

Is Mary Jane?

Mary Neylan as a Model for Jane Studdock in *That Hideous Strength*

When *That Hideous Strength* was first published in 1945, C.S. Lewis was in his mid-forties, a Christian, and a bachelor. One of his main protagonists in the novel, Jane Studdock, is in her early twenties, an unbeliever, and (unhappily) married. Despite these obvious differences, many readers find Lewis's depiction of Jane's thoughts and feelings surprisingly convincing. She remembers from her teen years "fat men with small, greedy eyes and strange, disquieting smiles" (*That Hideous Strength* [THS] 153). She wonders if men truly understand "how much a woman gives up in getting married" (72). And she balks at the idea of male headship in marriage (168).

Jane Studdock is perhaps the most controversial character in one of the most controversial novels by Lewis. In *The Gender Dance*, Monika B. Hilder has documented the whole spectrum of opinion about Jane, especially the idea that she would be better off abandoning her academic work and starting a family instead (137–38). In the midst of what has been a perennial discussion among Christians for centuries about marital roles, Lewis adopted the conservative view—adhering to Paul's teaching in Ephesians 5:23, regarding the headship of husbands. Ransom's advice to Jane about wifely obedience echoes Lewis's own comments in other books such as *Mere Christianity*, his essay "Membership," and his private letters. In the end, most of the debate about Jane's role in *That Hideous Strength* centers less on Jane as a character and more on the lessons she is supposed to be learning as the novel unfolds.

But even readers who disagree with Lewis's model of Christian marriage are impressed with the psychological depth and complexity of the first female protagonist to appear in his fiction. How did Lewis have the creative confidence to depict the actions and attitudes of the young Jane Studdock? Though Lewis was capable of prodigious leaps of imagination, I believe his portrait of Jane Studdock gained depth and plausibility as a result of his mentor/seeker relationship with Mary (Shelley) Neylan, which began in 1931 and continued until the end of his life.

Literary Mentor and Spiritual Advisor

Born in 1908, Mary Shelley boarded at an Anglican school in Wantage for two years as a child but left due to illness. She studied under Hugo Dyson at Reading University for one year before transferring to St. Hugh's College, Oxford, where she was sent to Magdalen to be tutored by C.S. Lewis. Graduating at the age of twenty-three with a disappointing fourth-class degree, Shelley received a letter of consolation from Lewis, saying that her answers

on the examinations were too short and too general, but that she should not leave Oxford with the impression that she had a fourth-class mind (*Collected Letters* [CL] 2: 113). When Mary applied to teach at Dartington Hall, a coeducational experimental school in Devon, Lewis wrote a glowing recommendation letter for her—so full of praise that Shelley was selected for the position over the young W.H. Auden (Tisdall 216). Shelley began writing to Lewis, asking for titles of scholarly overviews of seventeenth and eighteenth century British poetry (CL 2: 211–212).

When Lewis visited Dartington Hall with Mrs. Moore, he was not at all impressed. The school stressed equality among faculty and students, and pupils were not required to attend classes that didn't interest them. Lewis found such policies naïve in the extreme, and Dartington is likely a model for Experiment House in *The Silver Chair*.

Shelley married Daniel Neylan in 1935. Daniel was an investment manager and later Latin teacher at Dartington. They had their first child, Sarah, in 1938. Mary did not seem comfortable in the role of wife and mother, and her letters to Lewis in the late thirties focus less on literary matters and more on her personal struggles. Both in her correspondence with Lewis and in face-to-face meetings, she sought him out not only with spiritual questions but also for answers about marriage and child-rearing. At one point, her persistent questions elicited from Janie Moore the comment, "that fool of a woman wants you, of all people, to tell her how to bring up a baby" (CL 2: 315).

The Neylans moved to Headington, near Oxford, in the autumn of 1939. Mary began seeking out Lewis as both a literary mentor and as a spiritual advisor. In the spring of 1940, Lewis wrote to both his brother Warren and his friend Dom Bede Griffiths that his former pupil, Mrs. Neylan, was on the threshold of Christian faith (CL 2: 378, 392). Mary did become a Christian later that year, though her daughter recalled seeing a note in her hand: "Perhaps it is not God I desire but Mr. Lewis" (Tisdall 224). After her husband Daniel also became a Christian, Mary asked Lewis to be the godfather of four-year-old Sarah, to which he agreed. He attended the christening in 1942, and wrote to his goddaughter from her childhood until she left home to attend the Slade School of Fine Art. Sarah Neylan Tisdall recalled accompanying her mother to see Lewis at his home, the Kilns, as well as his rooms at Magdalen College. Lewis and Mary Neylan continued to exchange letters and visits until Lewis's last illness. Sarah recalls visiting the hospital, where Mary drew a sketch of Lewis in the last days before his passing.

In the years between 1931 and 1963, Lewis's relationship with Mary seemed to evolve from teacher/pupil to spiritual advisor/seeker, almost to a surrogate father and grandfather. In the late 1930s and early 40s, especially, Mary shared so many personal things, including secrets and confessions, that Lewis replied that she was revealing too much, as he was neither a doctor nor a priest nor a member of her family (CL 2: 481). He later recom-

mended an “official” spiritual director, Father Walter Adams (*CL* 2: 482).

Because of his relationship with Mary, particularly between 1937 and 1943, Lewis became acquainted first-hand with a young woman’s struggles to adapt to married life as well as her pilgrim’s progress from atheist and believer in free love to a committed Christian (Tisdall 215). I believe this relationship gave Lewis the confidence to portray a young woman on a similar journey in *That Hideous Strength*. Jane Studdock is twenty-three in the novel, the same age as Mary Shelley when she left Oxford. Ransom is described as “nearer fifty than forty,” which also describes Lewis in the year *That Hideous Strength* was published in 1945. When Lewis published his George MacDonald anthology two years later, he dedicated it to Mary Neylan.¹

But is Mary Jane?

Jane Studdock resembles Mary Shelley Neylan not only in broad outline but also in many details:

“Being in Love” in Marriage

- Jane ponders the Anglican rite of marriage in the opening of the novel, recalling that love and companionship are listed third. She wonders if “being in love” means the same thing to men and women (*THS* 13–14). Later she asks Ransom what to do when a woman has fallen out of love with her husband (168).
- Mary wrote to Lewis complaining about being a “slave wife,” apparently questioning the Anglican rite of marriage. Lewis replied at length, explaining that the Prayer Book lists three reasons for marriage—having children, providing a proper outlet for sexual desire, and creating a partnership. Lewis questioned the whole notion of “being in love” as the sole basis for marriage, as feelings are so often transitory (*CL* 2: 392–397).

Faith

- Jane had not been to church since her school days (*THS* 13).
- Mary, at the age of nine, began boarding at St. Katherine’s School in Wantage, run by the Community of St. Mary the Virgin. She dropped out after two years due to illness and left her faith behind in her teens.

Writing

- Jane scolds herself for wasting time and says she *must* get some work done on her doctoral thesis on Donne (*THS* 14).
- Mary, according to her daughter, had trouble with procrastination, especially when it came to writing projects (Tisdall 210).

Physical Attractiveness

- Jane's physical attractiveness is commented on by several characters in the novel, with Mrs. Dimble and even Fairy Hardcastle seeing her as "pretty" (*THS* 29, 155). As the novel progresses, Jane becomes more and more aware of her own beauty, recognizing it as a gift (63, 152).
- Mary's daughter, Sarah Tisdall, reported that Lewis gave Mary the impression "that he found her attractive" (Tisdall 214). Indeed, after a visit from Mrs. Neylan, Lewis noted her improved health in a letter, adding "To put it quite bluntly, you looked much prettier" (*CL* 2: 961).

Psychoanalysis

- Jane wonders if she needs psychoanalysis (*THS* 32, 33). Grace Ironwood warns her that analysts will bring their own worldview to therapy sessions and their sense of the Normal to their therapeutic practice (66).
- Mary asked Lewis if she should consider being psychoanalyzed. Lewis replied that one must be careful, as analysts might impose their own views about happiness and wholeness in seeking to help their patients (*CL* 2: 372–373).

Sleep Problems

- Jane considered sleep to be "her enemy," largely because of her disturbing nightmares, so she often spent most of the night awake (*THS* 112).
- Lewis was concerned about Mrs. Neylan's sleep problems, ending one letter by asking about her sleepwalking (*CL* 2: 481) and concluding another, "Now, go to sleep. Blessings" (*CL* 2: 551).

Ancestry

- Jane Tudor Studdock came from distinguished ancestry, descended from the Warwickshire branch of the Tudors (*THS* 65).
- Mary Shelley Neylan was a distant relation of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (Tisdall 213).

Seventeenth-Century Poets

- As Jane approaches Christian faith, it occurs to her that she will be able to understand the seventeenth-century poets more fully (*THS* 319).
- When Mary eventually came to faith, Lewis wrote to her that becoming a Christian would help her understand the seventeenth-century poets such as Donne better (*CL* 2: 467).

Obedience and Humility in Marriage

- Jane is told by Ransom to not seek equality in marriage. He says that she must instead learn obedience and humility (148).
- Mary, after writing an eight-page letter to Lewis complaining that she

felt like a “slave-wife,” received an equally long letter in reply. In his response, Lewis emphasized the importance of obedience and humility, rooted in the fact that God’s grandeur and authority should produce in all humans, male and female, a posture of humility and obedience (CL 2: 371–72).

The Mating Habits of Bears

- At the end of *That Hideous Strength*, Mr. Bultitude the Bear (under the influence of Venus) finds himself a Mrs. Bultitude (THS 375).
- In the same period Lewis was composing the novel, he wrote to Mary Shelley a whimsical note about the mating habits of bears (CL 2: 551).

A Composite Character

Despite all these parallels, large and small, it is certainly not the case that Lewis simply took his impressions of Mary Shelley Neylan and transposed them into the fictional character of Jane Studdock. Jane has no children, and for most of the novel doesn’t want any. Mary Neylan, by contrast, had two daughters, Sarah and Mary Elizabeth. Mary’s husband Daniel was also a far more admirable character than the callow Mark Studdock. Lewis said that Daniel “behaved like an angel” in one letter, and sometimes wrote to Daniel directly. Sarah Neylan Tisdall described her father as “a saint, the nearest thing I have ever met to the true Christian ideal: loving, longsuffering, unselfish” (Tisdall 223).

In general, Lewis’s characters are composites, and he often put a part of himself into the people who inhabit the pages of his stories (Downing 119).¹ Dr. Dimble, with his historical approach to Arthurian legends (THS 31), his dread of listening to labored student essays (33), and his vivid sense of spiritual warfare (229) all remind the reader of Lewis himself. We sense a bit of Lewis too in Hingest’s comment to Mark Studdock about the nature of truth (70–71), and in Denniston’s remark that he enjoys all kinds of weather (113; CL 2: 22).

Reaching beyond the limits of gender and age, Lewis also finds much to empathize with in his portrait of Jane Studdock. Jane’s frightening dreams, her desire not to be “drawn in” (THS 72, 115), and her reluctant conversion all recall the Lewis of *Surprised by Joy*. It is also revealing that Jane—like Lewis himself—had unhealed grudges from “her childhood and her father’s house” (143).

Lewis also beautifully portrays the experience of Joy, or Sweet Desire, as experienced by Jane, evoked by ordinary rural scenes outside her train window of farmhouses, horses, and haystacks: “In between the stations things flitted past, so isolated from their context that each seemed to promise some unearthly happiness if one could but have descended from the train at that very moment to seize it” (50).

Conclusion

All in all, Jane Studdock is one of Lewis's most intriguing fictional creations. In his earlier works, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, *Out of the Silent Planet*, and *Peregrandra*, the protagonist is something of an alter ego for the author. *That Hideous Strength* marks an important artistic departure for Lewis, a willingness to anchor his story in the point of view of a secularized, demoralized young woman. I believe that Lewis was willing to take this literary leap in part because he had become so well acquainted in the previous several years with Mary Shelley Neylan, someone who offered him a first-hand look at the thought processes and feelings of a sensitive young woman seeking spiritual guidance.

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Notes

¹ For more information about Mary Neylan, see Joel Heck's online article at https://researchgate.net/publication/325229929_Mary_Shelley_Convert_Christian_Friend.

² I discuss in more depth the composite nature of Lewis's characters in *That Hideous Strength* in my book *Planets in Peril* (119-120).

Works Cited

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