus, by using fantasy, Lewis

appeals not only to the intellect but also to the imagination to direct the focus of his readers toward the spiritual realm.

How to Read and Study Literature

Christians seeking to read literature from a biblical Christian worldview can benefit from the valuable insights Lewis offers in *Experiment in Criticism* for how to read and interpret literature. One of Lewis's key arguments for the study of literature is that the reader must commit to receiving, rather than merely using, a book. Lewis states, "When we 'receive' it we exert our senses and imagination and various other powers according to a pattern invented by the artist. When we 'use' it we treat it as assistance for our own activities" (*An Experiment in Criticism* 88). Furthermore, "'Using' is inferior to 'reception' because art, if used rather than received, merely facilitates, brightens, relieves or palliates our life, and does not add to it" (88).

Ryken observes the danger of attempting to use rather than to receive literature:

There is a danger that we must be aware of when we look for world views in literature. It is the danger of reducing literature to a set of abstract ideas, as though this is what literature exists for. In the process, the story or poem itself becomes superfluous. Works of literature *embody* and *incarnate* a world view. In talking about that world view in the terms I have outlined, we inevitably formulate it in conceptual terms. But this conceptual framework should never become a substitute for the work itself. It should only be a light by which to illuminate the story or poem. Literature *imagines forth* a world view. It allows us to experience and feel that world view as experientially as possible. In effect, we look at the

world through the ‘eyes’ of the writer’s world view.” (*Windows to the World* 141-42)

Thus, Lewis’s maxim that “The necessary condition of all good reading is ‘to get ourselves out of the way’” when reading a book is highly beneficial to the reader (*An Experiment in Criticism* 93). This approach of receiving literature allows the text to speak for itself without the reader imposing preconceived ideas upon it.

Such an approach may ostensibly seem contradictory to a Biblical Christian worldview; however, Lewis considers this approach an act of love. Ryken demonstrates this idea in his comment on Lewis’s system of receiving, rather than using, a book:

Lewis thereby shows a respect for the literature he discusses that is akin to Christian’s respect for the Word that they regard as authoritative, whether it comes as Scripture or creed. In a day of ideological criticism in which critics use literature chiefly to advance their own political agenda, Lewis instead *listens* to authors and works. The model he provides in this regard may, indeed, be his greatest legacy as a literary critic. (*Reading the Classics with C. S. Lewis* 30)

Lewis’s approach to literature is thus based on humility and respect for the text. Whereas some critics attempt to use a literary work to fit it into their personal or political agenda, Lewis’s method allows the text to “speak for itself” rather than to be manipulated and warped by the reader.

To understand more fully Lewis’s insight, his essay “Meditation in a Toolshed” may be helpful for consideration. Lewis observes a beam of light entering a dark shed. His epiphany is that, to fully understand the beam of light, the viewer must look both *at*

and *along* the beam. To relate this to literature, Christian must not only read critically with the biblical Christian worldview, or “along,” but also “at” the text for what it is, to fully appreciate and understand it. According to Ryken, Lewis discredited the approach to literature that focuses on considering merely the “idea” of a book: “To reduce a piece of literature to its ideas ... is an outrage to the thing the poet has made for us” (Lewis, qtd. in *Realms of Gold* 8-9).

Moreover, Lewis offers another piece of advice for reading literature: he states that exposure to good literature aids one’s ability in detecting what constitutes good literature. He states, “The best safeguard against bad literature is a full experience of good; just as a real and affectionate acquaintance with honest people gives a better protection against rogues than a habitual distrust of everyone” (*An Experiment in Criticism* 94). Lewis also advises the reader on how to critique a book based on his own reading and the guidance of critics: “He is, in a word, to have the character which MacDonald attributed to God, and Chesterton, following him, to the critic; that of being ‘easy to please, but hard to satisfy’” (120). When Lewis considers those critics who have been most beneficial to him in his study of literature, he states that they are those who helped primarily

by telling [him] what works exist. But still more by putting [the works] in their setting; thus showing [him] what demands they were meant to satisfy, what furniture they presupposed in the minds of their readers. They have headed [him] off from false approaches, taught [him] what to look for, enabled [him] in some degree to put [himself] into the frame of mind of those to whom they were addressed. This had happened because

such historians on the whole have taken Arnold's advice by getting themselves out of the way. They are concerned far more with describing books than with judging them." (*An Experiment in Criticism* 121-122)

Thus, for Lewis, context is crucial to a fair study and judgment of literature. He esteems critics who faithfully put a work in its historical and cultural setting to more fully understand its meaning. By first understanding a book by its context, readers can then apply it to their own lives; both through a more fuller grasp of human life and as a safeguard against blindspots of the contemporary age.

Furthermore, Lewis offers his counsel on properly balancing books with what their critics claim for them. Lewis states, "The truth is not that we need the critics in order to enjoy the authors, but that we need the authors in order to enjoy the critics" (*An Experiment in Criticism* 123). Also, "If we have to choose, it is always better to read Chaucer again than to read a new criticism of him" (Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* 124). In other words, Lewis prefers the original text to the criticism of it; yet, simultaneously, he recognizes the value of criticism insofar as it is placed in its proper position below the text.

Conclusion

Lewis's expansive knowledge of literature and his positions at the two greatest universities for humanities give him credibility for establishing his own literary theory. He not only explores the merits of literature from a critical standpoint in his essays and books, but also incorporates his principles into his own fiction writing. By advocating that readers must receive, rather than use, a literary text, Lewis offers an approach that encourages readers to enjoy literature rather than to impose one's personal agendas on it.

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