

2022

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### Recommended Citation

Poe, Harry Lee (2022) "The Reading Life of Young Jack Lewis, 1914-1917," *Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/1940-5537.1265>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cslewisjournal/vol16/iss1/3>

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# The Reading Life of Young Jack Lewis, 1914-1917

HARRY LEE POE

When young Jack Lewis had a disastrous experience at Malvern College, Albert Lewis sent his son to live with Albert's old headmaster who had retired to Great Bookham, Surrey. The elder Lewis hoped that the old man could prepare young Lewis for entry to Oxford and a profitable career. From the fall of 1914 until the winter of 1917, Lewis studied with W. T. Kirkpatrick and mastered the academic texts that Kirkpatrick assigned him to read. While these studies prepared Lewis to win a scholarship to Oxford, the pleasure reading which Lewis enjoyed in the evenings prepared him for a career as an English literature teacher and scholar while laying the tracks on which his conversion and calling as an apologist would emerge.<sup>1</sup>

When Lewis arrived in Great Bookham, he had the dream of becoming a great poet. After living with Kirkpatrick a short time, however, he resolved to become a philosopher. He did not exactly abandon the dream of poetry, but he developed divided loyalties. He planned to go up to Oxford where he intended to excel. First, he would undergo optional "Mods" (Classical Honour Moderations), the public Greek and Latin examinations, because

<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the part played by Lewis's pleasure reading on his later life, see Harry Lee Poe, *Becoming C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 143-70, 182-85, 191-93, 195-96, 209-20. For a treatment of the literary influences on Lewis leading up to his conversion, see Joel D. Heck, *From Atheism to Christianity* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2017), 29-45. For a treatment of primarily religious books which influenced the mature Lewis, see James Stuart Bell and Anthony P. Dawson, *From the Library of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

as he explained to his father, “People might feel that they could never be quite sure of you unless they knew what you had done in Mods.”<sup>2</sup> Then he would win a first in *Literae Humaniores*, known in Oxford as “Greats” (classical philosophy and history). Finally, he would be invited to be a fellow of one of the more prestigious colleges where he would teach philosophy. That was the plan. A war intervened, but by July 1922, he had completed the plan, except no college invited him to become a fellow. He had no alternate plan.

### Preparation for a Career

Those who live an academic life have long been fond of extolling the value of learning for learning’s sake and that a university does not prepare a student for a job but for a well-lived life. It is a lovely sentiment for the independently wealthy who never plan to work, but C. S. Lewis needed a job and he could not get one doing the only thing he was qualified to do. Therefore, he stayed on at Oxford for another year and took a second bachelor’s degree in English literature in hopes that it would make him more attractive as a job applicant.

Lewis had a great intellect, but intellect alone is not enough to earn a degree from Oxford University in one year. Unlike an American university degree based on the number of hours a student has sat through lectures, an Oxford degree is based on what a student has learned. Students do not take a set number of courses filled with tests, quizzes, and exams. Instead, for an hour each week they meet with a tutor who guides their reading and for whom they prepare a paper of 3,000 to 5,000 words. The process is designed to prepare students to take one test in which they are expected to know everything on the subject. In the course of the tutorials, students are guided in their reading. Lewis was able to complete a degree in English literature in only one year because he had already done most of the reading as his pleasure reading at “Gastons,” Kirkpatrick’s house in Great Bookham.

Lewis liked routine, and at Gastons he fell into a regular pattern that divided his day between work with Kirkpatrick and free time to do as he

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. by Walter Hooper, 3 vols. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004-7), 1:438.

pleased with little supervision. His daily schedule involved:<sup>3</sup>

8:00 Breakfast  
 9:15 Greek lessons  
 11:00 Break  
 11:15 Latin lessons  
 1:00 Lunch and free time  
 5:00 Lessons  
 7:00 Break  
 7:30 Dinner and English literature

By 9:00, he was free to read what he liked. Decades later, Lewis still regarded this schedule as the ideal life—a schedule he had not had the freedom to follow, but the schedule he would like to have followed.<sup>4</sup>

When he went to Gastons, Lewis's favorite pleasure reading was Norse mythology, but his field of reading quickly expanded. Norse mythology led him to William Morris and his *The Well at the World's End*. Morris led him to Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, which led him to Crétien de Troyes's *The High History of the Holy Graal*. Chrétien led him to Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. (In 1936, he published a book about them called *The Allegory of Love*, and it established him as one of the new lions of English literary criticism. It all began with a little light reading.) He wrote to Arthur Greeves in January 1915 of his purchase of Malory's *Arthur*, which he had ordered on 17 November 1914: "I am more pleased at having bought it every day, as it has opened up a new world to me."<sup>5</sup> The new world was in the plot.

### Preparation for Conversion to Christianity

What all these stories have in common is their plot. It is the "journey story." The hero ventures forth on a great quest for which he abandons everything. He must go to the ends of the world in search of the great

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 1:78.

<sup>4</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1955), 135-6. In this ideal life, he would have taken tea alone no later than 4:15 during which he would be free to read "formless books which can be opened anywhere," like Boswell's *Life of Johnson*.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 1:103.

thing beyond worth, but along the way he must fight many battles often to rescue a damsel in distress. Once he reaches the prize, he returns home as a person who has been changed in the course of the quest. Lewis loved this plot all his life. He wrote scholarly books about it. His science fiction novels and Narnia tales relate this plot, and when he first came to narrate his conversion to Christianity, he used this plot to tell *The Pilgrim's Regress*. He did not know it when he first read it, but he would discover that this plot is the allegory of the Christian story. Encountering the plot reinforced for Lewis his occasional experience of that longing for something that he called Joy, which nothing seemed to satisfy.

His reading of the other great stories of the English language tradition also had a spiritual effect on him. While W. T. Kirkpatrick filled his head with a materialist interpretation of reality during the day, the fiction he read filled his head with a deep longing for a reality beyond this world. In a materialist world, there are no values, just brute matter. Nothing is right or wrong, good or bad, beautiful or ugly. Things just are.<sup>6</sup> Yet, Lewis fell in love with the values expressed by the Brontë sisters, Jane Austen, and all the rest. His pleasure reading brought him to a state of cognitive dissonance between the values he found in the great literature of the western tradition and the materialist philosophy which Kirkpatrick had fed him. Decades later, long after his conversion, he explained it this way: "Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless."<sup>7</sup>

### Preparation for Apologetics

From the values he found in the journey story, Lewis's pleasure reading eventually compelled him to account for morality and the universal sense of right and wrong. Where do they come from? Any explanation would have to satisfy the logical training he had received from Kirkpatrick. The question became a chief topic of conversation for Lewis in the 1920s, as well as the subject of papers he wrote and his first set of lectures in the year he taught philosophy for University College before gaining a fellowship in literature at Magdalen. The titles of the lectures were "The Good, its

<sup>6</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 163.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 161.

position among the values" and "Moral Good, its position among the values."<sup>8</sup>

In his desperation as evidenced throughout the diary he kept between 1922 and 1927, Lewis sought to disprove what he called the "Promethean attitude."<sup>9</sup> In Greek mythology, the titan Prometheus took fire, the exclusive property of the gods, and gave it to humans. The Promethean attitude was the view that moral consciousness had come from outside the material world, just as Prometheus had brought fire to humans from the gods. Lewis did not see how that could be possible, however, since he believed that nothing existed beyond the physical world. Instead of disproving this view, Lewis ended up adopting the Promethean attitude and proving to himself that "right and wrong [are] a clue to the meaning of the universe" and that values come as a gift from God.<sup>10</sup> It all had begun with his pleasure reading at Gastons. As he would glibly remark about his youthful reading habits, "A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading."<sup>11</sup>

His reluctant belief in the reality of values became the starting point of Lewis's conversion and the foundation for his later apologetics. It is the opening salvo of his radio broadcasts which became *Mere Christianity*. It is also the foundational issue on which he developed *The Abolition of Man*. And it all began with a little light reading.

### What Young Lewis Read

What follows is a list of what young Lewis read for his lessons with W. T. Kirkpatrick (over 50 works) and what he read for pleasure (over 150 works). He probably read more than this, but this is all that can be documented. We know that he read many of these books two times or more while at Gastons, because his letters to Arthur Greeves every week were full of discussions of what he was reading at the time. The choice of books which Kirkpatrick put before Lewis foreshadows a point Lewis would make in *The Abolition of Man* about "a boy who thinks he is 'doing'

<sup>8</sup> C. S. Lewis, *All My Road Before Me*, ed. by Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), 348.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, *All My Road Before Me*, 281.

<sup>10</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 181.

his ‘English prep’ and has no notion that ethics, theology, and politics are all at stake.”<sup>12</sup> The reading Lewis did at Gastons enriched his mind, but it also ignited his heart and fanned the spark he called Joy.<sup>13</sup>

### W. T. Kirkpatrick’s Assigned Reading List<sup>14</sup>

#### Greek and Latin

Aeschylus 158

*The Agamemnon* (Lewis Family Papers, 5:12)<sup>15</sup>

Apollonius 278

*Argonautica* (209, 221) [cf. William Morris translation]

Apuleius

“Cupid and Psyche in *The Golden Ass* (268)

Catullus (288)

Cicero (137)

Demosthenes (137)

*De Corona* (Lewis Family Papers, 5:12)

Euripides (158)

*Helena* (107)

*Gesta Romanorum* (268)

Herodotus

*Histories* (284)

Horace 200

*Epistles* (152)

Homer (167)

*The Iliad* (71, 128)

*The Odyssey* (102, 152)

Lucan (199)

Lucretius (trans. Bacon) (238)

*Tantum religio* (*Surprised by Joy*, 162)

<sup>12</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 3.

<sup>13</sup> For a full discussion of the influence of Lewis’s experience at Gastons between 1914 and 1917 on his conversion experience the following decade in Oxford, see Harry Lee Poe, *Becoming C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019) and Harry Lee Poe, *The Making of C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> All numbers following authors and/or titles in the list refer to page numbers in volume one of Hooper’s *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, except where indicated.

<sup>15</sup> Letter of 17 August 1915, from W. T. Kirkpatrick to C. S. Lewis (“Clive”), in Warren Hamilton Lewis, ed., *MS Memoirs of the Lewis Family, 1850-1930*, Wade-A-110, 1933-5, Marion E. Wade Center Collection, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL, 5:12. These papers edited by Major Lewis are often referred to colloquially as the *Lewis Family Papers*.

Ovid (154)

Plato

*The Phaedo* (Lewis Family Papers, 5:12)

Pindar (193, 199)

Tacitus

*Annals* (234, 284), (Lewis Family Papers, 5:12)

*Germania* (284)

*Histories* (284)

*The Life of Agricola* (102, 284)

Virgil

*Aeneid* (112, 128, 157, 177)

### Secondary:

Lang, Andrew

*History of English Literature* (157)

*The Odyssey of Homer* (trans. S. A. Butcher and Andrew Lang), (238)

Murray, Gilbert

*A History of Ancient Greek Literature* (158)

### French

Chénier, André

*Poésies* (219)

Froissart

*Froissart's Chronicles* (287)

Maeterlinck, Maurice

*La Mort* (270, 274)

*Oiseau Bleu* (239)

Nadier, Charles

*Contes Fantastique* (273)

Paris, Gaston

*Littérature Française du Moyen Age* (269, 278, 282)

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques

*Les Confessions* (282, 285)

Voltaire

*Contes* (274)

### German

Chamisso

*The Amazing Adventure of Peter Schlemiel* (276, 286, 289)

Fouqué, Friedrich

*Sintram and his Companions* (289)

*Undine* (289)



**English**

Bacon, Francis

*Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral* (121)

Bennett, Arnold

*How to Form Literary Taste* (240, 246)

Benson, A. C.

*Upton Letters* (160)

Boas, F. S. 237, 243

*Shakespeare and His Predecessors* (238)

Boswell, James (234, 241)

*The Life of Samuel Johnson* (228)

Bridges, Robert

*The Spirit of Man* (166)

Burrell, Arthur

*British Ballads: English Literature for Schools* (170, 173)

Clodd, Edward

*Memoirs* (251)

Collins, William

*The Poetical Works of Gray and Collins* (269)

Green, John Richard

*Short History of the English People* (245)

Lang, Andrew (284)

*History of English Literature* (157)

*The Odyssey of Homer* (trans. S. A. Butcher and Andrew Lang), (238)

Mackail, John William

*Springs of Helicon: A Study in the Progress of English Poetry from Chaucer to Milton* (157)

Pater, Walter

*Renaissance* (219)

Ruskin, John (247)

*A Joy Forever* (165)

Schopenhauer, Arthur

*The World as Will and Idea* (151)

Swinburne, Algernon Charles (174, 238)

*A Study of Shakespeare* (107)

### **Jack's Pleasure Reading at Gastons<sup>16</sup>**

Ainsworth, William Harrison (92)

Anderson, Hans Christian

*The Mermaid and Other Fairy Tales* (119)

<sup>16</sup> All numbers following authors and/or titles in this list refer to page numbers in volume one of *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, except where noted.

- Arnold, Matthew  
     "Balder Dead" (220)
- Austey, F.  
     *The Talking Horse and Other Tales* (272)
- Austen, Jane (174, 235, 239, 245, 256, 287)  
     *Emma* (182, 197)  
     *Mansfield Park* (129, 182, 281)  
     *Northanger Abbey* (181, 257)  
     *Persuasion* (181, 186)  
     *Pride and Prejudice* (260)  
     *Sense and Sensibility* (70, 223)
- Bail, Francis William  
     *The Descent of the Sun* (274)  
     *The Heifer of the Dawn* (274, 278)
- Beowulf* (244)
- Blackwood, Algernon  
     *The Complete John Silence Stories* (201, 214, 215, 219, 270)  
     *The Education of Uncle Paul* (161)  
     *Jimbo: A Fantasy* (222, 224, 225)
- Brontë, Anne  
     *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (284, 290)
- Brontë, Charlotte (201, 281)  
     *Jane Eyre* (117, 161, 202)  
     *The Professor* (245)  
     *Shirley* (117, 174, 180, 189, 211)  
     *Villette* (102, 117)
- Brontë, Emily  
     *Wuthering Heights* (202, 258)
- Brontës (170, 180, 236, 260, 290)
- Bunyan, John  
     *The Pilgrim's Progress* (247, 254)
- Burney, Frances  
     *Evelina* (233)
- Burns, Robert  
     "To a Mouse" (177)
- Burrow, George  
     *Lavengro* (236)
- Byron, George Gordon, Lord  
     *The Destruction of Sennacherib* (154)
- Carroll, Lewis  
     *Alice in Wonderland* (272)
- Chaucer 250  
     *Canterbury Tales* (183, 185, 187, 192)  
     *Troilus and Criseyde* (156, 157, 239)

- Chénier (*Surprised by Joy*, 140)
- Cluifton-Brock, Arthur  
     *William Morris: His Worth and Influence* (117, 118)
- Crawford, Francis Marion  
     *Arethusa* (272, 274)
- Chrétien de Troyes  
     *The High History of the Holy Graal* (249, 254)
- Dante (275)
- De Quincey, Thomas (199, 285)  
     *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (113, 181, 182, 187, 192, 199)
- Dickens, Charles  
     *David Copperfield* (154)
- Dumas, Alexander (293)
- Edda* (249)
- Gaskell, Elizabeth Cleghorn  
     *Cranford* (235, 239)  
     *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (285, 289, 290, 291)
- Goldsmith, Oliver (174)  
     *The Vicar of Wakefield* (69)
- Goethe (97)
- Gray, Thomas  
     *The Poetical Works of Gray and Collins* (269)
- Haggard, H. Rider  
     *Pearl Maiden* (165)
- Hankey, Donald  
     *A Student in Arms* (242)
- Hardy, Thomas  
     *Under the Greenwood Tree* (211)
- Hart, Bret (154)
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel  
     *House of the Seven Gables* (256, 258, 261)
- Henty, George (105)
- Herrick, Robert (*Surprised by Joy*, 140)
- Hewlett, Maurice  
     *The Lore of Proserpine* (162, 168)
- Hugo, Victor  
     *Hans d'Islande* (290, 293)  
     *Les Misérables* (270)
- Ibsen, Henrik (78)
- James, Henry (274)
- Keats, John (98, 288, 290)  
     "Endymion" (220)  
     "The Eve of St. Agnes" (220)

- Kalevala* (222, 226, 228, 232, 235)  
 Kingsley, Charles  
     *Westward Ho!* (184)  
 Kipling, Rudyard (233, 236, 237)  
     *The Jungle Book* (106)  
     *Kim* (106)  
     *Puck* (106)  
     *Rewards and Fairies* (236)  
     *The Seven Seas* (106)  
 Lamb, Charles  
     *The Last Essays of Elia* (242)  
     "The Superannuated Man" (226)  
     *A Tale of Rosamund Gray and Old Blind Margaret* (278)  
 Landor, Walter Savage  
     *Pericles and Aspasia* (110)  
*Laxdaela Saga* [Icelandic saga of Gudrun] (128, 129)  
 Layamon  
     *Brut* (162)  
 Lockhart, John Gibson  
     *The Life of Scott* (240)  
 Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth  
     "The Village Blacksmith" (154)  
     "The Wreck of the Hesperus" (154)  
 Macauley, Thomas (238, 247, 274, 277, 281)  
 Macdonald, George (236, 252)  
     *At the Back of the North Wind* (175, 180)  
     *Phantastes* (169, 173, 175, 189, 206, 258, 281, 293)  
     *Sir Gibbie* (175)  
     "The Golden Key" in *Works of Fancy and Imagination* (254, 257)  
 Malory (235, 244, 245, 249, 274, 278)  
     *Morte D'Arthur* (94, 103, 128, 192, 196, 207, 227, 229, 232, 239)  
 Mandeville, Sir John (*Surprised by Joy*, 140)  
     *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* [ed. A. W. Pollard] (214)  
 Mayne, Colburn[?] (173)  
 Merriman, Henry Seton  
     *The Grey Lady* (103)  
     *With Edged Tools* (103)  
 Milton, John (182, 183, 215, 232)  
     *Paradise Lost* (94, 199, 214, 215, 220, 269, 278, 290)  
     *Paradise Regained and Minor Poems* (225, 227, 232)  
 Mitford, Mary Russell  
     *Our Village* (239)

- Morris, William (218, 249, 274, 278, 281, 282, 287, 288, 290)  
*Earthly Paradise* (220)  
*Grettir Saga: The Story of Grettir the Strong* (165)  
*The Life and Death of Jason* (201, 207, 209, 221, 269, 282, 293)  
*Lyric Poems* (92)  
*The Roots of the Mountains* (119, 122, 128)  
*Rapunzel* (227)  
*Sigurd the Volsung* (92)  
*Völsunga Saga: The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs, with Certain Songs from the Elder Edda* (trans. By Eirikir Magnusson and William Morris) (165, 168)  
*The Well at the World's End* (92, 94, 122, 128, 153, 169, 245, 270)
- Osborne, Dorothy  
*Letters of Dorothy Osborne to Sir William Temple* (ed. by E. A. Perry) (230, 239, 241, 250, 254, 256)
- Peacock, Thomas Love  
*Headlong Hall* (150)
- Poe, Edgar Allan, (290)  
 "The Raven" (199)
- Ronsard, Pierre de (*Surprised by Joy*, 140)
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel (220)
- Sand, George  
*Tales of a Grandmother* (274)
- Scott, Sir Walter 225, 245, 293  
*The Antiquary* (232, 235, 236, 249, 254, 257)  
*The Fair Maid of Perth* (240)  
*Guy Mannering* (240, 257, 260)  
*Ivanhoe* (211, 240)  
*Quentin Durward* (240)  
*Rob Roy* (180, 183, 184, 185, 186, 190, 293)  
*Tales of a Grandfather* (259)
- Shakespeare, William  
*As You Like It* (69)  
*A Midsummer Night's Dream* (246)  
*Othello* (132)  
*Sonnets* (246)  
*The Tempest* (246)  
*Twelfth Night* (214, 220)  
*The Winter's Tale* (246)
- Shaw, George Bernard (242)  
*Love Among the Artists* (190)
- Shelley, Mary  
*Frankenstein* (181, 183, 187, 189)

- Shelley, Percy Bysshe (98)  
*Adonis* (110)  
 "Ode to the West Wind" (290)  
 "Prometheus Unbound" (232)  
 "To – : One Word is too often Profaned" (198)
- Sidney, Sir Philip  
*Arcadia* (196, 199, 201, 205, 207, 211, 214)  
*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (180, 192)  
*Song of Roland* (207, 212)
- Southey, Robert (199)
- Spenser, Edmund (240, 246)  
*The Fairie Queene* (106, 151, 152, 157, 160, 161, 165, 169, 170, 175, 196, 223, 225)
- Stephens, James 236  
*The Crock of Gold* (196, 281, 293)
- Sterne, Laurence  
*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (241)
- Swinburne, Algernon Charles (174, 238)  
*Atalanta in Calydon* (151)  
*Erechtheas* (151)  
*Poems and Ballads* (112)
- Tennyson, Alfred, Lord  
 "Break, Break, Break" (172)
- Thisted, Valdemar Adolph  
*Letters from Hell* (215, 219, 225, 232, 236, 256)
- Thackeray, William Makepeace  
*Henry Esmond* (104)  
*History of Pendennis* (210, 213, 217, 220)  
*The Newcomes* (223, 225)  
*Vanity Fair* (281)
- Tristan and Iseult* (trans. Joseph Bédier, French edition), (183, 195, 196, 207)  
*Tristan and Iseult* (Matthew Arnold), (220)
- Trollope, Anthony (174)
- Troly-Curtin, Marthe  
*Phrynette and London* (222)
- Twain, Mark (154)
- Vachell, Horace Annesley  
*The Paladin* (228)
- Walton (*Surprised by Joy*, 140)
- Ward, Mary Augusta  
*Lady Connie* (230, 234, 251)
- Wells, H. G.  
*The Country of the Blind, and Other Stories* (70-71, 246)

Wordsworth, William 154

*The Prelude (Surprised by Joy, 158)*

Yeats, William Butler

*Plays for an Irish Theatre (90)*