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## Main content

Article Preview :

Thirty Years after his death, C. S. Lewis remains a Celebrity Author: the complacent professor who churned out winsome children's fiction and quotable religious apologetics. That image, confirmed by the recent celluloid treatment, *Shadowlands*, trivializes the weight and worth of Lewis's achievement, as well as the struggle behind it.

It was the practice of Clive Staples Lewis, while at Magdalen College, Oxford, during the 1940s, to have friends, students, and colleagues to dinner parties. Amid much drinking and even more revelry, Lewis would sometimes perform an astonishing parlor trick. Upon being told how terrible it was to remember nothing, he would reply that it was worse to forget nothing, as was the case with everything he read. Of course, this declaration would be met with incredulity and demands that he put up or shut up. And so he would solicit a series of numbers from the most skeptical guest, which he then would apply to a bookcase, a shelf within that case, and a book upon that shelf. The guest would then fetch the specified volume (which could be in any one of several languages), open to a page of his own choosing, read aloud from that page, and stop where he pleased. Lewis would then quote the rest of that page from memory. Like some supremely gifted performer - a DiMaggio, or a Spencer Tracy - he made it all look easy.

In its astonishing ease, this feat of memory is emblematic of the facility that many people have come to associate with Lewis's life, work, and even his religious convictions. Precisely because of this facility, he has come to be seen as a trivializing Pollyanna, tremendously gifted but of little ultimate consequence as a writer and thinker. The hit movie *Shadowlands* (about Lewis's late marriage to Joy Davidman Gresham) seems to have perfectly captured this celebrity image by presenting him as a sort of human tea cozy," as one reviewer aptly put it.

To be sure, as icon and phrase-maker Lewis has had considerable appeal. He has been cited by church-men of the utmost authority (John Paul II and Billy Graham) and by powerful political leaders (Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and George Bush, who borrowed "a thousand points of light" directly from *The Magician's Nephew*). Writers from highbrow critic Wayne Booth to children's author Madeleine L'Engle imitate him. Others use his motifs in their work (the notion of "longing" appears in Walker Percy's *The Second Coming*) or make allusions to him (Robertson Davies in *The Manticore*, Tom Wolfe in *Bonfire of the Vanities*). Most of his 50-odd books have been continuously in print since first publication, the *Narnia* series alone selling in the millions-per-year range in several different languages worldwide. A patently uneven industry of anecdotal memoirs, biographies (three in the last seven years, the best being Jack: *C.S. Lewis and His Times*, by George Sayer, who knew Lewis well), and especially commentary continues to flourish. And a number of societies devoted to the study of his life...

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