



The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism

C.S. Lewis

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In this novel written within a year of his conversion, Lewis characterizes the various theological and temperamental leanings of different parts of the Church.

The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism Details

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From Reader Review *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism* for online ebook

Erin says

I loved this book! It is clear that it was written with more than a knowledge but rather a deep understanding of "the search" and the many different viewpoints that one comes into contact with along the way. The graceful art in which he interwove and utilized one's capacity for spacial visualization in such a deep and revealing way was amazing. If I were to liken it to something, and this may be a little strange but bear with me, it would remind me of a flower. It starts off as a bud held in your hand. It's fairly interesting rather simplistic, something easily grasped. However, as it begins to unfold there hidden vibrant colors, you begin to realize it's shape has changed completely and it's actually a much deeper and more complex approach than you first thought. As you lean in to breath its fragrance, you find that you were never holding the flower but standing upon it.

I loved the fun use of words sprinkled throughout, it was challenging and just plain fun. Like a treasure hunt. I loved how he tied in Old English roots etc. The only thing I wish that I had had was a better knowledge of Greek or at least a commentary or translation. But honestly, I enjoyed this book so much, I would love to read a commentary on it. There were so many thoughtfully chosen, unexplained details that I think would be fun, to unravel and discover their respective sources.

Jay Miklovic says

At the outset I must confess that at least 1/3 of this book was well over my head. With that said, this was an enjoyable book to read, and the portions which resonated with me were well worth the confusion I endured during the other portions.

Lewis was a master of allegory, and this book is no exception. The reader who struggles intellectually with the faith will find this book to be a breath of fresh air. John, the main character's, struggle with the various philosophies and philosophers of the world were so vivid and real that you cannot help but think "I have fought this same battle" as you are reading. At many points you sense yourself to be in John's shoes knowing that you are fighting, at this very moment, the exact battle which Lewis has portrayed. I often found myself wondering as I read how each discourse would end, just hoping it would give me insight to my own struggles.

This was an excellent book. I imagine if I were better read in the philosophers which Lewis takes aim at I would have given the book 5 stars. The reason for leaving the last star off is my own ignorance.

Lewis, in the afterword which he wrote 10 years later, laments his own obscurity in the book, and I share that lament. There were simply too many times where Lewis assumed his reader would understand his subject matter, which was too broad of an assumption, at least for a reader like me.

Nonetheless, I highly recommend this book, and believe it was well worth wrestling through.

Jon R. Jordan says

Reading note:

I recommend beginning with the Afterword. Your mileage may vary, but in it Lewis addresses many of the concerns you may have with the book itself.

Book note:

Lewis allegorizes his own conversion experience in an attempt to generalize for a wider audience much of what he experienced being drawn to the faith. Cultural and intellectual commentary abounds, but I found the real beauty of the book in its portrayal of the Church, Baptism, and conversion.

Jacob Aitken says

This book described Lewis' conversion to Christianity using an allegory. Theme: beware of the desiring of the very desiring. It parallels many of the same themes in *Surprised by Joy,* namely that joy (or sehnsucht) is inevitable and can be filled rightly or wrongly. The reader discovers that Christianity does not get rid of utter desire and joy, but transforms them. In the meanwhile, using John, Lewis tells us how he escaped the snares of various penny-ante yet at the time culturally respectable secular philosophies.

The good:

Lewis showed how Christianity rehabilitates Plato. The discussion of archetype and ectype was brilliant.

Reason personified as a female. One is reminded of Joan d'Arc. Reason's introduction in the book is one of sheer awe. John is caught in the muck and slime of his own foolishness, then reason appears like lightning from a clear sky, sword in hand to rescue him. But Lewis is careful. He knows that Reason has limits and the reader sees what Reason can and can't do for the Christian.

Very good section at the House of Wisdom. I wonder if he is subtly alluding to Steiner and Anthroposophy.

Remember those people, devotees of Paul Tillich, who say that God (or x) is just a symbol of our human projection (or whatever inanity they bring up)? Lewis cuts that off at the pass:

'Your life has been saved all this day by crying out to something which you call by many names, and you have said to yourself that you used metaphors.'

'Was I wrong, sir?'

'Perhaps not. But you must play fair. If its help is not a metaphor, neither are its commands. If it can answer when you call, then it can speak without your asking. If you can go to it, it can come to you.'

Translation: that God-projection of yours who is a symbol of a symbol (or whatever)--can he talk? Can he answer prayer? Can he speak? I thought not. Better to have the living God.

The bad:

The book moved too quickly. Most people will have no idea what he is talking about half of the time. But

Lewis recognized this as well. Still, definitely required reading for the Lewis aficionado.

David Sarkies says

An allegory of the author's intellectual journey

6 December 2014

After I started reading this book for a second time I suddenly kicked myself for not reading Pilgrim's Progress beforehand because it is quite clear that the former book has heavily influenced this work. However, I have read it (a while ago) and are somewhat familiar with the story, so it wasn't that big of a mistake. Anyway, following the tradition of Pilgrim's Progress, Lewis sets out to write an allegorical spiritual journey which, while based on his life, is not necessarily strictly following it (and there are a number of instances where the allegory diverges from his own experience). Once again, like Surprised by Joy Lewis' journey is one through the intellectual sphere as the character John (no doubt taken from the writer of Pilgrim's Progress – John Bunyon) travels to seek the island that as a child gave him so much joy. There has been some discussion as to why Lewis' chose the title 'Pilgrim's Regress' in that the Christian journey is not one of regressions. However I feel that that completely misses the purpose of the book. Pilgrim's Progress is an allegorical story of everyman's journey from becoming a Christian and the struggles that many face as they go on that journey. This is not the case with Lewis' story because it is not the Christian journey that Lewis is exploring, but the journey to becoming a Christian. It is the case that once John finally overcomes the final obstacle the road suddenly becomes clear, however the journey to that point is anything but smooth.

Another factor we need to consider is that this is not the journey of the everyman, but the journey of an intellectual as he navigates the various philosophies that are thrown up against him and the lies and deceptions that he encounters. The allegories are presented in numerous ways, such as hedonism being painted as brown boys and girls (and these creatures come across as being little more than automatons who act like snares to entrap the unwary traveller), or Freudianism being painted as the land of the giants.

It is interesting to see how John navigates these obstacles, though to understand some of these obstacles, one must first know a few things about the world in which Lewis is writing. To explain this though I need to show you a map of the world:

As you can see, there is a path that travels directly across the continent effectively dividing it in half. As Lewis explains in his introduction this divides the two spiritual points on his compass – to the south of the line you have emotion and feeling while to the north of the line you have the world of intellect and reason. You will notice that a lot of the time John spends to the north of the road, which suggests that he saw that emotion could not really provide anything of substance, so he crossed into the intellectual sphere (which is very much a trait of C.S. Lewis, who did marry, but not until quite late). As with all allegories though, they do have a tendency of falling apart because I know in my own life I have drifted through emotion and reason at the same time.

The other interesting thing that I noted is that as he travels across the country, the Christian truth doesn't necessarily become clearer to him, but rather is diluted with other ideas that serve to undermine the message. If the Christian message is salvation by faith, and God revealing himself to us in the form of Jesus Christ, then this message can easily be undermined, such as through the introduction of laws. This is something that comes out at the beginning where he is forced to go to church every Sunday wearing very uncomfortable clothes, and being told that one must obey the laws otherwise one will be thrown into the pit. No wonder he

walked away from this because there was clearly no joy, just pain and fear.

However, as he travels, he comes to see some truth in his past, however it was a truth that was undermined by the need for power. The question arises where the rules initially came from – where they always were, or where they only created afterwards. If there is indeed a moral absolute, then that suggests that the laws have always been around, however the question is then raised as to which laws are a part of the absolute and which were created afterwards to essentially enslave humanity. While Paul the Apostle does speak about the need to live a moral life, he also cries out against the laws and the rituals that are created to effectively enslave us.

The final thing that I wish to note is the elements of Gnosticism that seem to exist in this book. For instance we hear a lot of the Monad, which is something that has come out of the ancient Gnostic literature that I have read. The Monad is effectively the supreme being, otherwise known in the common parlance as God. However, unlike the God of the Bible, who reveals himself, the Monad is trapped behind a cloud of unknowing: a mysterious figure the truth of which we can never learn.

Sharon Barrow Wilfong says

C.S. Lewis is mostly known for his Narnia Chronicles. Some of us are also familiar with his Science Fiction Trilogy. Then there is the bulk of his work that fall under the genre apologetics.

I've read most of Lewis' work but I had not read the Pilgrim's Progress before. He wrote it shortly after he became a Christian and it is interesting in its insight into one man's conversion experience and also as a comparison to his later works.

Inspired by John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, Lewis wrote his work as an allegory. It starts with a young man, John, who is living on a pleasant countryside with his parents.

As a young boy, he gets smacked for doing the wrong thing, such as shooting at birds or pulling flowers out of the garden, even though he really doesn't understand why this is bad. When John asks why these things are wrong he is told that the Steward says so.

He asks who the Steward is and is told the Steward is the man who makes the rules for the country.

John asks why. Because the Landlord set him to do it.

Who is the Landlord? The owner of all the country.

One day John's parents take him to see the Steward. He is in a large, grand, formidable building and stands behind a pulpit or Judge's Bench. The Steward is an affable old man who cheerfully waves them towards him, but when they get down to business, the Steward puts on a scary mask and pontificates about the "Rules" and how one must obey them or there will be dire, dire consequences.

John looks at a card with the rules on it that the Steward had given him.

"Half the rules seemed to forbid things he'd never heard of and the other half forbade things he was doing every day and could not imagine not doing and the number of rules was so enormous that he felt he never could remember them all."

Then the Steward asked if John had broken any of the rules. John is petrified. The Steward takes the mask off again and mutters, "Better tell a lie, old chap, better tell a lie. Easiest for all concerned." then "pops the mask back on again." So John denies breaking any of the rules.

Afterward the Steward takes off the mask, becomes his cheery self again and whispers down to John, "If I were you, I wouldn't worry too much about it."

Later John's Uncle George has notice to quit his farm. He has to see the Steward. John and his parents walk with George to see the Steward. All of them are wearing masks now, except George who is too upset to put his on. John, his parents and the Steward walk him to the edge of the Land up to the Landlord's castle. where he then had to walk on by himself. George is very upset but has no choice.

"Nobody ever saw him again.

'Well,' said the Steward, untying his mask as they turned homeward. 'We've all got to go when our times comes.'"

John is concerned about being turned out without any notice like George. He asks his mother if George might be put in the black hole.

"How dare you say such a thing about your poor uncle? Of course he won't."

'But hasn't Uncle George broken all the rules?'

'Broken all the rules? Your Uncle George was a very good man.'

'You never told me that before,' said John.

That is the introduction to John and his journey across the Landlord's Land. I think most of us recognize the Church of England and what it had converted Christianity into by the time of C.S. Lewis, although it had been developing in that direction for some time. Namely, that God and His presence had been largely removed from worship and all that was left was ceremony and "rules" that the average citizen acknowledged one needed to follow in order to be "civilized."

I have heard the term lately of "Christian Atheists." These are people who claim they do not believe in God but believe that the rules provided by Christian belief are necessary for a society to flourish. That is what many churches have devolved into. "Be a nice person. Don't hurt anyone, but don't take any of it too seriously."

John is not satisfied with this because it does not speak to the deep longing in his being that wants something more than to simply be a "good person" and get along with others. So he embarks on a journey, like Pilgrim in Bunyan's story, and on the way he travels through several lands and meets many strange sorts of people.

Each country, of course, represents a segment of society present when Lewis wrote the story in 1931. First John finds sex and plenty of young girls to have sex with. He finds that the pleasure he experiences is short lived and simply doesn't reach to the bottom of his desire. He keeps seeking but never finds what he is looking for. Unfortunately for him, he finds that his sex partners proliferate and he has a miserable time escaping them.

This is meant to be taken symbolically. While it is easy enough to throw someone over after you're tired of them, a type of "spirit" of them stays with you. This is sometimes called emotional baggage but it also is something more profound.

From there he meets Mr. Halfway who presents True Love to him through his beautiful singing. Or at least John thinks so. It is actually quite shallow but sounds so beautiful it deceives him for sometime. He finally stays with Halfway's daughter only to find she is really just a sister of the other girls he was with.

My favorite place he visits is the Lost Generation, because I've just finished reading Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Lewis nails some of the pretensions of the Jazz Age. He describes them:

"They were all either young, or dressed up to look as if they were young. The girls had short hair and flat breasts and flat buttocks so that they looked like boys: but the boys had pale, egg-shaped faces and slender waists and big hips so that they looked like girls-except for a few of them who had long hair and beards.

'What are they so angry about?' whispered John.

"They are not angry, they are talking about Art"

Lewis penetrates through the falsehood of the Jazz Babies, then those who like philosophy without spirit, the "rational" or scientific age. And also the Barbarism and Paganism that was looming overhead with the rise of Hitler though he does not explicitly name him.

In the end John travels all around the world until he ends up back where he started, however, he is not the same person thanks to the fact that he meets with Reason, a woman on a white horse, and Old Mother Kirk.

The conversations that John has with the people at each stopping point is illuminating to Lewis' own spiritual journey.

At one point John is told that his desires created a Landlord because he needed one to exist. Reason later tells him that the opposite is true. The Doubters are the ones who need the Landlord to not exist, hence their own logic is built on that premise.

In the end, John does find what he is looking for, which can be summed up in a teaser:

Science can try to explain how a tree came to be. But it cannot tell us why it is beautiful. Finally meeting the Landlord answers that question and also fulfills all of John's deepest longings, which is to be in intimate fellowship with Him.

The conversations Lewis writes between a Spiritual pilgrim and every argument against seeking the Landlord makes the book a valuable read.

Didymus Bibliophilus says

I am surprised at how long it took me to discover this book. I think the first time I heard of it was while reading George Sayer's Lewis biography. It is definitely a must-read for Lewis fans.

As *The Pilgrim's Regress* is Lewis' first novel as a Christian, I am also surprised at how developed his understanding of the faith was, even in its infancy. This book contains many of the same ideas that will be expressed more clearly in his future works like *Mere Christianity* and *The Great Divorce*. He will express his ideas more clearly, but they are very much the same ideas being expressed.

A funny note: when someone from the American Catholic publishing house Sheed & Ward read the book (it might have been Frank Sheed himself?) they assumed it was about Lewis' conversion from Protestantism to (Roman) Catholicism. It is not.

I read the Wade Annotated Edition of this book. Unless you're a high-caliber classicist and philosopher I wouldn't recommend reading any other edition. The text is strewn with literary allusion and Greek and Latin phrases. The Annotated Edition does an excellent job of explaining these references. As an added bonus they include a few of Lewis' own annotations found in a copy of the book he gave to one of his students, so that's fun (although his annotations usually require a further explanation from the editor).

The edition also includes a few illustrations which are quite nice.

If you haven't read Lewis before, do not read this first. But do try to get to it at somepoint.

Mike (the Paladin) says

I love C.S. Lewis but I'll be honest here. this one went almost completely over my head the first time I read it. I got a philosophical reference here and there but Lewis was so well versed in philosophy that I was left in the dust and forced back to the drawing board. Anyone who has studied Lewis probably knows he started as an atheist and after much struggle became a Christian. He came to the Lord in large part through logic and philosophical study so early on thought most others did to. This book follows that process through an allegorical journey.

Heavy going but still well worth it if you want to put in the time or already have the philosophical chops.

C.S.Lewis, Surprised by Joy: "A young man who wishes to remain a sound atheist cannot be too careful of his reading."

Steven Wedgeworth says

This book is pretty much inaccessible to the general reader. There's no need for you to read any version other than the annotated edition because you will need all of the help you can get. I enjoyed the aspects where Lewis interacts with the Enlightenment and various modern literary, philosophical, and psychological movements. He was also prescient in his understanding of reactionary right-wing movements in Europe at the time.

Still, this is not going to be a book that most people will enjoy. It is incredibly difficult, even if you are comfortable with the genre of allegory and the general topics under discussion. Parts of it are entertaining, but parts are simply not. I lost interest after John's conversion, and the "regress" (for which the book is

named!) seemed to be almost an afterthought.

This book strikes me as primarily important for contextualizing Lewis's larger philosophy of nature and grace and giving the ideas in his other books a more explicit foundation. It's clear that Lewis is something of a big-tent Anglican Protestant, somewhat perennialist but also definitively Augustinian. It's an education in a box, but it will take a lot of work on the reader's part.

Steve Hemmeke says

One of Lewis's first books after his conversion, he uses Bunyan's trope to do what we now call a "worldview apologetic," as only a Cambridge literature don could. This work is quite obscure and hard to follow, at least for my small brain (though he admits the obscurity himself in a later preface in this edition.)

Lewis begins with hypocritical Puritan Christianity, and is merciless in his critique, replete with masks, badly told stories, and pious cliches. John, the Pilgrim, quickly leaves it, and regresses on from fornication, to Thrill, the spirit of the age, every modern form of philosophy you can imagine. He does what Van Til 20 years later called Christians to do: tear down every argument and philosophy opposed to Christ. The difficulty is that I didn't recognize much of it, 60 years later and through Lewis' prism. He writes that he didn't mean it to be autobiographical, but I think as one of his earlier works it very much was.

Some parts were clear and great.

1. Mother Kirk must carry us across the chasm, but most refuse her way and go the harder way around.
2. We suppress the truth about God, but wind up praying to Him, and pursued by Him, anyway.
3. We substitute cheaper, quicker and shallower desires for the true Desired One.
4. There are as many sins of the mind as there are of the flesh: Lewis catalogs many of the former.
5. Temptation is hard to resist, even when we see the devastating results right in front of us.
5. Neither reason, feeling, nor virtue alone will carry us to glory, but we do need all three.

If you take it up, be ready for some tough sledding. But there is reward along the way.

Douglas Wilson says

Excellent. Finished the audio version in February 2016. In the Afterword, Lewis apologizes for the book, an apology I refuse to accept. Just delightful.

Kris says

Such an under-rated book by Lewis. I was amazed at all the things he managed to pack into this simple literary device -- a little allegory that turned out to not be so little.

So many philosophical movements, so many religions, so many emotions and character traits explored -- I loved seeing where John would go next and what pitfall he would discover. Loved Lewis's note at the end, from the third edition, as well -- a beautiful exploration of his fascination with desire and its basis in Christianity. I wish more commentaries from lit critics were written on this book alone.

I think I expected less, because this is such an early book from Lewis. But it was very powerful, and great to listen to. I liked how the reader tried to do various voices. I'll definitely be getting my hands on and re-reading this again some day, marking up the margins with notes. I don't know why I waited so long to read it in the first place!

M. J. says

It is always disappointing to read a book by a favorite author that disappoints. In this case, there are clear reasons why it does so, some of them outlined in the Afterword to this, the 1943 edition of the 1933 book.

I had become aware of the title decades ago in college; it was a clever title, and I wanted to read the book then, but being a student and newly wed afforded little in both money and time. It was not until sometime in the past decade, when my wife was spending a small fortune at Borders, that I obtained and read a copy. That copy vanished, and resurfaced last week, so I decided to give it a second chance.

Part of my problem is that the book is allegory. Lewis admits that it is a particularly obscure allegory, because he, thinking that his experience would be extremely common, was afraid it would be overly obvious. He discovered in the decade after it was published that despite the "logic" of his own progress toward Christian faith it was extremely uncommon for others, even other intellectuals, to go through the same steps, and thus he was overcautious. Additionally, though, he admits that the popular intellectual and philosophical landscape of the world changed drastically after he wrote the book, with the result that his metaphors and images pointed to ideas and movements which were no longer terribly well known. If they were so unfamiliar in 1943, they certainly would be obscure six and seven decades later.

That said, there were many ideas and schools of thought that I did recognize--Freudianism, religious modernism, hedonism--and his handling of these through the allegory is extremely well done, giving an accurate impression of the effect these have on our views of reality and showing where they fail. Reason's riddles to the Giant are particularly clever, and even when some of the details of the allegory are unclear the overall pattern comes through well.

The story is laced with fantasy tropes--the giant, dragons, dwarfs--but is not much like a fantasy adventure, more akin to its titular inspiration, *Pilgrim's Progress* (which I read some years ago). It flows with a dream-like quality, and is couched as being a dream of the narrator concerning the first person character (the counterpart to Pilgrim in the other book, but named John in this one), yet is still very coherent as a journey of the central character, sometimes in the company of others particularly Vertue, sometimes Reason, with stops along the way among such as the Clevers and the Pale Men and Mr. Broad, sometimes hearing tales of others he avoided. More deeply, it is something of an apologetic based on the argument that men have a desire for some object unclear to themselves, which is not satisfied by anything other than God. John's desire takes the form of an island in the east he has briefly glimpsed from a distance, of which he gains glimpses in other things but cannot find; God is the Landlord living the castle to the west who owns the property on which they live and will ultimately cancel each resident's lease. The regress occurs because John spends most of the book running away from the Landlord's castle trying to reach the island, but the outcome of that would be a major spoiler.

It is well worth reading if you have some knowledge of philosophical ideas of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and even without that it does a good job of illustrating the flaws with many of the errors that keep people from faith.

Amanda says

Before picking up this excellent book, there are a few things the reader needs to understand: First of all, what the title means. Many people are confused about the word "regress," especially since it mirrors Bunyan's "The Pilgrim's Progress." Many people (myself included) are under the impression that the story is about a Christian backsliding in his faith. In reality, the "regress" refers to the fact that, as Richard Wagner put it in "C.S. Lewis and Narnia for Dummies," you aren't "simply shuffled off to heaven by a host of angels. You have to go back to the real world after you make a decision for Jesus Christ" (p. 231).

Secondly, if the reader doesn't understand the symbolism, it will be a long and perhaps meaningless journey. Some of the symbolism is quite obvious -- Mr. Wisdom represents wisdom, and the story of the mountain apple is symbolic of Adam & Eve eating the apple in Eden. However, there are many symbols in the book that are not quite as obvious, especially since they may reference philosophies that have fallen out of popularity since Lewis's time. For this reason, I highly recommend that the reader find a companion book or website to reference while reading about the pilgrim's journey. I used (and recommend) "C.S. Lewis and Narnia for Dummies," but I am sure there are many other resources as well.

Now, on to the meat of my review. Many people (Lewis included) would say that the allegory has failed, because he intended to generalize about the journey from atheism to Christianity. However, when writing he didn't realize how subjective his journey was, and so in the end the story became more autobiographical than he intended. In that sense, yes, the allegory has perhaps failed. Yet, I still found myself relating to many of John's (the pilgrim's) pit stops in his journey. I have been to the city of Claptrap and have seen the Canyon. I have met Mr. Broad, Mr. Sensible, and Vertue. On my return journey from the Canyon, my world looked entirely different. Indeed, there are many ways in which the modern reader can relate to John's travels, even if you are not familiar with 19th-century Rationalism or philosophical idealism.

Specific to this edition of "The Pilgrim's Regress," the headlines at the tops of the pages are, in my opinion, very helpful. Some might find them distracting, and if you are one of those types, perhaps you ought to ignore them altogether. However, I thought they helped me focus on the most important aspects of the story and helped me tie it together quite nicely.

Kells Next Read says

Actual Ratings: 3.25
