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## Capturing C. S. Lewis's "Mere" Christianity: Another Look at Shadowlands

### Abstract

In his *The Achievement of C. S. Lewis* (1980), Thomas Howard reflects that Lewis's life was "not terribly exciting," and adds, "[i]t would be hard to make a big box-office film of it." Hard - yes. Impossible - no. Thirteen years after Howard's statement and thirty years after Lewis's death, Richard Attenborough brought Lewis's life to the big screen. Philip Yancey notes that "[s]ome evangelicals complain that the movie distorts Lewis's life and waters down his Christian message." I contend that even the most fundamental evangelical should have no complaints and that the highly religious film deserves another look.

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In *Shadowlands* (1993), director Richard Attenborough exquisitely uses film techniques to present an ever-so-accurate presentation of Lewis, the man of books, and of his philosophy, his "mere" Christianity.

First, how does Attenborough's film biography portray C. S. Lewis? Linda Seger, author of *The Art of Adaptation*, advises anyone attempting a biographical film to remember that "it is impossible to tell a 'Womb to tomb' story in two hours."<sup>1</sup> Thus, Attenborough's decision to stick with screenwriter Nicholson's portrayal of only a few short years in Lewis's life was a wise one. Basically, the time under consideration is a two-to-three year telescoped period in the early 1950s focusing on Lewis's falling-in-love-with-Joy experience. The telescoped "facts" revealed in the film are on track: Attenborough's C. S. Lewis (Anthony Hopkins) is a late middle-aged professor, a writer of children's stories, and an author of Christian apologetic works. He is a bachelor living with an alcoholic elder brother in an old country home (The Kilns). Three of the most important aspects of C. S. Lewis are foregrounded: the film portrays Lewis as a brilliant debater, as a beloved public figure, and as an emotionally isolated man. Attenborough does, indeed, capture the essence of the man. However, of greater significance to the film's worth is Attenborough's ability to adapt Lewis's philosophy, his Christian theism. Lewis himself defined his "mere" Christianity as "the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times."<sup>2</sup> He was not interested in divisive doctrines,

describing his *The Case for Christianity* as "more what might be called philosophy" and defining philosophy as did Plato - not as a subject but as a way.<sup>3</sup> However, Attenborough's film illustrates that Lewis's way was less easily traveled than the scholar had - for twenty-five years - proclaimed.

To Attenborough's credit he covers all of the ever-so-big issues Lewis addresses in his writings: death, heaven, hell, pain, faith. The film's question is: Do C. S. Lewis's ready answers suffice? The answer is the film's story of life being driven to a deeper level of experience.

The obvious subject of concern in the film is death - not the Merle Oberon *Wuthering Heights* mystical, romantic, beautiful death - but the morphined, agonizing, suffering real death of a real person: Joy Gresham Lewis. Joy credits her acceptance of Christianity with sustaining her through years of marriage to a philandering alcoholic husband. Attenborough's Joy's admission to Lewis that her showing up on his doorstep was a "running away" from problems at home was true-to-life. She later said: "I was so much under Bill's influence that I had to run away from him physically and consult one of the clearest thinkers of our time."<sup>4</sup> She did consult Lewis, inviting him to the now-famous luncheon portrayed in the film, and the rest, as they say, is history. In the film, shortly after a "technical" marriage, Attenborough shows Joy suddenly falling down in her apartment. Doctors diagnose cancer. Jack faces the truth; he is in love with this sick woman. Joy's cancer goes

into remission. A happy period follows, but the shadow of her illness grows ever longer. The cancer, again active, consumes her body. She suffers. She dies.

Jack's grief was intense. His "faith - so ardently championed in his books - was shaken to its very foundation."<sup>5</sup> Attenborough's film visually captures this dark period of doubt and bitterness. The suspense builds as the viewer wonders if Lewis can continue to regard death as a simple river-crossing on a bridge built by the great Bridge Builder. Shortly after Joy's death, Jack attends a social gathering. Everyone turns as Jack enters the room, quietly whispering, one by one, "so sorry, Jack," "so very sorry." Harry Harrington (Michael Denison) reminds him that "we see so little here." Faith, he points out, is all that sustains one. "Only God," he says, "knows why these things happen." Jack turns on him with a vengeance, angrily shouting: "We're the creatures in the cosmic laboratory. I have no doubt the experience is for our own good, but it still makes God the villainous vivisectionist!" The film lays out the harsh reality of death.

The reality of heaven, too, is certainly explored and affirmed. Indeed, Attenborough pays great attention to Lewis's belief in the reality of heaven. When Jack voices his anger at Riley's suggestion that the Narnia wardrobe is a Freudian sexual image, insisting instead that it is a symbol of magic, he implies much. The Lewis scholar, Thomas Howard, argues that Lewis's greatest achievement was his attempt to return the modern child to the possibilities of imaginative truth - to

embrace fantasy, imagination, and the supernatural and the possibilities of glories and the glorious.<sup>6</sup> Lewis was convinced that the myths of all cultures shed some light on the "one myth that really happened."<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Narnia wardrobe that the children in the stories must open, enter, and push through in order to magically enter another world is but a metaphor for the courage to leave the land of the material and open the door to the possibilities of the metaphysical.

However, the greatest illustration in the film of Lewis's thoughts regarding heaven is given via the Golden Valley picture. As Joy enters Lewis's masculine study surrounded by books, she stops and stares at a picture on the wall. Jack tells her that when he was a very little boy it hung in his nursery and that he thought it was a picture of heaven. Later, after the "marriage before God and the world" on Joy's hospital sickbed and during her period of remission, Joy suggests taking a holiday and locating the actual valley portrayed in the picture. When they arrive at the inn and ask the keeper for directions, she informs them that the valley's name was mistranslated. The actual translation from the French should have been "door," not "golden." They drive to the place, get out of the car, and behold - before them lies the door to Narnia! The English countryside has never looked more radiant; golden shafts of sunshine bathe a green, green meadow. A perfect sky smiles down on Joy and Jack as they walk through the pasture, holding hands and laughing over little intimate jokes. It very much is the Golden Valley of the picture; it appears to

be as mystical a place as the imagination can conjure. However, rain soon begins to fall, reminding all that "the old Narnia" does sometimes provide a glimpse of heaven but clouds soon appear, shadows soon fall. The "real country" - the new Narnia - heaven - can only be reached by opening death's door. The film's most blatant address of the issue of heaven occurs after Joy's death. Its poignancy relies on effective understatement. Douglas asks his stepfather: "Do you believe in heaven?" and Lewis firmly responds: "Yes, I do."

Not only heaven but hell, too, is addressed in the film. Joy is in the hospital daily taking cobalt treatments, suffering from her fight with cancer. Jack, too, suffers - intensely. It is this intense suffering that wakens him to the realization of how very much Joy matters to him. He puzzles over his feelings for Joy and says to himself: "How could Joy be my wife? I'd have to love her, wouldn't I? I'd have to care more for her than for anyone else in this world. I'd have to suffering the torments of the damned," and, through sobs and tears, realizes that he is. His state of grief over the possibility of separation from Joy is so intense that he parallels it to his vision of hell - eternal separation from the God of Love. Thus, Attenborough's film makes it increasingly clear that the love that exists between Jack and Joy mirrors the love that Lewis advocates between God and humankind and that Jack's separation from Joy mirrors his hell that is separation from the source of all love.

"Something must drive us out of our nursery into the world--we must grow up!" becomes the film's C. S. Lewis dictum. This statement very much summarizes the plot of Attenborough's story. The "something" that drives Lewis out of his cloistered and safe world - his nursery - into the real world of open spaces full of bright joys and dark shadows is love; the something that forces the man to grow up is intense suffering and tragic loss - pain. Attenborough illustrates this humanizing journey through careful attention to Jack's progressive relationship with Joy, his detached professor to human being relationship with a student, his increasingly intimate relationship with Douglas, and his maturing relationship with God.

Attenborough's attention to Lewis's "faith journey" deserves further comment. For decades Jack Lewis had been voicing and writing words of faith; the film does not neglect this issue. Lewis had habitually addressed even great losses with ready answers. In one of the lectures portrayed in the movie, he waves a newspaper at the audience. And begins:

Yesterday I read a letter that referred to an event that took place almost a year ago. That was the night a number 1 bus drove into a column of young Royal Marine cadets in Chatham, and killed twenty-four of them. You remember? The letter asks some simple but fundamental questions. Where was God on that December night? Why didn't He stop it? Isn't God supposed to be good? Isn't he supposed to love us? Does God want us to suffer? What if the answer to that question is yes. You see, I'm not sure that God particularly wants us to be happy. He wants us to love and be loved. He wants us to grow up. I suggest to you that it is because God loves us that he makes us the gift of suffering. Or to put it another way, pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world.



Lewis continues his discussion, reasoning that "we're like blocks of stone, out of which the sculptor carves the forms of men. The blows of His chisel, which hurt so much, are what makes us perfect." Attenborough's film suggests that Lewis's God put the man and his philosophical claims to the test. What does a writer do when overcome by any emotion? He writes. Lewis's "Grief Observed," claims Ralph C. Wood, is "darker than anything in Kafka or Sartre."<sup>8</sup> Lewis accuses God of being a Cosmic Sadist, an evil tyrant. Lewis later described the book as one "which ends in faith but raises all the blackest doubts en route."<sup>9</sup> In the film, a drained Lewis, sitting behind his desk, voices his Grief Observed thesis. He turns to his brother and admits: "I'm so terribly afraid. Of never seeing her again. Of thinking that suffering is just suffering after all. No cause. No purpose. No pattern. No sense. Just pain, in a world of pain."

Some Christian critics negatively assess Attenborough's film's ending, suggesting that it belittles the reality of Lewis's re-established, re-strengthened, "metal toughened by fire," faith. I disagree. The final scene is, once again, Narnia-like in its imagery. A long shot reveals Lewis and Douglas walking through another Golden Valley meadow. Richard Dyer explains: "he romance literally embodies the theology and, as suggested by the last surging (music, camerawork, rolling green valley) shot, [Lewis's] love for God is enriched by his experience of love in the here and now."<sup>10</sup> Attenborough leads into this final shot via bleedover. Lewis

has previously been "interviewing" a new tutoree. He has been asking the boy probing questions, not delivering his previous pat answers. He asks the new student what he thinks of the notion that we read to know we are not alone. The lad thinks this through and begins voicing his opinion. Lewis goes to the classroom window and looks outside. Attenborough uses voice-over: Lewis queries, "Why love if loving hurts so much? I have no answers; only the life I've lived. Twice I've been given a choice: the boy chose safety; the man chooses suffering." The film in its entirety answers the "Why love" question. It proclaims that it 'tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all; indeed, pain and suffering is part of the living experience. As Joy puts it, "it's part of the deal." To further clarify, safety provides only that - safety. Accepting the risk of suffering, however, provides the possibility of experiencing great joy. Furthermore, the film, and specifically Lewis's "I have no answers" concluding statement reiterates the thinking of a previous great intellect: "There lives more faith in honest doubt ... than in half the creeds."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, faith can only be faith in the absence of certainties.

As he concludes *A Grief Observed*, Lewis muses: "The best is perhaps what we understand least."<sup>12</sup> Attenborough provides a perfect example of such. In the film, Lewis, who was troubled by the issue of prayer since childhood, continually prays. When Joy's cancer goes into remission, Reverend Harrington tells Jack, "God is answering your prayers." Jack replies with fervor: "That's not why I pray-

-I pray because I can't help myself--the need flows out of me. It doesn't change God; it changes me." Thus, the film suggests that prayer, never understood by Jack, was still one of the "best" things. Life, the intellectual Lewis finally learns, is not to be fully understood. Shortly before his death, Lewis concluded an interview with these thoughts:

The world might stop in ten minutes; meanwhile, we are to go on doing our duty. The great thing is to be found at one's post a child of God, living each day as if it were out last, but planning as though our world might last a hundred years.<sup>13</sup>

Attenborough's final portrayal of Lewis shows him practicing this advice. He is "at his post," taking care of Douglas, enjoying the Narnia that sometimes resembles heaven, contemplating the mysteries of this experience called life. The camera dollies farther and farther back; a long shot reveals Douglas and Lewis, arm-in-arm, walking toward a horizon of blue cloudless skies.

There is yet one aspect of the film that must be addressed. The title. Never, I dare say, has one author used one word quite so consistently throughout his canon. Never, I dare say, has one director managed to use shadows more philosophically. Attenborough opens his film with a long shot of a glorious sunrise; however, the sky is not cloudless - "heaven" is obstructed from clear view. The clouds make shadows on the land below. The clouds become heavier, hanging somewhat ominously over an impressive Oxford skyline. Attenborough then cuts to a shot of

shadowy, flickering candles as solemn, Latinate choir music is heard as the Oxford chapel comes into focus. An astute viewer perceives that this is a land clouded by shadows and that the light of knowledge is, at times, dim and uncertain. When Douglas visits the Lewises for the first time, he asks if he might see their wardrobe. Douglas enters the attic; a low-angle shot pans the piece of furniture, and the wardrobe--the gateway to the magical other world described the Narnia stories -- casts a long shadow over the child. Thus, Attenborough communicates Lewis's contention that each person must choose whether or not to journey through the shadows of the mind and embrace the possibilities of the imagination--the possibilities that lie beyond scientific reason. After Joy's initial visit with Jack and Warnie, she boards the train leaving Oxford. She looks at the brothers through the window; they appear shadowy. In this scene, Attenborough ever so cleverly manages to use shadows as a foreshadowing: Jack and Warnie are later left behind in the land of shadows as Joy departs on yet another journey - a journey to the shadowless land of heaven.

The final chapter in Lewis's Narnia books is entitled "Farewell to Shadowlands." The children have arrived in the "new Narnia," i.e., heaven. They have left the Shadowlands behind. Lewis's description of this world as a land of shadows accurately describes his final thoughts on Christian theism. This world, he contends, provides rare glimpses of the perfection that awaits the believer in the

new, shadowless land. Human comprehension, too, is, at best "shadowy"; Lewis finally concludes that there is much that lies beyond human reason - "uncertainty," he told Joy shortly before her death, "is what God has given us for a cross."<sup>14</sup>

Attenborough's *Shadowlands* reminds us that all thinkers long to make sense of life, arriving at perfect answers to life's questions, but that even the greatest intellects have met with defeat. The complexities of pain and suffering are perhaps best approached by contemplating Attenborough's Lewis's final words on the subject: "The pain now is part of the happiness then." Attenborough's film reminds all Christians that the pain we confront while living in the shadowlands will - one day - serve to intensify the joy of a shadowless heaven.

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Seger. *The Art of Adaptation*. (New York: Henry Holt, 1992) 52.

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity*. (New York: Macmillan, 1952) 6.

<sup>3</sup> C. S. Lewis. *The Case for Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1968) Preface.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Sibley, 107.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Howard, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Sibley.

<sup>8</sup> Ralph Wood. Rev. of *Shadowlands* in *The Christian Century* 111, no.6 (February 1994) 203.

<sup>9</sup> qtd. in Richard L. Purtill. "Did C. S. Lewis Lose His Faith?" in *A Christian for All Christians*, eds. Andrew Walker and James Patrick (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1992) 33.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Dyer, "Feeling English" in *Sight and Sound* 4, no. 3 (March 1994) 17.

<sup>11</sup> Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses" in *A Pocketful of Poems*, ed. David Madden (Ft. Worth: Harcourt, 1996) 114-15.

<sup>12</sup> C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*. (New York: Walker and Company, 1961) 71.

<sup>13</sup> qtd. in Karen Lindskoog. "Farewell to *Shadowlands*" in *Mythcon Proceedings*, (1971) 12.

<sup>14</sup> Brian Sibley, 131.