

HOW WAS C.S. LEWIS INFLUENCED
BY READING BOOKS?

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ST 574: Theology of C.S. Lewis
November 4, 2018

Thesis: Numerous influences shaped C.S. Lewis, but none more significant than the books he read. The effects of this influence emerge in his early life, the shaping of his identity, his conversion to Christianity, and ultimately to his theology.

In many ways, C.S. Lewis experienced an unremarkable childhood. He endured a significant amount of pain in losing his mother at a young age and suffering the hardships of a boarding school that left its mark on him more than even his time in the war. He later concluded, “I will take part in battles but not read about them.”¹ Lewis defended this strange argument by explaining that “A boy who is unhappy at school inevitably learns the habit of keeping the future in its place.”² As a child, it was in reading books that Lewis found a way to feel he could control his future. This connection with books became the foundation on which he built everything else. “It is important to acquire early in life the power of reading sense wherever you happen to be.”³

He did not share a close relationship with his father, yet the strongest link between them was in the way Albert Lewis provided books and fostered a love of reading in his son. C.S. Lewis recalled how “My father bought all the books he read and never got rid of any of them.”⁴ One cannot help but wonder how Lewis might have developed differently without this availability of books in his home. As Alister McGrath notes, it was this prevalence of books in his home that became one of the most lingering memories of his childhood.⁵ It may not seem as unique in today’s culture, yet Lewis

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1955) 195.

² Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 195.

³ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 68.

⁴ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 10.

⁵ Alister McGrath, *C.S. Lewis - A Life* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers Inc., 2013) 14.

noted that “we grew up in a world of cheap and abundant books.”⁶ Books shaped many of the memories Lewis had with his father, even noting that “if my father came home unexpectedly at mid-day, having allowed himself an extra half-holiday, he might, if it were summer, find us with chairs and books in the garden.”⁷ Sadly, without a shared love of books, Lewis may have experienced an even more strained relationship with his father. One senses a bit of sadness when Lewis recalls that “A very few tastes I could share with my father.”⁸

Even as an adult, Lewis recalled how “Many of the books that pleased me as a child, please me still.”⁹ The love of reading he developed as a child remained with him his entire life. He vividly described times when “the whole weekend’s reading lay ahead, I suppose I reached as much happiness as is ever to be reached on earth. And especially if there were some new, long-coveted book awaiting me.”¹⁰ This is not merely reading to fill the time. This was a love of reading that books reinforced in him. It stirred something deep inside him and gave him an ability to process the world around him. Lewis even remembered the library being a blessing in his life, “Not only because it was a library, but because it was a sanctuary.”¹¹ It may even be said that he longed to go back to this early stage of his life, at least in the way he interacted with the books he read. “There was a humility in me (as a reader) at that time which I shall never recapture.”¹² McGrath notes

⁶ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 179.

⁷ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 151.

⁸ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 125.

⁹ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 86.

¹⁰ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 179.

¹¹ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 138.

¹² Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 200.

that this desire to return to his childhood of reading can also be found in letters that Lewis wrote to his friend Arthur Greeves.¹³

One book in particular stood out to Lewis in these early years. Without realizing the effect it would have on him, Lewis read the words, “I heard a voice that cried, Balder the beautiful is dead, is dead.”¹⁴ Even though Lewis “knew nothing about Balder,” he found himself “uplifted into huge regions of northern sky” and “desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described.”¹⁵ This enticing of his imagination profoundly shaped him early on and set the course for how he would extend his imagination in his own writings through books such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*. One clue to understanding the significance of his reading in these early years is when Lewis noted that “I never read an autobiography in which the parts devoted to the earlier years were not far the most interesting.”¹⁶ One must assume he applied this to his own life as well.

In addition to influencing his early life, Lewis would have his identity shaped by reading books as well. McGrath observed how Lewis chose solitude and books rather than making friends like most kids his age.¹⁷ As a result of this choice, Lewis later remarked how he “Developed a vocabulary which must (I now see) have sounded very funny.”¹⁸ Even adults thought he might be showing off despite the fact he was using “The only words I knew.”¹⁹ This further alienated him from others and reinforced his identity

¹³ McGrath, *C.S. Lewis*, 64.

¹⁴ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 18-9.

¹⁵ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 18-9.

¹⁶ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, xii.

¹⁷ McGrath, *C.S. Lewis*, 16-7.

¹⁸ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 58.

¹⁹ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 58.

as a loner. This also gave him space for his imagination and for exploring “his own private worlds.”²⁰ It was in this space that another notable part of C.S. Lewis’ identity emerged in his ability to memorize and recite quotes. McGrath recalls the story of Kenneth Tynan observing Lewis play a memory game with him in which Tynan picked a book from Lewis’ library and read aloud and was then amazed to find that Lewis could identify the book and the context.²¹

Not only did the younger Lewis appreciate reading books more than other kids his age, but he also read a different kind of book than others around him. “I could not help knowing that most other people, boys and grown-ups alike, did not care for the books I read.”²² This had a profound impact on his identity. Instead of causing him to see himself as more advanced than others his age, his reading gave him “a slight feeling, not of superiority, but of inferiority.”²³ He noticed this again about his time at Wyvern, in that when he began there “Nothing was farther from my mind than the idea that my private taste for fairly good books... gave me any sort of superiority to those who read nothing but magazines.”²⁴

Ironically, this began something in Lewis that readers find as a charming attribute. It may have even shaped his approach to writing as a layman rather than claiming any spiritual authority. In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis offered a disclaimer on the nature of what he wrote. “Any theologian will see easily enough what, and how little, I

²⁰ McGrath, *C.S. Lewis*, 18.

²¹ McGrath, *C.S. Lewis*, 166.

²² Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 125.

²³ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 125.

²⁴ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 123-4.

have read.”²⁵ This statement may seem comical to many readers today. It is precisely this humility that invites readers to approach his works as unassuming and perhaps even to lower their guard in allowing his ideas to shape them in surprising ways.

One notable shift in forming his identity came when “I discovered that other people... loved books that I loved.”²⁶ This would open the door to lifelong friendships. It may seem that these friendships influenced him to equal measure as his reading of books, but that overlooks the way in which Lewis chose his friends. “You may have noticed that the books you really love are bound together by a secret thread.”²⁷ Lewis spent much of his time in conversations with others who had a similar “secret thread” in what they read. As James Como noted, Lewis also relied on his friends for their copies of books as he did not keep an extensive library himself.²⁸ This only works when a person’s friends read similar books. This is why The Inklings were able to profoundly shape one another as a result of the books they read and wrote. This collective identity would begin by a shared love of books and eventually lead to Lewis’ own conversion.

Like other areas in his life, Lewis’ conversion to Christianity was propelled by the books he read. Once Lewis established his identity as a reader of good books, he then stumbled into certain books which challenged him in a variety of unexpected ways. When he read the classics, he noticed that “Conscious causes of doubt arose.”²⁹ As Lewis continued to read more, he could not anticipate where it would ultimately take him.

²⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1940) 1.

²⁶ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 196.

²⁷ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 150-1.

²⁸ James T. Como, *Remembering C.S. Lewis* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005) 6: The Tutor.

²⁹ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 75.

“Liking an author may be as involuntary and improbable as falling in love.”³⁰ The authors he liked began to challenge him in ways he was unprepared to process. As if in a battle, Lewis noted that “All the books were beginning to turn against me.”³¹ He realized that he “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.”³² In the language Lewis used to describe this process one can feel the power he assigned to these books. He felt overwhelmed and helpless by contrast. “A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading.”³³

A pivotal moment in this conversion process happened when Lewis read *Phantastes* by George MacDonald. Lewis described his reactions to reading this book not just in logical terms, but in emotional terms that almost sound poetic. “It is as if I were carried sleeping across the frontier, or as if I had died in the old country and could never remember how I came alive in the new.”³⁴ This was not a complete transformation in Lewis, but something was dramatically happening to him. “That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptised; the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer.”³⁵ Something inside him shifted, and he now had to figure out a way to make sense of it. It is interesting to note that Lewis described his conversion process beginning with his imagination, and this as the result of reading MacDonald’s book. Michael J. Partridge highlighted that before reading *Phantastes*, Lewis was an atheist who was heading in the

³⁰ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 233.

³¹ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 260.

³² Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 260.

³³ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 234.

³⁴ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 220.

³⁵ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 222.

direction of Romanticism.³⁶ It was MacDonald that stopped him in his tracks. Almost comically, Lewis admitted that “I had not the faintest notion what I had let myself in for by buying *Phantastes*.”³⁷ Can one give any higher compliment to a book? Most readers cannot help but envy the power this book had over Lewis and to wish the same experience for themselves.

Another notable example of his reading in the conversion process was when Lewis began to read G.K. Chesterton. “I had never heard of him and had no idea of what he stood for; nor can I quite understand why he made such an immediate conquest of me.”³⁸ This is a stunning acknowledgment of the credibility Lewis ascribed to the books he read, even if he was unfamiliar with the author. As he noted, “In reading Chesterton, as in reading MacDonald, I did not know what I was letting myself in for.”³⁹ One gets the picture of an unarmed Lewis reading Chesterton and being moved beyond explanation or defense. In this sense, his conversion to Christianity can be seen as one of surrender. This was not the result of Lewis approaching his reading with naivete, rather that everything he read previously could not compete with the persuasion of what he now found in the books he read. McGrath even noted that in some ways Lewis took up the role of an apologist in line with what he found in Chesterton.⁴⁰ Can one give any higher compliment to an author?

³⁶ Michael J. Partridge, “C.S. Lewis and George MacDonald,” accessed October 29, 2018, https://fuller.instructure.com/courses/2357/pages/handouts-week-2?module_item_id=120714.

³⁷ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 222.

³⁸ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 233.

³⁹ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 234.

⁴⁰ Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C.S. Lewis* (West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons, Ltd., 2014) 9.

Finally, as Lewis pursued Christianity with the remainder of his life, he shaped his theology through reading books as well. Lewis now realized that “In science we have been reading only the notes to a poem; in Christianity we find the poem itself.”⁴¹ He used his journey and the experiences in reading to shape how he would write as a theological voice for others. “The things I assert most vigorously are those that I resisted long and accepted late.”⁴²

As with the books that had overwhelmed Lewis such as from MacDonald and Chesterton, Lewis had the same experience with the Bible. He described being “chilled and puzzled” by what he found as he studied it more in-depth.⁴³ He noted that “One of the things that surprised me when I first read the New Testament seriously was that it talked so much about a Dark Power in the universe.”⁴⁴ Like many of the books he read, Lewis found ideas in the Bible he could not anticipate. True to form he allowed these new ideas to shape and influence him.

Lewis understood reading as a critical part of developing one’s theology. It was not enough to read, but one must also read for theological depth. “If you do not listen to Theology, that will not mean that you have no ideas about God. It will mean that you have a lot of wrong ones.”⁴⁵ Lewis’ experience in reading theology grounded him in its practice in the real world. “For a great many of the ideas about God which are trotted out as novelties today are simply the ones which real Theologians tried centuries ago and

⁴¹ C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1947) 212.

⁴² Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 260.

⁴³ Lewis, *Miracles*, 183.

⁴⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1952) 45.

⁴⁵ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 155.

rejected.”⁴⁶ Lewis described a man with a shallow form of Christianity who begins reading astronomy “And who perhaps abandons his religion on that account,” but could in fact experience “His first genuinely religious experience.”⁴⁷ Lewis saw reading as the way to prevent and move away from a shallow faith. Even after someone has developed an understanding of the truth in God, “We have to be continually reminded of what we believe. Neither this belief nor any other will automatically remain alive in the mind. It must be fed.”⁴⁸ One can trace the continuance of this argument when Lewis posed the question, “Did ye never know a lover of books that with all his first editions and signed copies had lost the power to read them?”⁴⁹

Stewart Goetz observed how Lewis considered readers to either be in the majority or the minority when it came to how and what they read.⁵⁰ Lewis embodied what it meant to be a minority reader, especially as it implied a willingness to read the same book multiple times in a lifetime. He then challenged others to follow him in this regard. When he applied this way of reading to his theological journey, it had profound effects on the faith of many others. “Good books which are remote from modern sympathy need to be treated at greater length than good books which everyone already knows and loves.”⁵¹ This way of reading allowed Lewis to offer a unique perspective on the faith for his readers.

⁴⁶ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 155.

⁴⁷ Lewis, *Miracles*, 81.

⁴⁸ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 141.

⁴⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 1946) Kindle Locations 752-3.

⁵⁰ Stewart Goetz, *C.S. Lewis* (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 2018) 1.

⁵¹ Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward, *The Cambridge Companion to C.S. Lewis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 24.

Bruce L. Edwards noted how Lewis saw the reading of books from people who were no longer alive to be a way of grounding himself in reality rather than as an escape.⁵² Never is this truer than in the way he approached his theology. The brilliance of so much of what Lewis wrote was in its ability to take complex theological ideas and make them palatable for a wide variety of readers. He was able to do this to such a significant degree as a result of the profound influence that reading books had on his life. As a writer, he then offered the fruits of that influence for the benefit of others.

⁵² Bruce L. Edwards, *C.S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy* (Westport: Praeger Perspectives, 2007) 96.

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