

SHADOWLANDS THE REWRITING OF A LIFE DEVOTED TO LITERATURE (C.S. LEWIS CENTENARY 1898-1998)

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"Your father and mother and all of you are -as you used to call it in the Shadowlands- dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning".

The Last Battle
C.S. Lewis

I saw Richard Attenborough's *Shadowlands* on 14th February, 1994. A moving picture for a romantic date. An appropriate day, some of you might say. In fact, I still have the ticket. I remember that I was in my last year at university and our Professor of English Literature had told us to go and see it. "A must", as she used to say about those things we should not miss. So I went and it somehow changed my life. After all, it is in part the reason why I am now writing my thesis on C.S. Lewis and his books for children. In this year of 1998, the literary and academic world is going to commemorate with many kinds of events his 100th birth anniversary, and I want to make a modest contribution to the celebration with my essay.

Professor Lewis was a familiar figure in our lectures on Medieval and Renaissance Literature. His book *The Allegory of Love* (1936), with its commentaries on Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*, as well as providing an indispensable tool in the explanations of the unattainability of the kind of love portrayed by the courtly love tradition, was also the source of the dialogues between him and his students both in the TV film and in the movie. But I did not know anything about the man. And the film made me wonder about his life. Was it Jack Lewis and Joy Davidman's true love story? Or, was it just the portrait of a beautiful but fated relationship between an Oxford don and a divorced Jewess, between two atheist-turned-into-Christian souls depicted by the names mentioned above? To answer these questions I will disclose the true story¹ and contrast it with some of the rewritings it has produced.

¹ Before going on my with my work, I would like to clarify something about the so-called truth of Jack and Joy's story. They are the only ones who know the "true story", and unfortunately, they are not here to speak by themselves. Thus, what I am taking as the real thing is what appears in the Lewis papers (Bodleian Library, Oxford) and books, and in some biographies such as Gresham's *Lenten Lands*, Hooper & Green's *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*, Sayer's *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis* and Wilson's *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*.

The 1993 *Shadowlands* was the final product of an idea born in the early 80s. In those years, Brian Sibley (who later would publish a book under the title *Shadowlands: C.S. Lewis and Joy Davidman*) and Norman Stone wrote a script entitled *Surprised by Joy* which never became a film. In 1985, William Nicholson wrote a new script based on the first one, which resulted in the BBC TV drama *Shadowlands*, directed by Norman Stone and starring Joss Ackland and Claire Bloom in the main roles. The production was awarded an Emmy for Best Drama in the USA, and got two more prizes - Best Single TV Drama and Best TV Actress - in the UK.

Nicholson himself rewrote the piece as a stage play also called *Shadowlands*. This version starred Nigel Hawthorne and Jane Lapotaire and proved to be a success. It was premiered at The Theatre Royal, Plymouth, on 5th October, 1989, and first acted in London at the Queen's Theatre, on 23rd October, 1989. Considered the best play of 1990, it was awarded the Evening Standard Drama Prize. It also premiered in Broadway in 1991.

The world famous movie version was also written by Bill Nicholson, and it starred Anthony Hopkins as C.S. Lewis and Debra Winger as Joy Gresham. Its novelization was carried out by Leonore Fleischer in 1993, but I will not be commenting on it for the purposes of this paper. So, I will take the first three versions to compare with the real life one.

The very title, those lands of shadow, recalls Plato's myth of the cave. We are constantly reminded that this world of ours is not the real one, not only by Lewis's talks about suffering on the screen², but also by his books for children and short stories³.

Shadowlands takes as a starting point Oxford in 1952, the year when Lewis meets Joy for the first time. As a matter of fact, the exchange of letters between them goes back to 1950, a correspondence with an overt Christian tone which is not clearly reflected in any of the versions. Although Lewis had declared himself a safety-first creature, up to that time his life far from resembled a cloistered existence. He had served in the French trenches during the First World War and had female acquaintances, e. g. Ruth Pitter and Dorothy L. Sayers. He was envied and rejected by the Oxford academic community, who would never forgive his success as a popular writer. And he led a strange life in the company of his brother and the widow Mrs. Moore, which would last until she died, in 1951. Nobody, not even his brother Warnie, could understand what he described in his diary as "a self-imposed tyranny" which went on for almost 30 years. It happens, though, that C.S. Lewis reported it to be a pledge made by him and his brother-in-arms, Paddy

² "For believe me, this world that seems to us so substantial, is no more than the shadowlands. Real life has not begun yet". *Shadowlands*, Act 1.

³ Apart from the passage from the Narnia stories which I open my paper with, C.S. Lewis wrote a short story called *The Shoddy Lands* quoted in the movie: "We live in the shadowlands. The sun's shining somewhere else. Round a bend in the road. Over the brow of a hill..." (*Shadowlands*, 1993).

Moore, during the Great War: if one of them were to die, the survivor would take care of the sonless parent. Nevertheless, most people continue to see Mrs. Moore as a kind of villain in Lewis's life.

There is not too much about Joy Davidman's life in the rewritings, previous to her meeting Lewis. Born in 1915 in New York to Jewish parents, she declared herself an atheist at the age of eight. After that, she only believed in the prosperity of the United States, a faith destroyed by the Depression years which led her to nihilism. With an M. A. in English Literature and affiliated to the Communist Party, she was able to combine the propaganda activities with her work as a teacher and as a scriptwriter until she got married in 1942. Her husband's alcoholism and violent behaviour made her turn toward Christianity and she became a convert in the late 40s. By then, she had been acquainted with Lewis's Christian books for quite a long time and she decided to write to him. So far she had also produced some literary pieces: a volume of poems, *Letter to a Comrade*⁴ (1938); a Lawrencial novel, *Anya* (1940), based on her mother's life back in Ukraine; *Weeping Bay*, (1950), a naturalist book; and a contribution with her husband Bill Gresham to a Protestant Anthology, *These Found the Way* (1951). It is from this last one that the passage in the TV film and the play in which she talks to Lewis about her conversion was taken, and also the lines with which she somehow tries to state what led her to a belief in nothing when she was in her twenties: "Men, I said, are only apes. Love, art and altruism are only sex. The universe is only matter. Matter is only energy. I forget what I said energy was only."⁵ In 1952 her estranged marriage and the wish to meet Lewis were reasons enough to travel to England with her two sons, David and Douglas, where she was invited to Oxford and honoured with a lunch at Magdalen College by Lewis. This coming to England marks the beginning of the fictitious story.

Many things have been invented about this first meeting which are far from what really happened. In all the versions Joy is the one who invites C.S. Lewis and his brother Warnie to tea in an Oxford hotel, where she goes on her own both in the TV film and in the movie, and with her youngest son, Douglas, in the play. The boy brings with him a copy of *The Magician's Nephew*, which was not published until 1956, and there are continual references to the story the book tells. This lack of accuracy, however, is essential as a background for the events we are going to witness: love, loss and suffering. The talk between them makes a perfect excuse to let the public know things about their lives: the reasons of their atheism, their reciprocal surprise at knowing about the atheism of the other, the logic behind Joy's communist ideas -here one could choose between Fascism and

⁴ The poem "Snow in Madrid", which Joy recites, was taken from this book. Though she admits never having been to Spain, the source of it could be in her first husband's fighting on the Communist side during the Spanish Civil War.

⁵ Quoted in CARPENTER, H. *The Inklings* (1982:234).

conquer the world, or Communism and save it. At the Kilns, they follow their conversation this time addressing the question of suffering and the experience of it. This fact is quite astonishing for those who know Lewis's writings, since the only book he wrote about the subject, *The Problem of Pain*, had been published in 1940. Again, the rewriter has adapted reality to serve the new version. The audience has to be in touch with the happenings in Lewis's life: the death of his mother when he was a boy of nine and the interiorization of all that rage and helplessness. The sentence "Pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world" becomes thus indispensable for the remainder of the story and shyly introduces the Christian touch lacking in the film.

It is also here at the Lewis' where the children first appear on the screen: two in the TV film, as there was in real life, and only one in the movie. It was easier for the making of these versions to have only one child, and as Douglas was the one most related to the story, he was the one kept. Besides, he himself had written an account of his early years with his mother and C.S. Lewis, and he had helped with the making of the story. The presence of the boy serves as a bridge to the magic of the Narnia stories. In the T.V. film, we are delighted with some passages from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *The Magician's Nephew*. In the play, there is a wardrobe, a magic one as in the first book, which appears at the climax of the two acts; and Douglas re-acts the role of Digory, trying to heal his dying mother with an apple from the land of youth. In the movie, the wardrobe is in the loft at the Lewis', but it does not work as the boy proves. In the three versions, Joy's youngest son is the one who asks for an autograph in his Narnia book and this is the same in all of them, "The magic never ends". In real life, and unlike what is depicted by the rewritings, apparently Lewis knew children very well; not just because he and his brother had been once children as he says in the film, but because he had taken in three London children during the air raids, as happens in his first Narnia story.

At the lunch at Magdalen, we are presented with a Christmas drinks party in which some of Lewis's friends show their dislike for Joy. Warnie describes her in his diary as "medium-height, good figure, horn-rimmed specs., quite extraordinarily uninhibited" and asking in the presence of a group of men for a place in that monastic establishment where a lady could relieve herself. In the three versions, her extrovert character is shown by the same sentence, in answer to Christopher Riley's ironic commentaries: "Professor Riley, as you know, I'm an American, and different cultures have different modes of discourse. I need a little guidance here. Are you being offensive, or merely stupid?" (*Shadowlands*, Act D). However, a person who knows a little about C.S. Lewis may wonder who those people are? There is no J. R. R. Tolkien, Owen Barfield⁷, Hugo Dyson or Colin Hardie. His friends on the screen and the stage are Rev. "Harry" Harrington, Alan Gregg, Maurice Oakley, and Christopher Riley. They could be fictionalizations of his friends in real life, or colleagues from Cambridge, this last not very likely, though. After all, Lewis

⁶ Ibid. 237.

had left Oxford in 1954, after 30 years of full dedication to the institution, to hold a Professorship of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Magdalene College, Cambridge, the rival university. But this is not portrayed in the rewritings, which throughout the film take Oxford as the place where Lewis worked. Before his change of working place, Mrs. Gresham had been to the States and back, and was now determined to settle down in London, and as a divorced woman. If Lewis had been rejected by the Oxford community for his popularity among the people, this turned out to be the last straw: a friendship with a divorced communist Jewess. Tolkien's Catholicism would never accept this, which signalled the definite freezing of their relationship.

Until 1956, the year Joy was diagnosed with bone cancer, many things happened, but the rewritings just concentrate on the progression of this friendship towards love. Joy is portrayed as a demanding woman who cannot understand C. S. Lewis's fears of compromising himself. He tries to fight Joy's attacks with passages from his book *The Four Loves*, differentiating between *agape*, brotherly love, and *eros*, passionate love. In real life, apart from his going to Cambridge, Lewis published two important books: *The Horse and His Boy*, the only Narnia story dedicated to Joy's sons, and *Surprised by Joy*, his autobiography, a title with no double meaning, but alluding to William Wordsworth's poem. Joy published a book about the Ten Commandments applied to life nowadays, *Smoke on the Mountain*, with a foreword by her friend Lewis. In 1955, Joy moved to Oxford, but in the rewritings we keep seeing Lewis going back and forth London to visit her everytime he has to give a talk. It seems that the story is not important at all, it just serves the development of the characters; a funny thing, since Lewis's literary tastes always put the argument above the people involved in it. As he says in the movie, and following Aristotle, "Argument is character".

Changes mark the year of 1956. Jack and Joy had been meeting each other for six years and on 23rd April he agreed to a civil marriage so that she could stay in England. They underwent a tense situation: nobody knew that they had married and the frequency of Lewis's visits had made the neighbours start talking. Her move to the kilns with her sons had been decided upon before Joy went into hospital to follow a treatment for the acute rheumatism he suffered. It was nothing as dramatic as what happens in the movie. There, and after the Encaenia festival, Joy left Lewis's rooms at Magdalen after accusing him of preventing people from getting near him: "I've only just seen it. How you've arranged a life for yourself where no one can touch you. Where everyone close to you is younger than you, or weaker than you, or under your control" (*Shadowlands*, 1993). As it is known from the rewritings, this anger gave way to appealing, terrible news: Joy, like Lewis's parents before, had cancer, and the disease had spread quite extensively throughout her body. One femur and the hip were almost destroyed, and there was metastasis in the other leg and

⁷ Owen Barfield died last December (14th). The first Narnia story was dedicated to his daughter Lucy.

the shoulders. The possibility of losing Joy made Lewis arrange a church wedding, and on 21st March, 1957, after having surmounted a lot of problems due to Joy's being a divorcee, their union was blessed. It is very likely that this wedding would have happened some time, regardless of Joy's state, for Lewis was determined not to have another woman at home in an ambiguous situation. Fantasy is introduced in their union in the play version: Douglas, as Digory in *The Magician's Nephew*, goes into the wardrobe and picks up a magic apple which he later puts in his mother's hands waiting for a miracle that somehow takes place: by mid-1957, the cancer was remitting and the affected organs were healing. That same year, in December, she was able to walk with the aid of a stick. Had God listened to Lewis's prayers this time? Perhaps. Anyway, "the following years were the happiest", as he admitted.

Joy's move to the Kilns meant a complete renovation of the house, and at the beginning a certain restlessness in Warnie, who still remembered the tyrannical Mrs. Moore. The wonder of her recovery in the movie version is equalled to the May Day celebration at Oxford University: life had beaten death as the triumphant sun rises victoriously over darkness in the summer's solstice. In the three years that their marriage lasted they travelled to Ireland and to Greece, this last trip in the company of Roger Lancelyn Green and his wife. Only in the play is the Greek excursion mentioned, and there is nothing about the Irish one. In the TV film, neither of them takes place, and in the movie version they both become a journey to Herefordshire, in search of the Golden Valley, the subject of a picture that hung in Lewis's study and reminded him of his childhood. It could be said that it is a quest for his childhood and what happened there, a way of understanding what Joy says to him, that he cannot hold on to things, but he must let them go, that he has to grow up for good: "What I'm trying to say is, that pain, then, is part of this happiness, now. That's the deal" (*Shadowlands*, Act II). And pain came again: cancerous spots were present in many of Joy's bones. She had a breast removed on 20th May, 1959, and finally died a year later, on 13th July, 1960.

Joy's death led Lewis to question God's goodness. This is clear in the rewritings when he talks about God being the vivisectionist in a cosmic laboratory, but he never lost his faith. Those words were taken from *A Grief Observed* (1961) and completely decontextualized to show his suffering, the contrast between the Lewis who said that pain was something necessary for the human being to know that this was not Real life and the Lewis who experienced that truth. In the same book, he talks about the embarrassment he felt when he talked to the children about their mother, the same that he felt when he underwent his mother's loss. However, when C.S. Lewis lost his mother he was eight or nine; when David and Douglas lost theirs, they were sixteen and fourteen, respectively, as one concludes from Lewis's diary. What these rewritings aim to show is the mature Lewis and the little Lewis, and that is why they use a younger child, who, as Lewis at his age, did not believe in heaven, did not want to cry, but would die for a glimpse of his beloved mother. Their final embrace and the tears they shed and shared healed both hearts:

the little heart of the boy and the double-wounded heart of the mature man. They both are decided to grow up and to help each other in the process. The rest of the story does not matter, nor the inaccuracies; the question C.S. Lewis posed in all his talks remains unanswered.

“Why love, if losing hurts so much? I have no answers any more, only the life I've lived. Twice in that life I've been given the choice, as a boy, and as a man. The boy chose safety. The man chooses suffering.” (*Shadowlands*, 1993).

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