

The Importance of Imagination for C.S. Lewis and for Us

by Art Lindsley, Ph.D.

A recent poll of *Christianity Today* readers found that the one book—other than the Bible—that has most influenced their lives was C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*. C.S. Lewis' popularity shows no sign of waning; if anything, it is increasing. What is the key to his continuing impact? An essential part of the answer would be the way in which he combines reason and imagination.

Different Genres

Other authors who have been considered culture-shapers have, like Lewis, employed more than one form of literature to communicate. For instance, Jean-Paul Sartre could write philosophy (e.g. *Being and Nothingness*) as well as drama (e.g. *No Exit*). In other words, his ideas were communicated in rational discourse and via the imagination by means of drama. Similarly, C.S. Lewis could give an argument against relativism in *Abolition of Man* or effectively counter it in his novel *That Hideous Strength*. This could be illustrated in the parallel between many of his non-fiction and fictional works.

Imagination and Meaning

Lewis argued at one point that, while reason is the natural organ of truth, "imagination is the organ of meaning." In other words, we do not really grasp the meaning of any word or concept until we have a clear image that we can connect with it. You can find a more detailed argument of this contention in *Selected Literary Essays* (see "Blusphels and Flalanferes"). The practical effect of this belief in Lewis' writing was that even in the midst of an apologetic argument, he provided just the right picture, image or metaphor to help the reader grasp the meaning of the argument. For instance, note the use of image or analogy in this quote from *The Weight of Glory*:

...Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

The "mud pies" and the "holiday at the sea" help us glimpse what it means to be "far too easily pleased" or to impoverish our own desires. Most of Lewis' major ideas are also developed in his fiction.

Imagination and Faith

Imagination played a key role in Lewis' conversion. Through the reading of George MacDonald's Christian fantasy, *Phantastes*, Lewis reported that a new quality, "a bright shadow," leapt off the page. Later he described the new quality as "holiness," recalling this time as a baptism of his own imagination. Although Lewis still needed to confront certain rational objections to the Christian faith—and to finally submit his will to what he had discovered—his "baptism of the imagination" was the starting point in his journey to faith. In a similar fashion, Lewis' own fiction has resulted in the same imaginative renewal for many people.

Another important issue in his conversion was the emerging contradiction between his reason and his imagination. Referring to his youthful retreat into fantasy and myth, he says in *Surprised by Joy*:

Such, then, was the state of my imaginative life; over against it stood the life of my intellect. The two hemispheres of my mind were in the sharpest contrast. On the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow 'rationalism.' Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless.

Lewis saw the logical conclusion of his atheism as a "grim and meaningless universe." Atheist Bertrand Russell made a similar observation that atheists must build their lives on the basis of "unyielding despair." Yet Lewis deeply loved the realm of imagination. In poets, novelists and saints he discovered aspirations to meaning, dignity, morality, and immortality. These things he loved imaginatively but found them "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Later Lewis describes this tension:

All the books were beginning to turn against me. Indeed, I must have been as blind as a bat not to have

seen, long before, the ludicrous contradiction between my theory of life and my actual experiences as a reader. George MacDonald had done more to me than any other writer; of course it was a pity that he had that bee in his bonnet about Christianity. He was good in spite of it. Chesterton had more sense than all the other moderns put together; bating, of course, his Christianity. Johnson was one of a few authors whom I felt I could trust utterly; curiously enough, he had the same kink. Spenser and Milton by strange coincidence had it too. Even among ancient authors the same paradox was to be found. The most religious (Plato, Aeschylus, Virgil) were clearly those on whom I could really feed. On the other hand, those writers who did not suffer from religion and with whom my sympathy ought to have been complete – Shaw and Wells and Mill and Gibbon and Voltaire – all seemed a little thin; what as boys we called ‘tinny.’ It wasn’t that I didn’t like them. They were all (especially Gibbon) entertaining; but hardly more. There seemed to be no depth in them. They were too simple. The roughness and density of life did not appear in their books.... The upshot of it all could nearly be expressed in a perversion of Roland’s great line in the Chanson – ‘Christians are wrong, but all the rest are bores.’

Later, of course, through a combination of many factors, the tension was resolved. Reason and imagination were united. Lewis had found through his imagination a key to reality.

Imagination and Myth

From an early age, C.S. Lewis had a fascination with mythology. He was particularly drawn to Norse mythology. Once as a young man he saw an illustration from “Siegfried and Twilight of the Gods” and one line, “the sky turned around.” For Lewis it was enough: “Pure ‘Northern-ness’ engulfed me: a vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of the Northern summer, remoteness, severity...the memory of Joy itself...”

The experience of the power of myth was not an isolated experience but a recurring theme in Lewis’ life and writing. When he arrived at Oxford, he joined an Icelandic study group led by J.R.R. Tolkien that required learning Icelandic for inclusion. He was so drawn to this pagan mythology that he describes himself later as “a converted Pagan living among apostate Puritans.”

One of Lewis’ early objections to the Christian faith was its comparison with Paganism:

No one ever attempted to show in what sense Christianity fulfilled Paganism or Paganism prefigured Christianity. The accepted position seemed to be that religions were normally a mere farrago of nonsense,

though our own, by a fortunate exception was true.... But on what grounds could I believe this exception? It obviously was in some general sense the same kind of thing as all the rest. Why was it so differently treated? Need I, at any rate, continue to treat it differently? I was very anxious not to.

Along with this observation, Lewis had been gripped by the reality of the gospel narrative:

I was by now too experienced in literary criticism to regard the Gospels as myths. They had not the mythical taste. And yet the very matter which they set down in their artless, historical fashion...was precisely the matter of the great myths. If ever a myth had become fact, had been incarnated, it would be just like this.... Here and here only in all time the myth must have become fact; the Word, flesh; God, Man. This is not “a religion,” nor “a philosophy.” It is the summing up and actuality of them all.

When Lewis, years later, raised this issue with Tolkien and Dyson, it led to a crucial all night conversation. In this discussion they argued with Lewis that Paganism prefigured Christianity and Christianity fulfilled Paganism as suggested in the above quote. They argued that these pagan religions did contain truths and arose out of the structure of reality created by God. These pagan myths were echoes of reality and cosmic pointers to the true myth, the “Myth become Fact” in Christ. The Gospel account of Christ is the Story that fulfills these previous stories, the one difference being that the Gospel narrative is historical – a true fact. Later in his essay, “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism,” he further develops these arguments in opposition to those who, like Rudolf Bultmann, want to argue that many of the Gospel accounts are mythological, that is, historically untrue.

Lewis’ insight into the role of myth influenced his view of other religions. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*:

If you are a Christian you do not have to believe that all the other religions are simply wrong all through. If you are an atheist you do have to believe that the main point in all the religions of the whole world is simply one huge mistake. If you are a Christian, you are free to think that all these religions, even the queerest ones, contain at least some hint of the truth.

Later in the essay, “Christian Apologetics” in *God in the Dock*, he divides religions as we do soups into “thick” and “clear.” To summarize his argument:

By Thick I mean those which have orgies and ecstasies and mysteries and local attachments: Africa is full of Thick religions. By Clear I mean those which are philosophical, ethical and universalizing: Stoicism, Buddhism and the Ethical Church are Clear religions.

Now if there is a true religion it must be both Thick and Clear: for the true God must have made both the child and the man, both the savage and the citizen, both the head and the belly.... Christianity...takes a convert from central Africa and tells him to obey an enlightened universalist ethic: it takes a twentieth-century academic prig like me and tells me to go fasting to a Mystery, to drink the blood of the Lord. The savage convert has to be Clear: I have to be Thick. That is how one knows one has come to the real religion.

In other words, the disdain that a Western atheistic sociologist might have for a primitive tribe that sacrifices a chicken in order to placate evil spirits would show a truncated view of religion. Certainly this view of sacrifice might be argued to demonstrate unwarranted superstition but at least this primitive tribe understands the “deeper magic” that blood is necessary to deal with evil. Something, somehow is written into the conscience that points to the nature of ultimate reality. So in reading the stories in all religions and mythologies, we catch echoes, however faint, of the Myth become fact.

Extending Our Awareness

Imagination can also lead to an expanding awareness of the world by seeing through the eyes of others. Lewis loved to read about worlds created by authors as much as he enjoyed creating his own. He loved reading novels that showed the writer’s insights into life. He wrote:

My own eyes are not enough for me. I will see through those of others. Reality even seen through the eyes of many is not enough. I will see what others have invented. ...Literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege of individuality.... In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself.... Here as in worship, in love and in moral action, and in knowing I transcend myself and am never more myself than when I do... [Without this exposure to other views of the world through literature, one may be] full of goodness and good sense but he inhabits a tiny world. In it, we should be suffocated. The man who is contented to be only himself, and therefore less a self, is in prison.

Children’s Stories

Lewis also applied his understanding of the imagination to the realm of children’s literature. He questioned the division between children’s and adult literature, realizing that when we lose childlikeness, we lose something of our humanity (Mark 10:15). A good story is good for both child and adult.

Children’s stories retain their appeal throughout the generations:

It does not seem useful to say, “What delighted the infancy of the species naturally delighted the infancy of the individual.... Surely it would be less arrogant and truer to the evidence to say that they are not peculiar. It is we who are peculiar. Fashions in literary taste come and go among adults, and every period has its own shibboleths. These, when good, do not improve the tastes of children, and when bad, do not corrupt it, for children read only to enjoy. Of course, their limited vocabulary and general ignorance make some books unintelligible to them. But apart from that, juvenile taste is simply human taste.

C.S. Lewis’ *Narnia Chronicles*, although written for children, have been read and enjoyed by people of all ages. Having recently read all of *Narnia* to my boys (ages 7 and 9), I found my own appreciation for the books to be greater than ever.

Imagination, then, was the beginning of Lewis’ conversion, an important dimension in his view of other religions and myths, significant to his perception of the world, and an aid in his grasping the meaning of anything. His great capacity for imagination combined with his extraordinary ability to reason reveal a key to C.S. Lewis’ abiding relevance and appeal to this increasingly postmodern age where the focus is always too much on one or the other.



Dr. Art Lindsley is Scholar-in-Residence at the C.S. Lewis Institute, author of numerous articles, co-author of Classical Apologetics and a frequent lecturer.

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8001 Braddock Road, Suite 300 • Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
www.cslewisinstitute.org

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