

# Aslan Wept: C. S. Lewis and Today's Students

By Nancy Lecourt

These books tell the story of the Great Controversy, without ever mentioning God!" Gary Bradley, my sophomore biology teacher at San Gabriel Academy, held up C. S. Lewis's space trilogy—*Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*. Since he was one of my favorite teachers, I got the books and started reading.

That same year, 1967, my English teacher, Carolyn Stevens, was taking her devotionals from another book by Lewis, *The Great Divorce*. I soon had my own copy, and I was fascinated by the idea of damned souls as tourists, taking a bus from the grimy suburbs of hell to the grassy meadows of Paradise.

After this, I read everything I could by Lewis: *Mere Christianity*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *Surprised by Joy*, *Miracles*, *The World's Last Night*, *The Problem of Pain*, and so on. I literally had every book he had written, so far as I knew.

Lewis got me through the spiritual crises of my adolescence: he made it possible for me to be both a Christian and a thinking person, to remain an Adventist, but still feel connected to the rest of the Christian world.

Adventism had not been presented to me as logical, or even as part of a grand tradi-

tion—only as The Truth. I was eager for what I found in Lewis, a door into what felt like a larger, airier space: Mere Christendom.

As I look back, it seems odd that I didn't hear of the Narnia books until almost ten years later, at a Bicentennial party. I suspect that they were not shelved with the other Lewis books, and because they were for children, not considered interesting or even respectable, perhaps, in the same way as the other books.<sup>1</sup>

Yet I do not regret this—what a delicious treat it was to find these seven glorious fantasies, now considered Lewis's best work by many, when I thought I had read it all—like suddenly discovering I had an extra week of summer vacation, or another layer of chocolates in what had looked like an empty box.

These days, Adventist students usually begin with Narnia: *The Lion, the Witch, and the*



*Wardrobe* is often read to them in elementary school. Unfortunately, many stop there.<sup>2</sup> For years, I have made it a practice to include at least one Lewis book when I teach Great Books, our general education literature class at Pacific Union College. I always ask students what other Lewis books they have read, and find that many have read none, never even heard of Lewis before—though always a few have read several.

Finally, this spring I was able to teach an entire course in C. S. Lewis, the most enjoyable class of my thirty years of teaching (yes, I began as a very small child...). As I pre-

Students seemed particularly taken by the concept of the “weight of glory,” Lewis’s term for the approval of God that will eventually rest upon those who are saved. More importantly, because each of us will one day be either a saint or a lost soul, we need to recognize the weight of our neighbor’s glory—that we are surrounded by potentially immortal creatures, and we are daily pushing them toward one destination or the other.

Another English major, Lindsay Bautista, wrote a story about a little girl whom Aslan calls on to bear the weight of her brother and father’s glory—even

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pared to teach, I wondered if today’s students would love Lewis as I did when I was their age, more than thirty years ago. Would they appreciate his clarity, logic, and wit? Or would something else catch their attention?

As I planned the syllabus, I thought about how important conversation was to Lewis, how he thrived on the weekly meetings in his rooms at Magdalen College, Oxford, or at the Bird and Baby pub, where he and his friends talked and argued and critiqued each other’s manuscripts over their pints (and smokes).

So I felt that the central organizing principle for our class should be conversation: We would sit around a seminar table, drink tea, and talk. I went to the local Dorcas and bought a lot of mismatched mugs, plugged in the teakettle, and we were ready.

We met in a room with westward facing windows every Wednesday evening, and the setting sun came through the trees and onto the faces of sixteen students, thirteen of them young women. Each evening we read both fiction and nonfiction. Gradually we got to know each other, and Lewis.

Themes began to emerge. Pleasure, for example. As English major Cecily Allen wrote, “Often as Adventists it seems like we are being told what we should not take pleasure in, never what we can take pleasure in. But pleasures are those things that bring us in contact with God, that turn our eyes toward heaven....”

Although the students certainly appreciated Lewis’s famously clear and logical prose, they seemed more struck by how personal he is—how he puts his finger on the very sin we want to avoid talking about. We shared our own personal failings as we read the *Screwtape Letters*, confessing that we often recognized ourselves in his characters.

though her brother is a bully, and her father abusive.

Rachel Reeves, a history major, wrote on her final exam: “The person next to me is very much more important than the task at hand: the class I’m studying for will end; the car I’m buying will break; the civilization I’m shaping will fall; but my sister will be around forever. I guess I can take the time to listen to her talk about her day.”

Another theme, which was inevitable, I suppose, turned out to be discomfort with Lewis’s attitudes toward girls and women. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Lucy is told that she must not go to war because “battles are ugly when women fight.”

In *Mere Christianity* we read that husbands are the heads of their wives because—well, what real woman would WANT to boss her man around, I mean, honestly? It’s not natural. And what would the neighbors think? (This is, of course, a rough paraphrase—but not very rough.)

The young women in the class loved Lewis, and yet they felt the sting of these small insults. We noted them, tried to imagine that Lewis did better after his marriage, and forgave him for being, like us, a product of time and place.

We talked about dancing. Lewis uses dance as a metaphor frequently; not just in the Narnia books, but also in his nonfiction, and in the grand finale of *Perelandra*, the “great dance,” which represents the entire universe as organized and powered by God’s will.

Dance in Lewis figures delight, celebration, and order within apparent disorder. Dance is even used to explain the Trinity, the *pas de trois* that is Love itself.

Social studies major Audrey Grube wrote her final paper on dancing, and concluded with this sweet pic-

ture of Lewis: “I like to imagine him covertly dancing around Oxford, or along a forest path—perhaps even watching, longingly, a young couple at a festival on a summer night. I imagine him this way for I, too, am a dancer, but only at heart....”

Indeed, the theme of dance helped us resolve some of our problems with gender hierarchy. Although Lewis is clear in his rejection of “mere” equality—his concept of an ideal ruler is clearly a king, and the ideal government a monarchy—this only applies, it would seem, to our fallen state.

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The Great Dance at the end of *Perelandra* feels almost feminist in its insistence that the great design is neither linear nor hierarchical, but circular: “In the plan of the Great Dance...each is equally at the centre...there seems no centre because it is all centre. Blessed be He!”

Finally, another, darker theme emerged: the death of the mother. Lewis lost his own mother on his eighth birthday, and the memory of this first, early sorrow never left him. We felt the sharp pain of Digory in *The Magicians’ Nephew*—written more than thirty years later—whose mother is dying

In a wonderful moment of wish fulfillment, Lewis allows his character to do what he could not: heal his mother with fruit from the Narnian Tree of Life:

There she lay, as he had seen her lie so many other times, propped up on the pillow, and a wan, pale face that would make you cry to look at it....

The brightness of the Apple threw strange lights on the ceiling...And the smell of the Apple of Youth was as if there was a window in the room that opened on Heaven.

“Oh, darling, how lovely,” said Digory’s mother...And no sooner had she finished it than she smiled and her head sank back on the pillow and she was asleep: a real, natural, gentle sleep, without any of those nasty drugs, which was, as Digory knew, the thing in the whole world that she wanted most.

Near the end of the quarter, one of the young men in the class had to leave us—his own mother was dying of cancer. And we had no Apple to give him. At the final exam, I told the remaining students what had happened,

why he wasn’t with us. A student who had recently become a Christian made an impromptu card for the others to sign. On the front she drew Aslan, weeping.

## Notes and References

1. I may be wrong about this. In 1979, Peter Schakel could write that ten million copies of the Narnia books had been sold (in *Reading with the Heart: The Way into Narnia*).

2. In pre-Harry Potter days, this book was often banned from Adventist elementary schools because it dealt with magic and

witches. Now, it is extolled because the witches are evil, as opposed to both good and bad witches in the Rowling books. Apparently the presence of both good and bad magic in the Narnia books is somehow overlooked. But I begin to rant....

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Nancy Lecourt is a professor of English at Pacific Union College, Angwin, California.

