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C.S. Lewis’ A Grief Observed as Fiction

Abstract
Supports (although for different reasons) Walter Hooper’s contention that A Grief Observed is only partly autobiographical. Bases his conclusion on literary style, similar past work, the psychology of grief, and letters written by Lewis following his wife’s death.

Additional Keywords
Lewis, C.S. A Grief Observed; Sarah Beach
When he arose on April 23, 1956, C.S. Lewis was a fifty-seven-year-old bachelor; he had never married. But that day he married the divorcee Helen Joy Davidman Gresham in a civil ceremony that gave his American friend British citizenship, allowing her to remain in England. It was an act of friendship. But on March 21, 1957, the two were married by an Anglican priest in the hospital where Joy was suffering from severe cancer of the bone. Lewis took his dying bride home to The Kilns, where in the following months she made a miraculous recovery. The cancer remained in remission for about two years. Then x-rays in October 1959 revealed the extensive recurrence. In April 1960 they had a glorious trip to Greece, despite Joy's increasing pain. She died in Oxford on July 13, about three years and four months after their ecclesiastical wedding. There is much evidence that this brief marriage, begun when Lewis was in his late fifties, was a very happy one.

By early September 1960, less than two months after Joy's death, Lewis talked confidentially with his close friend Roger Lancelyn Green about the possibility of publishing A Grief Observed.¹ We don't know if the manuscript was complete in September, but it was published the following year, under the pseudonym N.W. Clerk. As far as his biographers can tell, Lewis did not send copies to friends, nor did he ever refer to the book's being his (Green and Hooper, p. 277). Only after his death did A Grief Observed appear as by C.S. Lewis.

That brings me to a difference in the critical reactions or approaches to this little book. Most Lewis scholars read it as the personal, autobiographical outpourings of grief by Professor C.S. Lewis, defender of the faith, whose faith was almost shattered by his wife's death. For example, Richard Partill says, "In A Grief Observed, Lewis recorded with almost clinical detachment his feelings of rebellion at the death of his wife." And again, "...emotionally he felt that God was cruel or unjust -- feelings he expressed with painful honesty...."² Margaret Hannay describes the book as "this most personal of Lewis's published writings"; she considers it a "journal" that "is an extremely honest and moving account of bereavement..."³ Quoting from the book itself, she says, "He began writing as a 'defense against total collapse, a safety-valve,' and as an attempt to describe the state of sorrow" (Hannay, p. 224). Taking A Grief Observed as straight autobiography, she says that Joy's death "called into question his earlier assurance about the providence of God, bringing back his adolescent fears of a sadistic but omnipotent deity" (Hannay, p. 265).

Even Lewis's American friend Chad Walsh, who also had known Joy Davidman well for years, calls the book "the most nakedly personal" of Lewis's books.⁴ To Walsh it is "the raw cry of agony...when his world collapsed about him, and all the tidy assurances of God's reality seemed a child's household of cardboard playthings. Here is a Lewis plunged into the depths of a Job, stripped of all that had given him assurance, compelled to live day by day in the darkness of utter bereavement."⁵ Like Mrs. Hannay, Walsh reads A Grief Observed as autobiography. Even the Green and Hooper Biography quotes from it as evidence of Lewis's attitude toward his marriage (Green and Hooper, pp. 277-78).

But Walter Hooper modifies this approach. In his "pictorial biography" of 1982, he says, "During the months following Joy's death he poured his feelings into a partly autobiographical work published under the pseudonym N.W. Clerk as A Grief Observed (1961). It has proved to be of immense consolation to those who, in losing husband, wife, or friend, have felt spiritually bankrupt, yet found their faith strengthened in the end. But it does not duplicate exactly Lewis's own highly unusual marriage. It was not meant to. For religious as well as physical reasons Lewis's marriage was not consummated. Lewis's grief and, in the end, resolution, are of course there. Even so, the book was intended for 'Everyman,' and in order to achieve this Lewis felt he had to add certain 'paddings' if the book was to be of help to the average man and woman..."⁶ Without denying that the book contains autobiography, Hooper sees it less as the expression of raw agony and more as a rhetorical construct intended to help others through the process of grief.

So we have well-known readers of Lewis differing on the nature of A Grief Observed. Most read it as a personal journal, the written record of Lewis working through his grief. But Walter Hooper views it as partly fictional, like Letters to Malcolm, where there is no real-life Malcolm, no other half of the correspondence. I recall that Hooper doubts Lewis literally wrote A Grief Observed in four notebooks he found lying around. And Peter Schakel has recently said the same. The notebooks may be just the fictive premise for the book, like the correspondence-motif in Letters to Malcolm, or like Hawthorne's saying he found the manuscript of The Scarlet Letter in the attic of the Salem Customs House.

Does it make a difference which way we read it? Obviously I think it does. If genre makes a difference -- and it does -- it matters whether we read it as an autobiographical journal or as a psychological novella intended for the spiritual edification of its readers. And it certainly matters to Lewis's biographers, and to those of us who care about the man who wrote those books we love. The days of the New Critics are over; we no longer fear stepping outside the lines of the text qua text. If the man who wrote Mere Christianity and The Last Battle had a crisis of faith over the expected death of his wife, I want to know it. But if he artistically transmuted his own grief into a prose elegy for Everyman, I want to read the book without committing the Personal Heresy.

The question about the book is, I trust, clear. To seek an answer, let's examine some of the evidence as I currently understand it. Since the weight of reader response is on the side of A Grief Observed as the literal verbalizing of Lewis's grief, I shall present the case for it as fiction based on autobiography.

But first let me dismiss Hooper's stated reason for seeing it as only partly autobiographical. He
insists that Lewis and Joy never consummated their marriage. Thus he has to explain at least two passages in *A Grief Observed* in which the grieving husband speaks of the happy sex life he and "H." had had. Thus Hooper concludes these are "paddings" to help readers who have been bereft of normal marital relations. But there is plenty of evidence that, if it's any of our business, the Lewises enjoyed a normal sex life. I won't go into the evidence here because it is of little relevance to my topic. I bring it up at all only to make clear that in building a case for Hooper's view of the book as a whole, I do so for very different reasons.

I proceed to my case. When I first read *A Grief Observed* I could not believe that the rational, insightful Christian writer whose other works I'd come to know -- I could not believe that C.S. Lewis had been so shattered by his wife's death; I could not believe that he had plunged so near to despair. Of course it was emotionally overwhelming; of course the pain and loss were like losing one's arm or leg (pp. 61, 67, 70); but the musings about God as "Cosmic Sadist" go beyond these feelings (e.g., p.35). This grieving husband did not seem like C. S. Lewis. Surely it was partly a pose.

But perhaps my Wordsworthian memory has enriched that first reading. What are my current reasons for taking the book's speaker as a persona? I have four.

My first reason is reflected in my title, *A Grief Observed* as a personal elegy. My hypothesis is that Lewis was so steeped in literary tradition, including the elegy, that when he went to write this book he readily utilized traditional motifs by which poets have dealt with grief. For example, there are at least nine exponents in *A Grief Observed* that also appear in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, the greatest elegy of the nineteenth century. Some are common to Everyman's experience of bereavement, but others suggest the literary nature of Lewis's efforts rather than the spontaneous jottings of an overwhelmed griever.

For example, the elegist, early in his grief, does not want to lose that grief in the course of time, for that would cast a shadow backward over the quality of his love. Tennyson's singer, assured by well-wishers that in the long run good will come from his friend's death, reacts against such consolation:

Let Love clasp Grief lest both be drowned,
Let darkness keep her raven gloss.
Ah, sweeter to be drunk with loss,
To dance with Death, to beat the ground,
Than that the victor Hours should scorn
The long result of love, and boast,
Behold the man that joyed and lost,
But all he was is overworn.9

Later, after the happy celebration of the second Christmas after Hallam's death, the elegist fears for a moment that grief has faded:

O sorrow, then can sorrow wane?
O grief, can grief be changed to less? (78)

Lewis's mourner deals with the same problem. Very early he says, "People get over these things. Can, I shan't do so badly. One is ashamed to listen to this voice..." (p. 2). Later he realizes that he isn't always thinking of his wife, yet the world seems "flat, shabby, worn-out looking"; then he remembers why.

This is just one of the nine motifs common to *In Memoriam* and *A Grief Observed*. I will simply list some of the others, without bothering for substantiation. Both speakers express the difficulty, the impossibility, of expressing their grief adequately; both talk of the outward calm that masks their inner despair; both realize they would not want to have missed out on the love that now pains them (Tennyson 27; Lewis, pp. 69-70); both make progress toward a spiritual resolution and then regress as faith and hope are shattered by doubt and sorrow; and most striking of all, the elegist's inability to visualize the dead loved one, then having a climactic sense of that loved one's existence. No doubt these elements recur in actual cases of bereavement, or they would not have made their way into the elegiac tradition; but the number of them in *A Grief Observed* and their careful articulation suggest that Lewis was writing a literary work for Everyman, rather than straight autobiography. In his novel *Perelandra* he expands on Milton's temptation motifs in *Paradise Lost*; perhaps in *A Grief Observed* he expands on Tennyson's grief motifs in *In Memoriam*.

If this unearthing of elegiac motifs were the only evidence I had of the book as fictionalized autobiography, I would be unconvinced. But there is more. My second shard of evidence comes from an earlier situation in which Lewis wrote his way through his inner turmoil. It was around 1925, when his manuscript of *Dymer*, a long narrative poem, had just been rejected by a publisher. When his good friend Arthur Greeves suffered the same sort of blow in 1930, Lewis wrote him of how he had, through writing, come to terms with his own deep disappointment. But here is what is particularly noteworthy about his approach: he made central to the process the premise that the worst would happen; that is, that he would never get *Dymer* published, would never achieve his dream of becoming a noted poet. This acceptance of the worst he made a prerequisite to the healing process of writing. Thus in 1930 he advised Arthur "to assume absolutely mercilessly that the worst is true, and to ask what then?" The letter continues, "...after a very miserable night I sat down to assume the worst, as I advise you to do, and on that basis to come to terms with the situation. Only I did it in writing...it was of the greatest [help] to me." The rejected manuscript in his twenties and the deceased wife in his sixties are infinitely different losses, but what if Lewis wrote *A Grief Observed* from the fictional premise, "the worst is true"? This life is all we have, and Joy's is over; or, even worse, the Cosmic Sadist still inflicts pain upon her (*A Grief Observed*, pp. 7, 35, 45). Such a "let's pretend" premise would greatly alter our view of the "shattering" depicted in the book. It was a technique he had used before, and it fits nicely with the hypothesis that the book's speaker is an invented persona, the book an artful guile for every bereaved person.

My third reason for this hypothesis is psychological. Taken as Lewis's own reaction to Joy's...
death, the book does not ring true to modern psychological studies of grief. Such studies show that the surviving spouse suffers a longer and more disturbing bereavement when 1) the survivor was clinging ly dependent on the spouse, 2) the partner had mixed feelings about each other rather than a solid relationship, or 3) the death was sudden or unexpected. There is no evidence that any of these three conditions fits the Lewis marriage, nor do they fit the marriage depicted in A Grief Observed. The closest would be the clinging dependency of the husband-narrator, suggested by the depth and length of his grief. But this is a circular argument: we know that this man grieved long and hard. Perhaps there’s an undistributed middle in there somewhere: either way -- circular argument or faulty syllogism -- the conclusion is fallacious. Nothing in these psychological studies suggests that Lewis would undergo the severe reaction depicted in A Grief Observed.

Certainly Joy’s death was not sudden or unexpected. Lewis and his wife learned in October 1959, about nine months before her death, that the bone cancer had returned and was widely spread (Green and Hooper, p. 270). Both knew her condition was critical during the trip to Greece, three months before she died (Green and Hooper, p. 271). In the previously mentioned studies of grief, death from cancer did not rank high as a cause of severe grief in the remaining spouse. Indeed, “The death of a spouse from cancer often was associated with more rapid and less distress-ridden recovery” than for those whose spouses died suddenly or unexpectedly (Kastenbaum, p. 226). On my first reading I was surprised at “Lewis’s” reaction to H.’s death; now I have psychological evidence that it is unlike the usual grief of such persons.

We move to my fourth and final reason for taking the book’s speaker as a persona assumed by Lewis. Lewis’s letters written soon after Joy’s death do not depict the extreme grief of A Grief Observed. The most poignant one is to Vera Gebbert just two days after the death: “Alas, you will never send anything along ‘for the three of us’ again, for my dear Joy is dead. Until within ten days of the end we hoped, although noticing her increasing weakness, that she was going to hold her own, but it was not to be.” He describes Joy’s last days and then closes, “You will understand that I have no heart to write more, but I hope that when next I send a letter it will be a less depressing one.” This expression of grief strikes me as genuine and appropriate, without any fist-shaking at God. Later letters are even calmer.

In late April or early May, learning that Joy was dying, Sheldon Vanauken had sent the Lewises a sculptured Christ, a reproduction of a twelfth-century Norman art object. In July or August, just weeks after Joy’s death (July 13), Lewis wrote Vanauken that the figure, which at first he hadn’t liked, “has grown on me gradually. I believe it will come to mean a great deal to me.” And on August 5, less than a month after his loss, Lewis wrote to Mrs. Gebbert (apparently in reply to a question), “I believe in the resurrection...but the state of the dead till the resurrection is unimaginable. Are they in the same time that we live in at all? And if not, is there any sense in asking what they are ‘now’?...Perhaps being maddeningly busy is the best thing for me” (Letters, pp. 294-95). Certainly the last sentence refers to his grief over Joy’s death. But it is difficult to imagine that letter being written that soon by the devastated husband of A Grief Observed. The letter is dated August 5; remember that by early September Lewis was considering publishing the book.

Finally, Lewis’s letter to Arthur Greeves, written August 30, about six weeks after Joy’s death and during the very time of his composing A Grief Observed, shows a calm acceptance of his loss:

My dear Arthur

It is nice to hear from you. It might have been worse. Joy got away easier than many who die of cancer. There were a couple of hours of atrocious pain on her last morning, but the rest of the day mostly asleep, tho’ rational whenever she was conscious...I’d seen violent death but never seen natural death before. There’s really nothing to it, is there? One thing I’m very glad about is that in the Easter Vac she realized her life long dream of seeing Greece. We had a wonderful time there. And many happy moments even after that. The night before she died we had a long, quiet, noulushing, and tranquil talk.

(They Stand Together, pp. 553-54)

That’s the voice of the mature C.S. Lewis whose writings had nourished my mind and my heart. Is it the same voice we hear in A Grief Observed? I think not.

In his (published) letters written shortly after his wife’s death, then, we hear Lewis the man, sensitive, suffering — but neither angry nor doubtful of his Christian hope. There is nothing in them to match the following passage from the book:

Can I honestly say that I believe she now is anything?...when I try to pray for H.,...I have a ghastly sense of unreality, of speaking into a vacuum about a nonentity.

The reason...is only too plain. You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you...Only a real risk tests the reality of a belief. Apparently the faith — I thought it faith — which enables me to pray for the other dead has seemed strong only because I have never really cared, not desperately, whether they existed or not. Yet I thought they did.

(pp. 25-26)

A few pages later the narrator mentions a friend quoting St. Paul to him: “‘Do not mourn like those who have no hope’” (p. 29). Nothing in the letters above indicates or even implies that Lewis himself ever needed such correction in his days of grief. This suggests an important difference between the voice of A Grief Observed and that of the Christian author behind it.

For four reasons, then, I support Walter Hooper’s contention that in A Grief Observed Lewis padded his own experience of grief in order to write to Everyman. But my four reasons do not include Hooper’s one. To recap mine: First, the book’s elegiac elements suggest that it is conscious art and not autobiographical journal. Second, Lewis’s way of dealing with the first rejection of Dymer suggests that he may have created a mourner in extremis as a way of working through his own grief. Third, psychological studies suggest that this mature, stable Christian would not have been as shattered as the speaker of A Grief Observed. And fourth, Lewis’s letters of the time do not suggest such extreme grief but on the contrary show a sad acceptance...
of the expected death. Joy’s death hurt her husband deeply, but it did not shatter his view of God; it did not make his world collapse around him; it did not vitiate his literary talent. He worked through his grief by stepping outside it a bit, observing it, and writing a work of conscious art that would serve others.

After writing and delivering an earlier form of this paper, I read Peter Schakel’s excellent Reason and Imagination in C.S. Lewis (1984), in order to review it for the Lamp-Post. There I found the following: [In A Grief Observed Lewis found a way to] express deep and personal feelings in a way that could be helpful to others. It is crucial to separate the truth of the book from biographical accuracy. Lewis wrote what was...a fictional diary, and used in it a "persona," an imaginary "diarist" through whom he could express himself....The "I" in the book...must not be completely identified with Lewis, and great caution should be used in treating the book as a source of information about Lewis's life or marriage. In its form it was an imaginative book, one for which matters of historical factuality are not relevant. (p. 168)

Shackel and Hooper are the only ones I have found who read A Grief Observed as fictionalized autobiography. I join their company.

I close with Hooper’s account of Lewis’s telling him about the trip to Greece. You remember that Lewis and Joy spent several days there in April 1960, even as the cancer worsened. Talking to Hooper, "Lewis said, 'Joy knew she was dying, I knew she was dying, and she knew she was dying -- but when we heard the shepherds playing their flutes in the hills it seemed to make no difference!'" (They Stand Together, p. 553, n.). I like to think that behind that beautiful and moving comment are echoes of a life spent reading pastoral literature, including elegies and the twenty-third Psalm. May we be as well prepared as was C.S. Lewis to cope with the grief this world includes.

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14 There are, however, clear echoes of this letter in A Grief Observed, p. 26 -- or the letter echoes the book.

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