Immersed: A Journal of Faith, Arts, and Letters

The Mind of the Writer

Joseph Young

Writing is not only an act of expression, a means to get a grade, or a way to be understood; it is a unique form of creativity. Being creative is a foundational characteristic exclusive to humans, and I believe it is because humans are image-bearers of God. Since He first created, and therefore, is creative by nature, it is a wonderful privilege to create out of an expression of our shared attributes with God. I hope to help students see how their assignments and papers can have an impact and relevance outside of getting a grade by analyzing famous Christian writers: C.S. Lewis and Dorothy Sayers. Both authors share my beliefs that writing is a way to exercise faith and worship God by using the creative capacities we all have. Sayers and Lewis give guidelines in their works, *The Mind of the Maker* and "On Stories," on how Christian faith and creative writing intersect to make well-crafted stories and god-honoring artists: while Lewis advocates writing stories with complexity and layers of meaning, Sayers talks about portraying the world as it really is. Both authors' perspectives could foster greater meaning and dedication to the craft of writing among students.

C.S. Lewis strongly advocates stories that go beyond the superficial and exciting. He challenges writers to intentionally create things that can truly be impactful and more substantive than cliché action, drama, or fantasy stories. In his essay "On Stories," Lewis allegorizes his belief that stories shouldn't be merely exciting. Using wine as the story, and the alcohol is the excitement of reading it, he explains that excitement is not the primary reason *good* stories are enjoyed: "If a man loves wine and yet hates one of the strongest wines, then surely the sole source of pleasure in wine cannot be the alcohol" (Lewis 7). There is something more than excitement that a story must contain for it to be deemed good, according to Lewis. A good story should not be deemed good simply because it is exciting; there must be something deeper that it contains. Scholar Peter Shakel agrees with this idea in his paper "Imagination and the Arts of C.S. Lewis," where he writes that "the imaginative appeal of story begins with . . . excitement" (54). The word "begins" implies that excitement is not the end goal of a story; stories, when reread, still contain excitement. However, "On Stories" contains a distinction: it is a different quality of surprise (Lewis 17). This second read-through gets readers to think rather than to solely experience what they are reading, where Lewis says that the re-reader can discover the surprises that were surprising during the first read-through and enjoy them more fully because they know what is coming (Lewis 17-18). Good stories should have complexities that warrant re-reading, so the reader can look for and enjoy the surprises in literature again and again and experience something that the story was designed to do. Likewise, the article "C.S. Lewis, Evangelism, and the Role of the Story" explains the purpose of stories: Rebecca Hans notes that the main thing a piece of art calls readers to do is to get out of the way, stop, listen, and observe (qtd. in Dyrness 9). Good art should be thought-provoking as well as observably beautiful. These things are what Lewis believes make for good stories because they add depth to the story rather than produce a predictable yet exciting story. Not only do stories have to go beyond the exciting, but they also need to have messages and/or content applicable to all ages.

Lewis asserted that good stories must be appreciated and applicable to children and to adults. Can stories really be impactful and worth reading and analyzing if they only apply to a specific age group? Lewis seems to think not, as "On Stories" reflects multiple times: "No book is

really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally [or more so] worth reading at the age of fifty" (15). If children are the only audience that can take away ideas, morals, or enjoyment from a book, then there is something more transcendent and profound missing from it that the adult reader notices. This shows a story's lack of depth because it does not speak of truths and realities that a broader age group can recognize. Lewis states that a "mature [literary] palate will probably not much care for *crème de menthe* [an alcoholic beverage]; but it ought still to enjoy bread and butter and honey" (15). It is not enough for Lewis to say that stories are intellectually stimulating or novel, but they can speak to the child, the mature, and the child-like nature within mature readers. By making stories that can be universally accessible and applicable, the writer has done something truly challenging because children and adults are so different. But both of them share a commonality of desires and dreams that a good story can and should speak to, which both age groups can derive enjoyment, ideas, or comfort from. This type of depth means that the writer must be mindful of how the reader's perceptions of the story's content can and will change as they mature; this is a difficult yet worthwhile pursuit.

Lewis finally points out that good stories add depth by touching on the divine. Schakel articulates this idea as the "Mythopoeic" which is the "making of stories that involve the marvelous or supernatural" (62). Good writing transcends the normal, the mundane, and the worldly. Good stories should reflect the eternality of human beings. Furthermore, Lewis's ideology about the connection between story, imagination, and faith is articulated in the essay, "C. S. Lewis & Christological Prefigurement" by P. H. Brazier, where he states that stories "can under certain circumstances be an oracle through which God gives some understanding of a revelatory nature." There is no shortage of imagination exerted in writing and reading good stories. Lewis would, most likely, agree with this idea of the imagination through stories as a means by which God can call people to Himself or testify to His existence. The article continues that "[Lewis asserted] that God used . . . fallen human imagination . . . to communicate some sort of intimation of God's salvific actions: the prefiguring images/myths were . . . pneumatologically given, not humanly invented." Lewis states that stories depicting the divine can be entertaining and a witness to God. This implies that imagination is a gift of God, even if we are fallen creatures, and that God can use it to bring glory to himself and to spread the truth about the reality of a spiritual realm, God, and man's depravity. These truths add complexity and value to a story and provide entertainment if done well. This is an incredible responsibility that Christian artists are called to consider and incorporate into their works. Interestingly, Sayers agrees with this idea of storytelling, but she also believes in not reducing a story to a sermon.

Sayers also advocates for acknowledging the responsibility to storytelling as a Christian: most notably, depicting the world accurately by giving the devil his due. In her non-fiction work *The Mind of the Maker,* she touches on the significance of creating in relation to Christians and their identity as created beings by God. This privilege, to Sayers, in *The Mind of the Maker,* brings with it a responsibility of communicating truth. She states that a writer cannot acknowledge God's existence without acknowledging the devil's existence (53). Sayers is concerned with making a strong story by accurately portraying good *and* evil, and she calls Christians, who know intimately of God and Satan, to write about both. Discounting one and highlighting the other in isolation can lead to a pragmatic yet inaccurate picture of the world and human experience. Sayers believes that depicting the malevolent power sin has in lives and on the world, through a detective work, for example, becomes a more lasting and impactful Christian witness than an apologetics paper on sin (p 8), says Christine Fletcher, in her paper "Dorothy Sayers and the Responsibilities of the Christian Writer". There is nothing wrong with Christian apologetics, and it is a vital tool to

understand the doctrine of Scripture, but Sayers suggests that fiction allows readers to vicariously *experience* the weight and pain of life in a sinful world. To do the opposite and portray the world inaccurately to Christians and unbelievers would be a disservice and a lie that can only lead to frustration. Both believers and non-believers feel the weight of living in a broken world every day. Christian writers, therefore, should not deny this fact but acknowledge it and even depict it. This is not to glorify it, but to empathize with the audience and accept this reality. Once this is done, the writer can then speak truth from God —implicitly or explicitly— to a searching heart for hope.

Sayers also believes in the artist's honor and responsibility in sharing in the role of creator with God. According to the *English Standard Version Bible*, in the beginning, Jesus, the Word of God, describes how the world was made through Him. (John 1. 3). It is not insignificant that the first act God performed was the act of creation. Additionally, readers see this promised act of creation again at the end of Revelation, where the Lord Jesus promises He is "making all things new." (21. 5). The first and closest to last action of the Christ is to create because it is part of His nature. And because humans are made in the image of God, they share some of his attributes, such as knowing good and evil, self-awareness, and free will. Sayers states in *The Mind of the Maker* that God and man share another common characteristic: humans are the only creatures that can and want to make things (22). Sayers believed that writers should and do create not to get money or fame but because it is an intrinsic quality of humans. How much more should Christians write, create, and build new worlds out of nothing, if not to at least share in God's nature? This is a profound privilege that God has given to humanity, but Sayers seems to challenge the Christian writer to a higher artistic and integrous standard.

Sayers challenges Christians to write with integrity. She notes that if Christians are to be good stewards of their words, they should not merely write to please an audience or to half-heartedly put out work to gain money. Christians can and should be mindful of the content and images they write about. Especially because words have great power, and because Christians know the reality of the world better than unregenerate man, they have a responsibility to use their words carefully. Sayers writes, in a letter within the paper, *Dorothy Sayers and the Responsibility of the Christian Writer,* by Christine Fletcher (qtd. From Sayers) the following:

> To his charge that she is the 'itch' to write with her Christian duty, she reminds him that with the exception of The Mind of the Maker, 'everything, almost, I have written has been a commissioned job.' To accept any job honestly, she must ask, if she has any truth 'asking to be communicated.' If not, then neither the money nor the audience nor anything else should influence her, or any other artist, to accept the job. (5)

This is an integral perspective of Christian writing. Christians are called to do everything to the glory of God. Christians, like Sayers, are to think of their artistic ability as from God. Because of this, like any gift received from God, it should be managed and used in a way that glorifies Him. Fletcher goes on to (qt. Sayers) that Sayers' aim of writing was to "tell that story to the best of my ability, within the medium at my disposal—in short to make as good a work of art as I could." (8). Whatever Christians do, God calls them to do it well and in a way that glorifies Him. This is crucial for the Christian writer, because it allows them to shift their target audience, ultimately, from people to God. This will enable them to be more courageous writers and dedicated to their craft. This includes being mindful and discerning about the impact, content, and influence of the words a writer uses. It encourages them to write excellently in their craft and their content. For Lewis and Sayers, all of these things can better help writers approach their work more methodically.

In their literary works, "On Stories" and *The Mind of the Maker,* Lewis and Sayers both communicate their thoughts about how Christian faith can influence writing and the writer. This is

seen through Lewis's beliefs that good stories should be complex, where the story contains more than excitement, and is reflective of the divine, while Sayers states that good writing helps the writer glorify God, because writing allows the author to depict the world as it really is –giving the devil his due-- without dismissing the benevolence of God, and to partake in God's creative nature. Understanding these connections can help readers to appreciate what good art can be, and it can help writers develop their craft with intentionality and joy that their work can have an impact for the Kingdom of God.

Works Cited

Brazier, P.H. “C. S. Lewis & Christological Prefigurement,” *The Heythrop Journal*, vol. 48, no. 5, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2265.2007.00341.x

English Standard Version Bible. *Crossway,* 2024, *ESV.org*

Fletcher, M. Christine. “Dorothy Sayers and the Responsibilities of the Christian Writer,” *Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1197-201:* Vol. 5, Article 10, pp. 5, 8, https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol5/iss1/10

Hans, Rebecca. “That Hideous Strength and Till We Have Faces : C.S. Lewis, Evangelism, and the Role of Story,” *Journal of Inklings Studies,* vol. 7, no. 2, 2017, p 9, *Edinburgh University Press,* https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/epdf/10.3366/ink.2017.7.2.3

Lewis, C.S. “On Stories,” *Of Other Worlds.* 1947, pp. 7, 15, 17-18. PDF download.

Sayers, Dorothy. *The Mind of the Maker, Harper Collins San Francisco.* 1987, pp. 22, 53.

Schakel, Peter. “Imagination and the Arts of C.S. Lewis: Journeying to Narnia and Other Worlds,” *Good Book*, 2002, pp. 54, 62, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Imagination_and_the_Arts_in_C_S_Lewis/pN6y8TcInToC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=C.S+Lewis+%22on+stories%22&pg=PR9&printsec=frontcover