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C.S. Lewis and Christian Postmodernism: Jewish Laughter Reversed

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C. S. Lewis's last novel *Till We Have Faces (TWHF)* details the tragedy of a queen who fails to find self-fulfillment. It seems to be far from humorous. However, it can be seen as a comedy of Jewish laughter turned into Christian joy. Although G. K. Chesterton's influence on Lewis's comical expression is well-documented, Joy Davidman's Jewish impact on Lewis's humor has not been fully discussed, even though she was deeply involved in the editing of *TWHF*. This paper will compare Lewis's concepts of Jewish and Christian laughter in his *Reflections of the Psalms* (1958), and it will evaluate Davidman's imprint on *TWHF*, finally arguing that Lewis is a Christian postmodernist writer who retells mythologies as is done in postmodernist literature, but reverses them into the completion of the Gospel.

CHRISTIAN POSTMODERNISM

C. S. Lewis challenged the rationalist theology of modernism and expressed his stance through literary approaches similar to those used in postmodern literature, such as metafiction-style multiple stories and blurring the roles of narrator, author, and character. However, although postmodernist literature strives to deconstruct the grand narrative, Lewis ultimately intends to express a greater story that is beyond human understanding by employing mythologies as multiple narrative-subjective perspectives.¹

HISTORY OF LAUGHTER

Laughing was not satisfactorily discussed in academics until the 20th century, when Henri Bergson began exploring the two sides of laughing, affirmative and negative. In the 21st century, Michael Billig objected to the positive psychology of laughing, arguing for the consideration of the negative

1 For further information on Christian postmodernism, please refer to my book, *C.S. Lewis and Christian Postmodernism: Word, Image, and Beyond*. *C.S. Lewis and Christian Postmodernism: Word, Image, and Beyond*.

aspects of laughing.

Today, although there are many theoretical approaches to humor, three theories of humor dominate: relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory. John Morreall categorizes the three theories according to different time periods—classical, Renaissance, modern—but Billig finds complementary and simultaneous mechanisms common to the three theories.

In the classical era, Plato focused on laughing about the misfortunes of others; that is, feeling joy and superiority to others. The Christian philosophy of the Middle Ages, therefore, took a negative attitude toward laughing. The Renaissance was open to the incongruity of values, allowing the clown or comedy to be elevated over authority. One of the first examples of incongruity is, as Peter Berger suggests, a Latin work, *The Praise of Folly* by Erasmus in the 16th century.

Folly ranges across a wide swath of human life and thought in her sermon. Much of the satire continues to bite more than four centuries later, and therefore continues to give pleasure. But for the present considerations, Erasmus's book is important for another reason: Perhaps for the first time here is the presentation of what could be called a full-blown *comic worldview*. (Berger 20)

In the 20th century, the debate on laughing was ignited by Sigmund Freud, Henri Bergson, and Mikhail Bakhtin. Although Freud ascribed laughing to a physical release, Bergson focused on laughing as the incongruity between spirit and body, while Bakhtin considered the world to be inherently comical and foolish, regarding it as an anti-world. Helmuth Plessner harmonized the theories of incongruity and concluded that laughing is produced not only by the physical body, but also from what is beyond the body, or metaphysical, describing “the human position . . . as eccentric” (36).

There appears to be a consensus about laughing among critics like Plessner, Berger, and Billig. They look at both sides of laughing, subjective and objective. When you laugh as a subject, your laughter is an expression not only of joy but also of superiority, incongruity, and release. However, when you are laughed at as an object, you are being mocked. Among the laughs of incongruity, Peter Berger focuses on those of “a fool” who makes us laugh with comical stories and actions. Within the term, *fool*, he includes not only the traditional clown as a producer of laughs, but also the sacred fool who is an object being religiously laughed at.

LAUGHING IN THE BIBLE

The Bible offers no account of Jesus Christ laughing, but there are a number of incidents of Jesus being laughed at by others. Jesus is described as the object of laughter by the Roman soldiers and chief priests (Mark 15:20 and 31). Jesus Christ fell from the highest majesty of God to the lowest level of humanity. In this world, He lived as a sacred fool until He received the highest glory through His resurrection. As the Apostle Paul says, Christ was “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23).

LEWIS’S IDEA OF LAUGHING

Terry Lindvall discusses Lewis’s idea of laughing, defining it as joy, based on the demon’s categories of humor in *The Screwtape Letters* (10). However, Screwtape’s analysis of humor is not necessarily trustworthy because Lewis describes the demon as a liar. The demon Screwtape rejects God, instead devouring another demon inferior to him, a hellish act of cannibalism. Although the demon defines the cause of humor as “Joy, Fun, the Joke Proper, and Flippancy” (53), he is not aware that he is being laughed at by readers. He has no understanding of a fool, sacred or otherwise, not only as the subject who makes us laugh, but also as the object of our laughter.

The study of Lewis’s use of laughing-related words used in each work, such as “laugh,” “mock,” and “fool,” shows that his fictional books include laughs, both affirmative and negative, but also the laughter of incongruity, which cannot be categorized as either one or the other. Secondly, it is obvious that there are references to fools, especially in Lewis’s last novel, *TWHF*.

Lewis ascribes his “light touch” writing style to G. K. Chesterton’s humorous tendency:

I believe this is a matter of temperament. However, I was helped in achieving this attitude by my studies of the literary men of the Middle Ages, and by the writings of G. K. Chesterton. Chesterton, for example, was not afraid to combine serious Christian themes with buffoonery. In the same way the miracles plays of the Middle Ages would deal with a sacred subject such as the nativity of Christ, yet would combine it with a farce. (“Cross-Examination,” *God in the Dock* 259)

He was influenced by Chesterton not only as a writer, but also religiously. During his military service in World War I, he read

Chesterton's essays and also his *The Everlasting Man*. Lewis then converted from atheism to Christianity, and thirty years after his conversion, he still remembered Chesterton's skill at humor.

Liking an author may be as involuntary and improbable as falling in love. . . . His humour was of the kind which I like best—not "jokes" . . . , a general tone of flippancy and jocularity, but the humour which is not in any way separable from the argument but is rather (as Aristotle would say) the "bloom" on dialectic itself. . . . I liked him for his goodness. ("Guns and Good Company," *Surprised by Joy* 220-221)

As Chesterton seeks to use humor as the tool for telling the truth in his literature, Lewis writes a Christian literature in harmony with laughter.

LAUGHING IN *TWHF*

Many of Lewis's novels are written from the perspective of the persona "I," which combines an objective narrator and a subjective character. Unlike earlier works, *TWHF* is nearly monopolized by the different facets of its main character, Queen Orual. The main part of the story consists of two letters by Orual as a fictional author. Although she complains to the gods about their unfair judgement of her sister Psyche, the two letters are written in a form of parallelism that contrasts with the three types of parallelism. Parallelism is a rhetorical form found in the Hebrew Scriptures such as the Psalms, using short sentences made up of two brief clauses.²

Orual accuses the gods of using unfair judgement in two different forms of trials or courts of justice: the first letter refers to a civil case and the second to a criminal case. Lewis discusses the two forms of trials in his book *Reflections on the Psalms*, which was published in the same period as *TWHF*.

The ancient Jews, like ourselves, think of God's judgement in terms of an earthly court of justice. The difference is that the Christian pictures the case to be tried as a criminal case with himself in the dock; the Jew pictures it as a civil case with himself as the plaintiff. The one hopes for acquittal, or rather for pardon; the other hopes for a resounding triumph

2 Three parallelisms are synonymous, contrasting, and comparative. This is not only found in the Psalms, but in the wisdom and prophetic literature of the Bible (Job, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and the prophets). <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/asbury-bible-commentary/Major-Characteristics-Hebrew>.

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with heavy damages. Hence he prays “judge my quarrel,” or “avenge my cause.” (Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* 9)

In the first letter, Orual curses the gods as if she were a Jewish accuser in a civil trial, while in the second letter she speaks first to the gods and later finds herself praying to the Lord for grace as if she were a Christian in the dock in a criminal case. In a metafictional dream, she was dragged into a court just like Christ was delivered to Pontius Pilatus’s court. At the end of the second letter, there is another kind of reversal in Orual’s spiritual journey. She enters into the picture-scrolls, integrating herself with Psyche in a metafictional medium—a picture-story within a letter-story—transforming herself into a pilgrim wandering to save the world from its sins. In the second letter, she repeatedly reads the first letter, both silently and aloud, until she learns the truth. She realizes that her own accusing voices are the response from the gods or, ultimately, from the Lord:

Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer.
Only words, words; to be led out to Battle against other words.
Long did I hate you, long did I fear you. I might— (TWHF
308)

The last part, “I might—” looks as if it ends in mid-sentence. Especially for the modernist Priest Arnom, who found Orual dead, this last part may look like a sign with no meaning, but for readers who have experienced everything in the Queen’s two letters, it is possible to see a vision of another world beyond the written letters. Lewis deconstructs Orual’s words just as postmodernism literature does, but, at the same time, presents an understanding of what transcends human language beyond “I might—” as Christian postmodernism does.

JEWISH CHRISTIAN WRITER JOY DAVIDMAN

C. S. Lewis came to know the mind of a Jewish poet more deeply through his encounter with the Jewish Christian poet Joy Davidman. Davidman was more popularly known at the end of the 20th century through biographical works, such as Brian Sibley’s *Through the Shadowlands: The Love Story of C. S. Lewis and Joy Davidman* and the movie *Shadowlands* (1993). However, those works focused on Davidman as Lewis’s wife, not as a writer herself. In the 2000s, however, there has been an increasing academic interest in her works.

Davidman was born to Jewish immigrant parents in New York in 1915, converting to Christianity in her thirties. She is introduced

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as a Jewish Christian writer by Lewis in the foreword to *Smoke on the Mountain*, which she wrote to explain the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament (1954).

Another point of interest in Joy Davidman's work comes from her race. In a sense the converted Jew is the only normal human being in the world. To him, in the first instance, the promises were made, and he has availed himself of them. He calls Abraham his father by hereditary right as well as by divine courtesy. He has taken the whole syllabus in order, as it was set; eaten the dinner according to the menu. Everyone else is, from one point of view, a special case, dealt with under emergency regulations. To us Christians the unconverted Jew (I mean no offence) must appear as a Christian manqué; someone very carefully prepared for a certain destiny and then missing it. And we ourselves, we christened gentiles, are after all the graft, the wild vine, possessing "joys not promised to our birth"; though perhaps we do not think of this so often as we might. And when the Jew does come in, he brings with him into the fold dispositions different from, and complementary of ours; as St. Paul envisages in Ephesians 2. 14-19. (*Smoke on the Mountain* 7-8)

Joy's spiritual contribution to Lewis is described by Lyle W. Dorsett as "something that stimulated—maybe completed—him" (131), and by Abigail Santamaria as "a constancy of contentment" (292). On the other hand, her literary inspiration for Lewis is evaluated by Don King as "a collaborator and shadow editor" (242).

Joy read the drafts that Lewis was writing, giving him incisive comments, and encouraging him as an editor until *TWHF* was completed. She mentions her deep involvement in the writing process of the novel in a letter to William Gresham:

Jack has started a new fantasy — for grownups. His methods of work amaze me. One night he was lamenting that he couldn't get a good idea for a book. We kicked a few ideas around till one came to life. Then we had another whiskey each and and bounced it back and forth between us. The next day, without further planning, he wrote the first chapter! I read it and made some criticisms (feels quite like old times): he did it over and went on with the next. What I'd give to have his energy! (King 242)

CONCLUSION

For Lewis, laughing is a religious experience in which an accuser who curses the gods will be changed into a seeker who asks God

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for grace and salvation. His last novel *Till We Have Faces* is Lewis's divine comedy, in which the main character loses herself, abandoning an accusatory approach, unexpectedly encountering the gods, and ultimately the Lord.

Lewis interprets mythologies as the prophetic tool of conveying the truth, but the analysis of laughing in *Till We Have Faces* reveals that he includes Jewish Scriptures in the mythologies. Joy Davidman's Jewish thought influenced the converted Christian Lewis or, as he called himself, "the graft, the wild vine," contributing to his completion of his last novel. The discussion of laughing and humor thus reveals that Lewis is a writer who deconstructs human language just as postmodernism literature does, but he presents another world beyond the limits of humanity as Christian postmodernist literature does.

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