C. S. LEWIS’S LAUGH AT MODERNISM: THE ST(R)EAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN “THE SHODDY LANDS”

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Abstract

Although C. S. Lewis wrote at a time when Modernism was in bloom, he highly decried this literary movement, clearly expressing his disapproval of the entire paradigm of that age. In the article “On Juvenile Tastes”, he claims that the contemporary literary world showed little concern with the narrative art, but more with literary novelties, a category in which he includes the famous technique of “the stream of consciousness”, which he critically nicknamed “the steam of consciousness”. Even if he never actually used this technique per se, he pretended to do so in the short story “The Shoddy Lands”, which explores the mind of Peggy, a very shallow character. The result is highly amusing and thought-provoking, showing in a literary manner his opinion about Modernism. This paper will analyse some aspects of the short story mentioned above in the light of the stream of consciousness technique and reveal Lewis’s intention in apparently engaging with this modernist psychological narrative mode.

Keywords: stream of consciousness, Lewis, The Shoddy Lands, Modernism, mind

INTRODUCTION

Many of C. S. Lewis’s readers perceive him as a defender of traditionalism against modernity for good reason. There is much evidence that he deplored the values of the modern world and especially how they were translated in literature,
showing throughout his entire body of works his appreciation for classical writers such as Dante or Milton, rather than the modernists that were fashionable in his time. It even sometimes seems that he was quite ignorant of modern techniques in literature, since his fiction does not even remotely resemble that of James Joyce or Virginia Woolf, for example, who are usually considered the leading names in 20th century English literature.

Presumably trapped in his ivory tower together with his friends, the Inklings, he is sometimes viewed as an “escapist”, due to his love for fantasy, which provides ways of getting away from reality into enchanting worlds. While there are several arguments to support this view, what is not as well-known is the fact that he actually engaged with this literary movement by pretending to use one of its pivotal techniques: the stream of consciousness. Even though the result is clearly not a modernist text, Lewis makes a very powerful point in it.

The focus of this paper is to analyse the way and the reason C. S. Lewis seemed to employ the modernist technique of the stream of consciousness in one of his short stories entitled The Shoddy Lands. We will first look briefly at Lewis's opinion of Modernism and of the use of the aforementioned approach, then we will give some context for this lesser known short story and examine the manner in which the author appears to use it. Before we draw our conclusions we will also highlight some important aspects concerning the major aim of his undertaking.

**LEWIS ABOUT MODERNISM**

The fact that C. S. Lewis was not very fond of Modernism has never been a secret. On the contrary, he repeatedly claimed in his letters or critical writings that he disliked this new literary movement and what it promoted, “with attitudes ranging from incomprehension to dislike and, in some cases, utter condemnation” (Hiley 9). The reason for this categorical opinion lay at the very basis of this current of thought, which promoted other ways of doing literature, that in their turn were significantly different from those preferred in the past.

In a lecture entitled “Science as a Vocation”, given in 1917, Max Weber talks of the modern age as a “disenchantment of the world”, which resulted in the withdrawal of “the ultimate and most sublime values” (30). Modern people advocated for a major shift of values by refuting what they considered wrong in
the previous centuries. No longer attracted by stability and tradition, they thought they were bringing humanity to a new level of development, without anticipating the remarkably “deep sense of crisis” that followed the significant changes (Calinescu 5). In literature, the movement that promoted this view was known as Modernism. Its most important features are: a continual experimental approach to literature, which gave rise to numerous literary techniques (such as the stream of consciousness), a focus on symbolism, a feeling of despair, the reality of everyday life, introspection, fragmentation, discontinuity, together with a new perception of time.

Lewis thought that in the grip of such an audacious pursuit of novelty, the modernists forgot something essential and he militated for a return to a lost normality:

While the moderns have been pressing forward to conquer new territories of consciousness, the old territory, in which alone man can live, has been left unguarded, and we are in danger of finding the enemy in our rear. We need most urgently to recover the lost poetic art of enriching a response without making it eccentric, and of being normal without being vulgar. Meanwhile—until that recovery is made—such poetry as Milton’s is more than ever necessary to us. (A Preface to Paradise Lost 57)

In other words, Lewis did not think well of the general tendency to explore the new and the unknown at the risk of losing what is sound and valuable. Furthermore, he claims that modernist poetry had its source in “the ‘sick of everything’ mood” (qtd. in Sayer 90). Generally, Lewis had quite biting words for the creators of this new literary style, also claiming in A Preface to Paradise Lost that they were illogical: “In one respect, Milton’s technique is very like that of some moderns. He throws ideas together because of those emotional relations which they have in the very recesses of our consciousness. But unlike the moderns he always provides a façade of logical connexions as well” (42). This façade, however, is not something the modernist writers intended to show, as their aim was completely different.

One of the striking modernist traits that Lewis particularly disliked was the fashion of free verse. He cared very much for traditional poetry that rhymed, having dreamed of becoming a poet himself for a long time, which is why he
disapproved of this new trend. He was quite militant about it in his youth since, as mentioned in his biography Jack/C. S. Lewis and His Times, he planned to make an annual collection of poems written in the old style, in an attempt to “convince some of his contemporaries that it was still possible to write poetry that rhymed and scanned and was on ‘sane subjects’” (Sayer 90-91).

The famous author further criticised this movement in his essay “On Juvenile Tastes” for its limited interest in the actual narrative art and its preoccupation with “technical novelties and with ‘ideas’, by which it means not literary, but social or psychological ideas” (Lewis Selected Literary Essay 63). One of these psychological inventions the literary world was interested in was the stream of consciousness. This technique was popular in early 20th century literature, as it supposed an immersion into the depths of the unconscious which had, presumably, never been explored before in a literary manner. The term was coined by William James, an American philosopher and psychologist, having afterwards been used in literary studies in order to designate “an approach to the presentation of psychological aspects of character in fiction.” (Humphrey 1)

Consciousness is seen as “the entire area of mental attention, from preconsciousness on through the levels of the mind up to and including the highest one of rational, communicable awareness,” this last area being the one most targeted by writers of fiction who are concerned with “those levels that are more inchoate than rational verbalization—those levels on the margin of attention.” (Humphrey 2-3) Modernist writers usually brought what had been marginal so far into the centre of attention, which gave their literature an appearance of novelty.

In his book Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel, Robert Humphrey (1954) further develops this point by explaining that if consciousness could be regarded as an iceberg, then this technique would be mostly interested in the part below the surface, which would actually be “the prespeech levels of consciousness”. The aim of this type of mind exploration would be to reveal the psyche of the characters presented and consequently to contribute to the analysis


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of human nature (4, 6). This interest in the psychology of the individual was famous at the beginning of the last century, with the advent of psychoanalysis theorised by Sigmund Freud.

The most noteworthy authors who successfully employed this technique are Marcel Proust, with his famous madeleine anecdote from *In Search of Lost Time*, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, all of whom used it in different ways. Although these writers claimed to enrich the art of fiction with the addition of deep psychology to the novel, there is a fundamental issue that remains: if the human consciousness is chaotic (as it has been contended), then it is quite problematic how one could depict logically what is illogical, how order could be made out of disorder (Humphrey 9, 85).

Regarding Lewis’s opinion about this literary fashion, we can easily sense a paradox. He could come across as quite indifferent to this preoccupation, as he claimed in the *Introductory Letter* to his poems that he is “out of touch with all the dominant trends of contemporary literature,” having been called ‘an escapist’ (*The Collected Poems of C. S. Lewis* XIX). However, the truth is that he was not completely unknowledgeable about it, at least regarding the stream of consciousness technique, which he called “the steam of consciousness”:

> Lewis was not fond of that chaotic genre of stories which go under the name of ‘stream of consciousness’ literature—or ‘steam of consciousness’ as I have heard him call it—because he believed it impossible for the human mind to observe its thoughts and be the object of its thoughts at the same time. This would be like looking in a mirror to see what you look like when you are not looking at yourself.
> (Walter Hooper in the Preface to *The Dark Tower and Other Stories*)

The nickname “steam of consciousness” is certainly meant to be humorous, but it shows at the same time Lewis’s disbelief in this type of psychological process. He develops this view in *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, where he analyses this technique in detail. He claims that modernists are fond of it because it presumably shows reality as it is, without any embellishments. Nonetheless, the writer does not agree with this view, as he thinks the “reality” it claims to represent is actually artificial, for in order to show the activities of one’s mind, the latter should be first suspended. The result is that the modernist author finds
nothing logical or stable, either thoughts or feelings, in the explored consciousness:

The poet who finds by introspection that the soul is mere chaos is like a policeman who, having himself stopped all the traffic in a certain street, should then solemnly write down in his note-book ‘The stillness in this street is highly suspicious.’ . . . For consciousness is, from the outset, selective, and ceases when selection ceases . . . And even if it were granted (which I do not grant) that the unfocused or unelaborated consciousness were in itself specially real, it would still remain true that literature which claims to represent it is specially unreal. For the very nature of such unfocused consciousness is that it is not attended to. Inattention makes it what it is. The moment you put it into words you falsify it . . . There may be a place for literature which tries to exhibit what we are doing when will and reason and attention and organized imagination are all off duty and sleep has not yet supervened. But I believe that if we regard such literature as specially realistic we are falling into illusion. (Lewis A Preface to Paradise Lost 135-137)

In other words, Lewis thought that the whole attempt to represent the reality of the mind was absurd. The technique was doomed to failure and deceit from the very basis of its existence. The writer preferred classical authors who brought something new to life, a special ingredient that nobody had ever seen or heard of, not those who apparently faithfully copied the daily existence of common people. He expounded this view in his great critical work An Experiment in Criticism, contending that the reason why people read is in order to enlarge their lives. They do not wish to be self-sufficient, rather they long to see the world with different eyes, to experience the feelings of other people and have as many windows to other worlds as possible (137-138).

**THE SHODDY LANDS**

Although Lewis unreservedly criticised the stream of consciousness, it seems that he attempted to engage with it once, according to Walter Hooper, when he wrote the short story The Shoddy Lands, which was first published in “The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction” (Lewis The Dark Tower and Other Stories 11) in 1956. The work of fiction was intended to show the weakness of this technique and thus to have a laugh at the fruitless attempt of the modernists.
The Shoddy Lands is written in the first person singular, apparently from the perspective of an alter-ego of the author. In his rooms at Oxford, the narrator meets with his friend, Durward, who brings with him his new fiancée, Peggy. He dislikes the girl from the outset mainly because she is the reason why the two friends cannot talk of what they are really interested in, but also as she seems remarkably shallow. Upon looking at her, he suddenly finds himself in a totally different place, where everything is vague and shoddy: the trees, the shoes he was walking in, the grass, the flowers, the people, the sunlight etc. The experience is so strongly negative for him that he believes he is dead. The only clear things that he finds in this new environment are women’s shops, clothes, jewellery, high-heeled shoes and arrogant men.

He soon discovers that he is in Peggy’s mind, upon seeing her as a gigantic shape, with better looks, updated to the latest fashion. Peggy’s mental landscape seems to be full of herself, or rather, of a distorted image of herself, improved in terms of appearance but the same as regards the character, which does not have any additional kindness or honesty, virtues Lewis cherished. From the first location which was on a beach, the background suddenly changes and the narrator finds himself in a luxurious bedroom that he deeply dislikes. He sees Peggy dressed in a two-piece swimsuit, looking like the girls from advertisements and his repulsion towards her increases. He feels she has nothing to offer except for shallow things, in which he is certainly not interested. Suddenly he hears two knocks on the door: one belonging to Durward, Peggy’s future husband, and another mysterious one which addresses her in a very unusual way: “Child, child, child, let me in before the night comes.” (Lewis The Dark Tower and Other Stories 110) The last knock brings a dash of spirituality into the story as it turns out it comes from Christ. The narrator then unexpectedly finds himself back in the real world, delighted to have escaped from the prison of Peggy’s mind.

In the last paragraph, he decodes his experience, claiming to have been in the girl’s mind and to have seen the world as she perceived it: she at the centre of it and everything else gravitating around herself, her most cherished material things being very clear and distinguishable, while the other elements in life (including most of nature and other people) remaining blurred, as she found
them unimportant. He concludes by expressing his regret for his friend who will marry such a frivolous and selfish person.

This story points to certain weaknesses of the stream of consciousness technique and also subtly proposes an alternative. We will take each point separately. Firstly, the narrator calls the procedure by which he got into Peggy's mind "pathological": "My view is that by the operation of some unknown psychological—or pathological law, I was, for a second or so, let into Peggy's mind." (Lewis The Dark Tower and Other Stories 111) The term is quite drastic, highlighting the unnatural character of this phenomenon. Although there is a vast literature written in the first person, there was never a serious attempt to describe the minute working of the human psyche until the last century. Clearly, Lewis believed that such an attempt was both unsuccessful and futile. What is more, even if there were indeed such a way to intrude into one's consciousness, one may be very disappointed by what one would find there, as the narrator's experience shows us.

Secondly, the writer's choice to get a glimpse of the mind of such a character as Peggy is worth some attention. The girl is superficial and very preoccupied with material things, especially clothes and jewellery. She does not seem to have any other more elevated interests such as reading or writing. She lives in a world of appearances and advertisements, with no focus on what is deeper and more valuable. Why would anyone be curious to know such a consciousness? This question seems to be implied in the way the story is told. Perhaps it is also an allusion to the fact that not all minds deserve to be explored in such a thorough manner.

Thirdly, what is more alarming is the deficiency of Peggy's character, who lacks some crucial moral qualities such as honesty, kindness or care for other people, since her image of herself occupies the centre of her world. This is why all the others, except men in whom she has an interest, are blurred and vague, mere shadows in the landscape of her consciousness. She cannot be available for anyone else's needs as she is too preoccupied with striving to have the perfect body and clothes according to the current advertisements. This is why she does not allow even her fiancé to enter her own world, letting him knock at a metaphorical door of her mind (or heart) without receiving any attention. The striking aspect is that she does not even have a place for God, who remains forever knocking at a locked door. This could actually be interpreted as a symbol
of the secularised world Lewis was living in: people did not accept the idea of Divinity anymore, keeping it away from their interests. Perhaps the author also used this image as a criticism against the stream of consciousness technique, which promotes the exacerbation of the self to such proportions that it leaves out fundamental aspects of one’s existence.

Peggy’s mind resembles the cult of personality which is usually imposed in totalitarian regimes. In that context, the president is praised beyond measure and almost worshipped as a hero of the nation (which is quite convenient, as these regimes reject the idea of God). A human being is thus transformed into an idol and huge banners with his face and name are hung on the walls and carried in grandiose processions. In *The Shoddy Lands*, the same happens at the level of consciousness. The self is almost venerated as a value *per se*, shown in a gigantic and idealised version, with nothing else around greater than it. Peggy is the most distinct person in her mind, all the others are vaguely represented. She is the *alpha and omega* of her existence, the only source of wonder and appreciation.

At a deeper level, though, her mind is the expression of a fundamental human need: that of being commended and even “glorified”. Lewis explains this basic necessity in his splendid sermon “The Weight of Glory” in which he claims that such wish to be acknowledged is only natural: “The sense that in this universe we are treated like strangers, the longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality, is part of our inconsolable secret.” However, from his perspective, true glory has nothing to do with worshipping one’s personality, for “glory means good report with God, acceptance by God, response, acknowledgement, and welcome into the heart of things” (*C. S. Lewis Essay Collection: Faith, Christianity and the Church* 103). In other words, Peggy is criticized because she seeks the glory of this world by fulfilling its standards of beauty and fashion. However, he believes that this strong need of being seen and appreciated should be turned to spiritual glory, which could only be granted by the Lord. Perhaps this is why in this short story he used the biblical image of Christ forever knocking at the door of our hearts: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (*Revelation* 3:20). Obviously, Peggy did not seem to hear any voice, not even that of her lover, let alone of God. We could interpret this insertion of the numinous element as
another criticism of the stream of consciousness technique, which tends to exclude spiritual matters, favouring instead a secular way of perceiving reality.

THE PROBLEM OF MEANING

In general Lewis was concerned with conveying profound issues in his literary texts. This is why every work of fiction that he created is infused with multiple layers of meaning, ranging from the most obvious ones which form the surface, all the way to the deepest ones. The stream of consciousness technique intended to present the chaotic working of the psyche at the expense of a considerably reduced meaning, so much so that some critics believed it to be inexistent: “Any novel which has as its purpose the depiction of psyche must remain faithful to the elasticity, the range, and the whim of that psyche. Any such novel is subject to formlessness and, in a sense, meaninglessness.” (Humphrey 87-88) The author of Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel gives the example of the novel Ulysses by James Joyce as a representative of this tendency (88). There are clear differences between the “real” stream of consciousness technique and the caricature Lewis draws in his short story also in terms of meaning: the former lacks unity and confuses the reader, while the latter opens up new perspectives of understanding the world. It appears clearly in the following examples:

Look for something I.
His hasty hand went quick into a pocket, took out,
read unfolded Agendath Netaim. Where did I?
Busy looking for.
He thrust back quickly Agendath.
Afternoon she said.
I am looking for that. Yes, that. Try all pockets.
Purse. Potato. Where did I?
Hurry. Walk quietly. Moment more. My heart.
His hand looking for the where did I put found in his hip pocket soap lotion have
to call tepid paper stuck. Ah, soap there! Yes. Gate. (Joyce 234)

Although Ulysses was much applauded for its new writing style, it had some serious deficiencies in terms of the message it conveyed. The general impression
is that everything is chaotic and disorganised, moving at astonishing speed, without letting the reader grasp the main idea of the text. In contrast, Lewis’s short story presents the psyche from an external perspective, which helps the reader perceive the main message of the text:

I felt as if I had suddenly been banished from the real, bright, concrete, and prodigally complex world into some sort of second-rate universe that had all been put together on the cheap; by an imitator. . . . I realized that I was looking at a gigantic human shape. It turned round. Its eyes looked straight into mine. It was not only gigantic, but it was the only complete human shape I had seen since I entered that world. It was female. It was lying on sunlit sand, on a beach apparently, though there was no trace of any sea. It was very nearly naked, but it had a wisp of some brightly coloured stuff round its hips and another round its breasts; like what a modern girl wears on a real beach. The general effect was repulsive, but I saw in a moment or two that this was due to the appalling size. . . . She was Peggy. That is, she was recognizable; but she was Peggy changed. I don’t mean only the size. As regards the figure, it was Peggy improved. (Lewis The Dark Tower and Other Stories 105-106, 108)

We can certainly notice that Lewis uses a visual method of accessing the mind of a character. This may be so because the process of creating a story in his case is developed in images, not in words, as he explains in his article “On Three Ways of Writing for Children”, where he claims that images are the first things that come to his mind before he invents a story, comparing the process with bird-watching (Of This and Other Worlds 54).

By pretending to use this technique in his own visual characteristic way, Lewis also represents one of the main images of 20th century literature, “the hollow man”. He had played with this model before in the novel That Hideous Strength in the characters Mark Studdock and Wither (Shippey 246). However, in this short story, Lewis describes the prototype of the hollow woman, who has no interest other than her own perfect image. His corrosive criticism against this type of character is quite obvious. By focusing excessively on her own person, Peggy turns herself into an idol, which is reminiscent of Lucifer, who wanted to be higher than God: “Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty;/You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor;/ I cast you to the ground,/ I laid you before kings,/ That they might gaze at you” (Ezekiel 28:17). The
punishment of such pride was the angel's downfall, which introduced the first element of evil into the world, according to Christian teaching. Lewis does not go so far as to depict the result of her idolatrous way of thinking, but he makes a subtle allusion to it in the words “poor Durward” at the end of the story (The Dark Tower and Other Stories 111).

Peggy could be interpreted as a character that embodies Modernism itself, according to Lewis. Her love of shining things and of good appearances may indicate the attempts of the modernists to realistically represent life. Her incapacity to go beyond the limits of worldliness would echo their own shortsightedness for the spiritual realm. Finally, Peggy’s narcissistic approach to life could be the modern tendency to transform people into idols by developing individualism as a substitute for religion. Lewis’s criticism of this movement would also touch upon the loss of a religious perspective on life. In this light, the narrator's comment about not wanting to marry Peggy ("If I had to marry either, I should prefer the old, unimproved Peggy. But even in hell I hoped it wouldn’t come to that") could be seen as his categorical refusal to adopt the modernist creed (The Dark Tower and Other Stories 109)

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, C. S. Lewis engaged with Modernism both in his theoretical works and in his fiction. He expressed his disapproval and scathing criticism of the values it promoted and the literary means it employed by pretending to use the stream of consciousness technique, a method claimed by modernist writers, in his short story The Shoddy Lands. By choosing to depict Peggy’s consciousness, the unseen part of the iceberg, as the psychologists would put it, he reveals the shallowness of a person that lives only for herself, in a world where she is surrounded only by her petty interests in clothes and jewellery.

The author also derides Modernism as it seems to use the stream of consciousness in order to promote an inner cult of personality, which exacerbates the self and does not leave any place for God, who stands forever knocking at the door. Although it gives the illusion of reality, this technique cannot actually represent the real self, but only a shoddy imitation of it. Perhaps it is itself shoddy, as are most of the things in Peggy’s mind. Lewis’s play with this modernist literary invention is both amusing and thought-provoking, as he not
only offers the readers a comic image of shallowness, but he also encourages them to think of deeper issues such as idolatry, the place of God in one’s consciousness, and the essence of their own psyche.

Works Cited


BIONOTE

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