

## C. S. LEWIS – AT THE BORDER BETWEEN CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY AND FICTION

### Summary

The relationship between Christianity and literature is a theme that is both vast as well as seldom approached in literary criticism in Romania. Although the challenges of life, regardless of historical period, are complex and sophisticated, there are basic human needs that can neither be ignored nor tricked. The soul's deep yearning for meaning, moral dilemmas as well as the need to understand the essence and destiny of life, including hope, are the profound anxieties in each of us. It is precisely that sensitive and deeply hidden, possibly forgotten soul string of ours that may resonate with the story. The ways in which literature, including the literature written from a Christian perspective, has provided answers or "has avoided" answers, or "has indulged itself in story" so that it may provide the solution within the present-day context by codifying it in terms of postmodernism, are extremely complex, yet quite rarely analysed.

One explanation for the absence of a Christian perspective from the today's philosophical and literary debates may originate in the *sacred-secular* schism, which has reduced Christianity to a field with the status of private territory related to personal affinities and beliefs.

This has brought about a broader division in the modern society, called by sociologists "the public-private dichotomy", operating as a filter through which any absolute conviction becomes a prisoner of the private realm.

Religion, in particular, becomes mainly a matter of personal choice, being placed within the sphere of values. Thus, the idea of truth and falsehood is completely lost in terms of relevance, being separated from the field of scientific knowledge. Neutral as it is, although it cannot answer the essential questions related to human existence, scientific knowledge holds its position of absolute authority, peculiarly coexisting with the very philosophy of a denial of the absolute truth.

The theme of the study, *C. S. Lewis – At the Border between Christian Spirituality and Fiction*, proposes a dialogue between two established fields of study, namely the literary and the theological one, delineating an area of critical investigation by analyzing the two perspectives at their convergence in various historical and philosophical contexts, with a focus on the life and work of the British writer Clive Staples Lewis.

He is an outstanding example of scholarly literature, an epitome of teacher, writer and literary critic, whose literary work is deeply rooted in both universal culture and the truth of Christianity. Moreover, he has been engaged, in the most genuine and beautiful sense, in the

discovery and defence of this truth through works of literature, literary criticism, literary history and apologetics.

With C. S. Lewis, the metaphysical dilemma on the *fact-value* dichotomy was profoundly and subjectively experienced. The drama of the inner conflict is expressed by the author himself during his youth. Although inwardly he yearned for beauty and meaning, he unreservedly embraced materialistic atheism, which seemed to fulfil his thirst for objective knowledge:

On one hand, a sea filled with islands of poetry and myth; on the other, a misleading "rationalism" without substance. "I thought almost everything I love is imaginary; almost everything I thought was real seemed macabre and meaningless. (Lewis, 1986, 170)

In the case of Lewis, this tension translated into the terms of the dualistic paradigm that, between *Reason* and *Romanticism*, took him into the long and complicated quest of truth, from **atheism**, through **theosophy** and **pantheism** to **realism**, **idealism**, up to **theism** and finally to **Christianity**.

The experience itself of inner division or of spiritual quest is neither new, nor out of the ordinary. What is unusual is the way he comes to understand his own need, the unique way through which he finds the solution in the truth of Christianity and equally in the inestimable value of the literary work that he produces, in his attempt to share the experience of the "journey", to explain the essence of discovery, to substantiate this essence into fiction by means of literature with the help of his literary friends.

**C. S. Lewis** (1898-1963) was first a professor of Medieval and Renaissance English Literature at the Oxford University and then was granted tenure at this department at the University of Cambridge for almost forty years. He grew up, was trained and worked in the first half of the last century against the background of debates and ideological battles of the three major lines of thought that disputed their dominant position in the Western European culture. These could be synthetically called rationalism, romanticism and Christianity.

Lewis was passionately engaged in the disputes of these three forces, being captivated in turn by each of them. Being a rationalist and a resolute atheist in the first half of his life, he is constrained to simultaneously accept the reality of certain subjective experiences of an entirely different nature from the rational one. Since childhood, his passion for literature and mythology as well as his sensitivity to the beauty of nature weave inside him an alternate world, that of longing, that of yearning for the transcendent.

At various times and in various stages of his life, he experiences during brief and completely random moments the climax of a certain longing – *Sehnsucht*, i.e. the sublime mixture of pleasure and pain that Lewis calls "Joy" – the experience itself being expressed

through the metaphor “stabs of Joy” –, which becomes the starting point for the spiritual journey that will lead him to the discovery of Christianity.

At the age of thirty, he experiences his conversion to Christianity, calling himself “the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England” (Lewis 2011, 245) because, after the difficult years of inner quest and struggle, his spiritual surrender comes as a dramatic moment. Undoubtedly, Lewis falls among those who discovered Christian faith "through and due to his interest in literature". His study of classical writers, his passion for Medieval and Renaissance literature, his reading of some Christian writers' works, his quite exceptional knowledge of philosophy presented him with a vision of existence that ultimately had a decisive role in his discovery of the attraction that Christianity may exercise, both in terms of reason and in terms of imagination.

It was not persuasion, but rather a path that led him to a vision of reality regarding the world and life which, though robust and coherent, was in keeping with the "longing" of his heart. He was mainly appreciated for the quality of thought and for the depth of his convictions, combined with an amazing ability to compress the most important ideas in just a few words, without wasting their meaning, by using concentrated visual analogies in order to illustrate complex issues. His imaginative capacity added a fantastic dimension to his rationalism. We can state that his special gift was his ability to present Christianity both rationally, through apologetic works, and imaginatively, through works of fiction.

Probably the least known dimension of C. S. Lewis' life remains, however, his position as an Oxford Don. His academic career was not just an exceptional one; it was the foundation of quality in all his other pursuits. Auditoriums were always filled by those who were eager to listen to his lectures of English literature. He was widely praised as tutor by his students. He was described as "the most widely read man of his generation, one who has read everything and remembered everything he read" (Empson in McGrath, 2013, 166). Due to his work *The allegory of Love* (1931) Lewis came to be acknowledged as "a giant of learning", a scientist able to write one of the volumes of the *Oxford History*. He was the first occupant of the seat of Medieval and Renaissance Literature Professor of the University of Cambridge, established specifically for him; in 1955, as a recognition of his high academic reputation, he was elected as member of the British Academy.

Beginning with the moment of his conversion, Lewis believed that the best service he could do to those around him was to explain and defend the faith common to all Christians of all times - that "enormous common territory" to which he referred to as the "essence" of Christianity. *Mere Christianity (Creștinism pur și simplu*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2004), which appeared as a result of lectures given at the BBC during the Second World War, is considered

one of the most influential religious writings of the twentieth century. However, the work that brought him the greatest success is *The Chronicles of Narnia* (*Cronicile din Narnia*, Rao International Publishing Company, Bucharest, 2005), which is translated into over forty languages and which is still being sold in millions of copies.

Lewis' name is associated to that of his friend and colleague, JRR Tolkien (1892-1973), author of the famous work *The Lord of the Rings*, considered a masterpiece of fiction in the English literature, which Lewis nominated in 1963 for the Nobel Prize in literature. The Literary circle *The Inklings*, which was born as result of the friendship of these two teachers, was active for more than ten years starting with 1933 and acquired almost legendary status.

The way C. S. Lewis became famous, but especially the fact that fifty years after his death his fame and authority did not fade as some commentators of the fifties thought it would, but instead grew and expanded, became a topic debated and analysed by many researchers in literary and theological circles. Lewis' work carries in its very essence a message that (though far from being theologically faithful to the various ecclesiastical or religious standards) has the force to arouse the deepest feelings and spiritual beliefs not only in the mind and heart of the ordinary readers but also among many contemporary theologians and writers.

The aim of this thesis, **C.S. Lewis – At the border between Christian Spirituality and fiction**, is that of presenting an overall perspective on the major aspects of Lewis' life and work, on his intellectual and spiritual journey, on his way of viewing nature and the functions of imagination and on his Christian conception. All these form together the foundation of the enormous success his fiction writings benefit from, especially *The Chronicles of Narnia*, but also his apologetic masterpieces.

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The two levels of analysis which stand out throughout this writing are those of the journey – in which underlined are essential elements in the revelation of the ongoing battle of reconciliation, balancing and harmonization of his rational and romantic internal universe – and that of the reflection that derives in his most important fiction works, each of them analyzed in the context of his apologetic works which were written in the corresponding periods. The tension between rationalism and romanticism which is intrinsically and dramatically lived reflects the intellectual, cultural and ideological reality of the modern society representing thus the reality of the division in human consciousness from all times.

One of the prevailing themes found in the works of fiction from all literature is that of pilgrimage, of the journey towards the place of worship. There is a difference in between such journey and the one that finds the character on a path which leads to the unknown with the desire of fulfilling a dream. In Lewis' account, the story of his life contains a less likely encounter, that of the adventurer who starts off looking for the fulfilment of his desire, but ends up, against his will, in the place of worship. His experience is a substantial argument in the struggle to understand what is the best way to reconcile rationalism with romanticism within a Christian understanding of the world. Thus literature and Christian spirituality are brought in the desired dialogue.

Regarding the structure of this thesis, we can identify five chapters.

**The first Chapter** deals with some theoretical aspects that sum up the historical premises in which the dichotomy reason/romanticism can be found, within the vast context of various dichotomies which are easy to pick up from different historical periods. A next step is to set some of the essential landmarks in approaching literature from a Christian perspective and the way in which the Inklings movement, but especially C.S. Lewis falls into this category.

**The second Chapter** addresses the topic of imagination which holds a central spot in the life and work of C.S. Lewis. A quick incursion in the representative theories about imagination throughout literary history followed by an analysis of the role of imagination in theology and practice of Christian life facilitates the understanding of the theory of imagination developed by Lewis. He argues that true knowledge is that of poetic nature, idea which comes in complete contradiction with the illuminist approach. In *Bluspels* and *Flanlasferes a Semantic Nighmaere* essay he affirms: For me, reason is the natural organ of truth, but imagination is the organ if understanding. Imagination (...) is not the cause of truth but its condition.''(Lewis, 2013, 265).

**The Third Chapter** presents the journey of his intellectual and imaginative formation, 'the history of joy', until the dramatic moment of conversion. This route is of particular and essential importance in understanding his works from later on.

His autobiography, *Surpised by Joy* was published in 1955 after he had written most of his books. Far away from being an autobiography resembling those of St. Augustin's Denomination or Rousseau's, Lewis, Lewis chooses all the essential elements which can help with the understanding of the influence that his childhood and adolescence had on his later intellectual and spiritual development.

**The fourth Chapter** puts in parallel the two main writings of his first 10 years as a Christian: *The Pilgrim's Regress* – representing and allegory analyzed in the context of the erudite work *The Allegory of love* – and *The Problem of Pain*, the first apologetic writing. Lewis analyzes the dichotomy reason-romanticism in a very clear manor in the *Pilgrim's Regress* by

using the dialectic of ‘north’ and ‘south’, image which proved to be perfect in explaining the relation between reason and imagination in the context of looking for an answer that would fit the desires of his heart. The role of *desire* was one of directing him to the place in which he could find and understand the *truth*. The intellectual barriers which he encounters on the way are passed one by one in such a way that *theism* and then, *Christianity* become acceptable from a rational stance, and thus, unavoidable.

One of the problems for Lewis in accepting the reality of God was the impossibility of reconciliation of the reality of the suffering and ugliness of man’s existence and the idea of a Good and perfect Creator, who cares about his creation. Published in 1940, *The Problem of Pain*, is an excellent example of how Lewis proves that the truth of Christianity is not to be purely accepted but it can be understood at the rational level. Lewis carefully articulates his answer to the most important and strongest atheistic argument, the fact that the reality of suffering in the world is a proof that we cannot state that there is a God who is loving and most powerful.

**Chapter five** propose a second parallel between two essential works written in the last ten years of C. S. Lewis’s life, *Mere Christianity – apologetic*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia – children literature*, which highlights a radical turning of the writer from the rationalist approach to the romantic one, change in which the main role is played by the importance that Lewis granted to the concept of *mythopoetic* literature. Even we can notice the fact that each of the chronicles has more than one level of meanings, and we can identify biblical or theological meanings behind their subjects or behind some of their details, we cannot consider any of them as being an allegory. Reading them as allegory would mean ‘breaking the spell’ of the story, and destroying their unity and autonomy, inviting to grasping their significance at the level of the mind and not of the heart.

We can identify in *The Chronicles of Narnia* different archetypes and motifs characteristic to fairy tales, all the natural circles, the message of losing and regaining the identity, which connects different parts and these with literature, inviting to multiple ways of reading, and different way of approaching them – (Michael Ward, Rodica Albu).

Lewis actually has the capacity of letting us with the feeling that he presents arguments while he is actually displaying a vision. (Farrer, în McGrath, 2013, 222)

What is interesting is the fact that, in the light of C. S. Lewis’ experience, the passing from the irrelevant Christianity of his childhood into the realm of owe of real Christianity could be interpreted as an experience of reconversion. So, ‘the smuggling’ of Christian truth through fiction could be reinterpreted in terms of postmodernism as an act of redeeming deconstruction through which, Lewis, using the means of figurative speech, the metaphors, allegories and

myths, re-embodies the divine truth communicating in a significant and a relevant way the 'magic' story of the Gospels to a world which seems to have no stories to tell any longer.