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Jack of All Genres: A Brief Analysis of C.S. Lewis's Works

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Southern Scholars Honors Project

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Ever since fifth grade when I discovered *The Bobbsey Twins* (and realized reading could be fun), I have looked forward to my encounters with each new book. Far away places, people I had never met and animals that did crazy things all became part of my literary world. Over the years I kept discovering new authors--George MacDonald, Walter Farley, Mark Twain, L.M. Montgomery, John D. Fitzgerald and of course, C.S. Lewis. All of these reading adventures contributed to my identity, enabling me to experience things that otherwise would not have been possible. And at the time, I had no idea that Lewis (who I greatly admired) read literature in the same way I did.

It was not until many years after I first became a Lewis enthusiast that I read his statement from *An Experiment in Criticism* in which he describes his own response to literature. Lewis writes that "in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do" (141). In these three short sentences, Lewis sums up not only my own attraction to his works, but also that of many others who read and reread books such as *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* or *The Great Divorce*. Although he was writing about his own literary heroes, he was unknowingly writing about himself. Therefore, in order for me to write intelligently about the C.S. Lewis experience, it is necessary for me to briefly re-

live my first memories of this unusual writer.

I first "met" C.S. Lewis during academy. One of my teachers would often make reference to some lion-creature that a C.S. Lewis wrote about in his children's series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I had never heard of Aslan or Narnia or even C.S. Lewis for that matter, but I was a die-hard fan of children's literature (a characteristic I seem not to have outgrown) so I determined to read these books and see for myself if they were any good.

I do not remember exactly how it happened, but instead of reading *The Chronicles of Narnia*, I acquired a copy of Lewis's spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy*. I read the book and was fascinated by this man C.S. Lewis. I had never read a book in which the personality of the author seemed so real. I wanted to know more about him and especially about these fairy tales he had written. By now I was sure they would be just the sort of books I loved to read over and over again. So, between academy classes which seemed so hard at the time but in retrospect seem so simple, I began reading *The Chronicles of Narnia*. As was my usual practice, I began at the "beginning" with *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (despite the advice of my teacher who suggested reading them in chronological order). I instantly loved them--all of them--especially *The Horse and His Boy*. The feelings of being in Narnia, the joy of meeting Aslan, and the right and wrong of it all made me never want to leave.

Now that I have almost completed an English degree, I still find myself asking

questions about the worth of this writer who so affected my life. I wonder if the world sees Lewis as just another popular Christian author like Max Lucado or Chuck Swindoll? Did anything he write have real value which will cause it to be read centuries after his death? Why is Lewis not recognized as a great English writer and thus given his rightful place in the English "canon?"

Although people rarely ask whether C.S. Lewis was a great writer or not, they do study his works as though they contain great value. Scholarly interest in Lewis's works has increased since his death as attested to by the number of books (not to mention dissertations) written about him and/or his works. One such writer, David Downing, the author of *Planets in Peril: A Critical Study of C.S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy* writes that "worldwide sales of his books have exceeded fifty million copies. Nearly all of Lewis's books remain in print, continuing to sell all together two million copies a year" (3). In fact, Lewis's popularity is such that one author felt it his duty to write a biography of Lewis which would dispel all the glorifying myths and reveal Lewis as merely an ordinary man.¹

One of the factors contributing to Lewis's continuing popularity is the three literary styles in which he wrote. Because of this variety, Lewis appeals to more people than if he had written only fiction or apologetics for example. As David Downing writes:

C.S. Lewis had three careers as a writer, all of them remarkable. He was

one of the most distinguished literary critics and scholars of his era, whose works on medieval and Renaissance authors are still considered landmarks in the field. He was also one of the most effective and influential advocates for Christian faith this century. And he produced popular fiction as well, works that continue on best-seller lists a generation after his death. (3)

In order to really understand the wide scope of Lewis's books (and what this says about Lewis's intelligence and skill as a writer) it would be helpful to briefly analyze a few of his best works. As mentioned above, Lewis's books can be separated into three categories (however this separation is not as neat as one would want). Even within each broad category (^{criticism}literary, religious, fiction) there are several types and his autobiographical works really need a category of their own. However, for the purpose of looking at the worth of Lewis as a writer, his autobiographical works can be assumed part of the religious section without any serious harm being done.

As a rough estimate, C.S. Lewis wrote at least eleven books on the subject of Christianity.² Probably the most famous is his work entitled *The Screwtape Letters*. In it, he addresses the subject of temptation by imagining a senior devil giving instructions to a junior devil on how to deal with his first "patient." The appeal of this book is two-fold. Firstly, the plot device of turning everything upside down is very humorous. And secondly, Lewis gives practical insight into what tempts

everyday people. Joe Christopher in his book *C.S. Lewis* writes "*The Screwtape Letters* in its popularity suggests Lewis found the right rhetorical approach to make morality and a religious point of view lively" (81).

Thus, *The Screwtape Letters* served to make C.S. Lewis a household name. Humphrey Carpenter in his book entitled *The Inklings* writes, "*The Screwtape Letters* were finished in a few months, and were passed to a Christian newspaper which serialised them during 1941. Ashley Sampson published them in book form the following spring, and so great was the demand for copies that *Screwtape* had to be reprinted eight times that year alone. An American edition came out in 1943 and was soon a best-seller. Lewis's name had suddenly become known to thousands of readers" (190).

The explosion into popularity generated by a wartime need for God which Lewis's religious works filled (such as *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Problem of Pain*, and his broadcast talks later published as *Mere Christianity*) created a larger audience for his religious works and encouraged him to write other books on the Christian faith. One of these books now famous is *The Great Divorce* which concentrates on the differences between heaven and hell.

In it, he once again creates a fascinating story which also conveys deep spiritual truths. *The Great Divorce* is a short book--one which can be read completely through in a few hours--however the ideas it contains are worthy for all people, especially

Christians. George Sayer in his book *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis* summarizes the main ideas in *The Great Divorce* which are a tribute to Lewis's mentor, George MacDonald. In the structure of *The Great Divorce* Lewis creatively reconciles the ideas of Universalism, predestination, purgatory and a post-death judgment by making hell and purgatory the same place and linking this place to heaven by a bus route (305). Another idea of MacDonald's that Lewis illuminates is that "the love we receive from the Father, if passed on, will transform others" (Sayer 306). Sayer notes that "for those sensitive to it, the book itself has this devotional effect" (306).

As mentioned above, Lewis wrote many other religious books besides *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce*. However, these two are his most creative works in the field of Christian literature and also the ones most often enjoyed by large numbers of people, both Christians and non-Christians.

Many aspects of Lewis's genius can be detected in his religious writings: his creativity, his Christian faith, his love of simple language and perhaps most intrinsically, his extensive background in literature. C.S. Lewis spent most of his adult life teaching English to undergraduate students at ~~either~~ ^{and} Oxford or Cambridge University. So, one would naturally expect a writer who happens to be an English teacher to have written some very insightful things about the field of English literature--and in fact, this is exactly what he did.

Of the more than eight books C.S. Lewis wrote about English literature or

education, each of them has a unique character.³ Thus it is difficult to choose one above the others, however three which have been highly acclaimed are *The Allegory of Love, English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* and *The Discarded Image*.

The Allegory of Love was Lewis's first major scholarly work and its quality was such that it immediately established him as a formidable literary critic. George Sayer writes that "the book produced such excitement at Oxford that for a time it was difficult to find anyone who cared or dared to question its main conclusions" (243). There were several reasons why *The Allegory of Love* created such a stir: one being Lewis's amazing skill at translation of Old French into Middle English and another his broad generalizations which conveyed such strong opinions. A.N. Wilson writes that "there is never a moment's dullness in *The Allegory of Love*. Its readability partly consists in the enthusiasm . . . and in the liveliness and unexpectedness of the examples" (145).

The book traces the history of courtly love stories from their beginnings to their influence on Shakespeare and Spenser. Margaret Hannay in her essay entitled "Provocative Generalizations: *The Allegory of Love* in Retrospect" writes that "tracing the convergence of the literary form of allegory and the social phenomenon of courtly love in the allegorical love poem, C.S. Lewis argued that the tradition finds fulfillment in the replacement of courtly love by marriage in Spenser's epic *The Faerie Queene*" (58).

Perhaps Lewis's greatest achievement in *The Allegory of Love* is his recognition of Spenser as a great writer. Wilson writes that "thanks largely to Lewis, Spenser is now once more regarded as one of the greatest English poets, having sunk into almost total obscurity before *The Allegory of Love* was written" (145). This ability in Lewis to see value where others notice none is part of what makes reading any of his works so enjoyable. Reading Lewis almost invariably leads to more reading.

In the opinion of A.N. Wilson, this tendency to be inspired by Lewis to read and reread is nowhere more prevalent than in relation to his book *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (243). The title of this book is explanatory of its content: it is a literary history of English writings in the sixteenth century which Lewis was asked to write for *The Oxford History of English Literature* series. The book is over seven-hundred pages long, thus Wilson writes "that in sheer magnitude, it is his biggest achievement, and it must rank as about the most entertaining work of criticism ever written" (241). George Sayer writes that "it is no exaggeration to say that there is wit and humor on every page" (325).

As with *The Allegory of Love*, Lewis's appeal in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* is in his fresh, insightful quotations, his amazing range of knowledge and his undaunted opinions. George Sayer writes that he is "as fresh on Shakespeare's poems as if no one had written on them before" (325). And such unusual conclusions as "there was nothing whatever humane about humanism" (qtd.

in Sayer 323) and "the Renaissance, as generally understood, never existed" (qtd. in Sayer 323) are just two examples of the personality of Lewis which shine through even his scholarly works.

One other of Lewis's scholarly works which has been much read, admired, and analyzed is his book *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*. Wilson writes of Lewis's *The Discarded Image* that it is "perhaps the most completely satisfying and impressive book he ever published" (151). In this book, Lewis explains the medieval mind set to the modern reader who often does not realize how different he or she is from someone of the middle ages. As one Lewis scholar writes "Lewis believed that an author's text deserved to speak out of and was capable of speaking out of its own time and culture to a contemporary readership, enabling readers to inhabit the world evoked by and through the author" (Edwards 30).

A good example of this in *The Discarded Image* is Lewis's discussion of the difference between the modern conception of the universe and that of the middle ages. Lewis writes that

You must go out on a starry night and walk about for half an hour trying to see the sky in terms of the old (Ptolemaic) cosmology.

Remember that you now have an absolute Up and Down. The Earth is really the centre, really the lowest place; movement to it from whatever direction is downward movement. As a modern, you located the stars at

a great distance. For distance you must now substitute that very special, and far less abstract, sort of distance which we call height: height which speaks immediately to our muscles and nerves. The Medieval Model is vertiginous. And the fact that the height of the stars in medieval astronomy is very small compared with their distance in modern, will turn out not to have the kind of importance you anticipated . . . To look out on the night sky with modern eyes is like looking about one in a trackless forest--trees forever and no horizon. To look up at the towering medieval universe is much more like looking at a great building. The 'space' of modern astronomy may arouse terror, or bewilderment, or vague reverie; the spheres of the old writers present us with an object in which the mind can rest, overwhelming in its greatness but satisfying in its harmony. That is the sense in which our universe is romantic and theirs was classical. (98-99)

Wilson writes of this sort of explanation as "a wide-ranging analysis of the world picture which almost all the old writers would have taken for granted but which we, our minds fed with different mythologies and sciences, would easily mistake" (151).

Lewis's talent for reading and understanding what happened hundreds and even thousands of years ago, coupled with his ability to express his findings in verbal or written form is what made him such a success at literary history. These gifts, then

combined with his natural creativity, enabled him to produce some very popular and enjoyable fiction.

C.S. Lewis wrote eleven books which can be categorized under the broad heading of fiction, all of which are quite popular.⁴ His science fantasy books referred to as *The Space Trilogy* or *The Ransom Trilogy* are quite popular with Lewis fans and are given a moderate amount of attention by Lewis scholars. *Till We Have Faces*, his retelling of a Greek myth in novel form, was believed by Lewis to be his best work. However, the *Chronicles of Narnia* (his children's stories) are the most famous and best loved of all his fictional books.

On the surface it seems contradictory that a man like C.S. Lewis (scholar, religious apologist, bachelor) would be famous for writing children's stories, however the combination of these odd qualities in Lewis was what made *The Chronicles of Narnia* possible. First of all, because Lewis was unmarried and living with his "adopted" mother during World War II, he provided country housing for some of the children evacuated from London due to the war. Sayer records that these children first inspired Lewis to write the Narnia stories (311). Secondly, Lewis's belief in Christianity encouraged him to use the Biblical epic as the foundation for these stories. And Thirdly, Lewis's extensive background in literature gave him the experience to create sophisticated stories in which the ideas were simple enough for children, yet complex enough for adults.

The Chronicles of Narnia consist of seven books (not published or written in plot sequential order) which tell the adventures of a group of children in another world named Narnia. Several books have been written solely on the Narnian Chronicles, so it is foolish to think they could be treated in full here. However, it is possible to give an overview of one of the books and then analyze why the series has been and still is so popular with both children and adults.

The first book in *The Chronicles of Narnia* is entitled *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It is not only the first one in the series that was written and published, but it is also the story which is the most famous. On the surface, the plot of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* parallels the gospel story of Christ. Through the doors of a wardrobe, four children find themselves entering into a world of conflicting good (Aslan) and evil (the White Witch). One of the boys "sins," so Aslan volunteers to die on the stone table to save his life, thus breaking the power of the White Witch over Narnia. Aslan then returns to life and reclaims Narnia from the White Witch, appointing the children to rule over the land for him in his absence.

It has been asked whether the similarity of the story line to the gospels hampers the enjoyableness of the tale. Chad Walsh in his book *The Literary Legacy of C.S. Lewis* addresses this topic by saying that "some critics have asked whether the symbolic dimensions of the seven tales are handled in such a way as to make the stories more effective works of literature. Or rather, do Christian doctrines seem

dragged in by their heels, converting the stories at their most theological moments into sugarcoated Sunday school instruction" (131)? For an answer to this question, Walsh asked people who read Narnia as children how they responded to the Christian elements. He writes

I find two things: the first is that children almost always recognize a second level in the tales. This in no way obstructs or engulfs the primary level, which is simply a series of good stories. But they become alert to characters and events operating on two levels. . . . Second, this acceptance of Aslan and the whole other level of the stories may or may not take an explicitly Christian form, depending on what sort of religious background the young reader has. (131)

Thus in his *Chronicles of Narnia*, especially *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lewis was able to write multi-level fantasies which were a success with children from the very beginning.

These stories were also popular with adults not just for their entertainment value, but also because the symbolism extends beyond the surface. However, when one tries to analyze *The Chronicles of Narnia*, he or she must keep the true purpose of the stories in mind. In his book *C.S. Lewis, Spinner of Tales*, Evan Gibson writes that "any discussion of their significance must tread softly. *The Chronicles* are lightly told. It would be disastrous to hang weights on their wings. However, that there is

significance--ethical and theological--no perceptive adult reader would deny" (132).

Another attraction of the Narnian stories is their reference to other mythic and literary characters which the reader is already acquainted with. Colin Manlove writes of this topic in his book *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Patterning of a Fantastic World*.

He writes that

Lewis struck in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* a blend of fantasy and the everyday that he was not again to match. The book is an extraordinary mixture of diverse things, from a lion who is a Narnian Christ to a witch out of fairy tale, from a Father Christmas out of myth to a female beaver with a sewing machine drawn from Beatrix Potter, from a society of articulate beasts and animate trees to a group of strongly characterized children partly derived from Edith Nesbit. (30)

The world C.S. Lewis created is charming, believable (in that fairy tale sort of way) and amazingly complex in its simplicity. Perhaps for one of these reasons, readers--both children and adults--find themselves taking the walk through the wardrobe time and time again.

However, despite all the seemingly compelling evidence, the question still remains of whether Lewis was a great author or not. As I asked in the beginning of this paper, did he make any lasting contribution to the field of English literature? The answer to this question will not be known until we have the tool of time with

which to examine those works of his which have survived. However, we can make some tentative predictions based on the happenings in the thirty-some years since his death.

As I have shown, Lewis's popularity is not dying away. For example, on the internet there are several Lewis sites which tell biographical information, show pictures, and offer meeting places for all those interested in Lewis and his works. I know of an internet mailing list (aptly named *MereLewis*) which provides a forum for all those wishing to discuss Lewisian topics with like-minded people. Off the internet, there are also C.S. Lewis societies both in North America and abroad which hold meetings, provide the opportunity to purchase books (and other Lewis-related items) and often publish newsletters.

Many of Lewis's works are also being reissued in new attractive bindings (some in both paperback and hardcover). For instance, the Cambridge University Press has very recently re-published such books as *The Discarded Image*, *An Experiment in Criticism*, and *Studies In Words* in a series called Canto which states as its purpose to "offer some of the best and most accessible of Cambridge publishing to a wider readership" (Canto edition introduction). The publishers Harcourt Brace and Company have also re-designed the covers of such books as *Till We Have Faces* and *Letters to Malcolm*, as well as issuing some of Lewis's previously unpublished short stories and poems. And of course, *The Chronicles of Narnia* have been redone once

again. But this time, the books have been rearranged so that they are numbered in chronological order instead of by publishing dates.

Not only are Lewis's books being republished and his works being discussed daily on the internet, he is also quoted and referred to in some of the most unlikely places. In a social psychology textbook published by McGraw-Hill, I was surprised to read the name of C.S. Lewis right alongside that of Shakespeare and T.S. Eliot. Like Shakespeare and Eliot, Lewis was given no special introduction--just quoted to lend weight to some issue of social psychology. I also found Lewis on the recommended reading list for those intending to take the Graduate Record Examination in English Literature. And perhaps most surprising, an Oxford English literature textbook recommends several of C.S. Lewis's scholarly works as suggestions for further reading.⁵

Although this sort of evidence is sporadic, it does indicate that people are still very much interested in the things Lewis wrote. If continued interest in him and his works did not exist, he would not be mentioned on the internet. If his works did not make money, publishers would not invest time and resources into republishing and reformatting them. If his writings were not worth reading, they would not be quoted. And if his works were not insightful, they certainly would not be recommended to those interested in English literature. So on the basis of this information, and the value of his works as reviewed in this paper, I make my predictions for the works of C.S. Lewis.

Regarding Lewis's religious books (the first category I discussed earlier), it is necessary to ask if Lewis is anything more than just another popular religious writer. Defenders of the Christian faith seem to come and go according to the needs of the religion they are defending. However, since Lewis wrote *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce*, sophisticated Christian literature that transcends simple apologetics, he has a chance of being remembered as a writer of religious classics.

However, those books which reveal Lewis's amazing intellect and strong personality more than any others are his works of literary history. Lewis spent more time writing books such as *The Allegory of Love* than any of his other works. And although these books convey ideas which are still useful to the field of English literature, they are subject to changing scholastic trends. The nature of these works also impedes any claim that they are great literature. Because they are tools with which to examine someone else's creative works, they will only be useful as long as those other works exist. For in essence, Lewis's purpose in writing his literary works was to encourage the reading of authors he felt were significant, not the reading of his commentary on those author's works.

In my opinion, the books which will most likely keep the name of C.S. Lewis alive are *The Chronicles of Narnia*. It is true that they are *only* children's literature, but it is possible that at some later date, children's literature may get the respect it deserves. The facts are that *The Chronicles of Narnia* are creative, well written, filled

with symbolism and immensely enjoyable to all age groups. These are qualities which will ensure their survival, and possibly their greatness.

Perhaps the best way to conclude this paper is with Lewis's own definition of a good book. Lewis writes in *An Experiment in Criticism* that "normally we judge men's literary taste by the things they read. The question was whether there might be some advantage in reversing the process and judging literature by the way men read it. If all went ideally well we should end by defining good literature as that which permits, invites, or even compels good reading" (104). Although Lewis was not writing about his own books, this method of criticism fits his works well, especially *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The fact that these books are read so often, with so much enjoyment, by so many people of all age groups, indicates that Lewis's works (whether considered great or not) have the best advantage of all--they are not only readable but enjoyable.

Notes

1. A.N. Wilson's book entitled *C.S. Lewis: A Biography* has been a topic of controversy for Lewisians ever since it was published in 1990. The book takes a psycho-analytical approach to Lewis's life, yet presents any findings as facts rather than speculations. Wilson's background as a professional writer (not even a trained psychologist or psychiatrist) does not help to lend any weight to his supposed discoveries. This book presents a major problem for any writer on Lewis. If Wilson's biography is used as source material, the writer must guard against the many deceptive comments and insinuations in it. If the book is not used, it is often necessary to explain why. A good summary of the objections to Wilson's work can be found in a review essay by John Beversluis published in the journal entitled "Christianity and Literature." In his article, he criticizes Wilson for trying to tarnish Lewis's image, faulty assessment techniques, reliance on psychology, dishonest wording, distrusting Lewis himself, and exaggeration just to mention a few points (179-194). However, Wilson's biography is not completely bad says Beversluis, Wilson "is very good on Lewis's literary criticism--in particular, *The Allegory of Love* and *The Discarded Image* (193).

2. The eleven books I am referring to listed chronologically are *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism*; *The Problem of Pain*; *The Screwtape Letters*; *Mere Christianity*; *The Great Divorce: A Dream*; *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*; *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*; *Reflections on the Psalms*; *The Four Loves*; *A Grief Observed* and *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. It could be argued that all Lewis's books are religious because they have religious elements. But the difference between his other literary or fictional works and those I have labeled religious is that the religious works deal solely with religion and nothing else (except for the autobiographies which frame his religious discoveries inside a spiritual life story).

3. Lewis produced many other lectures, essays and articles in addition to his scholarly books. The titles I am referring to in chronological order are *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition*; *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy (with E.M.W. Tillyard)*; *A Preface to 'Paradise Lost'*; *The Abolition of Man: Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools*; *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*; *Studies in Words*; *An Experiment in Criticism* and *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*.

4. The books I am including in the fiction category are his *Ransom Trilogy*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and his one novel. Listed in chronological order of when they were first published they are *Out of the Silent Planet*; *Perelandra*; *That Hideous Strength*;

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe; Prince Caspian: The Return to Narnia; The Voyage of the Dawn Treader; The Silver Chair; The Horse and His Boy; The Magician's Nephew; The Last Battle and Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold. Lewis also wrote many short fiction stories that have been compiled into book form which I have not mentioned.

5. Although Lewis spent the greater part of his teaching career at Oxford, he was not well-liked by some of his peers and the authorities there. He was denied a professorship several times, so after spending almost thirty years at Oxford, he moved to Cambridge in 1954. At Cambridge, he was asked to be the professor of medieval and Renaissance studies.

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