

***Shadowlands* (The Play and Film Versions as Art)**

C.S. Lewis has become a movie star. On the heels of impressive runs on television and in the theater, the most important Christian writer of the 20th century has made the leap to Hollywood. The first step of this improbable second career took place in 1985 when William Nicholson transformed Brian Sibley's literary biography *Through the Shadowlands* into a BBC teleplay starring Joss Ackland as Lewis and Claire Bloom as Joy. Two years later, encouraged by favorable response, Nicholson adapted his script for the theater. The result was *Shadowlands*, a drama with Nigel Hawthorne as Lewis and Jane Lapotaire as Joy described by one critic as a "heart-breaking, sensitive sketching of one of Britain's most esteemed literary heroes." After running consecutively in London's West End for nearly three years, *Shadowlands* was released as a major motion picture starring Anthony Hopkins as Lewis and Debra Winger as Joy, and Lewis's career as a movie star officially began.

In order to understand the appeal of C.S. Lewis as a theatrical character, it is necessary to recognize the conflicting driving the three dramatic depictions of his life. Central to each is an issue Lewis tackled in his apologetics and faced in his personal relationships: "the problem of pain." Despite their many similarities, each drama handles this core theological dilemma differently. In the following discussion, I illustrate how seemingly minor stylistic changes as the text traverses mediums significantly alter the overall characterization of Lewis as a suffering Christian.

Of the three versions, the teleplay is least like its followers. The fact that Nicholson's first attempt closely echoes Sibley's biography may account for the dramas plodding and somewhat uninventive theatrical structure. By far the most distinguishing and, for that matter, redeeming feature of the work comes from Lewis's own writings. Nearly from beginning to end, the teleplay overflows with allusions to such texts as *The Problem of Pain* and *Surprised by Joy*, as well as Lewis's radio addresses and personal letters. With skill and grace, Lewis's *A Grief Observed* as a means of bringing to life his hero's painful struggles; after all, few writers articulate loss better than Lewis. Although the drama as a whole suffers from a cluttered and sketchy quality, the presence of Lewis's own writings helps to create a very moving and uplifting theatrical portrait.

In many ways, the versions that seem most similar, the play and the film, conceal the greatest range of difference and, therefore, offer the most intriguing comparison. From the opening moments of the stage version, Lewis's Christian belief influences the dramatic action. Unlike the teleplay, the stage play begins with a direct, almost Brechtian address from Lewis. The lights come up to reveal the writer directly addressing the audience with: "Good evening. The subject of my talk tonight is love, pain, and suffering." Lewis then tells a story of the senseless death of twenty-three school boys in a bus accident. After which, he asks, "Now where was He? Why didn't He stop it? What possible point can there be to such a tragedy? Isn't God supposed to love us?" Lewis then attempts to answer this ageless query. Drawing careful distinctions between romantic love, simple kindness, and God's unconditional love, he proposes that "God doesn't necessarily want us to be happy. He wants us to be lovable. Worthy of love. Able to be loved by him. We don't start off being all that lovable, if we're honest. What makes people hard to love? Isn't it what is commonly called selfishness? Selfish people are hard to love because so little love comes out of them." Continuing the address, Lewis introduces the idea that

God battles human selfishness with a “mechanism called suffering.” He describes suffering, or pain, as “God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” Lewis eloquently concludes his address by connecting suffering with the eternal. He states: “We’re like blocks of stone, out of which the sculptor carves the forms of men. The blows of his chisel, which hurt us so much, are what makes us perfect. . . . For believe me, this world that seems to us so substantial, is no more than shadowlands. Real life has not yet begun.” This lucid intertext, loosely derived from *The Problem of Pain*, establishes a working theory that is poignantly and tragically called into practice later in the play.

Indeed, as subtext, the opening address is fresh in the minds of the audience as we witness Lewis’s comical first encounters with Joy Davidman Gresham. The memory of the address lurks in the shadows as Lewis struggles to repress his unexpected romantic feelings. It underscores his marriage proposal to Joy as she lies dying of cancer. It cannot full be forgotten as they marry and experience the euphoric, intense, and sensitive love of two people making up for lost time. Finally, the address is there, in the bleakness, haunting Lewis as he grapples with the pain, loss, and doubt that accompany Joy’s relapse and eventual death. In fierce dichotomy, intellectual theory does battle with emotional reality.

After dramatizing the painful repercussions of Joy’s death, the play concludes much as it begins. Addressing the audience in broken sentences, Lewis repeats the words that earlier slid so effortlessly from his lips: “We are like blocks of stone, out of which the sculptor carves the forms of men. The blows of his chisel, which hurt us so much, are what makes us perfect.” But now, interspersed in his narrative, reside faint utterances of doubt and anger, as he continues: “No shadow’s here. Only darkness, silence, and the pain that cries like a child.” The inclusion of this decidedly bleak vision evokes comparisons with *A Grief Observed*. In this poignant record of his grieving process, Lewis states: “Go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away.”

Ultimately, the last lines of the drama may best be viewed as a compromise between intellect and suffering. Alone on Stage, Lewis ponders: “So you can say if you like that Jack Lewis has no answers to the question after all, except this: I have been given the choice twice in life. The boy chose safety. The man chooses suffering. . . I find I can live with the pain after all. The pain, now is part of the happiness, then. That’s the deal. Only shadows, Joy.”

Admittedly, for audience members familiar with the entirety of *A Grief Observed*, the use of this somewhat ambiguous closing statement may seem incomplete. After all, by the time his diary runs its painful course, Lewis realizes, “We cannot understand. The best if perhaps what we understand the least.” For reasons that are unclear, Nicholson chooses not to follow the precedent of his teleplay and incorporate this passage into the closing moments of his drama.

However, it would be unfair to judge the ending of *Shadowlands* as an indictment against Lewis’s theories on suffering, or Christianity in general, simply because the drama’s ending does not fully capture the writer’s eventual belief in and surrender to the unattainable wisdom of God. The second to last line in the play: “So you can say if you like that Jack Lewis has no answer to the question after all,” is not contradictory to the humble admission of powerlessness made by Lewis at the end of *A Grief Observed*. Likewise, depending on the inflection of the actor, the final line, “The pain, now, is part of the happiness, then,” may easily produce a double meaning. The “then” may function as a memory of the unexpected happiness Lewis achieved during his marriage with Joy; it may also suggest a movement from past memories of Joy into a time in the near future when Lewis’s suffering will dissolve into eternal joy. Based on this later reading, the

final tag, “Only shadows, Joy” acts not only as a symbol of Lewis’s earthly despair, but also as a reaffirming statement emphasizing his belief that “real life has not begun.”

Similar to the play, the film version of *Shadowlands* contains a scene in which Lewis gives a lecture on the problem of pain. But unlike the play, Lewis’s speech does not occur at the beginning of the drama; instead, it is sandwiched ten minutes into the film. Moreover, the dynamics surrounding the address are noticeably different. Rather than a direct appeal to the audience, the camera avoids Lewis and pans outward to reveal the slightly bored but well-meaning faces of an auxiliary guild of elderly ladies. This shift in focus is highlighted by the fact that, aside from the clear and concise, “The subject of my talk tonight is love, pain and suffering,” the rest of Lewis’s address is barely audible; indeed, the somewhat comical expressions on the faces of the elderly women demote the address to background noise. Also, the address is much shorter than its stage equivalent. Left out completely are the references to different kinds of love and allusions to human selfishness.

In the absence of a clear description of Lewis’s theory, the struggle of its practical limitations cannot be fully explored or appreciated. There is no portent in the air when Lewis first encounters Joy. The unfolding of their unlikely love, although elegantly portrayed, is no longer overlaid with Lewis’s intellectual and spiritual solutions to pain and suffering. For these reasons, Joy’s cancer loses its tragic element and rings instead of *pathos*, an unfortunate and random coincidence. Likewise, Lewis’ proposal to Joy, their short marriage, and the repercussions of her death are similarly chiseled. *Newsweeks*’s David Ansen is certainly correct when he writes of the film, “You’d have to be a statue not to be moved by Winger’s death scene.” And yet without the full impact of Lewis’s philosophy on human suffering clearly presented, the drama lacks the spiritual/intellectual duality to operate on two levels. Rather than speaking universally about the problem of pain, the story simply becomes a film about a spouse dying.

Acknowledging the seemingly minor but ultimately major changes made to Lewis’s opening address invites the recognition of several other amendments between stage and screen. Among these changes, the complete removal of Douglas Gresham’s visits to Narnia, the inclusion of more romantic scenes between Lewis and Joy, and the replacement of erudite Oxford professors with rebellious Oxford students may be the most telling. Noticing these differences, I cannot help but imagine a pitchman, a la Robert Altman’s *The Player*, snuggling up to a Hollywood movie producer and saying, “It’s C.S. Lewis meets *The Bridges of Madison County* meets *Dead Poet’s Society*.”

For many reason, the stage and screen versions of *Shadowlands* appear to be kindred tales: under the same name they tell an analogous story using similar language. However, the apparent sameness is an illusion. On the stage, audiences witness a drama of crisp intelligence, pressing theology, and complex tragedy—a theatrical wallop that ambitiously explores issues of faith and the problem of pain. On the screen audiences view a secularization of the former—a drama of abridged intellectual content, coping theology, and *pathos*. Both versions depict Lewis by artfully blending fragments of his writings into the text at hand. But, in the film, something of the spirit, if not the language, of Lewis’s ideas is lost. Picturesque camera shots and first-rate acting do not hide this fact. Or, as Ricahrd Alleva keenly notes in his review of the film, his is C.S. Lewis biopic for secular humanists in search of a good cry.”

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