

# DESIRE FOR ETERNITY, FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN: THE DRAMA OF MODERNITY IN THE WORKS OF C.S LEWIS

## Lewis's Argument by Desire

- A. Lewis's long journey to faith—as documented in his spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*—began in early childhood through a series of seemingly mundane, and yet spiritually intense moments of supernatural insight.
1. Seeing a makeshift toy garden made by his brother fills the young Lewis with a sense of moist green places, an intimation, the elder Lewis felt, of Eden.
  2. Reading Beatrix Potter's *Squirrel Nutkin* troubles him with the Idea of Autumn.
  3. Glancing at some words from a book of Norse mythology transports him to cold Northern places.
  4. Lewis used the word joy or *sehnsucht* (“longing”) to refer to these moments.
- B. By sharing with his reader his own experiences, Lewis the apologist invites us to explore our own moments of joy and to question the source of our deepest longings.
1. As citizens of the modern world, we have been taught—consciously or unconsciously—by Freud and his heirs to interpret our spiritual longings as either a sublimation of more primitive emotions or a product of wish-fulfillment.
  2. But why and how could unconscious nature produce in us a conscious desire for something that transcends the natural world?
  3. Does not Augustine's claim (in *Confessions*) that God made us for himself and that our hearts are restless until they rest in him make better sense of the phenomena of joy?
- C. On the foundation of our *shared* experience of joy, Lewis rests one of his most appealing and original apologetics for the existence of God: the argument by desire.
1. Just as the fact that we experience thirst is proof that we are creatures for whom the drinking of water is natural, so the fact that we desire an object that our natural world cannot supply suggests the existence of another, supernatural one.
  2. The desire does not guarantee that we will achieve that other world (if stranded in the desert, we will die of thirst), but it does suggest that we are creatures who are capable of achieving it and who were in some sense made to achieve it.
  3. In the conclusion of his *Reflections on the Psalms*, Lewis notes how odd it is that we are continually surprised by the passage of time; given that time is the element in which we live, our shock at its passage is tantamount to a fish being surprised by the wetness of water.
  4. I would add that not only time but space is finally an alien thing to us: a strange thing indeed if we are products of natural processes that “know” only the time-space continuum.
  5. Apologists today, following the lead of Lewis's argument by desire, often speak of all people having a God-shaped vacuum in their heart that only Christ can fill.
- D. In *The Silver Chair*, two children and a Narnian Marshwiggle (Puddleglum) journey into the underground lair of the Emerald Witch and rescue Prince Rilian from enchantment; but the Witch catches them.
1. Slowly, seductively she tries to convince them that the world of Narnia that they *know* exists does not really exist, that it is just a dream: neither the sun nor Aslan really exists; they are just illusions they made up, mythic copies of real, mundane torches and cats.
  2. They almost give in, when Puddleglum, in an act of desperation, shoves his foot in the fire; the pain brings him back to his senses and he boldly proclaims that even if Narnia and Aslan are myths, he prefers them to the Witch's dark world.
  3. Contra Freud and Marx, material things are not the source of our religious yearnings: heaven is the true original; the things of our world are but pale copies.

## Lewis's Argument by Myth

- A. Like many educated men of his age, Lewis, guided by his reading of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915), considered the gospel story to be a myth.
1. Frazer, like the later Joseph Campbell, was a comparative anthropologist who cataloged such persistent archetypal myths/rites as the god or demigod who dies and rises again.
  2. This archetype—known as the Corn King because of its link to the seasonal cycle—appears in many cultures under many names: Osiris, Adonis, Tammuz, Mithras, Balder.
  3. As the gospels depict Christ as a “demigod” who was slain as a ritual scapegoat to expiate taboo guilt and who subsequently rose, he must be read in mythic (not historic) terms.
  4. Lewis simply assumed that modern anthropology had “proven” Christ a myth.
- B. A long talk with his friend J. R. R. Tolkien changed his mind about Christianity.
1. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings*, suggested to Lewis that the reason Christ resembled so closely the myths of the pagans was that Christ was the myth that came true.
  2. Inspired by Tolkien's suggestion, Lewis came to view myths as glimpses, road signs, pointers to a greater truth that would be revealed literally and historically in Christ.
  3. “The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, without ceasing to be myth, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) under Pontius Pilate.”
  4. The presence of so many Corn King myths strengthens the case for Christ, for it shows that Christianity is not a foreign thing but the answer to a deep human need.
  5. Until the coming of Christ, Lewis writes, God spoke through our conscience, through a historical people group (the Jews), and through the “good dreams” of the pagans.
  6. Just as Christ fulfilled all the Messianic prophecies recorded in the Old Testament, so, Lewis argues, he fulfilled all the highest yearnings of the pagans.
  7. What makes the gospel of Christ so compelling is that it appeals not only to our reason but to our imagination; yes, Christ is more than Balder, but he is not less.
- C. Building on Lewis's apologetic, I would argue that though Christianity is not the only truth (bits of truth can be found in all cultures and religions), it is the only complete truth.
1. Yes, truth is at the top of the hill and there are many ways around that hill, but the Truth that lies at the top is Christ himself: he who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.
  2. The Magi offer a powerful symbol of pre-Christians pagans who trusted to their limited knowledge of the stars and followed it until it led them to the full revelation of Christ.
  3. Medieval Christians recognized Plato and Virgil as proto-Christians used by God to prepare the pagan world; Paul even quotes pagan poets as pointers to Christ (Acts 17:28).

### ***Bio Louis Markos (www.Loumarkos.com)***

Dr. Markos is Professor in English and Scholar in Residence at Houston Baptist University, holds the Robert H. Ray Chair in Humanities. He is author of 11 books, among them, *From Achilles to Christ: Why Christians Should Read the Pagan Classics*, *Lewis Agonistes*, *Restoring Beauty: The Good, the True, and the Beautiful in the Writings of C. S. Lewis*, and *On the Shoulders of Hobbits*. This speech is taken from his book, *Apologetics for the 21st Century*. He has also produced two lecture series with The Teaching Company/Great Courses, published over 120 book chapters, essays, and reviews in various magazines and journals, given well over 300 public lectures in some two dozen states as well as Rome, Oxford, and British Columbia, and had his adaptations of *The Iphigenia in Tauris* of Euripides, *The Helen* of Euripides, and *The Electra* of Sophocles performed off-Broadway.