

FAITH ON TRIAL IN THE WRITINGS OF C. S. LEWIS

S.A. Abayasekara

Department of English, University of Colombo

Introduction

The value C. S. Lewis attaches to faith surfaces in the encouragement he gives his fellow believers. However, while extensive research exists on Lewis' religious propagations, there is limited examination of how his treatment of faith changes over time. Therefore, I examine this treatment across three books – *Perelandra* (1943), *Till We Have Faces* (1956), and *A Grief Observed* (1960)¹.

In *Mere Christianity* (MC - 1943), Lewis explains why a Christian needs faith. Emphasizing the danger emotion may pose to faith, he notes that faith shifting according to volatile mood would obscure one's understanding of God. In times of joy God would appear kind while hardship would make God "evil." By contrast, reason, the writer believes, would fuel faith.

Methodology

In exploring Lewis' treatment of faith, I map, chronologically, the changing beliefs of the key characters - and particularly of the protagonists - in the three books mentioned, considering the process by which they lose faith and regain belief.

Results and Discussion

Perelandra, published the same year as *MC*, closely follows the treatment of faith in the apologetic work. Lewis derives the idea for it from *Paradise Lost*, envisioning life without mortals' Fall, on the planet "Perelandra". The novel primarily comprises three characters: the protagonist Ransom, the Lady, and Weston.

Weston worships power. Moreover, he gradually shows increasing distance from God and proximity to Satan. "The devil does all [his] thinking for [him]" (1943: 126), and as Margaret Hannay comments, this statement indicates how Weston's surrender to evil destroys his reason

¹ See Abayasekara (2015) for a fuller treatment.

(1977: 75). But I would argue that the subsequent reference to his decaying “psychic organism” encompasses not just reason but his emotions also (1943: 135).

The Lady – an unfallen Eve - stands as a complete contrast. She initially does not even realise that she has a choice between obedience and disobedience – and when she does see so, delights that she can *obey*. Even when God does not speak to her as He generally does, she doubts neither his power nor wisdom (1943: 83).

The way these versions of faith question the divine bracket Ransom’s own doubting, less extreme than Weston’s and more severe than the Lady’s. The sense of divine presence often impacts his faith. Before leaving earth, having one of God’s spirits with him, his faith stands firm. But, as he realizes on Perelandra, that Weston may also be present, he momentarily forgets that the absence of a tangible heavenly being does not imply God’s absence or weakness.

But reason invariably comes to Ransom’s aid. Reason soon assures him that he is on Perelandra not by chance but God’s direction. It also makes him see how his name, “Ransom,” is no coincidence but indicative of his purpose.

In the two subsequent books, however, published many years after *Perelandra* and *MC*, Lewis takes faith to a place where his protagonists neither intellectually nor emotionally “see” God’s goodness. Thus here the trial surfaces regarding omnibenevolence rather than omnipotence.

In *Till We Have Faces (TWHF)*, a retelling of Apuleius’ *Cupid and Psyche* myth, while the narrator Orual does not question the gods’ power, she believes they use this power to harm mortals. Moreover, after Psyche, Orual’s half-sister with whom she forms an intricate bond, enters her life, this dislike becomes hatred. The change occurs as the city first shows Psyche adoration, but then claims that she has offended the gods, and must therefore be sacrificed.

But Psyche steadfastly believes in divine goodness. Unlike Orual who views Psyche’s sacrifice only as a cruel separation, Psyche sees it as

perhaps the realization of her lifelong wish to marry the greatest - and possibly divine - king. And Orual struggles to accept this interpretation. Her self-division escalates when she meets Psyche after the sacrifice, and Psyche declares that they stand before a palace Orual cannot see. Indeed Lewis' central alteration in his retelling lies in making the palace seemingly invisible to mortals. This twist emphasises the issue of faith, as Orual must believe in something she only fleetingly sees.

Reason, however, does not aid divine revelation as in *Perelandra*. Instead the novel examines the relation between faith and sight, considering how sight, joining with reason, emotion and one's will to believe, affects faith. And Orual "fails" this test. Not only does she willfully disbelieve in divine goodness to Psyche, she finally makes Psyche herself disobey her husband.

Yet the very process of writing changes Orual. She realises that she has been an unreliable narrator, and eventually attains spiritual beauty, proclaiming that the gods themselves "are the answer" (1956:307).

From fiction, *A Grief Observed (AGO)* moves to experiences revolving around a true event in the narrator's life – the death of his wife, Joy. Though *MC* states that one should not depend on feelings of oneness with God to approach Him, on a sense of God's abandonment in severest sorrow, Lewis questions God's goodness. His feelings thus influence his view of God, making God seem a fair-weather friend.

However, the psychological effect of writing gradually surfaces, whereby Lewis follows a process of rereading, and thence, reseeding². When analyzing his feelings and motives from a greater temporal and emotional distance, he sees how he himself has tainted his spiritual fulfillment. And through an effort to distinguish between feelings and understanding, Lewis changes his attitude of blame to praise, no longer waiting for the "right" mood to approach God.

Yet the dichotomy between reason and emotion disappears. Though reason aids Lewis' renewed belief, it is also aided by the "sense" of a

² I thank Prof. William Oram for suggesting the phrase "rereading into reseeding."

presence. Therefore the debate about whether one knows God by intelligence or by love finally becomes a mere “nonsense question” (1960: 76).

Conclusion

The challenges to faith that start in *Perelandra* and intensify in *TWHF*, thus reach their climax in *AGO*. But as this exploration of faith concludes, not just the fictional but also the more autobiographical character attains, as the writer explains, “this real belief in...[his] religion”, which for Lewis is “a wonderful thing” (*Letters*, Vol. 3, 2007: 751).

References

- Abayasekara, S. A., 2015, ‘From Fall to Leap: Journeys of Faith in the Works of C. S. Lewis’, BA thesis, Department of English, Smith College.
- Lewis, C. S., 1943, *Mere Christianity*, Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., New York.
- Lewis, C. S., 1943, *Perelandra*, Macmillan, New York.
- Lewis, C. S., 1956, *Till we have faces*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.
- Lewis, C. S., 1961, *A grief observed*, Seabury Press, Greenwich.