VII | JOURNAL OF THE MARION E. WADE CENTER

Film Review of: *Freud's Last Session* directed by Matt Brown

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SOURCE: *VII: Journal of the Marion E. Wade Center,* Vol. 40 (2024), pp. e183-e186

PUBLISHED BY: Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College

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Brown, Matt, director. *Freud's Last Session*. Last Session Productions, Subotica, 2023.

Freud's Last Session is a film that imagines a meeting between Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis at Freud's home in London on Sunday morning, September 3, 1939, the day Britain declared war on Germany. While the film presents the two men's contrasting views about God, it does so through a rambling conversation rather than an orderly debate or argument. Freud regularly insults Lewis and his views while Lewis takes the abuse with charm and wit as he points out the irony he sees in Freud's materialism. The film makes no effort to settle the question of God so much as to explore the characters of Lewis and Freud—their similarities as well as their differences.

Directed by Matthew Brown, a relatively unknown director with only a few small films to his credit, the movie stars Anthony Hopkins as Freud and Matthew Goode as Lewis. Hopkins starred as Lewis in the 1993 version of *Shadowlands*. He has played magisterial parts in major films over many decades, including *The Lion in Winter*, *The Elephant Man*, *Remains of the Day*, and *The Silence of the Lambs*. Knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1993, Sir Anthony has won two Academy Awards and numerous other awards for his performances. Goode has had major roles in such diverse productions as *Leap Year*, *The Crown*, *The Imitation Game*, and *Downton Abbey*.

Brown does a masterful job of immediately placing the story within the anxious weekend during which World War II began. Hitler invaded Poland on Friday, and England declared war on Germany the following Sunday, the day of the film's action. Through the use of newspapers, Chamberlain's radio broadcast to the nation, gas masks, and the inevitable preparations for the Blitz, Brown sets the mood of the nation as a backdrop to the conversation between Freud and Lewis. Even as Lewis travels to London by train on Sunday morning, the camera catches glimpses of children being evacuated from London to escape the bombs. The casual viewer might suppose that Brown has made a chronological error by having children evacuated hours before war was declared, but even on the day before, evacuees first arrived

at Lewis's home in Oxford, where he would continue to provide a place of security for children throughout the war (Lewis, *Collected Letters II* 270, 274).

Walter Hooper once called Lewis "Oxford's Bonny Fighter" (137, 174) to describe Lewis's approach to verbal combat at the weekly meetings of the Socratic Club in Oxford from January 1942 until June 1954. From the many reactions to the film that I have observed, both in written reviews and informal conversations, it appears that most people expected this kind of battle between Lewis and Freud on the screen. While Freud is depicted as combative and jeering, however, Lewis is pastoral toward a man who is dying and in great pain. Matthew Goode researched Lewis in order to play the part, and he probably comes remarkably close to how Lewis might have behaved in such a situation.

Lewis was a shy man who could perform powerfully on stage. In the company of his closest friends, like Owen Barfield, with whom he had some sharp disagreements, Lewis could argue and debate all night long. With strangers and casual acquaintances in a social setting, however, Lewis tended to turn to wit and humor to deflect arguments. Goode does an excellent job of bringing Lewis's flare for wit and humor to the screen. Lewis's mild laughter runs throughout the film in contrast to the loud, sneering laughter of Hopkins's Freud. Freud's contemptuous laughter erupts when he throws an insult at Lewis over his faith. It is not the spontaneous response to something funny but the contrived and practiced laughter of ridicule.

Freud and Lewis both have their burdens to bear in the film. Freud's terminal cancer manifests itself with coughing, blood, grimaces of pain, agony of movement, and a general bad temper. For Lewis, the coming of the Second World War renewed something that had never really gone away—his terrors of the last war. Today we call it post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD). He suffered nightmares. He also bore in his body the pain of shrapnel in his chest which was slowly making its way to his heart (Poe 19-22, 51-52, 56, 69, 215, 299, 303, 304). In the film, in spite of the unsettled, and unexplored, differences the two men have about God, the universe, and many other matters, they care for one another in their distresses. During an air raid drill, the sound of the sirens and the press of the crowd send Lewis into an awful PTSD panic as the men make their way to the makeshift air raid shelter of a church. Lewis's PTSD never appears to have manifested itself in a panic attack in real life, but in the movie it serves as a metaphor for his experience. Lewis, in turn, helps Freud remove his mouth prosthesis when he has a choking episode due to his cancer of the mouth and jaw.

The film has an unusual genesis as the adaptation of the play *Freud's Last Session* (2010) by Mark St. Germain, which was an adaptation of the PBS production *The Question of God: Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis*, which was the adaptation of the book *The Question of God: C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love Sex, and the Meaning of Life*, which was the product of a

course on Lewis and Freud taught by Armand Nicholi at Harvard University for over twenty-five years.[1] A nearly two-hour-long film about two men talking presents a number of challenges for a filmmaker, but Brown solves the problems as well as anyone could hope to. He makes use of significant flashbacks to advance the particular storyline he wants to pursue. With Freud, he explores the arrest of Freud's daughter by the Gestapo, her release, and their flight from Vienna to London. He also examines Freud's childhood in an Orthodox Jewish home. With Lewis, he explores the death of Lewis's mother when he was a child, the horrors of the trenches in France during World War I, and the relationship between Lewis and Mrs. Moore—the mother of his dead friend Paddy Moore—who lived with him from 1919 until her death in 1951. To these episodes, Brown adds brief scenes of Freud's daughter, Anna, who had a dependent relationship with her father. The skillful use of flashbacks provides a storyline for both men that contextualizes their conversation, imagined to have taken place a few weeks before Freud committed suicide to escape the pain of his cancer.

Like *Shadowlands* and *The Most Reluctant Convert*, this film takes liberties with the facts of Lewis's life. Richard Attenborough's *Shadowlands* eliminated Joy Gresham's older son, David, from the story. In *The Most Reluctant Convert*, Lewis's four schools are condensed to one, and the late-night talk with Dyson and Tolkien about myth is restaged as a sunny afternoon chat with just Tolkien. In that tradition, this film places Paddy Moore in the trenches with Lewis in France when they make their pledge that if one of them dies and the other survives the war, the survivor will look after the parent of the one who died. According to Moore's sister, Lady Hempriggs (Maureen Moore Blake), the incident took place at their home in Bristol just before the two friends shipped out in different regiments (McGrath 66). Tolkien is called by his first name, John, but he always went by his second name, Ronald (Carpenter 471, 489, passim). Lewis is called Professor Lewis, a status he did not receive until he was elected to a professorship at Cambridge in 1954 (12 June 1954, *Collected Letters III*: 488-89). He is called a famous apologist, but he had not yet written his famous apologetics, and he wouldn't broadcast what became *Mere Christianity* until later in the war. Nonetheless, the film works because it is not a documentary or an effort at biography. It is what Lewis called "a supposal" (Letter to Mrs. Hook, 29 December 1958, *Collected Letters III*: 1,004-1,005). It is a film of historical fiction.

Though it takes liberties with when and where events took place in the life of Lewis, *Freud's Last Session* references his later work in apologetics and his agreement with Moore because, apart from these experiences, the complicated man who visits Freud in the film would not exist. It is the famous apologist who critiqued Freud's views on God as the projection of a father figure on the universe who visits Freud, though his public critique of Freud would not appear until he published *The Problem of Pain* in 1940. The film

focuses, instead, on Lewis's allusion to Freud's view of God in his first apologetic work, the allegorical *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933). Upon meeting Freud, Lewis makes an embarrassed apology for his representation of Freud in that book. After listening to the apology for how Lewis characterized him, Freud declares dismissively that he knows nothing of the book. When they part, Freud gives Lewis a small package as a parting gift, with instructions not to open it until Christmas. Opening the package on the train while making his way back to Oxford, however, Lewis finds Freud's inscribed copy of *The Pilgrim's Regress*.

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Notes

[1] Sørina Higgins reviewed the play for *Sehnsucht* in 2010. See, Sørina Higgins, "Review of Freud's Last Session (play)," *Sehnsucht: The C.S. Lewis Journal*, 4:1, Article 15. DOI: https://doi.org/10.55221/1940-5537.1059 Available at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cslewisjournal/vol4/iss1/15.

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