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C.S. Lewis: Reactions from Women

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C.S. Lewis: Reactions from Women

Abstract
Recounts the experiences of eight women (including the author) who knew C.S. Lewis.

Additional Keywords
Lewis, C.S.—Attitude toward women; Lewis, C.S.—Personal reminiscences; Lewis, C.S.—Relations with women
HAVE A QUARREL with Owen Barfield. He has said that C.S. Lewis could properly be called a misogynist on the theoretical level. As a feminist and a Lewis lover I may try to disprove that claim some day.

Fortunately, Barfield went on to assure people that Lewis was not at all a misogynist in his personal life. I can hear witness to that, and I will. When Glen [GoodyKnight] invited me to speak at Mythcon VI, he suggested that I tell about my own encounter with Lewis. I’ll do that and more. I’ll tell you a bit about C.S. Lewis and eight women who encountered him: Flora, Hope, Jamie, Joy, Kathryn, Caroline, Kathleen, and Kaye. These include his mother, his cousin, his foster mother, his wife, a student, a church executive, a poet, and an editor.

THE FIRST WOMAN in C.S. Lewis’s life was, I think, the most important of all. She was Florence Augusta Hamilton Lewis of Belfast. She was the daughter of an eloquent Irish preacher who sometimes wept in the pulpit and his extremely bright and eccentric wife Mary who excelled in logic but ran a very topsy-turvy (and dirty) home. From this peculiar background the second daughter, Florence Augusta, called Flora, was sent to college to study math. She was brilliant in mathematics and logic and had a calm, sunny disposition.

When Flora was 24 her neighbor Albert Lewis, a young lawyer, told her he was in love with her. Staying calm, sunny, and logical, Flora didn’t rush into marriage. She kept Albert waiting eight years and finally married him when she was 32 years old. She gave birth to their first son Warren Hamilton Lewis when she was 35. She named him after her parents. When she was 39 she gave birth to her second and last child and named him Clive Staples Lewis. Why she named her baby “Clive Staples” is a mystery not even explained in the new Lewis biography by Green and Hooper. Since the Lewis family history consists of eleven volumes, each containing some 300 pages of single-spaced typing, we know is that when he was four she gave in to his sensible and stubborn decision to be called Jack from then on.

Flora Lewis was a tutor and companion to her boys, and then when Jack was only nine and she was 46 she died of cancer. She died on her husband’s forty-fifth birthday, when the quotation on his calendar was Shakespeare’s line “Men must endure their going hence.” Her husband always kept that page of his calendar, and that line is now inscribed on C.S. Lewis’s tombstone.

Flora’s death was the end of the old world for Albert Lewis and his two sons. Their home was never happy again. It would be fifty years before Jack lived happily with a woman again. One can only speculate about how Flora’s personality and early death shaped his later life.

There is one glaring contrast between C.S. Lewis and his mother. She was gifted in math and he was a dunterhead in math. Even with special remedial tutoring he couldn’t pass the entrance test in math to enable him to attend Oxford, and he was fortunate to be admitted by a waiver for World War I veterans. As I understand it, his grasp of mathematical concepts was fine, but he disliked ordinary computation. Walter Hooper says that Lewis couldn’t even understand the difference between net and gross and had to be restrained by Owen Barfield from giving away more money than he earned. His generosity was that extreme, but I don’t believe his ignorance was.

Walter Hooper also claims that Jack’s brother Warren Lewis was so inept at figures that he got the unreasonable idea that he was poor in his last years and took to smoking a certain cheap brand of cigarettes which he disliked just in order to get the coupons that came with them to cash in for free socks! It is a fact that there was some delightful eccentricity in the family along with the brilliance. Both qualities came from both sides of the family.

Unfortunately, no words from Flora Lewis about her son Jack or anything else are yet available to the public. However, we can pause briefly to hear the words of Flora’s lovely Belfast cousin Hope (Charlotte Hope Ewart Harding). Hope was no doubt one of the first women who ever met Jack, and she knew him well. When he was fourteen she called him Jacko and wrote to his father, “I always knew he was a remarkable boy, besides being one of the most lovable I ever came across.” (If you have read his autobiography, you know that he didn’t describe himself so kindly at that awkward age.)

FIVE YEARS AFTER Cousin Hope called Jack one of the most lovable boys she ever came across, another woman wrote in a letter, “Jack has been so good to me. My poor son asked him to look after me if he did not come back. He possesses for a boy of his age such a wonderful power of understanding and sympathy.” Those were the words of Mrs. Janie King Askins Moore. Lewis was 19 and Mrs. Moore was 46. If she thought he had already been good to her then, she should have foreseen the 33 years to come. Lewis stuck with her until she died.

The story of this involvement is familiar to people who know C.S. Lewis’s life. Paddy Moore had taken Jack home to meet his middle-aged mother and younger sister Maureen before the two boys were shipped to France. Albert Lewis refused Jack’s urgent pleading to come to see him for perhaps the last time when he was leaving for the front, and he refused to come to England to see him afterwards when he was recuperating from wounds in the hospital. Mrs. Moore was there both times to fill the gap. Mrs. Moore was reportedly still handsome at 46. That was the very age that Flora had been when Jack has lost her. In his loneliness, Jack became temporarily infatuated with Mrs. Moore. They started living together as mother and son.

Aside from being 46 years old, Mrs. Moore had little in common with the long-lost Flora. Mrs. Moore had the opposite of a sunny disposition and was never calm or logical. She never bothered to read a book, and she talked mainly about herself.
As time went on, Jack became a Christian and she became an atheist. When he was at home she interrupted him ruthlessly to help her with housework and errands. She also had her ten-year-old daughter Maureen and a couple of maids and a gardener, of course, but the house was always in tumult and every day seemed to bring new crises. If you listened closely you will find Mrs. Moor's attitude towards her daughter briefly descried midway through struggle, although of course she is not identified by name. In her last years Mrs. Moore became bedfast and ended up in a nursing home where Lewis visited her every day. She finally died in 1951.

Perhaps Paddy Moore was better off being killed in the war than he would have been if he had lived all those years with that woman, with all of whom he grew to be such great friends until he realized her romantic intentions and started hiding when he saw her coming up his walk. His feelings for Joy had made him grow up to be able to repress her in that manner. He was known to many of those at Redlands, England, as Mrs. Moore and her daughter—and that time with her daughter and Maureen, the woman, who claimed shortly after his death, "I just lived my life for my son..." At least C.S. Lewis, her unofficial foster-son, was spared the burden of having her live her life just for him. Her daughter Maureen was the one who had to endure that burden after Paddy died, and it was evident from the letters that they wrote that she and her mother had become great friends until he realized her romantic intentions and started hiding when he saw her coming up his walk. She returned to America for a divorce from her husband, who was involved with another woman, and returned to England to resume her friendship with Jack.

It was 1951, the year Mrs. Moore died, when a book was published in America entitled These Found the Way, which included an essay by the writer Helen Joy Davidson Gresham telling how she had moved from atheism to Christianity. The very next year Joy made another move—from America to England—and arrived with her two sons on C.S. Lewis's doorstep. What she hadn't mentioned in her essay was that the books of C.S. Lewis had influenced her conversion and that she, like many other Lewis readers, had been exchanging letters with him. She and Jack had become great friends until he realized her romantic intentions and started hiding when he saw her coming up his walk. She returned to America for a divorce from her husband, who was involved with another woman, and returned to England to resume her friendship with Jack.

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his life after all. (Bies has recently been taken over by Collins.)

Lewis complained to me that The Screwtape Letters was greatly overrated. Why? I suppose it has too popular. He also told me that he was a terrible speaker and had been all his life. Then he went on to discuss science fiction.

I remember that he recommended Arthur Clarke. I asked him if he had ever read any Ray Bradbury and he said no. A couple of years later I heard Bradbury speak and got to ask him afterward how he liked C.S. Lewis's space trilogy, and he said he had never read it. I read in a Lewis biography a line that indicates in that 1956 he had in fact already sampled Bradbury. Possibly he misunderstood my question or the name had slipped his mind. I suppose Bradbury really knew the Lewis trilogy also. I conclude that it doesn't always pay to ask questions.

In fact, I know it doesn't, because I had a burning question to ask Lewis. "How?" I asked, "you intended for your readers to pronounce the name Aslan?" All he would say was that he didn't care and that I should pronounce it however it seemed best to me.

The one piece of advice that I can recall that Lewis gave me besidest urged me not to smoke was to record for pleasure. Now that I stop to think about it, I have obeyed him on both counts. It was probably after being warm on the topic of pleasure reading that, after a pity statement or two I could not get the hang of, I exclaimed that that was just what he had written in such and such a book.

He pretended to be crestfallen and said, "That's the trouble with writing a book. Once people have read it, your conversation is not new to them!"

By the time we got up and left the Royal Oxford, Lewis had spent an hour and a half with me. The peculiar part is that he seemed to enjoy every minute of it. I had a Brownie camera with me and wanted to take his picture but was afraid that he might feel offended if I asked, so I didn't. He shook my hand and headed for his bus. I walked down the street in a daze, looking at the hand that he had touched. That night I wrote to my friend John Lindszko, "C.S. Lewis is the kindest man I have ever met—and his eyes twinkle. You really can't imagine how they twinkled.

Eight Months after my wonderful tea with Lewis, Joy was dying of cancer in the hospital adjoining Lewis with Lewis and die as his wife. And so he married her in a Christian ceremony at her bedside. They could not get married instead she began to get well!

He seemed to possess a kind of boyish greatness." She had tea with writing a book. Once people have read it, your conversation is not new to them!"

During World War II some little girls had moved into The Klims was her very happy husband. He seemed to possess a kind of boyish greatness. She had tea with me, and asked if I had brought along a tape recorder. She had tea with me, and asked if I had brought along a tape recorder. She said she was very happy. She had tea with me, and asked if I had brought along a tape recorder. She said she was very happy. She had tea with me, and asked if I had brought along a tape recorder. She said she was very happy.

She met Lewis at a dinner party and did not expect to like him very much because she had only read The Problem of Pain and The Screwtape Letters. She said that after Charles Williams died in 1945 there was a gap in Lewis's productivity for more than ten years—from 1945 to the late 1950's! Take a look at the list of books that came out in that supposed gap. In my opinion the only death that cut off C.S. Lewis's creativity was his own, and I cannot be at all sure of that!}

In Lewis's Last Years he became friends with the poet Kathleen Raine who was doing research on William Blake at Cambridge. She met Lewis at a dinner party and did not expect to like him very much because she had only read The Problem of Pain and The Screwtape Letters. She said that after Charles Williams died in 1945 there was a gap in Lewis's productivity for more than ten years—from 1945 to the late 1950's! Take a look at the list of books that came out in that supposed gap. In my opinion the only death that cut off C.S. Lewis's creativity was his own, and I cannot be at all sure of that!}

The Very Last Woman to meet C.S. Lewis was Kaye Webb, an editor of Puffin Books. She went to the Klims two days before he died to make plans about their paperback edition of the Narnian chronicles. Kaye Webb's reaction to C.S. Lewis was, "What a great and dear man. How I wish I'd had a chance to know him very much..."

Shortly before Kaye Webb met him, Lewis said that he hoped that in heaven he would find that Spencer had written another six books of The Faerie Quean for him to read there and that he was looking forward to being with the T. H. White, the creator of Mr. Magoo. The Foundation has already accepted his recent biography, some American bishops considered the Eros because she considered it shocking. According to the Tolkien autobiography, Tolkien might not have lived long enough to finish his life's work. Tolkien always called Mrs. Rakestraw "Mrs. Cartwheel." Mrs. Rakestraw took it upon herself to snap out and discard parts of the tape about Eros because she considered it shocking. According to the Tolkien autobiography, Tolkien might not have lived long enough to finish his life's work. Tolkien always called Mrs. Rakestraw "Mrs. Cartwheel," Lewis complained to Walter Hooper about this illustration and learned that he too detests it and hopes for a change. When I look at

While Lewis and Joy were enjoying their brief happiness in 1958, a new American woman came into his life—Mrs. Caroline Rakestraw of the Episcopal Radio-TV Foundation of Atlanta, Georgia. She arrived in London to supervise the recording of his lectures on "the four loves" for American radio. Her comment on his recording session was, "His personality filled the room."

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