

Clive Staples Lewis

1898-1963



It was a crisp November morning. The streets of Belfast were bustling with Christmas shoppers preparing for the quickly approaching holiday. Children pulled at their mother's coats, pleading for this and that; house girls were buying up the necessary turkey trimmings, and countless men warmed themselves by the burning cans that lined the city streets. Yet, there was at least one household that could not be found in the market streets on the 29th day of this 11th month, they had bigger things to contend with than holiday preparations. For a new life was about to be unleashed upon the world - a life that would challenge and change the course of Christian thought.

Clive Staples Lewis was the second born son of Albert and Flora Lewis. Clive's father was a solicitor whom Clive would often describe as constrictive, peculiar, and narrow in his ways. The cold winds of solitude were always present within their home. They could be heard whispering through the corridors of their house, and echoing within the chambers of their hearts. His childhood quietly crept by, as moments of seclusion converged into years of isolation. One of the few things that brought pleasure into his life was the company of his older brother. Warren was three years older than Clive, and always a rich source of intimate friendship and deep-rooted happiness. There were many dark days when the clouds that often settled above Clive could be swept away by a few words and a simple embrace from his brother. They were more than family; more than siblings, they were friends.

It was not long before Clive dove into the world of literature. The pages of the books he would devour brought him glimpses of other worlds and other lives. It was his portal, his own "magical wardrobe"¹, into a reality that could not hurt, reject, or abandon him. As his tastes matured and the years went on his love for the written word, and even the pages they were bound upon, increased exponentially. He barely noticed the curious looks of passersby as he was often found smelling the pages of a new book in the library, and carefully inspecting others aspects of its physical make-up; such as, its binding, color, and even the quality of the paper. As many other children with a predilection towards learning,

¹ Lewis, C. S. [The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe](#)

Clive grew to detest school sponsored sporting activities. Instead, he would simply bury his nose in a book in a vain attempt to expel the pains of life found in the outside world. Clive would often refer to his childhood as being encapsulated within one concept: *Sehnsucht*, “a deep-seated longing for joy”².

Being such an avid reader it was only a matter of time before Clive would begin to spin tales of his own. In fact, before being able to write he would often make up fanciful stories, which in turn, his father would transcribe for him. From birth, the art of the written word coursed through his veins. For him, writing a book was simply the task of capturing that which overflowed from deep within. It was never a question of creating, for Clive it was a question of containing. Being able to harness the many thoughts and visions that struggled to dominate his mind.

In his tenth year, Clive’s mother fell sick to cancer. He watched as this carnivorous disease consumed her whole. She quickly deteriorated from the woman who brought him life and love, to a shadow of death, a walking corpse. The doctors used to visit several times a day, now they were barely seen. Loved ones filled the halls out of concern, bringing casseroles and false hope. But what once was a surging river of friends and family was now barely a trickle. In their wake was left dirty dishes and an undertow of despair. It was at this time that Clive Staples Lewis had his first transformational encounter with God. Buried amongst dirty sheets and guest towels long discarded, he cowered in the deep recesses of his third floor linen closet as death waited upon his doorstep. Clive’s religious upbringing was nominally Christian at best, often expressed through practical atheism at worst. Yet, at this instance he cried out to God, as many others do in times of trial and distress. He pleaded for his mother’s life. He beseeched the “magician” in the sky, a term he would later use to explain his childhood concept of God. However, when it was time for the rabbit to appear from out of the hat, he was nowhere to be found – just an empty hat. His wand was merely the walking stick of a useless old man, its power but a myth, folklore of the elderly and fairy tales of children. On August 23rd, 1908, Flora Augusta

² Gilbert, Douglas & Kilby, Clyde S. C.S. Lewis: Images of His World: pp. 9

Hamilton Lewis lost her battle with cancer. Death had finally breached the front door and swept her up in his cold embrace. It would only be a matter of time before her children would struggle to remember her face, her smell, the feel of her lips upon their forehead, the safety as they lay within her arms. Clive searched out the security of his impenetrable linen closet fortress, crawled beneath the neglected garments within, and spoke one last message to God – “go away”. As far as Clive was concerned, for the next 21 years it appeared as though He did.

The life of a single father in the early nineteen hundreds was a difficult and seldom traveled path. The loss of his wife helped to foster the already cold and disconnected heart within Albert, Clive’s father. Within a month after the death of his wife, Albert sent his two sons to England. They were enrolled at Wynyard, in Watford Hertfordshire. This began two years of Hell on earth for the Lewis boys. It was not long after their withdrawal in 1910 that the headmaster of this prestigious English school was declared insane. Yet, the Lord does work in mysterious ways. Somehow, through the confusion and the beatings Clive heard true Christianity taught in its simplest form. He may not have been able to accept the God that he banished from his closet fortress, but he did begin to pray and read his Bible.

Shortly after departing from Wynyard, Clive contracted a respiratory disease. This led to a short hiatus in Ireland with his father, but nothing could keep him away from the England that he had grown to love so deeply. In 1911 Clive returned to his home away from home and enrolled in Cherbourg House, a preparatory school in Malvern. His brother was presently attending Malvern College. After his illness and time spent with his father Clive needed the comforts and familiarity of his beloved Warren. The lifestyle that he found at Cherbourg provided the perfect environment for the growth of spiritual weeds and briars. It was not long before they sprung up and choked out the small and defenseless plant of hope that had taken root in Clive’s heart. It was at this time that Clive consciously ceased to be a “Christian”. He began to be enveloped in a Hedonistic lifestyle that this world knows all too well: a never-ending pursuit of

pleasure and a plague-like avoidance of pain. Clive's priorities were refashioned with an importance placed on self-image, fornication, and the arts that helped bolster such a lifestyle. He became a lover of Wagner's music and was barely seen without his well-used copy of *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods*. In 1913, Clive followed in the footsteps of his older brother and enrolled in Malvern College. He was recognized almost immediately for his brilliant writings, which could often be recognized by their atheistic and pessimistic overtones. When reflecting about his time in Malvern Clive is quoted as saying, "I maintained that God did not exist. I was also very angry with God for not existing. I was equally angry with Him for creating a world"³. It was not long before Clive grew to hate his time at Malvern; he was eventually able to persuade his father to remove him.

From the spring of 1914 to 1917 Clive continued on a roller coaster ride of education. He studied under the great dialectician W. T. Kirkpatrick in which he was able to progress greatly in Greek, Latin, French, German, and Italian. He then sat for a classical scholarship at Oxford and was elected to University College. In April of 1917 his studies at Oxford were disrupted by what has since then been coined the Great War. Clive Staples Lewis was "recruited" into the army. By September 25th of that same year Lewis was commissioned as Second Lieutenant in the Somerset Light Infantry, within two months he arrived on the front lines. Lewis turned nineteen, huddled amidst death and filth as bullets indiscriminately tore the life away from countless numbers of young men. His candles had been replaced by the torches of the night watch, his cake had become rations, his presents – the gift of another day alive. A man of his wisdom and education has had to resort to survival of the fittest in a kill or be killed world.

Within a year Lewis was admitted to the British Red Cross Hospital at Le Tréport. He was suffering from a case of trench fever: "a disease that is marked by fever and pain in muscles, bones, and joints and that is caused by a bacterium"⁴. As the deafening silence of his hospital ward settled about him, he

³ Gilbert, Douglas & Kilby, Clyde S. *C.S. Lewis: Images of His World*: pp. 9

⁴ Miriam-Webster: online – www.m-w.com

lay in his sterile bed pondering over the fact that “. . . the gods hate me – and natural enough considering my usual attitude towards them”⁵. Within three months Lewis rejoined his fellow soldiers in the pits and holes they had come to refer to as home. On April 14 Lewis sustained a chest injury while in action at Mount Bernenchon; he was hospitalized and soon transferred back to England. While being treated for the shrapnel still lodged in his chest he would often be found dismissing others praise over the fact that he had brought in approximately sixty German soldiers while in active duty. Yet throughout all things, whether in the trenches surrounded by decaying flesh and the horrors of war, or while in the hospital as the realization of the aftermath of war sank in, Lewis was rarely without his books. Names such as Milton, Scott, and Trollope brought comfort in times of great distress. He would ponder over the works of Boswell and Eliot, while the words of Cellini and Balzac would often usher him into a suspended reality. His body may have been exposed to the harsh truth of this world, but his mind had found solace amidst the noise. However, something continued to scratch at the back of his mind. As “deep cries out to deep” Lewis was never able to find true peace. His ongoing state of *Sehnsucht* remained unanswered . . . unsatisfied.

In 1919, at the age of 21 Clive published his first book entitled *Spirits in Bondage*. It was a small volume of lyric poems that he wrote under the pen name Clive Hamilton. He is later quoted as saying that the theme of the book is that “nature is wholly diabolical and malevolent and that God, if He exists, is outside and in opposition to the cosmic arrangement”⁶. As with most atheists Clive maintained a serious interest in the spiritual realm. Of course, it is an interest based on unbelief and opposition, but it is an interest nonetheless. This book acted as a springboard for Clive as it preceded many awards, prizes, honors, and certificates. Caught up in a whirlwind of recognition Clive finally attained a sense of stability as he accepted his election in 1925 to a Fellowship in English Language and Literature at Magdalen College, Oxford. It was a position

⁵ Gilbert, Douglas & Kilby, Clyde S. C.S. Lewis: Images of His World: pp. 10

⁶ Gilbert, Douglas & Kilby, Clyde S. C.S. Lewis: Images of His World: pp. 11

he was to hold for almost thirty years. Throughout his years at Magdalen College he became acquainted with many friends; among them are the noted J.R.R. Tolkien, Nevill Coghill, H.V.D. Dyson, A.C. Harwood, and C.T. Onions. It was in this chapter of his life that Clive's long and slow moving towards Christianity climaxed. Cloaked in the darkness of night, Clive Staples Lewis was reduced to a mere man upon his knees as he uttered the words that would lead towards life - "God is God". With this one statement a deathblow was struck upon a struggling atheist and simultaneously the pains of a new birth began to emerge. Yet, in order to inspect the roots of this immense tree of Christian thought and literature we call C.S. Lewis, we must dig deep into his past to see that which influenced him most.

Clive's conversion was a long and tumultuous one. It actually began many years ago through the form of a conversation between him and his boyhood friend Arthur Greeves. The two had enjoyed each others company for many years but had never really ventured towards the discussion of religion or spiritual matters. Arthur was finally able to breach the subject, which resulted in an outburst of ridicule and pain from a bitter and jaded Lewis:

"Religion is nothing more than man's own invention and is utterly without real foundation. Primitives made up religion out of their ignorant fears of thunder and other natural phenomena. They came to the point of believing these to be evil spirits and began to try to placate them with sacrifices. Thus various cults arose, usually after the death of a leader. It was out of such a situation that a philosophical Jew called Yeshua, or Jesus, had a cult grow up about Him."⁷

Of course Lewis went on to chastise his friend for being so unenlightened. "After all", he would state, "People had abandoned such 'backward' thinking ages ago". Of course, this was the beginning of many

⁷ Gilbert, Douglas & Kilby, Clyde S. C.S. Lewis: Images of His World: pp. 16

long conversations between Clive and Arthur. Throughout these times of banter Lewis was always willing to view and discuss any new theistic evidences that his childhood friend would toss his way. After all, being a logically minded person Lewis was more than willing to concede that there was a Hebrew man that walked this earth whom they called Yeshua. In his superficial examination of the evidence he had to submit to the truth that Jesus did exist; but that was about as far as he was willing to go. As with many Atheists, Lewis struggled with Materialism as well. The validity of the existence of Jesus was not the issue; to Lewis it was the documented miracles found in Scripture. To accept Jesus of Nazareth the man was one thing, but to accept Jesus Christ the God was ludicrous.

“When I say ‘Christ’ of course I mean the mythological being into whom He was afterwards converted by popular imagination . . . That the man Yeshua or Jesus did actually exist, is as certain as that the Buddha did actually exist: Tacitus mentions His execution in the Annals. But all the other tomfoolery about virgin birth, magic healings, apparitions and so forth is on exactly the same footing as any other mythology . . . most legends have a kernel of fact in them somewhere.”⁸

When speaking of the conversion of Lewis one must realize that the heavens did not rend themselves before him, there was no myriad of angels singing above, nor were the demons of the deep clawing at his door. Lewis was in fact converted through a series of conversations, books, and long bouts of logical inward thought and retrospection. One of the main tools used to break down the walls of Atheism that had bound Lewis for so long was his attendance to College. For most students, their time at College proves to be a time of “liberation” from the religion and dogma that has been placed upon their shoulders since birth. Not Clive however, seeing as he had already been “enlightened” and “freed” from

⁸ Gilbert, Douglas & Kilby, Clyde S. C.S. Lewis: Images of His World: pp. 17

the bondage and guilt of religion, the effect of College was quite the opposite. He spent his days discussing “Christian Mythologies” with Agnostics, and religious practices with recovering Atheists. Of course, one of the strongest influences and loudest voices in Lewis’ life was still his books. He delved into religious works such as Berkeley’s *Dialogues* and Clutton-Broch’s *The Ultimate Belief*. At times, he felt his Atheistic beliefs confirmed and yet there were also instances when he felt they were threatened.

The first mortal wound that his Atheism sustained was at the moment Lewis decided that logic involves “participation in a cosmic *Logos*”⁹. As his ideals of Materialism began to be stripped away Lewis allowed concepts of the spiritual realm to be taken into consideration for the first time. Of course, his classification of the term “spiritual” would be redefined over the years, but this was definitely a step in the right direction.

The next assault that Lewis would undergo occurred, ironically, after his return from war. He would recommence his studies at Oxford and it was at this time that Lewis met a whole slew of men considered to be Christians and intellectuals. During the process of his befriending them, Lewis began to notice something different within these men. Clive would later refer to this revelation as the time he began to apprehend the gap between morality and holiness. Throughout his time with these men of God, Lewis’ choice of literature would increasingly become more and more religiously based. It is fitting that it was a book, Lewis’ prized possessions, which delivered the final deathblow to his Atheistic Worldview.

Lewis had stumbled upon a copy of Samuel Alexander’s *Space, Time and Deity* and with it came the discovery that changed the way he viewed his very own existence. This revelation can be summed up in a single thought, “one cannot at the same instant hope and think about

⁹ Gilbert, Douglas & Kilby, Clyde S. C.S. Lewis: Images of His World: pp. 18

hoping; hope and reflective thought about it can alternate rapidly, but they are two different things”¹⁰ All his life, Clive had been plagued by a hope for something that he could find no better a word for than Joy – his ongoing, insatiable hunger of *Sehnsucht*. With his reading of Alexander he understood that he had been misdirected in his search for Joy. He had wasted his years in pursuit of a sensation when what he really wanted was the real object. As he would later come to admit, the Joy that he had been trying to capture was simply a by-product of the real thing. It was “merely the mental track left by the passages of Joy – not the wave but the waves imprint on the sand.” He would go on to postulate “no image or sensation could ever be equal to the thing of which it was only the vestige”.¹¹ He was able to accept the fact that the world is not comprised solely of concrete or abstract experiences- it was not a question of either/or, but both/and. The world consists of a mixture of the concrete and abstract, not independent of each other but working together to lead one to the Absolute Truth of reality. He was able to apply this new insight of existence to his ever-increasing theological worldview by concluding that, “God is real, but to inquire into doctrines of God is abstractive. It is impossible to have the two experiences at the same moment. Both experiences have their value, but they should never be taken as equivalents.”¹² As a child releases the hand of his mother, a hand of comfort and protection, so did Lewis release his grip on the concrete. With this newfound knowledge of reality Lewis was able to step into the realm of the abstract, the realm of knowing God and knowing Jesus as God.

C.S. Lewis can be seen as a present day Paul for with the transformation of his life came a great shaking of the Christian church. The many thoughts and concepts that he had once embraced he now passionately warred against; joining the ranks of those he had once so

¹⁰ Gilbert, Douglas & Kilby, Clyde S. *C.S. Lewis: Images of His World*: pp. 19

¹¹ Gilbert, Douglas & Kilby, Clyde S. *C.S. Lewis: Images of His World*: pp. 19

¹² Gilbert, Douglas & Kilby, Clyde S. *C.S. Lewis: Images of His World*: pp. 20

vehemently persecuted. He would go on to write such beautiful apologetic and evangelistic literature as *Mere Christianity*, *Miracles*, *The Narnia Chronicles*, *The Great Divorce*, *The Screwtape Letters*, as well as a plethora of other groundbreaking and significant pieces.

Lewis had struggled with, and conquered, an obstacle set before most intellectuals – the “disconnect” between knowledge and knowing. Through the gifting of God Lewis was able to understand things that most men would never ascertain. Yet, like he had, how many men squander their talents on the concrete things of this world, things that will all cease to be. So obsessed with trying to understand the imprint that they completely neglect the object that it points to. They forever live in this realm of the “disconnect” as they dichotomize the abstract and the concrete, the “spiritual” and the “real”. Lewis; however, was freed from this compartmentalized lifestyle. It took 21 years but Lewis eventually “entered through the narrow gate” as he bridged the gap between his mind and his heart.

On November 22, 1963 Clive Staples Lewis died from a combination of ailments. As the world slowly drifted into the background, Clive ascended the steps of his childhood home one last time. He opened the door of his linen closet fortress but this time he was not met by neglected bed sheets and piles of towels. This time, he was met by the arms of his heavenly Father, by Joy in its most concrete state.

He was finally safe . . . he was finally home.

Bibliography

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Internet material found at: www.cslewis.org