

An Allegorical Apology: C. S. Lewis's *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933)

“There are many ways back to the truth, and no way, faithfully followed, can lead anywhere, at last, except to the centre.”—*Early Prose Joy*, 1930

“There could be no question of going back to primitive, untheologized and unmoralized, Paganism. The God whom I had at last acknowledged was one, and was righteous. Paganism had been only the childhood or religion, or only a prophetic dream. Where was the thing full grown? or where was the awakening?”—*Surprised by Joy* (1955)

Brief Early Timeline

1898 , November 29	Clive Staples born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, to Albert (1863-1929) and Florence (1862-1908).
1899 , January 29	Baptized at St. Mark's, Dundela
1908 , August 23	Lewis's mother, Flora, dies of cancer.
1914 , April	Meets Arthur Greeves, life-long friend and correspondent.
September 19	Lewis begins to study with W.T. Kirkpatrick (i.e. “The Great Knock”) in Great Bookham Surrey, until April 1917.
1917 , September	Enlists in British army, commissioned as second lieutenant.
November 29	Arrives at the front line, Somme Valley, France.
1918 , April 15	Wounded at Mount Berenchon during the Battle of Arras.
October	Assigned to Ludgerhall, Andover, England.
December 23	Arrives home after 11/11 Armistice.
1920 , March 31	Receives a First in Honour Moderations (Greek and Latin Literature).
1922 , August 4	Receives a First in Greats (Philosophy & Ancient History); B.A. degree.
1923 , July 16	Receives a First in English in the Honors School
1924 , October	Serves as philosophy tutor at University College.
1925 , May 20	Elected a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, will serve as tutor in English Language and Literature until 1954.
1927 , February	Becomes a Member of Tolkien's Kolbitár.
1929	Admits to theism, though not yet Christianity: “In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed.”
September 25	Albert, his father, dies from cancer.
1931 , September 19	Late night conversation with Hugo Dyson and Tolkien about Christianity
September 28	Becomes a Christian and a communicant in the Church of England.
1933 , May 25	Publishes <i>The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism</i> .

Exploratory Questions

- What is it that you truly long for, beyond the day-to-day matters of daily existence?
- Why are some people drawn to and other repulsed by religion, especially Christianity?
- How much hope can we find in ethics, philosophy, or natural science?
- Likewise, what kind of answers does psychology, social theory, or politics offer?
- Are literature, poetry, art, or music pointers to the divine? Why and/or why not?
- Can one embrace Christianity without the organized Church? Explain.
- What causes someone to make a major change in worldview?

Definition & Defense of Allegory

“Allegory, in some sense, belongs not to medieval man but to man, or even to mind, in general. It is of the very nature of thought and language to represent what is immaterial in picturable terms. What is good or happy has always been high like the heavens and bright like the sun. Evil and misery were deep and dark from the first. . . . To ask how these married pairs of sensible and insensibles first came together would be great folly; the real question is how they ever came apart. . . . This fundamental equivalence between the immaterial and the material may be used by the mind in two ways. . . . On the one hand you can start with an immaterial fact, such as the passions which you actually experience, and can then invent *visibilia* to express them. . . . This is allegory. . . . But there is another way of using the equivalence, which is almost the opposite of allegory, and which I would call sacramentalism or symbolism. If our passions, being immaterial, can be copied by material inventions, then it is possible that our material world in turn is the copy of an invisible world. . . . The difference between the two can hardly be exaggerated. The allegorist leaves the given—his own passions—to talk of that which is confessedly less real, which is fiction. The symbolist leaves the given to find that which is more real. To put the difference in another way, for the symbolist it is we who are the allegory.”

—*The Allegory of Love* (1936)

The Argument from Desire

Adam Barkman traces the following five concepts in Lewis’s thought. Each reveals an aspect of Lewis’s argument from desire, i.e. from spiritual longing or desire for the transcendent:

Platonic Eros: The first vocabulary Lewis encountered to describe spiritual longing. Eros in platonic terms is the innate desire for beauty, as well as the awareness that one lacks it. Such eros involves the love of wisdom, truth, and ultimately happiness, and because this world is only a copy of the Forms, it longs for its true home which is elsewhere.

Sehnsucht: This German term involves “seeing the sublimity of nature,” “longing for the unattainable,” and the “dreaming of fantasy worlds.” For Lewis, the term is a pointer to the nostalgia that includes a sense of the bygone, the out-of-the-way, or the supernatural.

Joy: Lewis was drawn to this term in the 1920s, and he would eventually base his prose autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, on the William Wordsworth’s poem of the same name. He defined it as “an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction.”

Romanticism: In the preface to the third edition of *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, Lewis defined the “romantic” as “a particular recurrent experience . . . of intense longing” which nevertheless has “no hope of possible satisfaction” and yet “is better than any other fullness” (209-210).

Numinous: A rather late term in Lewis’s vocabulary, he borrows it from Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy*, which he likely read after its 1936 English translation. The numinous is something beyond the sublime. It carries with a sense of mystery, awe, even danger, and is a desire so fundamentally basic that it precedes human rationality.

Together, these terms, despite their differences, suggest that 1) given that human beings have these unfulfilled desires for something beyond this world, such a beatific possibility likely exists, and 2) this beatific possibility is ultimately a divine one.

[Barkman, Adam. “Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*.” *C. S. Lewis’s List: The Ten Books That Influenced Him Most*. Ed. David Werther and Susan Werther. NY: Bloomsbury, 2015. 113-134.]

The Overall Structure

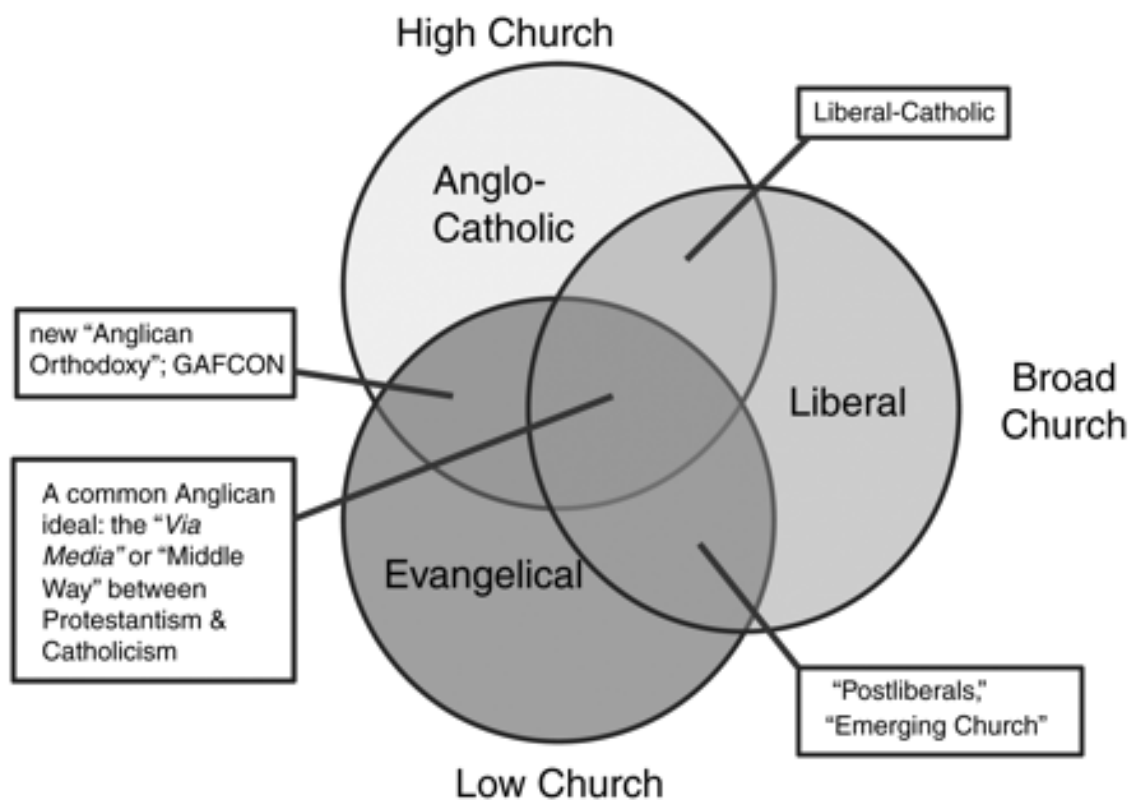
Books 1-2 *Childhood and Adolescence in Puritania*—John’s first vision of the Island; his adolescent experiences with sex; his early responses to legalistic Christianity; and his first encounters with rationalism.

Books 3-4 *Bondage to and Rejection of the Spirit of the Age*—John lost among the various theories and productions of the avant-garde, becomes enslaved by psychoanalytic claims, only to be rescued by reason and set back upon the road in search of truth.

Books 5-7 *North & South along the Canyon*—Unable to accept the Church, John and his virtue explore a number of other worldviews, including Epicureanism, various anti-Romantic movements, the heroic nihilism of fascism and communism, and the various schools of British philosophy, including that of Idealism.

Books 8-9 *Lessons from History and Conversion*—Increasingly divided from his natural moral understanding, John finally comes to terms with what God was up to in both myth-centered classical cultures and among the Jews. He finally realizes he must give into baptism, but wars for a season against the various voices he has encountered.

Book 10 *Fighting the Good Fight*—John and his virtue now see the journey on entirely different spiritual terms. He must fight and defeat both the temptations of world-hatred and world-seduction. But this is a fight until one crosses the river of death.



Comprehension Questions

Book One

1. What are John's first experiences with the rules? What do they suggest about religion and legalism?
2. How does John's first vision of the island give him a sense of joy and Sehnsucht?
3. Likewise, how does his first experience of someone's death ("of being turned out") affect him? As such, is this predictable?
4. How did John come to mistake the brown girl(s) for the Island?
5. How would you describe his resulting sexual bondage?

Book Two

1. What makes Mr. Enlightenment's line of reasoning suspect? What is Lewis telling us about traditional Enlightenment rationalism?
2. What are Mr. Vertue's limitations?
3. Why is the romance with Media not an effective substitute for the Island?

Book Three

1. How does Victoriana (Edith Sitwell) represent a kind of false persecuted artist?
2. What kinds of rationalization do the Clevers make for the avant-garde?
3. How does Sigismund Enlightenment represent some of the danger of psychoanalysis?
4. What is the false logic of the jailor's catechism?
5. How does the virgin knight of Reason expose the Spirit of the Age?

Book Four

1. According to Reason, what are the limits of reason and the natural sciences?
2. Why does one sometimes need to remain in doubt?
3. What are the meanings of Reason's three riddles?
4. Why is there yet a true warning with the first riddle?

Book Five

1. How does Mother Kirk's account mirror the account in Genesis 2-3?
2. Why does Vertue claim self-sufficiency? What motivates this approach?
3. How would you describe Mr. Sensible's personality? What does he suggest about the nature of stoicism and Epicureanism?
4. Likewise, what is Drudge's life like? What does the state of the garden reveal about Epicurean "moderation"?

Book Six

1. Why have Mr. Neo-Angular, Mr. Neo-Classical, and Mr. Humanist taken up together? What makes their common life surprising?
2. On what grounds does Neo-Angular undercut John's desire for the Island, his respect for Reason, and even his having listened to Mother Kirk?
3. Is any of what Savage says true? Explain.
4. What renders the three pale men unable to fight Savage? What is Lewis saying about these intellectual movements?

Book Seven

1. Why has Vertue started to grow sick and lose hope?
2. What is Mr. Broad (Church)'s approach to religion, and why is it not enough?
3. What is the substance of Wisdom's instruction? What does he believe to be true, and what does he believe to be false?
4. How does Wisdom understand something like the argument from desire?
5. From where do Wisdom's children get their night feasts, and what does this signify?
6. What makes Wisdom's Idealism really a form of pantheism?

Book Eight

1. On what grounds, do Vertue and John reach such different conclusions based on Wisdom's Philosophical Idealism?
2. Why does Wisdom's Idealism not serve John in his journey along the cliff?
3. What does the Man (i.e. Christ) teach John about the Landlord and the rules?
4. Why does John not want to live in a world with a real Landlord?
5. Why did the Landlord send pictures to the people? What made the Shepherd People different?
6. How do the hermit's lessons in history change things for John?
7. At the end of chapter IX, the hermit History gives two reasons for why cultural change happens slowly. Do you agree?

Book Nine

1. What lesson does the dream of inner light send John?
2. What does Death teach John?
3. Why does baptism involve complete self-surrender, and how do the wraiths try to prevent John from going on?
4. What does the Voice (of God) mean by calling the dying god "*my mythology*"?
5. Why are the Island and the Mountain one thing?

Book Ten

1. Why do John and Vertue see a new vision of the country?
2. What was deceptive about Mr. Sensible and his quotations?
3. What makes Mr. Wisdom's condition, like Limbo, neither the best nor the worst?
4. What makes the black hole (Hell) an act of mercy on the Landlord's part? Do you agree?
5. Why is Pride wrong to reject the body and the natural world?
6. Why are the Clevers suppressing all knowledge but technological knowledge? What is the foreseeable future?
7. How would you describe the temptations of the witch?
8. What are the meanings of the Northern and Southern Dragons?
9. Why end the allegorical novel with a Brook? How does one prepare for one's death?

Afterword

1. How does Lewis (in 1943) further clarify and define the argument from desire?
2. How did Lewis come to see the difference between himself and the Neo-Scholastics?
3. How do the theological versions of the North and the South fall out on the question of nature and grace?