

An Introduction to C. S. Lewis



Clive Staples Lewis—C. S. Lewis to many readers—was born in Belfast, Ireland, on November 29, 1898. His parents were Albert James Lewis, a solicitor, and Florence Augusta Lewis. Lewis had one brother, Warren Hamilton Lewis, with whom he remained close for all of his life. Lewis read widely as a child, but dearly enjoyed stories about animals and nature, a theme which resurfaced in his later work *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Lewis and his brother Warren even created an imaginary world called *Boxen* in which animals lived and talked together.

Coupled with Lewis' love of creating worlds filled with anthropomorphic animals and lively natural settings was his love for ancient literature, including the epic sagas of Iceland, Norse mythology, and Greek and Medieval literature. Readers familiar with his work will recognize how these these genres and themes influenced the trajectory of his life's work.

In his early years of education, Lewis attended several private preparatory schools in Britain, including Wynyard School in Hertfordshire (1908), Campbell College in Belfast (1910), and Cherbourg House at Malvern, Worcestershire (1911). Due to poor health, though, he never remained at these schools for long. It was during his time in Worcestershire that Lewis pronounced himself an atheist, a belief he held onto until 1929 when he became a theist and then a Christian.

In December 1916, Lewis received a scholarship to study at University College, Oxford. His life of academic study took a tremendous turn, however, for in 1917 Lewis enlisted in the British Army. After training, Lewis attained the rank of Second Lieutenant with the Third Battalion of the Somerset Light Infantry. At age 19, he arrived at the front lines of France's Somme Valley where he experienced the horrendous realities of trench warfare.



Figure 1 Trench warfare during World War I

Lewis' experiences of war shook him deeply—experiences shared by many young British university students during World War I. Lewis was wounded April 15, 1918, in the Battle of Arras, but his roommate and best friend Paddy Moore died, along with other friends, classmates and infantrymen closely associated with Lewis. He returned to Andover, England, and was discharged in December 1919.



Figure 2 University College, Oxford

Following World War I, Lewis returned to his studies at University College, Oxford, finishing with first-class honours in Greek and Latin literature, Philosophy and Ancient History, and English. He became a philosophy tutor at University College in 1924, and a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1925, where he served as an English Language and Literature tutor for 29 years.

He met fellow writer J. R. R. Tolkien in 1926, forming with Tolkien and several other scholarly friends the literary group called “the Inklings.” He made his home in Oxford, living in a house called The Kilns (pictured below) and meeting with the Inklings in The Eagle and Child pub. In 1954, Lewis accepted the position of Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Magdalene College, Cambridge, spending his time moving between Cambridge and Oxford.



Lewis published his first work of fiction, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, in 1933, continuously publishing work up until his death at The Kilns in 1963, at age 64. He is buried at Holy Trinity Church in Headington Quarry, Oxford, beside his brother Warren Lewis. His most notable works include *The Allegory of Love* (1936), *Out of the Silent Planet* (the first novel of his Space Trilogy series; 1938), *Mere Christianity* (1941), *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), *The Abolition of Man* (1943), *Perelandra* (1943), *That Hideous Strength* (1945), and the first novel in the Chronicle of Narnia series *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950). Lewis published the last novel of his Narnia series, *The Last Battle*, in 1956. Other notable works include *Till We Have Faces* (1956) and *The Four Loves* (1960).

Lewis married Joy Davidman Gresham, an American poet and writer, in 1956. She, like Lewis, was an atheist who converted to Christianity later in life. She died of breast cancer in July 1960, a loss that affected Lewis deeply. He published *A Grief Observed* after his wife's passing, as well as *The Discarded Image* and *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, both published posthumously.



Figure 3 Lewis and Joy Davidman

C. S. Lewis remains one of the most prominent intellectuals and writers of the Twentieth Century, recognized for his philosophical work, his writing on Christianity and spirituality, and his novels. He wove his complex, rich views of the world, and of faith, virtue, joy and sorrow, throughout all of his work. You will encounter these in this course as you study *The Abolition of Man*, *That Hideous Strength*, and *The Discarded Image*.



Figure 4 Statue of Lewis and the Wardrobe in Belfast