

## Inklings Forever

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Volume 5 A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth  
Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis &  
Friends

Article 25

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6-2006

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#### Recommended Citation

Bozzo, Zan (2006) "The Voice of C.S. Lewis," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 5 , Article 25.  
Available at: [https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings\\_forever/vol5/iss1/25](https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol5/iss1/25)

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# The Voice of C.S. Lewis

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Undergraduate Student Essay

# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume V**

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth  
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 2006

Upland, Indiana

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## **The Voice of C.S. Lewis**

Zan Bozzo

## The Voice of C.S. Lewis

Zan Bozzo

I have searched long and hard to find a specific sentence that has always been at the forefront of my mind. Needless to say, I still have not found it, and so I am forced to use my own words to capture its meaning. In an attempt to give credit to its author, I believe that it is hidden within Chesterton's, *The Everlasting Man*, or Boethius's grand work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. The quotation, as I remember it, states, "God's greatest gift to mankind is found in both Reason and Imagination." Now, excluding Christ's sacrifice on the cross, and possibly, free will, Reason and Imagination are indeed two of the greatest gifts given to mankind. The writings and teachings of C.S. Lewis are largely based on these two elements. Together they are the sponge that inevitably absorbs the reader. There is a third element that makes Lewis's writing so profound, namely Tone. These three elements: Reason, Imagination, and Tone are what constitute the voice of C.S. Lewis. Through this voice, many, both young and old, believer and unbeliever, skeptic and supporter, have come to view Christianity in a new light.

In an argument against evolution, G.K. Chesterton, in his notable work, *The Everlasting Man (EM)*, ironically painted a picture of the inherent human trait we have come to call Imagination. Based on the prehistoric paintings found throughout cavernous dwellings, Chesterton made the point that man, from the very beginning, has always been separated from the animals. The ability to paint, create, and ultimately, imagine, is a unique attribute solely found in mankind. Chesterton writes, "When all is said, the main fact that the reindeer men attests, along with all other records, is that the reindeer men could draw and that the reindeer could not" (*EM*, 34). Drawing from this evidence, Chesterton concludes, "In all sobriety, he [the cave-man] has much more of the external appearance of one bringing alien habits from another land than of a mere growth of this one" (36). Whether mankind shares some ancestor with the apes is a separate issue entirely and has little to do with the voice of C.S. Lewis. The reason for mentioning the above quotations is to show the distinction between man and beast. Man has been given

something that no other creature in this world possesses. The Bible tells us that Reason and Imagination are attributes of our God. Created in His image, we too are given these rare and unique abilities.

Chesterton's depiction certainly says something about creativity and imagination, but what does it have to say about Reason? During that particular illustration Chesterton doesn't mention Reason specifically. This is due to the fact that he is already utilizing this gift. He is Reasoning and forcing the reader to Reason with him. Just as a painter doesn't have to talk about imagination or creativity when he paints, the logician says nothing about Reason when he thinks rationally. Chesterton's actions and writings speak for themselves.

The importance of reasoning is apparent in all of C.S. Lewis's writings. Each chapter is designed to be an exploration for truth. This method of thinking appears in Plato's, *The Republic*, in which Plato uses, "penetrating and dialectical reasoning with poetic imagery and symbolism" (*Political Thinkers*, 2) as a technique to portray his ideal state. But before going further, it is necessary to identify Lewis's love for reasoning and note its roots. In his autobiography, *Surprised By Joy (SJ)*, Lewis comments on his education during his earlier life at a boarding school he often referred to as "Oldie's School." While failing to see many beneficial experiences with his teacher Oldie, Lewis does, however, recognize one fact, ". . . [Oldie] forced us to reason, and I have been the better for those geometry lessons all my life" (*SJ*, 29). While at Oxford, Lewis and his group of friends, the Inklings, met frequently at the Eagle and Child to reason together on life's mysteries. Lewis's conversion is a testimony in of itself. As an atheist, Lewis searched for truth, and through Reason and Imagination, came to the conclusion that there was indeed a God.

But why is it necessary to use Reason? What good can come of it? A natural inclination of man is to question one's existence. When searching for this truth, inevitably one runs into questions that are broad in nature and have little "real" and present evidence to draw conclusions from. There is, however, some

evidence, and the process of thinking based on this evidence is Reason. Lewis acknowledges this when he writes, “The problem is not simple and the answer is not going to be simple either” (*MC*, 42). That is the very reason we need to utilize our precious gift of rational thinking. Saint Thomas Aquinas, a thirteenth century philosopher and theologian, once wrote, “The light of reason is placed by nature in every man, to guide him in his acts towards his end” (*Political Thinkers*, 128). When Lewis talks about the four cardinal virtues, he places “prudence” at the head of the list, writing:

Prudence means practical common sense, taking the trouble to think about what you are doing and what is likely to come of it. Nowadays most people hardly think of Prudence as one of the ‘virtues.’ In fact, because Christ said we could only get into His world by being like children, many Christians have the idea that, provided you are ‘good,’ it does not matter being a fool. (77)

The significance of prudence is also expressed in *The Screwtape Letters* (*SL*) from the point of view of a Senior Demon named Screwtape, who is instructing his nephew in the art of bringing men to sin. “By the very act of arguing, you awake the patient’s reason, who can foresee the result?” (*SL*, 2). Screwtape goes on to say, “. . . strengthening in your patient the fatal habit of attending to universal issues and withdrawing from that stream of immediate sense experiences” (2). Clearly Lewis is demonstrating to the reader that the best defense against turning from the ‘good’ is through Reason. The “immediate sense experiences” Lewis refers to are the very things that distract us from Reason. They are the idols we build for ourselves, the mortal pleasures we so often see in every day life. And if they distract us from Reason, they distract us from truth, which sends us down a road leading away from our God. It is important to remember two things with regard to Reason: (1) Reason is influenced by “external impressions,” as Epictetus puts it, which can lead to wrong conclusions, and (2) we are given the ability to think rationally because we are created in the image of our God. We must remember that C.S. Lewis, one of the world’s greatest logical thinkers, was once an atheist. This bright mind, for years, was under the illusion that he reasoned through life’s greatest unknowns. Lewis was using his Reasoning abilities, however, all reasoning is based on some form of external impression. Some form of information or experience. And so Reasoning, with the correct information, can lead to some amazing discoveries. On the other hand, incorrect information, even through the use of correct Reasoning, can lead to false conclusions. Lewis writes, “He is the source for which all of your reasoning power comes; you could not be right and He

wrong any more than a stream can rise higher than its own source” (*MC*, 48). This illusion of Reason is simply; as Screwtape puts it, jargon. “Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the Church” (*SL*, 1).

One of C.S. Lewis’s most noticeable contributions, even to unbelievers, is his point that Jesus was one of three things. Many people hold Jesus up as a “great moral teacher” but reject his claim to be the Son of God. Lewis reasons through their “foolish thinking,” as he puts it, and writes that Jesus had to be one of the following: a lunatic, a liar, or the Son of God. “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher” (*MC*, 52). This is just one of the many examples in which Lewis seems to step beyond typical human understanding and manages to brilliantly introduce some rational results.

“Art is the signature of man” (*EM*, 34). A signature is something completely unique to the individual. It is a manner of identification. To say “art is the signature of man” is to say that art is truly unique and the product of mankind. I agree with Chesterton in that art is the signature of man when it comes to our relationship with the other living creatures of this world. Art, however, is really the signature of God, and this says something about the magnitude of this gift. Created in His image, our Reason and Imagination are mere reflections of His. A sculptor creating the intricate details of the human body, the various muscles and features, is an amazing work of art. A painter depicting the setting sun on a peaceful ocean is a true representation of Imagination. These creations, though beautiful and enchanting, are still minute reflections of the vast imagination of God. No human art can compare to the mind-boggling mechanics of the human body or the astonishing world we live on. This is not to say that we are not to create art. On the contrary, it is a gift only given to one species in this world; it is a tool to capture the presence of our Lord. “Monkeys did not begin pictures and men finish them” (*EM*, 34). We should rejoice in the fact that we are created in the image of God and that we can share in that creative nature.

Lewis is constantly using the power of Imagination to portray and enhance his thoughts. Through his imaginative and creative written works, Lewis enables the reader to see the lessons one can learn through rational thinking. Viewing these thoughts in fictional form often appeals to a wide audience, commonly including children where the more nonfiction-oriented pieces would be far too advanced for them. Probably Lewis’s best known written work is the series *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Directed toward a younger audience, the reader is ushered into a fictional world full of allegory and meaning. While Lewis may have been writing the Narnian tales primarily for sheer pleasure, he takes advantage of the opportunity to add Reason into the Imaginative atmosphere. In his most popular book of the series, *The Lion, The Witch, and*

*The Wardrobe (LWWW)*, Lewis reasons through the role of Christ, which is portrayed by the lion Aslan. “‘Safe?’ said Mr. Beaver . . . ‘Who said anything about safe? Course he isn’t safe, but he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you’” (*LWWW*, 86).

Throughout the seven books of the series, one can find these rational hidden meanings, enlightened through the power of Imagination. Located in *The Magicians Nephew (MN)*, Aslan talks of the White Witch who is a representation of the Devil. The following quote, through Reason, illuminated by the Imagination, teaches us of what becomes of an evil heart:

‘She has won her hearts desire; she has unwearying strength and endless days like a goddess. But length of days with an evil heart is only length of misery and already she begins to know it. All get what they want. They do not always like it.’ (*MN*, 208).

Readers witness the dramatic re-portrayal of the sacrifice of Christ as Aslan gives himself up to the White Witch to be sacrificed for the sins of one of the story’s main characters, Edmund. Aslan, however, is found throughout all seven of the books, guiding the children and those who dwell in the fictional world. Through this imaginative work, one can see many things that would often be difficult to visualize in a work of nonfiction.

Another notable work of fiction stemming from the hand and mind of C.S. Lewis is *The Great Divorce (GD)*. Given the freedom of Imagination, Lewis explores the contrasting natures of Heaven and Hell. The story begins in a corner of Hell as a group of individuals, or “phantoms”—as they are soon to find out—head on a trip to Heaven. Christians are often presented with the question, often from nonbelievers but at times from believers as well, “Why can’t God just send all of us to Heaven?” Before I read *The Great Divorce*, I am not really sure I fully understood the answer to this question. But through the imaginative narrative of Lewis, he showed me the answer rather than telling it. Upon reaching Heaven, the main character begins to walk through this new land, and commented, “Walking proved difficult. The grass, hard as diamonds to my unsubstantial feet, made me feel as if I were walking on wrinkled rock, and I suffered pains like those of the mermaid in Hans Andersen” (*GD*, 25). This is but one reference to the idea that Heaven will cease to be Heaven to those who aren’t worthy of being there. It would be their Hell. It would be too good for them.

*The Great Divorce* is full of intriguing conversations between the sinful “phantoms” of Hell and the godly spirits of Heaven. Each conversation—only meaningful because of our imaginative nature—teaches the reader some useful and extraordinary truths

through the process of Reason. One such conversation reveals an unbeliever’s stubborn attitude toward dealing with one’s faults:

‘Oh, of course. I’m wrong. Everything I say or do is wrong, according to you.’ ‘But of course!’ said the Spirit, shining with love and mirth so that my eyes were dazzled. ‘That’s what we all find when we reach this country. We’ve all been wrong! That’s the great joke. There’s no need to go on pretending one was right! After that we begin living’ (102).

Through these illustrations Lewis explores the themes of sin, temptation, addiction, love, and many others. Presented in this unique light, made available by the imagination, one can grasp its meaning as if they had lived it.

It is apparent now that both Reason and Imagination were central to Lewis’s method of thinking. It is often said amongst Lewis admirers, myself included, that when reading Lewis it seemed as if he could predict exactly what you were thinking. There have been times when reading his books in which I thought to myself, “Well . . . yes, I can see that. But what if . . .” and sure enough, in the next paragraph, Lewis would start off, “You might say . . .” (*MC*, 19) or “I am going to venture a guess . . .” (*MC*, 87). It’s as if I weren’t reading at all, instead, as if Lewis were conversing before me. Jill Freud, who stayed at the Kilns during the Second World War, once said, “I couldn’t look at him or speak to him for a week, because I knew from reading his books that he understood human nature horribly well, and I just thought, he will know all my thoughts, all my nasty little foibles. I felt completely exposed” (*Christianity Today*, 23). This conversational approach is the final element that makes Lewis’s writing so profound. It’s what we’ll call Tone.

Kathleen Norris, in her foreword to *Mere Christianity* wrote, “This book . . . is a work of oral literature” (*MC*, XVII). In part, Norris was referring to the fact that *Mere Christianity* was first broadcasted before making it into print. However, that same Tone which Lewis so easily seems to create in *Mere Christianity*, continues in his following works, labeling all “oral literature.” J.I. Packer once confirmed the remarks of Lewis’s stepson, Douglas Gresham, “‘If you want to learn how to do Christianity, read C.S. Lewis, and he’ll tell you.’ So said Douglas Gresham, Lewis’s stepson, and he was right” (*Southern Cross Quarterly*). Again, his longtime friend Owen Barfield reinforces the unique Tone of C.S. Lewis, who once said, “Somehow what Lewis thought about everything was secretly present in what he said about anything” (*Pineapple*, 2).

Jeffrey Schultz and John West Jr. write about this blend of Reason and Imagination, remarking in their *C.S. Lewis Readers’ Encyclopedia (RE)*, “Beyond the

comprehensibility of his apologetics to the common man, and the depth and beauty of his fiction, this fusion of Rationalism and Romanticism can be considered his subtlest, yet most far-reaching accomplishment” (*RE*, 349).

C.S. Lewis has become one of the best known twentieth century thinkers. His brilliant reasoning, captivating imagination, and conversational tone have influenced a wide audience and are becoming models for tackling life’s toughest questions. Lewis himself summarized perfectly his method of telling truth in one of his frequent letters to his friend, Owen Barfield, writing, “For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning” (*RE*, 349).

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