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C. S. LEWIS’S CONCEPT OF SEHNSUCHT: PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS, AESTHETIC ANALYSIS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EVANGELISM AND APOLOGETICS

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C. S. LEWIS’S CONCEPT OF SEHNSUCHT: PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS, AESTHETIC ANALYSIS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EVANGELISM AND APOLOGETICS

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This dissertation is dedicated to my lovely wife, Christie. The love and sacrifice she has given to make this work possible are unbelievable and Christ-honoring. I love you, Gorgeous. You’re still the best thing to happen to me since Jesus.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. S. Lewis</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Sehnsucht?</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophical Foundations</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelism and Apologetics</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic Analysis</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film and Music</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. C. S. LEWIS’S JOURNEY</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth and Childhood</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Journey Begins</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disbelief</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Working of Sehnsucht</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. C. S. LEWIS’S CONCEPT OF SEHNSUCHT</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sehnsucht in Three Forms</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five Main Aspects of Sehnsucht</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR SEHNSUCHT</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scriptural Foundations</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Theological and Philosophical Foundations</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. NON-CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR <em>SEHNSUCHT</em></td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socrates and Plato</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immanuel Kant</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthur Schopenhauer: Philosopher of Pessimism</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schopenhauer’s World System</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to <em>Sehnsucht</em></td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Rothko</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. <em>SEHNSUCHT’S USEFULNESS: EVANGELISM AND APOLOGETICS</em></td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sehnsucht’s Usefulness for Evangelism</em></td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sehnsucht’s Usefulness for Apologetics</em></td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. ANALYSIS OF <em>SEHNSUCHT</em> IN FILM AND MUSIC</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Film and Music?</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Films Evoking <em>Sehnsucht</em></td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music Evoking <em>Sehnsucht</em></td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art without <em>Sehnsucht</em></td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Encyclopedic C. S. Lewis</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Church</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

I am grateful to the Lord for the privilege of researching and writing this dissertation. He has blessed me with a loving wife, a caring family, an enriching seminary community, and generous churches that have enabled every bit of this work. First Baptist Church of Merritt Island and First Baptist Church of Sebring have graciously provided financial support, prayers, and time to complete this project; I am extremely grateful to my brothers and sisters in Christ in both of those churches.

My supervisor, Dr. Mark Coppenger, has been a wonderful guide and encourager through the process of writing this dissertation. Countless times, he has saved me from unnecessary work and helped me clarify my words—all while demonstrating a love for Christ and the gospel. Dr. James Parker has also been a faithful friend and consistent source of support from the earliest days of my master’s degree studies at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. I praise God for the influence of both men on my life and this work.

My main prayer in writing this dissertation is that God would be glorified in it as He builds His kingdom through evangelism, apologetics, and discipleship. His infusion of His world with breathtaking beauty has given us great help in these goals. I hope that my work may help the church further reclaim beauty for the work of Christ.

Matthew David Crawford

Sebring, Florida
May 2015
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The value of beauty for both evangelism and apologetics has often been neglected by defenders of the Christian faith. In spite of this, the virtually universal nature of many human aesthetic experiences holds much potential for making “a defense to anyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3:15).1 In particular, the fact that essentially all people—including philosophical naturalists and staunch atheists—acknowledge common experiences of beauty can open a door leading to acknowledgement both of God’s existence and the truth of the claims of Christianity.

Too often, approaches to apologetics have emphasized purely rational arguments, appealing to logic and reason while neglecting the emotions and needs of hearers. By way of example, one may consider an important recent text used in master’s level apologetics classes at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary: Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, Jr., Faith Has Its Reasons: An Integrative Approach to Defending Christianity.2 This very helpful 608-page book on apologetics considers four major approaches to apologetics and offers an integrated approach to this God-given task. The book is excellent in its God-honoring, irenic spirit, historical context, and clear application to conversations with those who do not believe in Christ.

However, Faith Has Its Reasons lacks any discussion of an argument for the Christian faith from beauty. Nowhere in the book is there a discussion of the power of aesthetic experiences and aesthetic arguments to help in undermining naturalism and

1Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the English Standard Version.

defending Christianity. Absent from the book is a discussion of the power of beauty or story to break down walls to the gospel, cause individuals to realize that there is something beyond this material world, and to seek the God from whom all beauty has come. I make this point not to denigrate the authors or their work, for this text has been incredibly helpful to me and many other students of apologetics. I merely point this out as an example of the sort of complementary work that must be done to enable a more complete defense of and persuasion for faith.

*Faith Has Its Reasons* is by no means the only apologetics text with this strong tendency towards the rational end of apologetics. In many such apologetic works, emotional or heart-based tools of persuasion are either forgotten, ignored, or relegated to a few paragraphs, while more rational, head-based arguments are given the lion’s share of the coverage.

In a fascinating article, “The Regaining of Faith: Reconversions among Popular Radicals in Mid-Victorian England,” Timothy Larsen illustrates the results of a one-sided apologetic approach. Larsen outlines the stories of several well-known Victorians who were raised in very religious settings, rebelled publicly and loudly against those backgrounds, but then ultimately came back to faith in Christ. In several of these cases it becomes clear that an excessive emphasis upon reason caused these individuals to doubt their childhood faith (since every tenet of Christianity cannot be conclusively proven), but also eventually to doubt their secularism. Significantly, what brought them back to the Christian faith was often a more heart-centered approach to thinking about religion. In a section on the crisis of doubt experienced by these Victorians, Larsen explains,

Excessive negations, it was claimed, were the result of the method of thinking used, a method that they came to see as an oppressive standard of logic that processed the data of human experience in a Procrustean manner. J. H. Gordon’s reconversion

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was facilitated by being able to judge critically his Secularist outlook: “That standpoint was the standpoint of the mere reason, the mere logical part of man’s nature, without any reference whatever to, or any acknowledge whatever of, any other part, intuitional or emotional, of the wondrous mechanism of human life. It was all reason, reason, reason. Can this thing be proved, or, can it be shown to be what it is said to be? If so, all right—if not, away with it. Thus, you cannot prove that you exist; and, therefore, away with the notion that you do exist!” Instead, they argued that truth could only be fully grasped once other guides than this kind of logic had been followed. These guides were named in various ways, including: heart, conscience, feeling, affection, intuition, and instinct. In other words, they gave considerable weight to the so-called internal evidences for Christianity in contrast to the older apologetics that often concentrated exclusively on external ones (that is, attempts at objective proofs).  

An apologetic approach that focused only on purely rational arguments for the truths of Christianity would not have worked with this group of radical Victorians. They had seen the limitations of human reason to fully explain and prove even minimal assertions by which we live our ordinary lives. They needed more, something different. They needed—and by God’s grace were brought back to Him through—an apologetic of the heart.

This is not to say, of course, that apologetics of the head and heart are hermetically sealed from one another. That which impacts the heart must come with a certain degree of equilibrium and symmetry. Apologists must not exaggerate a dichotomy between the two approaches; the primary point is merely that Christians must remain balanced in their apologetic strategy.

The harnessing of the power of beauty to draw people toward Christ does well in complementing a more reasoned, propositional approach to apologetics. Some individuals can be reached more effectively through beauty—of story, of image, and of sound—than through argumentation.  

4Ibid., 534. Larsen quotes from J. H. Gordon, The Public Statement of Mr. J. H. Gordon (Late Lecturer to the Leeds Secular Society), with Reference to His Repudiation of Secular Principles, and His Adoption of the Christian Faith (Leeds: J. Hamer, 1862), 7.

5This is not to say that strictly artistic forms of beauty are the only manifestations of beauty that can be used to reach someone with the gospel of Christ. In doctoral seminar work, I have explored the beauty of truth and the beauty of Christian character as other instances of beauty through which unbelievers in Christ may be drawn towards Him. But using this more expansive understanding of beauty is beyond the scope of this dissertation; it does, however, deserve further treatment.
parables illustrates the power of story to reach and change hearts. Robert Stein explains how Jesus and the prophet Nathan utilized the veiled power of story to penetrate hearts:

The parables were particularly useful for Jesus as a teaching device. Parables tend to disarm the listeners, for the meaning of a parable is often driven home before they can resist the point being made. An excellent example is found in Nathan’s parable to David (2 Sam 12:1-4). Before David could defend himself against the point of the parable, the arrow had struck his heart—“You are the man!” (2 Sam 12:7). Jesus often used parables in an attempt to break through the hostility of his hearers. The parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son are good examples (Lk 15:1-32).6 Stein’s point is applicable to beauty found in story as well as in other forms of art—audio or visual—and beauty found in nature.

In Apologetics for a New Generation, Craig Hazen explains philosopher and apologist John Warwick Montgomery’s distinction between encounters with the “tender-minded” and the “tough-minded” in evangelistic opportunities.7 Montgomery felt that the evangelist should alter his conversational methods based on whether the person with whom he speaks is influenced by tight logical argumentation—meaning the individual is tough-minded—or by appeals to the heart or emotions—meaning the individual is tender-minded.8 A clear example of a more tough-minded approach is the ontological argument for God’s existence; this argument attempts to use logic, the idea of God, and the concept of maximal greatness to contend for God’s existence. A tender-minded argument is exemplified by Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli when they write, “The Argument from Aesthetic Experience: There is the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. Therefore there must be a God.”9


8In his essay, Hazen does not give a citation for John Warwick Montgomery’s distinction. Through another author, I discovered that it exists on a taped seminar titled Sensible Christianity, recorded by the Institute for Law and Theology, Newport Beach, CA, 1981.

9Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, Handbook of Christian Apologetics (Downers Grove, IL:
Montgomery considered the arts to be great tools in reaching the tender-minded. Hazen, however, rightly extends Montgomery’s point further by stating that, at some level, all people have the tender aspect to their way of thinking. As a result, apologists should not deny the use of aesthetic experiences to connect with any person. Hazen explains, “We are tapping into something that we know is imprinted on each individual at some level and that can be powerfully used by the Holy Spirit to move everyone’s heart and mind in the right direction.”

Perhaps this point may be strengthened by considering its converse. Not only are many people reached by beauty or story who have rejected more formal argumentation for Christian truth, but it is often true that those who reject the Christian faith (especially those who have a significant Christian background as children) do so in the face of personal tragedy or disillusionment with the way they have been treated by the Christian church. I have often found this to be true in pastoral counseling and apologetic conversations; however, Paul Vitz, psychology professor at New York University, actually documents a strong correlation between atheism and personal tragedy in *Faith of the Fatherless*. Vitz psychoanalyzes the personal histories of numerous famous atheists, showing that many of them hold in common the loss of a father or an oppressive father. His study includes such well-known (and often militant) atheists as Friedrich Nietzsche, David Hume, Bertrand Russell, Arthur Schopenhauer, Voltaire, Ludwig Feuerbach, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and more.11

This is not to say that decisions to reject God’s existence are never

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10Hazen, “Capturing the Imagination,” 103.

11Paul C. Vitz, *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2013). In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis himself suggests a similar conclusion: “And as a matter of fact, if you examined a hundred people who had lost their faith in Christianity, I wonder how many of them would turn out to have been reasoned out of it by honest argument? Do not most people simply drift away?” C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 141.
accompanied by doubts about Christian truth, reading material authored by atheists, or other more intellectually-motivated explanations for abandonment or rejection of Christianity. But, if one does enough digging, one finds quite often that those who have rejected the faith were most spurred on in this decision by negative personal experience. This demonstrates again the importance of combining both tough- and tender-minded approaches to sharing the gospel of Christ. Christians must speak the gospel to the heart and the head.

Pascal seemed to advocate this same dual approach when—as a brilliant scientist, philosopher, and apologist—he famously said in his *Pensées*, “The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know.”12 William Edgar speaks in the same vein: “As such, apologetics has a deeply human side that is concerned with the whole person; it is not just a series of dry techniques or rational proofs.”13

**C. S. Lewis**

C. S. Lewis has become one of the most influential minds in modern Christianity, and particularly so in Christian apologetics. Much of this influence could be attributed to his achievement of the important balance I have been discussing. Lewis was blessed with skill and brilliance both in tough-minded apologetic reasoning and the use of tender-minded images of the gospel in his literature. In fact, the nature of Lewis’s own journey to faith in Christ indicates the importance of both approaches in gospel proclamation. In his spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, and in several other works, Lewis discusses a concept that will be central to this project—a concept of transcendence as found in aesthetic experiences. Lewis used a German word for this concept:


Sehnsucht. Although he does not always refer to it using this exact term, it is significant that he does so in his spiritual autobiography, and, for the present project, it is helpful to organize the discussion under this idea.

What is Sehnsucht?

Sehnsucht, although difficult to limit to a single English translation, can be defined as “desire,” “longing,” “yearning,” or even “nostalgia.” It is a compound word, composed of Sehnen and sucht. Cassell’s German Dictionary defines Sehnen as “longing, yearning, (ardent) desire, nostalgia” and sucht as “passion, mania, rage, craze, addiction.” With its parts taken together, the word conveys a deep longing that is never fully fulfilled. The concept is linked with Romanticism and philosophers within the German strain of Romanticism, such as August Wilhelm von Schlegel.

Bright Shadow of Reality, written by English professor Corbin Scott Carnell, is one of the most important studies on the spiritual concept of Sehnsucht. In this work, Carnell explains that the idea of Sehnsucht has often been subsumed into the larger and unwieldy concept of Romanticism:

And it will be seen that there is a definite similarity between Romanticism as I have described it and the particular attitude which is characterized by a sense of separation from what is desired, a ceaseless longing which points always beyond. It will be

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15Chapter 2 deals with the several terms Lewis uses to describe this concept. A case is made for the interrelated nature of these terms.


19For additional reference here, four personal letters from Lewis to Carnell can be found in Walter Hooper, ed., The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis (San Francisco: HarperCollins e-books, 2009), 3:318, 494, 979, and 995, Kindle.
seen that Sehnsucht indeed represents an aspect of that larger “ism” which has been explained as a vigorous reaction for or against one’s environment, resulting in feelings of wonder and aspiration. One might argue that wherever we find the Romantic attitude in its most intense forms, we may very well find Sehnsucht.²⁰

From this point, Carnell concludes that Sehnsucht is by no means rarely found in Western literature, even though it does not always come with this name. Lewis would have agreed: he experienced Sehnsucht through many types of literature—including many of non-Christian or even explicitly pagan origin—and in many personal encounters with beauty in nature. In addition (as mentioned previously), he also used other nomenclature for the concept.

**Why Sehnsucht?**

The concept of Sehnsucht for C. S. Lewis may be succinctly described as desire for beauty—specifically, beauty that finds it source in God and that draws men toward God. However, one must trace the development of the idea in Lewis’s understanding. Sehnsucht was not simply a concept C. S. Lewis used in his professional career as an Oxford and Cambridge don, lecturer, and author. It was also not limited to his experience as a professing Christian. Rather, Lewis explains in Surprised by Joy that he was affected even as a young child by a stirring yet unfulfilled desire for beauty:

> Once in those very early days my brother brought into the nursery the lid of a biscuit tin which he had covered with moss and garnished with twigs and flowers so as to make it a toy garden or a toy forest. That was the first beauty I ever knew. What the real garden had failed to do, the toy garden did. It made me aware of nature—not, indeed, as a storehouse of forms and colors but as something cool, dewy, fresh, exuberant. I do not think the impression was very important at the moment, but it soon became important in memory. As long as I live my imagination of Paradise will retain something of my brother’s toy garden. And every day there were what we called “the Green Hills”; that is, the low line of the Castlereagh Hills which we saw from the nursery windows. They were not very far off but they were, to children, quite unattainable. They taught me longing—Sehnsucht; made me for good or ill, and before I was six years old, a votary of the Blue Flower.

Lewis’s reference to the “Blue Flower” serves to connect Sehnsucht again to Romanticism. The blue flower came to be an enduring symbol for Romanticism,

²⁰Carnell, *Bright Shadow of Reality*, 27.
primarily because of its use in the fragment of a novel\textsuperscript{21} by early and influential German Romanticist author Novalis (this was a pseudonym; his actual name was Georg Friedrich Philipp von Hardenberg).\textsuperscript{22} Lewis states here that at an early age he had become a devoted follower of the tradition found in Romanticism. Interestingly, this commitment expressed itself in Lewis’s perception of beauty in art and nature, but also in his \textit{memory} of his experiences of these instances of beauty.

In total, Lewis speaks of three experiences from his childhood which took place prior to his embrace of atheism but which, when reflected upon later in life, left him with an ache that could not be cured and contributed to his ultimate conversion to Christianity. In addition to the memory of the toy garden mentioned previously, these experiences were Lewis’s reading of Beatrix Potter’s \textit{Squirrel Nutkin}\textsuperscript{23} and a portion of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s \textit{Saga of King Olaf}. These gave Lewis an experience of desire for joy, and he is clear that joy in this sense means something transcending mere happiness or pleasure.\textsuperscript{24} If experiencing \textit{Sehnsucht} for Lewis meant feeling intense desire, joy was the object of that desire—or so Lewis thought until he realized that joy was always and only found in God Himself.\textsuperscript{25} In this way, joy and \textit{Sehnsucht} become essentially identical in Lewis’s work, as they draw the human heart toward the God who is the Source of all beauty. The drawing of Lewis himself becomes the subject of the rest

\textsuperscript{21}The novel fragment is called \textit{Heinrich von Ofterdingen}, and in it a character of the same name is captivated by his dream of a blue flower with the face of beautiful girl. It can be found in English translation in Novalis, \textit{Henry Von Ofterdingen}, trans. Palmer Hilty (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1990).


\textsuperscript{23}The fact that Lewis was set on his quest for joy as a young child—and specifically through literature for children and a garden made as a child’s toy—seems significant for his authorship of \textit{The Chronicles of Narnia} and its presentation of Christian redemption in a manner that children can understand.

\textsuperscript{24}Lewis, \textit{Surprised by Joy}, 16-18.

\textsuperscript{25}This clarification, found on the last page of \textit{Surprised by Joy}, is explained in further detail in chap. 2.
of his spiritual autobiography—discussed in further detail next.

In a vastly different work entitled The Problem of Pain, C. S. Lewis tackles the formidable apologetic subject of the problem of evil. Yet, it is intriguing that in a work of this nature Lewis continues to speak of experiences of aesthetic contemplation that point to the soul’s need for God. Lewis elaborates,

There have been times when I think we do not desire heaven; but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our heart of hearts, we have ever desired anything else. You may have noticed that the books you really love are bound together by a secret thread. You know very well what is the common quality that makes you love them, though you cannot put it into words: but most of your friends do not see it at all, and often wonder why, liking this, you should also like that. Again, you may have stood before some landscape, which seems to embody what you have been looking for all your life; and then turned to the friend at your side who appears to be seeing what you saw—but at the first words a gulf yawns between you, and you realize that this landscape means something totally different to him, that he is pursuing an alien vision and cares nothing for the ineffable suggestion by which you are transported.26

Lewis then connects this intensely personal aesthetic encounter with the individual, unique soul and its desire for and connection to God:

We cannot tell each other about it. It is the secret signature of each soul, the incommunicable and unappeasable want, the thing we desired before we met our wives or made our friends or chose our work, and which we shall still desire on our deathbeds. . . . If we lose this, we lose all. . . . Be sure that the ins and outs of your individuality are no mystery to Him; and one day they will no longer be a mystery to you. The mould in which a key is made would be a strange thing, if you had never seen a key: and the key itself a strange thing if you had never seen a lock. Your soul has a curious shape because it is a hollow made to fit a particular swelling in the infinite contours of the Divine substance, or a key to unlock one of the doors in the house with many mansions.27

The significance of these excerpts lies in Lewis’s description of an aesthetic experience that can represent the object of lifelong searching and his subsequent connection of that experience to every person’s individual, personal need for God. In other works which are surveyed next, Lewis offers many more helpful explanations and


27Ibid., 150-51, emphasis added.
examples of how Sehnsucht can work in the heart of a person to point them to ultimate reality and fullness of joy.

**Philosophical Foundations**

C. S. Lewis is not alone in his view of the power of beauty to awaken men to the reality of a world beyond the purely material. After outlining Lewis’s spiritual journey and his use of Sehnsucht in both his fiction and non-fiction, this dissertation seeks to place Lewis’s view in two larger contexts. The first of these is the larger context of the work of other Christians in aesthetic philosophy. Primarily among those, of course, are the canonical biblical authors, who are writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, the views of other influential Christian philosophers are surveyed in order to view Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht in an appropriate historical setting. Augustine, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards are important voices in this discussion.

The second larger context in which Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht is scrutinized is that of secular philosophy. Do philosophers who do not acknowledge the Bible as a source of knowledge or truth nevertheless say that the contemplation or experience of beauty can point to something transcendent, something beyond this world? Lewis’s aesthetic is examined in this setting in order to study the power of beauty to draw men who deny the gospel or even the existence of God. This is crucial information, especially as it relates to the apologetic value of beauty within this dissertation.

**Evangelism and Apologetics**

Following the examination of corroborative evidence in both Christian and secular philosophy for Lewis’s understanding of beauty, this dissertation turns to the usefulness of Sehnsucht for Christian evangelism and apologetics. The possession of a true and faithful theology and philosophy is always practical; it should make a difference in the lives and legacies of those who hold to its tenets. In Mere Christianity, Lewis himself said, “Theology is practical: especially now. In the old days, when there was less
education and discussion, perhaps it was possible to get on with a very few simple ideas about God. But it is not so now.”

This principle surely applies to a proper view of the power of beauty, which surrounds every man:

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims His handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. (Ps 19:1-4)

“Glory” radiates from that which is truly beautiful. Not only that, glory and beauty are frequently associated with one another both in Lewis’s writings and in Scripture, as seen below. If the beauty found in the world is speaking to every man, Christians must not neglect to utilize this powerful witness in encounters with those who do not know Christ.

One of the reasons that the witness of beauty in the world has great potential to draw people toward God can be discovered in the biblical doctrine of Imago Dei. Those who observe and enjoy any real instances of beauty reflect God and show the work of His image upon them. This can be seen through God’s delight in His own creation in Genesis 1:31: “And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good.” The image of God is on every human being; this gives Christian evangelists and apologists an excellent opportunity to point to the witness of beauty in seeking to reconcile unbelievers to God.

To this end, testimonies are examined of those who have come to Christ—or at least have acknowledged an attracting or drawing influence toward God—through beauty in one of three instances. The first instance is that of God’s own beauty; these testimonies of real people who saw visions of God come from the Bible itself. The second instance is that of natural beauty—beauty not made with human hands. Across the spectrum of human experience and worldview backgrounds, there is a consistent recognition of the beauty of the world and universe. Places like the Grand Canyon, Yosemite National Park, and the

28Lewis, Mere Christianity, 155.
Great Barrier Reef attract thousands of people every year who come just to witness the grandeur and majesty of geological formations, wildlife, and other natural features found in these locations. Those who do so are not limited to believers in the Christian faith, theists, or even adherents of other religions. This section examines this enjoyment of beauty and its impact on those who experience it.

But this discussion of the drawing power of natural beauty is not limited to what can simply be observed through everyday sensory perceptions. This dissertation also examines the power of beauty in nature that can be discovered—that is, instances of beauty or simplicity in nature that have been revealed through scientific processes. Richard Feynman, well-known Nobel laureate in physics and author, said in his Messenger Lectures at Cornell University, “You can recognize truth by its beauty and simplicity.” In this, Feynman—who did not believe in God’s existence—speaks of the fact that sometimes the elegance of a potential solution to a scientific problem leads researchers to the truth. Other highly influential scientists have made similar points, including others who do not subscribe to Christian truth. Beauty in this case is of a different sort than purely sensory beauty as found in nature. In this sense, the beauty of a thing in nature is found more in its fitness for its setting or for the biological, physiological, or chemical necessity that it provides—especially if it does so in a simple and efficient way.

The third instance of beauty to be examined along with its impact is found in pieces of art—manmade beauty. The creation of manmade beauty can reflect the beauty of God and honor Him as humans imitate His original work of creation. In this way,


30Feynman has essentially offered a “god of the gaps” objection to the existence of God. He says that humanity has invented God and uses the notion of God to explain the parts of life and the universe that we do not understand. P. C. W. Davies and Julian Brown, eds., *Superstrings: A Theory of Everything?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 208-9.
artists can draw people toward God when they inspire feelings of *Sehnsucht* through their work. If all truth is God’s truth, then it seems to follow that all beauty is God’s beauty: thus, even artists who do not know God or deny Him completely can unwittingly participate in drawing men toward God through the heart longings that they kindle with beauty in their work. Here is another clear example of the work of *Imago Dei* in all men, as they reflect in a lesser way the creative work of God.

Following the discussion of the ways in which evangelism can be helped through the drawing power of beauty, this project moves to the logical next step: apologetics. How can the concept and personal examples of *Sehnsucht* help in the task of either defending faith or tearing down the strongholds of false belief in the lives of others? C. S. Lewis’s concept of *Sehnsucht* can be helpful to both evangelism and apologetics through its undermining of a naturalistic worldview—especially with regard to humanity’s shared experience of beauty in the world.

In his article, “Aesthetic Arguments for the Existence of God,” Peter S. Williams outlines two categories of apologetic arguments using aesthetics. Epistemological arguments primarily focus on the human ability to know that something is beautiful. Ontological arguments, on the other hand, leverage the very existence of beauty for apologetic use.31 This project taps into both streams of apologetic arguments using aesthetics, although it leans more heavily toward the former. This dissertation argues that a purely naturalistic view of the universe does not provide the logical basis necessary to explain mankind’s concept and experience of beauty. By contrast, Christianity clearly supports both. Lewis’s concept of *Sehnsucht* helps to explain how Christianity does so through *Sehnsucht*’s connection of beauty to longings which ultimately find their fulfillment in God, the very Source of beauty.

The argument is made that a naturalist cannot ground the concept of beauty,

which means that he cannot properly explain exemplifications of beauty which are widely recognized as aesthetically pleasing, even across cultural and worldview boundaries. Christianity, however, presents a coherent explanation of widely shared experiences of beauty. Humanity’s shared acknowledgement and experience of beauty points both to the existence of God and to the truthfulness of the Christian worldview. Peter Williams puts it this way,

Naturalism also fails to account for the existence of human experience, including aesthetic experience. The “death of God” has led to the “death of man” and hence “the death of art.” Aesthetic value is an objective reality that cannot be reduced to “nothing but atoms in the void.” Therefore naturalism should not look like a good candidate for a world-view to anyone who wants to retain a reasonable belief in aesthetic value, and this gives one reason to prefer theism.\textsuperscript{32}

As part of this section of the dissertation, the objections of prominent naturalists are addressed, such as the work of Denis Dutton in his book \textit{The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution}.

Finally, the section on evangelism and apologetics closes with a look at the case for Christianity over against naturalism based on the time-honored correspondence test for truth. The correspondence test for truth is used to see if Christianity or naturalism makes more sense when compared to the reality of this world and the manner in which people genuinely think, live, and perceive beauty—despite their claimed worldview. It is seen that the application of C. S. Lewis’s concept of \textit{Sehnsucht} strengthens the Christian case in this regard, as naturalism as a worldview extracts any proper philosophical basis for the wonder and transcendence that human beings almost universally experience when encountering great beauty and majesty.

\textbf{Aesthetic Analysis}

Once C. S. Lewis’s concept of \textit{Sehnsucht} has been used to explain the power of beauty in evangelism and apologetics, this project turns to more detailed analysis of

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid.
instances of beauty in order to better understand how Sehnsucht works, when it is present and when it is absent, and how it can contribute to an individual taking another step toward God and hopefully toward faith in Christ.

To clarify, this dissertation does not attempt to outline ways of using Sehnsucht in conversation to point to the truth of God’s existence and a person’s need for the salvation found in Jesus Christ. Although this is obviously a very important next step, this dissertation focuses on the philosophical and aesthetic tools that help in the task of apologetics, rather than on specific conversational techniques to be used in evangelism and apologetics. Again, this focus is largely for the sake of an appropriate limit in size and scope. A helpful project subsequent to this dissertation would include research and consideration of effective conversational ways to utilize the power of beauty to draw men unto God.

Knowing what this aesthetic analysis section does not cover helps to focus the reader on this section’s primary material. Philosophy, though often thought to be distant from impacting the ordinary lives of most people, has far-reaching effects through the power of ideas. Within a society, these ideas gradually and often imperceptibly trickle down from those in positions of authority, education, and celebrity, until—watered-down and modified—they become part and parcel of the way that the masses in that particular society think and act. This process applies to the branch of philosophy known as aesthetics, and thus to the experience and enjoyment of beauty. For this reason, the objective in this project is to focus on manmade art that reaches the masses. Philosophy and ideas are, of course, mediated through “higher” forms of art—such as paintings in a gallery or theater performances. But far fewer people in modern society experience these things than experience more popular forms of art, and those who do take in higher forms of art usually do so in less frequency than they take in more popular art forms.

Film and Music

Thus, for its aesthetic analysis this dissertation focuses on popular film and
music. These art forms are ubiquitous in Western culture. Popular music and film can be broadcast into the home through multiple means, accessed over the Internet, picked up in the mailbox, or streamed to mobile devices. As is argued in detail, film also possesses unique strengths in communicating beauty and Sehnsucht in an easily relatable way, since it combines multiple types of art (cinematography, acting, and music) and since it resembles real life more than any other type of art, theater excepted.

**Film and Music Evoking Sehnsucht**

Once the rationale for focusing on popular film and music has been established, five films and two pieces of music are analyzed that could evoke feelings of Sehnsucht. Evidence from the casts and directors of these films are considered (as well as original story authors, where applicable). Critical reviews of these movies are weighed. Finally, an aesthetic analysis of these films is offered.

Questions asked of these films include: when in the film is Sehnsucht evoked in the viewer? How is Sehnsucht evoked—through means of the story, the cinematography, the music, the acting, or some combination of these elements or others? Are there other elements in the narrative leading up to moments of Sehnsucht which contribute to or prepare for this moment of rapture or longing? How does this instance of Sehnsucht point or link to God or even the Christian story of redemption? Are the artists intentionally or unintentionally leading to this type of experience—or would they perhaps be explicitly opposed to this type of response? If they would be opposed, what does this say about God and His work in and through and in spite of art and artists? How might the power and beauty of this film be used to draw unbelievers to an encounter with God and exposure to the gospel of Christ?

Following this analysis of five films that trigger feelings of Sehnsucht, two pieces of music that have the same effect are studied. A similar process to the one followed in the film section is used, first analyzing any relevant background of the composer. Then, the specific worldview content of the music are examined. Critical
reception of these pieces is outlined. Finally, the pieces themselves are aesthetically analyzed.

Similar questions are asked of music that evokes Sehnsucht: when and how are these feelings of longing awakened? Do these feelings come through a powerful melody, a richness or depth of harmony, or a combination of these or other factors? Is there some type of significant contrast between sections of the music that brings about Sehnsucht? Is Sehnsucht provoked by tension and then resolution—or perhaps by unresolved tension? How does this instance of Sehnsucht in music point to God or Christian redemption? How might the power and beauty of this piece of music be utilized to draw unbelievers toward God and the gospel?

**Film and Music Lacking Sehnsucht**

It is important and helpful at this stage of the work to also identify films and music that clearly do not contain the power of Sehnsucht to draw men unto God; rather, these works of art (intentionally or not) are more likely to push men from God.33 There are three main varieties of such art.

The first variety of art that does not contain Sehnsucht is simply art that is not made with any serious vision or goal at all. This could be called the art of apathy where it exists simply to distract people from the reality of their lives or to keep them from having to face the serious and deep questions of human existence and spiritual truth. In cinema, these films are the ones filled with cheap and vulgar humor, as well as a pointless and often unrealistically tidy end to the story. Action films with many special effects and celebrities but virtually no plot would also fall in this category.

This first variety of art that does not evoke Sehnsucht could also be called the

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33The phrase “more likely” is used here because nothing is impossible for God (Luke 1:37) and because He constantly turns evil and Satan’s schemes into good for those He loves (Rom 8:28). God could use the darkest film in an incomprehensible way to draw a man to Himself. In this project, however, I am discussing the nature of individual works of art and the tendency and power they possess to push men towards or away from God through their beauty, story, and worldview content.
art of mere patronage—meaning that the work of art has been created as it has merely for the sake of critical approval, or for financial gain, or both. As is explained in further detail next, this type of art fails the test of artistic judgment that Francis Schaeffer called the test of *validity*. The work is invalid because it is essentially dishonest—not a true reflection of the artist and his worldview.\textsuperscript{34} In this case, because the artist is simply working for critical approval or a paycheck, the work falls short of achieving any sense of transcendence.

The second variety of art that does not contain *Sehnsucht* does have an intentional vision, but it is one opposed to the drawing of men to God through beauty. The term nihilistic art could be applied here. Nihilism is “a theory promoting the state of believing in nothing, or of having no allegiances and purposes.”\textsuperscript{35} Nihilistic films like *Basic Instinct* or *Natural Born Killers*, for example, not only deny the existence of God, but deny the existence of purpose, morality, and anything truly transcendent. Though truly nihilistic films and pieces of music are few in number compared to works of art in other categories, their darkness is oppressive, and they naturally push men away from God and true beauty.

The third variety of art that does not evoke *Sehnsucht* is very different from the previous two varieties, because its clear (but sometimes unmet) goal is to draw men toward God, or at least toward truth, goodness, and beauty. In these cases, Christians often make the works of art with the purpose of evangelism, Christian discipleship, or both. But many of these works of art lack *Sehnsucht*. This can happen because they are excessively concerned with sanitizing the story or characters for a morally concerned audience. This type of art can also be the result of a deliberate avoidance of any element in the story that

\textsuperscript{34}Francis Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible, The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1982), 399-400.

is not neatly wrapped up by the story’s end. The recent Christian movie *God is Not Dead* was marketed to churches as an apologetic answer to militant atheism, but it suffered from a problematic narrative and a lack of authenticity. In cases like these, the work of art loses some connection with reality and thus a sense of being lifted *beyond* reality to something that transcends and transforms existence.

This section of the dissertation briefly discusses instances of all three varieties of art that do not evoke *Sehnsucht*, while continuing to focus on popular film and music. The goal in this section is to more clearly understand *Sehnsucht* through showing its absence, even in pieces of art made by artists who would affirm some desire to point men toward God. Hopefully, this section is helpful when applied to evangelism and apologetics, through its words of caution against using works of art that are counterproductive to a sense of transcendence through God-directed beauty.

Following this final section of the body of the work, final observations and applications are made. My earnest prayer and hope is that God will use in conjunction the work of C. S. Lewis, this dissertation, and the work of countless artists throughout human history to draw many people unto Himself through the beauty which He has graciously infused into His creation.
CHAPTER 2
C. S. LEWIS’S JOURNEY

Before undertaking an examination of C. S. Lewis’s use of the concept of Sehnsucht, study must be made of personal aspects of Lewis’s life that explain his interpretation of the concept and its function in his life. To that end, this chapter turns to a brief sketch of Lewis’s life through his conversion—essentially the same time period covered in his spiritual autobiography, Surprised by Joy.

Birth and Childhood

Clive Staples Lewis was born in Belfast, Ireland, on November 29, 1898, to Albert James and Florence (Flora) Hamilton Lewis. He had one sibling, his older brother Warren Hamilton Lewis. Jack and Warnie, as they would come to be called, would live together most of their lives and remain best friends.

Lewis grew up in a family with some religious background, although his parents were not diligent in passing on their faith to their children. His father passionately exhibited the highest integrity in his job as a solicitor, and Flora was the daughter of a clergyman. However, despite this fact of Flora’s background, Lewis states in Surprised by Joy that of his mother’s religion he “can say almost nothing from [his] own memory.”¹

Lewis’s family belonged to the Church of Ireland, which is in fellowship with the worldwide Anglican Communion. But his family’s devotion to this Protestant group may have been more cultural or political than religious. Catholic author and professor, Joseph Pearce, makes just this observation using the following quote from an unpublished manuscript written by Warnie Lewis:

We went to church regularly in our youth, but even then one sensed the fact that church going was not so much a religious as a political right, the weekly assertion of the fact that you were not a Roman Catholic Nationalist. Our butcher and our grocer attended one suspected primarily to draw customers’ attention to the fact that at their shops could be bought decent Protestant food untainted by the damnable heresies of Rome.²

So it was that C. S. Lewis was baptized as an infant in St. Mark’s Church, Dundela Parish, Belfast, on January 29, 1899, by his grandfather.³

In Surprised by Joy and in his letters (especially to his lifelong friend Arthur Greeves),⁴ Lewis presents a relatively unfavorable picture of his father. Over time, they were driven apart by clashing personal idiosyncrasies, numerous painful relational misunderstandings, and repeated arguments. Many of these familial problems began or were exacerbated through the early death by cancer of Lewis’s mother when he was only nine years old. Prior to that time, Lewis had lived a carefree, happy life.

Lewis’s mother’s death was particularly significant for its impact on his spiritual condition over the next twenty years of his life. In his autobiography, he shares his experience of attempting to offer prayers of faith for her healing, and then, once she had died, for her return from the dead.⁵ Lewis says that his disappointment here did not produce results beyond itself, but his subsequent words indicate that his detachment from

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⁵Lewis’s response to his mother’s death is paralleled in American essayist Joan Didion’s The Year of Magical Thinking (New York: Vintage, 2006), in which she chronicles her grief at the death of her husband (author John Gregory Dunne) and the simultaneous serious illness of her daughter. Didion was so affected by the sudden death of her husband that she began to think that he would return and need his shoes (188). Notably, Didion’s account of her grief is similar to that of C. S. Lewis in A Grief Observed (New York: Bantam, 1976) in its subject matter and honesty.
religion was fortified through this experience.\textsuperscript{6}

The passing of his mother began a much darker period of C. S. Lewis’s life. He describes it with heartbreaking imagery:

With my mother’s death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life. There was to be much fun, many pleasures, many stabs of Joy; but not more of the old security. It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis.\textsuperscript{7}

He was permanently changed. However, if Lewis is correct in \textit{The Problem of Pain} in saying that pain is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world,\textsuperscript{8} then one can see God’s goodness even through this tragedy. The loss of Lewis’s false sense of security was good; over the next two decades, he was gradually drawn toward the only true Source of security, beauty, and joy.

\textbf{The Journey Begins}

The first chapter of \textit{Surprised by Joy} is very important to a proper understanding of the formation of Lewis’s concept of \textit{Sehnsucht}. In this chapter, he shows the reader the course upon which he was set as a child through three experiences of beauty—briefly introduced above. Lewis makes it very clear that these events are of great significance to his spiritual journey, because of their beauty and because of their imaginative and romantic\textsuperscript{9} qualities: “The imaginative experience of those years now seems to me more important than anything else.”\textsuperscript{10} He even announces that he will pass over events from this stage of his life that he possesses sharp memories of, but which could be removed from the history of his life without fundamentally changing who he is.

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{6}Lewis, \textit{Surprised by Joy}, 21.

\textsuperscript{7}Ibid.


\textsuperscript{9}It is important to remember here Lewis’s reference to the “Blue Flower” of Romanticism and his devotion to it before the age of six.

\textsuperscript{10}Lewis, \textit{Surprised by Joy}, 15.
\end{quote}
Lewis’s first life-altering childhood experience was the *memory* of the feeling he had when Warnie showed him the toy garden that he had constructed. The specific language he uses in describing the experience is important for this project.

As I stood beside a flowering currant bush on a summer day there suddenly arose in me without warning, and as if from a depth not of years but of centuries, the memory of that earlier morning at the Old House when my brother had brought his toy garden into the nursery. It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me; Milton’s “enormous bliss” of Eden (giving the full, ancient meaning to “enormous”) comes somewhere near it. It was a sensation, of course, of *desire*; but *desire* for what? not, certainly, for a biscuit tin filled with moss, nor even (though that came into it) for my own past. ἵππον —and before I knew what I *desired*, the *desire* itself was gone, the whole glimpse withdrawn, the world turned commonplace again, or only stirred by a *longing for the longing* that had just ceased. It had taken only a moment of time; and in a certain sense everything else that had ever happened to me was insignificant in comparison.11

The repeated use of the terms “desire” and “longing” show that Lewis is consistently speaking of *Sehnsucht*. In addition, his explanation of this feeling as something left unfulfilled shows how this experience set him on a quest for the rest of his life.

The second important childhood occurrence for Lewis was his reading of Beatrix Potter’s *Squirrel Nutkin*. He enjoyed all of Potter’s books, but *Squirrel Nutkin* was unique among them:

It troubled me with what I can only describe as the Idea of Autumn. It sounds fantastic to say that one can be enamored of a season, but that is something like what happened; and, as before, the experience was one of intense *desire*. And one went back to the book, not to gratify the *desire* (that was impossible—how can one possess Autumn?) but to reawake it. . . . It was something quite different from ordinary life and even from ordinary pleasure; something, as they would now say, “in another dimension.”12

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11Ibid., 16, emphasis added. Lewis translates ἵππον in a footnote: “Oh, I desire too much.” Alister McGrath explains the background of this Greek reference: “This epigram is often encountered in Renaissance art— for example, in Moretto da Brescia’s ‘Portrait of a Young Man’ (1516-18), which incorporates this slogan into a band on the subject’s feather beret.” Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis* (Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). 22. In a footnote, McGrath also explains an error with this reference in some editions of *Surprised by Joy*: “In transliterated Greek, this reads: *iou lian potho*. The Greek is incorrectly rendered in recent editions of *Surprised by Joy*, which contract these three Greek words into two, and incorrectly render the Greek letter upsilon by the typographically similar *nu*. The first edition presents the Greek correctly.” Ibid., 29.

12Ibid., 16-17, emphasis added.
Again, Lewis shows the unattainable nature of the thing desired. He also demonstrates a growing list of terms that are synonymous for Sehnsucht or related to the workings of Sehnsucht—in this case, he adds the term “Idea of Autumn” to the previously mentioned “joy,” “desire,” and “longing.” But perhaps most significantly with regard to this second experience, Lewis indicates that the desire came from a place or source beyond regular earthly existence. It was “in another dimension.” This is important for the understanding of Sehnsucht as describing beauty which comes from God and draws men toward God.

Finally, Lewis’s third pivotal childhood experience came as he read the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In The Saga of King Olaf, Longfellow translated a poem by the Swedish writer Esaias Tegner. Tegner’s poem (the term for this type of Scandinavian poem is drapa) was the account of the tragic death and funeral of the Norse god Balder. Lewis describes the event:

The third glimpse came through poetry. I had become fond of Longfellow’s Saga of King Olaf: fond of it in a casual, shallow way for its story and its vigorous rhythms. But then, and quite different from such pleasures, there came a moment when I idly turned the pages of the book and found the unrhymed translation of Tegner’s Drapa and read

I heard a voice that cried,  
Balder the beautiful  
Is dead, is dead –

I knew nothing about Balder; but instantly I was uplifted into huge regions of northern sky, I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described (except that it is cold, spacious, severe, pale, and remote) and then, as in the other examples, found myself at the very same moment already falling out of that desire and wishing I were back in it.\(^\text{13}\)

This description is intriguing for multiple reasons. As in the first experience described, the rush of thought and feeling that Lewis had at this moment was completely unexpected. It happened in an instant and without warning. It was not something that he was able to conjure through his own effort, mental or otherwise. Second, here Lewis has

\(^{13}\)Ibid., 17, emphasis added.
again added a term to those synonymous with *Sehnsucht*: “Northernness.”\(^{14}\) Third, right after Lewis says in this quote that the feeling was not to be described, he uses five adjectives to describe it, and none of the adjectives he uses represent ideas or feelings that are typically or naturally understood to be desirable.\(^{15}\) Clearly, there is a great deal of mystery—elsewhere Lewis even says “holiness”\(^{16}\)—wrapped up in Lewis’s desire for this otherworldly beauty and joy.

As if to answer any shred of remaining doubt as to the importance of these events for the rest of Lewis’s story and his testimony of coming to faith in Christ, after the third account Lewis tells the reader of *Surprised by Joy*: “The reader who finds these three episodes of no interest need read this book no further, for in a sense the central story of my life is about nothing else.”\(^{17}\) In this way, Lewis shows the course upon which he was set through an unquenchable desire for beauty from beyond this world.

**Belief**

There was a short period during C. S. Lewis’s life in which he did believe that Christianity was true. It was while he attended his first boarding school—a thoroughly horrible experience, as the headmaster was cruel and later found to be insane. The school was called Wynyard School, but in his autobiography, Lewis referred to it as Belsen—also the name of a Nazi concentration camp! While at this school in England, the most important thing that happened to Lewis was that for the first time he “became an effective

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\(^{14}\)Although he mentions “northern sky” in this quote and not the capitalized term “Northernness,” the latter is the term he comes to use for this sensation in *Surprised by Joy*—no less than seven times.

\(^{15}\)Of course, the idea of spaciousness is not always undesirable. However, spaciousness can also imply loneliness or desolation, so the overall point remains.

\(^{16}\)I am connecting “mystery” to “holiness” using the latter term to mean more than simply purity, but instead the quality of being set apart or beyond man’s ability to fully comprehend or reach.

\(^{17}\)Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 17.
believer.” He connects this change to the influence of the Anglo-Catholic church he attended during this time. Specifically, he was impacted through the teaching of Christian doctrine by people who Lewis was sure actually believed these truths. This fervor of belief must have stood in contrast to the tepid religious environment of his upbringing. But Lewis’s perseverance in devotion would not last long. The school he attended closed, he was moved for only a few months to another school in Ireland, and then finally sent to Cherbourg House in Worcestershire, England. It was at Cherbourg that his faith wavered and then collapsed.

**Disbelief**

Despite the power of the beautiful events that initiated a lifelong search for joy, C. S. Lewis’s path toward God was anything but straight. While at Cherbourg House, several factors converged and led to the abandonment of Lewis’s childhood faith. First, Lewis was predisposed to turn away from Christianity through an unfortunate personal spiritual practice. As a child, Lewis had been told of the importance of sincerely meaning everything that he prayed, rather than emptily saying words. Unfortunately, this principle became a source of bondage to Lewis, as he gradually became more and more afraid after times of prayer that he had failed to meet an appropriate standard of genuineness. His prayer times became extremely taxing as a result of this legalism, which gave birth to anxiety and doubt. Thus, when he came to Cherbourg, Lewis was already primed for an intellectual undermining of his faith; he was “already desperately anxious to get rid of

18Ibid., 33. Lewis’s language in this section of *Surprised by Joy* makes it seem that he is at least open to the idea that he was a true believer at this early stage before he became an atheist and eventually a Christian (perhaps again). Of course, if one believes in perseverance of the saints, one would deny that he had been a true Christian as a boy. The teaching of Heb 6 precludes the possibility of someone being a true believer, renouncing Christ, and then returning to salvation by faith in Him. However, it could be that Lewis is being intentionally vague in his language here, either because he does not know his true spiritual state when he was at this age, or because he is trying to avoid an unnecessary theological controversy at this point in the narrative.
[his] religion.”

The second factor that contributed to Lewis becoming an atheist was his conversations with a woman at Cherbourg. This woman, whom Lewis calls Miss C., was the college’s Matron, and she was very dear to Lewis. However, Miss C. was searching spiritually and interacting with some very obscure—even secretive—worldviews. She openly spoke with Lewis about the ideas from which she was imbibing, and in the process she awoke in Lewis what he calls the “passion for the Occult.” He became obsessed with the supernatural in general. Over time, Lewis became very conscious of the vague and unverified nature of claims made in accounts of Occultic events; gradually, this uncertain outlook spilled over into his understanding of the Christian faith. He states of Miss C. and this effect,

Little by little, unconsciously, unintentionally, she loosened the whole framework, blunted all the sharp edges, of my belief. . . . From the tyrannous noon of revelation I passed into the cool evening of Higher Thought, where there was nothing to be obeyed, and nothing to be believed except what was either comforting or exciting.

The third major factor that contributed to Lewis’s departure from Christianity was his increasingly pessimistic attitude toward the world; this is the aspect of his turn to atheism which seems most connected to his childhood grief and sense of abandonment. Lewis says, “I was now by no means unhappy. . . . As to the sources of my pessimism, the reader will remember that, though in many ways most fortunate, yet I had very early in life met a great dismay.” He goes on to say that he believes that the roots of his pessimism can be found even further back than his mother’s death, namely, a physical

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19Ibid., 61.
20Ibid., 60.
21Ibid.
22Ibid., 63.
defect with his thumbs that made him feel like nothing would ever do what he wanted it to do.

As a result of the convergence of these factors, while at Cherbourg House Lewis became a self-proclaimed atheist. Years later, he said in a letter that it happened when he was fourteen years old.23 “And so, little by little, with fluctuations which I cannot now trace, I became an apostate, dropping my faith with no sense of loss but with the greatest relief.”24

Indeed, Lewis became vehement in his opposition to the doctrine of God’s existence. For years, Lewis felt that the unhappy, struggling nature of the world provided evidence against God’s existence—essentially a form of the problem of evil as encountered in Christian apologetics. Lewis referred to this as “the Argument from Undesign” and said that he “had very definitely formed the opinion that universe was, in the main, a rather regrettable institution.”25

In fact, a few years later while at Malvern College, Lewis went so far as to write a Norse tragedy called Loki Bound, which possessed as a major feature a great deal of militantly atheistic pessimism: “I was at this time living, like so many Atheists or Antitheists, in a whirl of contradictions. I maintained that God did not exist. I was also very angry with God for not existing. I was equally angry with Him for creating a world.”26 This dark trend would continue in Lewis’s subsequent cycle of lyrics known as Spirits in Bondage, which is discussed in chapter 3.

The next major influence on Lewis’s life would be one that would further strengthen his atheistic views—his tutor William Kirkpatrick, affectionately known by

23Lewis, Collected Letters, 3:1551.

24Lewis, Surprised by Joy, 66.

25Ibid., 63, 65.

26Ibid., 115.
the men in the Lewis family as “The Great Knock.” C. S. Lewis’s father Albert had been educated at Lurgan College in Ireland, where Kirkpatrick had been headmaster; the two had a close friendship for decades.

Kirkpatrick was ruthlessly rational—Lewis says that if he had come into the world a little later, Kirkpatrick would have been a logical positivist—27 and a staunch atheist. It is not hard to see, however, that in God’s sovereignty, although Lewis was temporarily confirmed in his atheism by Kirkpatrick, he was also given intellectual tools with which to write powerful apologetic prose and devastating critiques of non-Christian worldviews.

During this time of his life Lewis—despite personally disbelieving in God’s existence—allowed himself to be confirmed in the Church of Ireland. He states in 
_Surprised by Joy_ that this was one of the worst acts of his life; he did it mainly out of convenience, to keep his father happy and avoid the tedious and incessant arguments that he knew would result if he refused confirmation.28 Such was the calloused spiritual state in which Lewis found himself in these early days. But even at this stage, the power of _Sehnsucht_ to draw Lewis toward beauty and toward God was not eradicated.

**The Working of Sehnsucht**

During his harrowing time at Wynyard School, Lewis experienced a temporary silencing of the call of joy on his life, which actually serves to highlight its inexorable power through its subsequent and powerful return to his consciousness. However, from this period of his life an important development must be noted because of its consistency with an understanding of _Sehnsucht_ as mediated through beauty in art and nature. Lewis reports of his time at the school he called Belsen:

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27Ibid., 135.

28Ibid., 161.
There was also a decline in my imaginative life. For many years Joy (as I have defined it) was not only absent but forgotten. My reading was now mainly rubbish...I read twaddling school stories in The Captain. The pleasure here was, in the proper sense, mere wish fulfillment and fantasy; one enjoyed vicariously the triumphs of the hero. . . . [Also,] the idea of other planets exercised upon me then a peculiar, heady attraction, which was quite different from any other of my literary interests. Most emphatically it was not the romantic spell of Das Ferne.

Das Ferne is German for “the far”; this fits well with Lewis’s use of Sehnsucht as a longing for something transcendent and out of reach. Das Ferne also corresponds closely to the “far-off country” Lewis describes in The Weight of Glory, which is discussed below.

In this quote, an important correlation exists between Lewis’s literary experiences and the silence of joy at this time in his life. Immediately after he states that joy was both absent and forgotten, he points out that his reading was the quality of garbage. He elaborates and mentions specific works and genres, and then points out once more that his interest in these was by no means in the stream of longing for something transcendent. These experiences would seem to strengthen the case that Sehnsucht functions to draw men toward God as they experience a true and haunting beauty that leaves them wanting more.

C. S. Lewis, cooped up most of the time in a violent, terrifying environment and only engaging with literature of little value, was largely cut off from the influence of Sehnsucht.

Corbin Carnell, in his seminal study of Sehnsucht in Lewis’s life and works from a literary perspective, agrees:

If it [Joy] were chiefly an escape mechanism, one would expect it to have been frequently experienced at Belsen, where vacations were longed for as the sick await recovery or prisoners the day of liberation. . . . The absence of “joy” at Belsen was probably connected with the decline in imaginative life which Lewis underwent there.

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29The Captain was a boy’s magazine published in England beginning in 1899. It was published by George Newnes, the media magnate who also founded The Strand—known for publishing serials of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories. See Kate Jackson, “‘Doing Things Differently’ and ‘Striking While the Iron Was Hot’: The Entrepreneurial Successes of the Media Magnate George Newnes, 1881-1910,” Publishing Research Quarterly 12, no. 4 (1996): 3-23.

30Lewis, Surprised by Joy, 34-35.

This point emphasizes again the prospects of using great art for the purpose of evangelism and apologetics. It is appropriate here to consider—from the evidence of Lewis’s life—how increased interaction with true and compelling beauty can draw men toward the God who is the Source of that beauty.32 This compelling beauty can come from something as simple as the observation of the beauty and intricacy of a human ear—as former Soviet spy Whittaker Chambers describes in his autobiography. Chambers powerfully explains that one day he suddenly looked at his young daughter’s ear with fresh, alert eyes and immediately recognized the design that had gone in to them. He writes that this was the point at which “the finger of God was first laid upon my forehead.”33 The ear was obviously the work of an intelligent artist; the beauty of his child’s ear began the undermining of his Communist materialism and atheism. This is the type of drawing effect that Lewis believes beauty can have through Sehnsucht.

Lewis presents a striking picture of the reappearance of joy in his young life; in this instance it was most closely associated with the Northern aspect of desire that he had experienced years before at the mention of the Norse god Balder. He describes the moment of joy’s return and its effect on his soul with an Arctic metaphor. He says that it was as if the Arctic had not only melted, but had been transformed into a verdant and vibrant landscape in the bloom of spring. His picture of this event in his mind is as clear as any other memory that he possesses at the time of writing his autobiography. It is important to note that Lewis was by no means at this time seeking an experience of joy;

32The attentive reader may raise a question here with regard to the strange contemporaneity of the silence of joy and Lewis’s claim (mentioned previously) to have been “an effective believer” while at Wynyard. Combining all of Lewis’s testimonial evidence with the Scriptural point in Heb 6 that no one who falls away will be able to return to the Christian faith, it seems clear that Lewis was either not a true believer in Christ while at Wynyard, or that his subsequent years as an atheist were only a temporary period of backsliding in his faith. The first option seems much more likely. Notably, an absence of joy and Sehnsucht when not engaging with beauty would fit with the testimony of an unbeliever, if this truly was Lewis’s spiritual state at this time.

the event seems completely due to chance until one factors in the sovereignty of God and
His clear pursuit of Lewis throughout his youth.

Someone must have left in the schoolroom a literary periodical: The Bookman, perhaps, or the Times Literary Supplement. My eye fell upon a headline and a picture, carelessly, expecting nothing. A moment later, as the poet says, “The sky had turned round.”

What I had read was the words Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods. What I had
seen was one of Arthur Rackham’s illustrations to that volume. . . . Pure
“Northernness” engulfed me: a vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the
Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer, remoteness, severity. . . . and
with that plunge back into my own past there arose at once, almost like heartbreak,
the memory of Joy itself . . . and the distance of the Twilight of the Gods and the
distance of my own past Joy, both unattainable, flowed together into a single,
unendurable sense of desire and loss . . . and at once I knew (with fatal knowledge)
that to “have it again” was the supreme and only important object of desire.34

Lewis’s description reiterates the important elements of Northernness, memory,
distance, unattainability, and desire that have contributed to a proper understanding of
Sehnsucht and its working in his personal journey. Following this quote, he explains at
length how his interest in Siegfried set him on a long course of reading books and
listening to Richard Wagner’s music—he devoured any of it that he could get his hands
on in these days, and Warnie and his father humored him. Lewis also points out that this
“imaginative Renaissance,” as he called it, led to “a new appreciation of external nature.”35
He began to look for scenes that resonated with his experiences in the world of Wagnerian
opera,36 and in the process he began to consistently experience the feeling of Sehnsucht
through nature itself, rather than only as nature reminded him of the Norse tales.

From this point forward, Lewis was “enslaved”37 by his overpowering

34Lewis, Surprised by Joy, 72-73.

35Ibid., 77.

36For example, “On that holiday at Dundrum, cycling among the Wicklow mountains, I was
always involuntarily looking for scenes that might belong to the Wagnerian world, here a steep hillside
covered with firs where Mime might meet Sieglinde, there a sunny glade where Siegfried might listen to
the bird, or presently a dry valley of rocks where the lithe scaly body of Fafner might emerge from its cave.”
Ibid.

37Ibid., 76.
experience of *Sehnsucht*’s inconsolable longing. The search became so important to his life that he could refer to joy as “it” (sometimes capitalized)\(^{38}\) in his letters, especially in letters written to his lifelong friend Arthur Greeves:

Thursday, October 3, 1929: To day I worked in the morning and afternoon and walked into town by Cuckoo Lane and Mesopotamia after tea. The real autumn tang in the air had begun\(^{39}\) . . . I saw both a squirrel and a fat old rat in Addison’s walk, and had glimpses of ‘it.’\(^{40}\)

Thursday, January 30, 1930: So I will say it after all: that I seem to have been supported in respect to chastity and anger more continuously, and with less struggle, for the last ten days or so than I often remember to have been: and have had the most delicious moments of *It*. Indeed to day . . . the same winter sunshine, the same gilt and grey skies shining thro bare shock-headed bushes, the same restful pale ploughland and grass, and more than usual of the birds darting out their sudden, almost cruelly poignant songs—today I got such a sudden intense feeling of delight that it sort of stopped me in my walk and spun me round.\(^{41}\)

Lewis’s obsession became so intense that he very actively and constantly sought this feeling: “Thence arose the fatal determination to recover the old thrill, and at last the moment when I was compelled to realize that all such efforts were failures. I had no lure to which the bird would come.”\(^{42}\)

But Lewis’s obsession was not simply for the object of the desire. He desperately wanted to experience the *desire* itself; for him, the two were one and the same: “There, to have is to want and to want is to have. Thus, the very moment when I longed to be so stabbed again, was itself again such a stabbing.”\(^{43}\) Thus, on and on this

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\(^{38}\) Punctuation, capitalization, and italicization of “it” in the next two snippets follow the way they appear in Lewis’s *Collected Letters*. Lewis is often inconsistent with capitalization of terms that have special meaning to him, like it, joy, desire, beauty, and glory. It is difficult to explain why without a clear explanation from Lewis on the matter. It may simply be an unintentional inconsistency in his own practice, or perhaps the work of different editors on different editions of different books printed by different publishing companies!

\(^{39}\) The reader should here recall Lewis’s term “the idea of Autumn,” which in his vocabulary is synonymous with “joy.”

\(^{40}\) Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 1:831-32.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 877.

\(^{42}\) Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 166.

\(^{43}\) Ibid.
cycle went for Lewis: the fanatical pursuit of joy as well as the almost painful desire for it. As this journey continued for Lewis, he would find glimpses of the object of his seeking in many places in art and nature, but at this point two specific influences had a particularly strong impact on his ever-intensifying search: authors and close friends.

**Authors**

About this time in Lewis’s life, there existed a strange and significant dichotomy in his mind. On one hand and due largely to Professor Kirkpatrick’s influence, he was highly rationalistic in his thinking, valuing great logical rigor. On the other hand and due largely to his inability to escape *Sehnsucht*, he found value and meaning only in the great glimpses of beauty he had found in places like that of the Norse myths—which he by no means took to be true or grounded in reality. He describes this compartmentalization: “Such then, was my position: to care for almost nothing but the gods and heroes, the garden of the Hesperides, Launcelot and the Grail, and to believe in nothing but atoms and evolution and military service.”⁴⁴

But once again, the experience of art—broadly defined, including literature—changed him. Lewis explains that he was reading the poetry of William Butler Yeats and the spiritual writings of Maurice Maeterlinck. Yeats was a fellow Irishman and Maeterlinck a Belgian who wrote in French. Both of these authors contributed to a paradigm shift for Lewis, because these were men whom Lewis respected as authors who were not Christians, but who really did believe in a spiritual world. Lewis routinely and purposefully ignored the spiritual claims of Christians at this point, because he had written off Christianity itself as untrue. But he did not have at this point a mental category for respectable non-Christian authors who wrote about the spiritual and believed it to be real. Lewis says that this revelation introduced a simple “perhaps” into his

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thinking that began to undermine his solely materialistic worldview.\textsuperscript{45}

However, the author that heralded a radical change of direction in Lewis’s spiritual journey was George MacDonald (1824-1905). MacDonald was a well-known Scottish author from the Victorian era who served for a time as a pastor of a Congregationalist Church and later as a professor of English literature. He wrote in multiple genres and became especially famous for his poetry, children’s stories, and fantasies. His fiction was often intentionally symbolic, which was rare for his time period.\textsuperscript{46}

C. S. Lewis did not seek out MacDonald’s works; rather, it happened, as Lewis says in \textit{Surprised by Joy}, “in superabundance of mercy.”\textsuperscript{47} Providentially, during his days studying under Kirkpatrick, he took a day trip and came home by train. Standing on the platform waiting for the train, he picked up and purchased a book to read on the way home: MacDonald’s \textit{Phantastes, a Faerie Romance}. He said later, “I had not the faintest notion what I had let myself in for by buying \textit{Phantastes}.”\textsuperscript{48}

A connection has already been noted between Lewis’s early Romanticism and the symbol of the Blue Flower as offered by Novalis. George MacDonald considered himself an enthusiastic disciple of Novalis. He translated some of Novalis’ writings, and between the title and first chapter of \textit{Phantastes}, there is a three-paragraph citation of Novalis in German. In choosing this fantasy, Lewis had not moved at all from the stream of desire and beauty that had been haunting him most of his life.

\textit{Phantastes} tells the story of Anodos, a young man who is transported via a dream to Fairy Land and has great and symbolic adventures there. These adventures in a

\textsuperscript{45}\textit{Ibid.}, 175.


\textsuperscript{47}Lewis, \textit{Surprised by Joy}, 178.

\textsuperscript{48}\textit{Ibid.}, 181.
dreamland forever change the real Anodos. For C. S. Lewis, there was a beauty and light in MacDonald’s story that gripped him. He writes that there was a familiarity to MacDonald’s *Phantastes*, in that it reminded Lewis of what he loved about the works of many other authors who had impacted him, such as William Butler Yeats or Edmund Spenser: “But in another sense all was changed. I did not yet know (and I was long in learning) the name of the new quality, the bright shadow,⁴⁹ that rested on the travels of Anodos. I do now. It was Holiness.”⁵⁰

Lewis continues to describe the impact of *Phantastes*, paradoxically explaining that, although MacDonald the Christian first connected holiness with *Sehnsucht* in Lewis’s thinking, MacDonald also brought Lewis’s experience of *Sehnsucht* into contact with everyday, common things. Arthur Greeves had already impacted Lewis in this area through teaching Lewis “the beauty of the ordinary vegetables that we destine to the pot” and the attractiveness of other unglamorous, “homely” items of normal experience.⁵¹ But MacDonald went a great step further by inextricably connecting this beauty to joy:

> Up till now each visitation of Joy had left the common world momentarily a desert. . . . Even when real clouds or trees had been the material of the vision, they had been so only by reminding me of another world; I did not like the return to ours. But now I saw the bright shadow coming out of the book into the real world and resting there, transforming all common things and yet itself unchanged. Or, more accurately, I saw the common things drawn into the bright shadow. . . . *That night, my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized*; the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer.⁵²

*Surprised by Joy* is not the only book wherein C. S. Lewis is explicit about the important influence of George MacDonald upon his life. Interestingly, he makes it very clear in a work of fiction—the theological fantasy *The Great Divorce*. In this book,

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⁴⁹Significantly, Corbin Scott Carnell’s extensive study on C. S. Lewis and *Sehnsucht* alludes to this reference in its title, *Bright Shadow of Reality*.


⁵¹Ibid., 157.

⁵²Ibid., 181, emphasis added.
individual ghosts journey from hell to heaven, with the opportunity to stay if they are willing to forget themselves and turn to Christ. Each of the ghosts is met by a citizen of heaven who somehow knew the ghost while they were both living their earthly lives. Each heavenly citizen serves as a spiritual guide and attempts to persuade his or her respective ghost to repent and to remain in heaven.

The narrator in *The Great Divorce* is one of the traveling ghosts, but he is also meant to represent C. S. Lewis himself; this is clear through biographical details spoken by the narrator as well as the fact that the book ends with the narrator realizing that he has not yet died, but has only had a warning through a dream. In chapter 9, Lewis’s spiritual guide enters the story, and he is the only citizen of heaven to appear in the story that is a known historical figure for the reader: George Macdonald, also referred to as “my Teacher” in the book. Lewis goes so far as to have the narrator ghost describe to Macdonald his introduction to his fantasy and its impact on his life:

> I tried to tell him how a certain frosty afternoon at Leatherhead Station when I first bought a copy of *Phantastes* (being then about sixteen years old) had been to me what the first sight of Beatrice had been to Dante: *Here begins the New Life*. I started to confess how long that Life had delayed in the region of imagination merely: how slowly and reluctantly I had come to admit that his Christendom had more than an accidental connexion with it, how hard I had tried not to see that the true name of the quality which first met me in his books is Holiness.

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53Dealing fully with the inclusive or universalistic questions generated by this post-death opportunity to respond to the gospel is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, it must be pointed out that, in the last few pages of the work, in a conversation with George MacDonald, the character that represents Lewis in the story brings up MacDonald’s Universalism. In response, he is told by MacDonald that “Any man may choose eternal death. Those that choose it will have it,” and that answers to these questions will not make sense from the perspective of those still living in and bounded by linear time. So, Lewis is not developing a doctrine of universalism here; the main objective of his book is to point out that our decisions and ways of living now on earth are already either hellish or heavenly; C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 122.

54Ibid., 69, for example.

55Lewis first read *Phantastes* at sixteen, but he was not converted until the age of thirty-two. The next chapter demonstrates how he wrestled greatly in the intervening years with both atheism and Christianity. Clearly, though, his encounter with George MacDonald was a seminal moment in Lewis’s spiritual formation and journey towards Christ.

This excerpt is significant because it complements Lewis’s description in *Surprised by Joy* of this event and its impact on him. Particularly noteworthy for the present discussion are the allusions to the art of Dante and the importance of the “region of imagination” to Lewis’s spiritual journey towards Christianity. MacDonald remains with Lewis’s character as his guide in *The Great Divorce* for the entire second half of the book. The intentional nature of this narrative decision demonstrates how pivotal George MacDonald and the haunting, holy beauty of his art was to C. S. Lewis’s conversion.

One additional influential author mentioned by C. S. Lewis in his spiritual autobiography is G. K. Chesterton. Lewis says that he had never heard of Chesterton prior to his period of recovery from trench fever during World War I, during which he read a collection of Chesterton’s essays. He did not agree with many things that Chesterton wrote, but he knew with certainty that he liked Chesterton. He attributes this liking partially to Chesterton’s purposeful use of humor, partially to Chesterton’s “goodness,” and partially to an intangible, involuntary connection that can sometimes occur between author and reader due to a “second cause” of a very obscure kind.”

It was speaking of Chesterton and his unexpected influence on his life that Lewis famously stated, “I did not know what I was letting myself in for. A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading. There are traps everywhere . . . God is, if I may say it, very unscrupulous.” One can easily see here the pursuit by God of C. S. Lewis through beauty and in the literature of authors that he liked, even if he did not know exactly why he liked these authors or what would be at the end of his desperate search for beauty.

Over time and as Lewis continued to read, Chesterton’s appeal distinguished him from non-Christian authors, *in spite* of his Christianity: “Chesterton had more sense

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58 Ibid., 191.
than all the moderns put together; bating, of course, his Christianity.” As Lewis came across more and more Christian authors who appealed to him in this way, the weight of their sensibility, arguments, and worldview reached a tipping point in Lewis’s life. This situation was only intensified by Lewis’s reading of Chesterton’s apologetic work *The Everlasting Man*—an event that took place just prior to his conversion.

These authors and others had a profound influence on C. S. Lewis and his journey to faith in Christ. But simultaneously, he was heavily impacted through several strong friendships that were pulling him in the same direction.

**Friends**

Lewis had by now finished his course of study with Kirkpatrick and gained admission into University College at Oxford. Regarding Lewis’s education, it will suffice for the current project to say that Lewis was an excellent student and received First honors with degrees in three different subject areas: Latin and Greek literature, ancient history and philosophy, and English literature. For the purpose of tracing the power of *Sehnsucht* as it worked to draw C. S. Lewis to God, this section briefly examines three friendships that affected Lewis during these pivotal years as a young scholar.

**Arthur Greeves.** Lewis refers to Arthur Greeves as “the First Friend,” and when he does so, he is speaking in a technical rather than primarily a chronological sense. For Lewis,

> The First [Friend] is the *alter ego*, the man who first reveals to you that you are not alone in the world by turning out (beyond hope) to share all your most secret delights. There is nothing to be overcome in making him your friend; he and you join like raindrops on a window.

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59Ibid., 213.


Greeves and Lewis were truly lifelong friends, having grown up near one another in Belfast and maintaining their friendship through such a vast collection of letters that Lewis’s side of the conversation alone was easily able to fill a large book.\textsuperscript{62} Greeves professed to be a Christian well before Lewis became one and tried through their correspondence to point Lewis to Christ.\textsuperscript{63}

What is significant is the common interest that initially formed the glue of their friendship. While at home on holiday from his education at Malvern College, he responded to an invitation to visit Greeves, who was recovering from an illness at his family’s house. Prior to this, Lewis and his brother Warnie had met Greeves, but neither had been interested in becoming his friend. When C. S. Lewis walked into Greeves’ convalescing room, what he saw changed all of that in an instant. He describes the scene:

I found Arthur sitting up in bed. On the table beside him lay a copy of \textit{Myths of the Norsemen}.

“Do you like that?” said I.

“Do you like that?” said he.

Next moment the book was in our hands, our heads were bent close together, we were pointing, quoting, talking—soon almost shouting—discovering in a torrent of questions that we liked not only the same thing, but the same parts of it and in the same way; that both knew the stab of Joy and that, for both, the arrow was shot from the North.\textsuperscript{64}

This unexpected and deep common interest not only would instantly form the friendship between these two men, but would bind them together for five decades, as they shared their lives and wrote to one another about a mountain of books and other experiences of beauty, both manmade and natural. Lewis spoke often with Greeves about his search for and experiences of joy, or “It.” When Lewis finally did become a

\textsuperscript{62}Lewis, \textit{They Stand Together}.

\textsuperscript{63}Confusing in the midst of Greeves’ professed Christianity is his homosexuality, which Lewis knew about and kept a secret. However, little is known of Greeves’ inner struggles or his thoughts on the disconnect between his faith and his way of living, because his side of the written conversation with Lewis was destroyed.

\textsuperscript{64}Lewis, \textit{Surprised by Joy}, 130.
Christian, he explained this event and its effects in detail to Greeves in his letters. This First Friend had a massive impact on Lewis’s spiritual life, and he did so largely through their shared experience of Sehnsucht in Norse tales.

Owen Barfield. Owen Barfield was a contemporary of Lewis’s as a student, author, and lecturer. In keeping with his categorization of relationships, Lewis referred to Barfield as the “Second Friend.”

But the Second Friend is the man who disagrees with you about everything. He is not so much the alter ego [as Greeves was for Lewis] as the antiself. Of course he shares your interests, otherwise he would not become your friend at all. But he has approached them all at a different angle. He has read all the right books but has got the wrong thing out of every one. It is as if he spoke your language but mispronounced it.⁶⁵

These two brilliant scholars happily and fiercely debated one another about any topic they came across. Barfield claimed to be a Christian, although he did combine his faith with the cult-like ideas of Rudolf Steiner as found in the philosophy known as Anthroposophy.⁶⁶ And despite Lewis’s exaggerated tone above in his description of the Second Friend, he makes it clear elsewhere in his autobiography that Barfield had a great impact on his thinking and on his spiritual journey. Through countless discussions on literature, philosophy, and theology, and through Lewis’s sustained observance of his serious and respectable mind, Barfield helped Jack Lewis along the road to Christ. In particular, Barfield’s favorable and archetypal view of myth helped to connect Lewis’s lifelong search for stories and art that evoked a haunting sense of longing with his ongoing search for spiritual truth. The topic of myth leads, however, to the third influential friend of this epoch in Lewis’s life.

J. R. R. Tolkien. J. R. R. Tolkien was a philologist, an Oxford don, and the

⁶⁵Ibid., 199.

prolific author of *The Lord of the Rings* and the other books that make up the saga of Middle-Earth. Through their shared experience of being on the faculty at Oxford, their membership in a society founded by Tolkien for reading Old Icelandic (or Old Norse) saga, and their legendary writing and discussion group known as the Inklings, Lewis and Tolkien exercised great influence over one another’s lives and important writings.

The long friendship between Lewis and Tolkien has been the subject of many biographical works, and the popularity of the recent films based on their books has aroused great popular interest in their relationship. In order to keep the focus sufficiently narrow, however, this close examination is limited to the connection between Tolkien’s view of myth (which Lewis ultimately accepted) and Lewis’s search for joy as represented by *Sehnsucht*.

To clarify, in ordinary use, the word “myth” often refers to something that is untrue. Indeed, caution is necessary in applying the nomenclature of myth to elements of biblical truth or theology; many biblical interpreters have erroneously referred to portions of the Bible as mythical—intentionally meaning that biblical events did not actually occur in space and time. This is not what Tolkien or the converted C. S. Lewis meant when they spoke of the myth of the Bible. Rather, they understood the Christian myth as the overarching story of the universe, and they saw similar pagan myths as distorted echoes of that primary story. Lewis explains in *Reflections on the Psalms*,

> The resemblance between these myths and the Christian truth is no more accidental than the resemblance between the sun and the sun’s reflection in a pond, or that between a historical fact and the somewhat garbled version of it which lives in popular report, or between the trees and hills in our dreams.\(^6\)

In his detailed biography, *The Inklings*, Humphrey Carpenter outlines a seminal conversation regarding myth between Tolkien and Lewis\(^6\) late one evening after


\(^6\)Hugo Dyson, another friend of C. S. Lewis, member of the Inklings, Christian, and professor of English, was also an important part of the long conversation following dinner that night. However, Humphrey Carpenter relates that this portion of the conversation only took place between Lewis and
they had shared dinner in Lewis’s college. By the time of this talk, C. S. Lewis had already given in to a portion of Christian truth, in that he had become a theist. But this conversation was one of the final events that pushed him into full acceptance of Christianity:

Lewis had never underestimated the power of myth. Far from it, for one of his earliest loves had been the Norse myth of the dying god Balder. Now, Barfield had shown him the crucial role that mythology had played in the history of language and literature. But he still did not believe in the myths that delighted him. Beautiful and moving though such stories might be, they were (he said) ultimately untrue. As he expressed it to Tolkien, myths are “lies and therefore worthless, even though breathed through silver.”

No, said Tolkien. They are not lies.

Carpenter explains in detail that precisely at that moment in the conversation, a rush of wind came upon both men that caused them to stop and even to hold their breath, because they thought it was going to rain suddenly. Tolkien used the occurrence to point out that when men first contemplated these phenomena in the world around them, they saw that “the world was alive with mythological beings. They saw the stars as living silver, bursting into flame in answer to the eternal music.” After Lewis agreed with this notion, Tolkien drove the point home, ultimately being used by the Lord to draw C. S. Lewis to faith. Lewis would later refer to this as the “long night talk”.

Tolkien. Thus, for the sake of brevity, reference to Dyson’s involvement in the discussion is limited to this footnote.

This event happened in 1929 in Lewis’s rooms at Magdalen College. Of this decision he famously said that he finally “gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.” Lewis, Surprised by Joy, 228-29. He clarifies in the next chapter that in saying he had converted, he did not mean that he had become a Christian, only a theist.


In the idea of creation echoing an “eternal music,” one can certainly see a reference or at least a parallel to Tolkien’s creation myth of Middle-earth, “Ainulindalë,” in The Silmarillion, ed. Christopher Tolkien, 2nd ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

Carpenter, The Inklings, 45.
But, replied Tolkien, man is not ultimately a liar. He may pervert his thoughts into lies, but he comes from God, and it is from God that he draws his ultimate ideals. . . . Therefore, Tolkien continued, not merely the abstract thoughts of man but also his imaginative inventions must originate with God, and must in consequence reflect something of eternal truth. In making a myth, in practicing “mythopoeia” and peopling the world with elves and dragons and goblins, a storyteller, or “sub-creator” as Tolkien liked to call such a person, is actually fulfilling God’s purpose, and reflecting a splintered fragment of the true light. Pagan myths are therefore never just “lies”: there is always something of the truth in them. 

Joseph Pearce, noted scholar on Lewis, Tolkien, and G. K. Chesterton, made the point in the 2005 Gheens Lectures at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary that all three of these influential men were eventually in agreement on this understanding of myth: “Tolkien, Lewis, and Chesterton would say that Christianity is the Archetypal Myth, and all the other myths only make sense in the sense that they relate to that one Archetype.”

Humphrey Carpenter has already made the connection between Lewis’s love of Balder and Northernness and Tolkien’s influential understanding of myth as it relates to the Christian true story of the gospel. But Lewis’s own words, written a number of years later, will make the point even stronger:

What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always about something, but reality is that about which truth is), and therefore, every myth becomes the father of innumerable truths on the abstract level. . . . Or, if you prefer, myth is the isthmus which connects the pinuscular world of thought with that vast continent we really belong to. It is not, like truth, abstract; nor is it, like direct experience, bound to the particular.

Now as myth transcends thought, Incarnation transcends myth. The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, without ceasing to be myth, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. . . . We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when

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Ibid., 43.

or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) under Pontius Pilate. By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth; that is the miracle.\textsuperscript{75}

Here Lewis shows clearly the gigantic impact of the night talk with Tolkien, not only on his conversion, but on the whole subsequent course of his writing—especially in \textit{Till We Have Faces}, the Narnia series for children, and the Space Trilogy for adults. Tolkien’s understanding of myth allowed Lewis to finally and inseparably connect the object of \textit{Sehnsucht} with the God of Christian truth, and to understand that the unreal but glorious elements of Balder and the other instances of beauty were all the time pointing to the real beauty of Christ and the gospel.

Just a few days later, Lewis took a ride in the sidecar of Warnie’s motorcycle as they both headed to Whipsnade Zoo for an enjoyable day together. Lewis says plainly that before he left on that short trip he did not believe that Jesus was God’s Son, but that when they arrived, he did believe. He says the final decision was not an emotional one.\textsuperscript{76} One can see why a great emotional push was not necessary; all of Lewis’s life, God had been drawing him to Himself through beauty and \textit{Sehnsucht}. Once he came to see the connection between beauty and God clearly through the help of influential authors and friends, the Holy Spirit used this knowledge to bring Lewis to life spiritually and save his soul.

This completes the story of how Lewis was brought to faith in Christ through the longing for joy that he called \textit{Sehnsucht}. But it does not complete the account of how Lewis understood \textit{Sehnsucht} over the course of the rest of his life, nor how he tried to draw others to Christ through longing for beauty in his subsequent literary output. Chapter 3 turns to this subject, through surveying Lewis’s major writings for a more complete understanding of \textit{Sehnsucht}.


\textsuperscript{76}Lewis, \textit{Surprised by Joy}, 237.
CHAPTER 3
C. S. LEWIS’S CONCEPT OF SEHNSUCHT

C. S. Lewis has been fairly influential in affecting the meaning of the concept of Sehnsucht, at least as it has been used in the English language. James P. Helfers shows this by pointing out that the Oxford English Dictionary quotes from Surprised by Joy to provide an example of how Sehnsucht is used.¹ This chapter provides a fuller explanation of C. S. Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht as it was fleshed out in his major works.

One of the most remarkable things about C. S. Lewis the author is his versatility and skill across multiple genres of literature. Lewis advanced thoughtful and compelling arguments in Christian apologetics, made significant contributions to his primary field of literary criticism, brilliantly imagined other worlds in his adult Space Trilogy (weaving together science fiction, fantasy, Christian theology, and Arthurian legend in the process), and effectively related to children through The Chronicles of Narnia. Many of his works across multiple genres remain popular—in 2005, Christianity Today ran a cover story entitled “C. S. Lewis Superstar” on Lewis’s enduring fame and cultural relevancy.²

However, it is important to note that not only has Lewis written prolifically in many genres of literature, but he has also consistently written the concept of Sehnsucht into his work. When one reads his works with an eye for this topic and its related themes, ²


it is startling how frequently they are featured in Lewis’s writing. Research for this
dissertation has included the reading (or re-reading) of every one of Lewis’s major works,
and, despite his wide-ranging genres and topics, not one of Lewis’s major works has
failed to treat or exemplify the theme of Sehnsucht in some way. Some works are
certainly much more explicit in their reference to Sehnsucht than others, but the overall
consistency is remarkable. Particularly arresting is the appearance of Sehnsucht and its
associated ideas throughout the timeline of Lewis’s life—including in works written prior
to his conversion to Christianity and works written during his extended period of
wrestling with the claims of Christianity.

Most of the time in his writings, Lewis does not use the word Sehnsucht, which
is understandable given its German origin and its lack of familiarity to the minds of most
of Lewis’s readers. But when one makes a full study of Lewis’s spiritual autobiography
Surprised by Joy and compares it with his other writings, it is very clear that certain words
and themes which recur in his work refer back to the phenomenon that he calls Sehnsucht
at the very beginning of Surprised by Joy. This chapter explains those connections.

**Sehnsucht in Three Forms**

C. S. Lewis demonstrates his personal understanding of the concept of
Sehnsucht in three primary ways: explicitly in non-fiction, implicitly in non-fiction, and
through fictional narrative.

**Explicit in Non-Fiction**

Lewis’s first use of Sehnsucht is the most obvious. In this use, C. S. Lewis
openly speaks in a work of non-fiction about the concept and how it operates in his life or
the life of another. As stated, he may not always use the term Sehnsucht, but in this type
of use he is very clearly speaking about the concept—explicitly explaining how the
desire for beauty can draw someone to God. Examples of this abound, some of which
have already been mentioned. From Surprised by Joy,
As long as I live my imagination of Paradise will retain something of my brother’s toy garden. And every day there were what we called “the Green Hills.” . . . They taught me longing—Sehnsucht; made me for good or ill, and before I was six years old, a votary of the Blue Flower.3

The reader who finds these three episodes of no interest need read this book no further, for in a sense the central story of my life is about nothing else. For those who are still disposed to proceed I will only underline the quality common to the three experiences; it is that of an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and from Pleasure.4

From the afterword to Pilgrim’s Regress,5

What I meant was a particular recurrent experience which dominated my childhood and adolescence and which I hastily called “Romantic” because inanimate nature and marvelous literature were among the things that evoked it. . . . The experience is one of intense longing.6

Lust can be gratified. Another personality can become to us “our America, our New-found-land.” A happy marriage can be achieved. But what has any of the three, or any mixture of the three, to do with that unnameable something, desire for which pierces us like a rapier at the smell of a bonfire, the sound of wild ducks flying overhead, the title of The Well at the World’s End, the opening lines of Kubla Khan, the morning cobwebs in late summer, or the noise of falling waves?7

From The Problem of Pain,

Are not all lifelong friendships born at the moment when at last you meet another human being who has some inkling (but faint and uncertain even in the best) of that something which you were born desiring, and which, beneath the flux of other desires and in all the momentary silences between the louder passions, night and day, year by year, from childhood to old age, you are looking for, watching for, listening for? You have never had it. All the things that have ever deeply possessed your soul have been but hints of it—tantalizing glimpses, promises never quite fulfilled, echoes that died away just as they caught your ear. But if it should really become manifest—if there ever came an echo that did not die away but swelled into


4Ibid., 17-18.

5C. S. Lewis, The Pilgrim’s Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992). Of course Pilgrim’s Regress is fiction and allegory; however, this quote is from Lewis’s afterword to the third edition, which is a non-fiction essay appended to the primary work of fiction. In this afterword, Lewis makes explicit the connections between the allegorical journey of John the pilgrim and Lewis’s own personal spiritual autobiography.

6Ibid., 202.

7Ibid., 204.
the sound itself—you would know it. Beyond all possibility of doubt you would say “Here at last is the thing I was made for.”

From *The Weight of Glory*,

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited. Beauty has smiled, but not to welcome us; her face was turned in our direction, but not to see us. . . . We should hardly dare to ask that any notice be taken of ourselves. But we pine. The sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers, the longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality, is part of our inconsolable secret. And surely, from this point of view, the promise of glory, in the sense described, becomes highly relevant to our deep desire. For glory means good report with God, acceptance by God, response, acknowledgement, and welcome into the heart of things. The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last.

Many more explicit examples in non-fiction could be given. From these, one sees that Lewis elaborates often on the workings of *Sehnsucht* (or desire, or longing, or another synonym for his concept) in his own heart and in the hearts of others who are being drawn by God toward Himself through their experience of and desire for beauty.

**Implicit in Non-fiction**

The second way in which C. S. Lewis demonstrates his understanding of *Sehnsucht* is by implication in works of non-fiction. In other words, in these instances, Lewis’s primary topic is not *Sehnsucht per se*, but what he says about his primary topic

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8C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 150-51. Lewis is clearly referring here to the type of friendship he shared with Arthur Greeves. Pages 40-41 quoted from the section of *Surprised by Joy* in which he describes this “first friend.” That description is very similar to the one quoted here from *The Problem of Pain*.


10Ibid., 40-41.

11Further examples could be given from another very different type of non-fiction: Chapter 2 quoted from two letters to Arthur Greeves in which Lewis explicitly spoke of the power of *Sehnsucht* in his life.
fits with his concept of *Sehnsucht*. In these cases, his primary topic interacts in some way with his view of *Sehnsucht* and illustrates more of his understanding of it. To illustrate, one could learn much about the geography and topography along the northern border of Florida if someone described the lay of the land along the southern border of Georgia, for this region is where the two states meet and interact with one another. This is similar to what Lewis does in regard to *Sehnsucht* when he describes how other ideas of his interact with it. And the numerous and varied other ideas that do interact with it show how fundamental this concept was to his worldview and personal experience. Again, examples of these implicit references abound.

From *God in the Dock*,

But if my religion is true, then these [pagan and mythological] stories my [sic] well be a *preparation evangelica*, a divine hinting in poetic and ritual form at the same central truth which was later focussed and (so to speak) historicized in the Incarnation. To me, who first approached Christianity from a delighted interest in, and reverence for, the best pagan imagination, who loved Balder¹² before Christ and Plato before St. Augustine, the anthropological argument against Christianity has never been formidable.¹³

In this passage, Lewis primarily deals with an anthropological argument against the Christian faith, an argument that derides Christian truth as having been based on myths which have all been proven false by science. But in the process of answering that objection, Lewis mentions how his interest in Balder and “the pagan imagination” was an important part of his approach to Christianity. He states that those myths may function as a preparation for the gospel.

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¹²As mentioned in chap. 2, Balder was the Norse god whose tragic death and funeral were detailed in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Saga of King Olaf*. Lewis’s childhood experience of this story was one of his earliest moments of *Sehnsucht*.

¹³C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 132. This quote is from a paper entitled “Religion without Dogma,” which was read to the Oxford Socratic Club on May 20, 1946. The paper was also published: C. S. Lewis, “A Christian Reply to Professor Price,” *The Phoenix Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1946). The argument Lewis was replying to originated in a paper H. H. Price had read to the Socratic Club on October 23, 1944; the paper was entitled “The Grounds of Modern Agnosticism.” That paper also ran in the same issue of *The Phoenix Quarterly*.  

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Again, from *God in the Dock*:\textsuperscript{14}

But if any man is tempted to think—as one might be tempted who read only contemporaries—that “Christianity” is a word of so many meanings that it means nothing at all, he can learn beyond all doubt, by stepping out of his own century, that this is not so. Measured against the ages “mere Christianity” turns out to be no insipid inter-denominational transparency, but something positive, self-consistent, and inexhaustible. I know it, indeed, to my cost. In the days when I still hated Christianity,\textsuperscript{15} I learned to recognize, like some all too familiar smell, that almost unvarying *something* which met me, now in Puritan Bunyan, now in Anglican Hooker, now in Thomist Dante. It was there (honeyed and floral) in François de Sales; it was there (grave and homely) in Spenser and Walton; it was there (grim but manful) in Pascal and Johnson; there again, with a mild, frightening, Paradisial flavor, in Vaughan and Boehme and Traherne. In the urban sobriety of the eighteenth century one was not safe—Law and Butler were two lions in the path. The supposed “Paganism” of the Elizabethans could not keep it out; it lay in wait where a man might have supposed himself safest, in the very centre of *The Faerie Queene*\textsuperscript{16} and the *Arcadia*. It was, of course, varied; and yet—after all—so unmistakably the same; recognizable, not to be evaded, the odour which is death to us until we allow it to become life\textsuperscript{17}. “an air that kills from yon far country blows.”\textsuperscript{18}

Here, Lewis addresses why he believes reading should not be limited to contemporary authors. He counsels that one should regularly digest the work of older authors in order to remain balanced and avoid the blind spots of one’s own age. In the course of the discussion, however, he uses as an example the great consistency of Christian authors over the centuries, and he illustrates this consistency through the “all too familiar smell,

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., 203-4. The quote is from an essay entitled “On the Reading of Old Books,” which was originally published as an introduction to *The Incarnation of the Word of God* by St. Athanasius, trans. A. Religious of C. S. M. V. (London: Centenary, 1944).

\textsuperscript{15}An example of Lewis’s hatred for Christianity can be seen in *Surprised by Joy*: “But, of course, what mattered most of all was my deep-seated hatred of authority, my monstrous individualism, my lawlessness. No word in my vocabulary expressed deeper hatred than the word *Interference*. But Christianity placed at the center what then seemed to me a transcendental Interferer.” Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 172.

\textsuperscript{16}This is the second reference in this quote to Edmund Spenser or to a work by him. Lewis’s academic background in medieval and renaissance literature is on display here. He frequently wrote and lectured on *The Faerie Queene*, and one of his lesser known works is Spenser’s *Images of Life*, ed. Alastair Fowler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

\textsuperscript{17}Lewis is referencing 2 Cor 2:14-17, showing how he had experienced both sides—death and life—of Paul’s metaphor of “the odour of Christ.”

that almost unvarying *something*” which met him in many different Christian authors. That beautiful, strange, and complex *something* is clearly the same phenomenon that draws him on in *Surprised by Joy*.

From *The Four Loves*,

But nature gave the word *glory* a meaning for me. I still do not know where else I could have found one. I do not see how the “fear” of God could have ever meant to me anything but the lowest prudential efforts to be safe, if I had never seen certain ominous ravines and unapproachable crags. And if nature had never awakened certain longings in me, huge areas of what I can now mean by the “love” of God would never, so far as I can see, have existed.19

In this section, Lewis discusses the power of nature to help in giving meanings to some theological terms. He gives three examples of such terms: glory,20 fear, and love. He implicitly refers to the work of *Sehnsucht* when he states that he would not be able to form his meaning for God’s love if nature had not awakened certain *longings* in him.

Again, from *The Four Loves*, in speaking about the love of nature,

Nature “dies” on those who try to live for a love of nature. Coleridge ended by being insensible to her; Wordsworth, by lamenting that the glory had passed away. Say your prayers in a garden early, ignoring steadfastly the dew, the birds and the flowers, and you will come away overwhelmed by its freshness and joy; go there in order to be overwhelmed and, after a certain age, nine times out of ten nothing will happen to you.21

Though the love of nature is Lewis’s primary topic here, what he says fits perfectly with his autobiographical statements in *Surprised by Joy*. In that work, he says that whenever he sought joy for joy itself, it evaded him; he specifically mentions his own futile attempts at this while in beautiful natural places.

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20Lewis’s mention of glory in an implicit reference to *Sehnsucht* is significant, especially when combined with the quotation from *The Weight of Glory* in the previous section which combines the ideas of beauty and glory. Although both are difficult to define, the ideas of glory and beauty are associated in Scripture (for example, see Exod 28:2, 40) and seem to be so in Lewis’s mind, as well.

From *The Abolition of Man*,

In the *Republic*, the well-nurtured youth is one “who would see most clearly whatever was amiss in ill-made works of man or ill-grown works of nature, and with a just distaste would blame and hate the ugly even from his earliest years and would give delighted praise to beauty, receiving it into his soul and being nourished by it, so that he becomes a man of gentle heart. All this before he is of an age to reason; so that when Reason at length comes to him, then, bred as he has been, he will hold out his hands in welcome and recognize her because of the affinity he bears to her.”

In context, Lewis is speaking in *The Abolition of Man* of the notion of objective value that appears across human cultures. Lewis himself quotes from Plato’s *Republic* here, but this passage seems to neatly fit the story of his own journey, especially when compared to *Surprised by Joy* and *Pilgrim’s Regress*. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis appreciates beauty as a young boy and is nourished by it, until eventually he is ready to receive the reasonable truth of the gospel. In *Pilgrim’s Regress*, Reason is a strong female character astride a noble stallion who slays the giant known as the Spirit of the Age and sets the pilgrim John (who represents Lewis) on the road toward the truth of Christianity. This quotation serves as another example of Lewis speaking on another topic but outlining points that fit well with and even complement his more explicit statements on the working of *Sehnsucht*. This is a mere sampling of the numerous passages in which Lewis indirectly explains his understanding of *Sehnsucht*; more examples are offered in this chapter in the context of explaining major aspects of Lewis’s concept.

**Fictional Narrative**

This third category of Lewis’s references to *Sehnsucht* is often the most difficult to see (or perhaps the easiest to pass over), but it is of no less value. This is the category in which Lewis fleshes out or exemplifies *Sehnsucht* through the experiences of

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22C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 16-17. Lewis’s quote is from section 402a of Plato’s *Republic* (he does not specify which edition of The Republic).

23The appendix of *The Abolition of Man* features an extensive list of particular objective values found across varying cultures.
his fictional characters. In such instances, *Sehnsucht* is demonstrated through something a character experiences, thinks, or speaks. *Pilgrim’s Regress* is a clear example of this—although as an autobiographical allegory it blurs the lines between fiction and non-fiction. *Pilgrim’s Regress* sometimes reads more like a philosophy lecture than a story—Lewis himself confessed in his afterword to the third edition that it was too obscure.\(^{24}\) Despite these factors, *Pilgrim’s Regress* fits into the category of fictional narrative that displays *Sehnsucht*, as do other fictional works of Lewis’s that are more subtle in their presentation. In these instances, it would be fair for the reader to ask if *Sehnsucht* is in the text by eisegesis. The goal is for the examples that follow to clearly show that Lewis has quite deliberately and consistently placed *Sehnsucht* there himself. This section begins with *Pilgrim’s Regress* and then moves toward more subtle examples.

*The Pilgrim’s Regress (1933).* The parallels to Lewis’s early life are unmistakable from the first words of the book. Lewis explains that young John is drawn toward beauty as a child.

I dreamed of a boy who was born in the land of Puritania and his name was John. And I dreamed that when John was able to walk he ran out of his parents’ garden on a fine morning to the road. And on the other side of the road there was a deep wood, but not thick, full of primroses and soft green moss. When John set his eyes on this he thought he had never seen anything so beautiful.\(^ {25}\) John’s mother stops him from experiencing the beauty of the wood as he would like to do. Much later, John goes out into the road to play and ends up experiencing this beauty more fully:

However, he went on always a few yards further till suddenly he looked up and saw that he was so far away from home that he was in a part of the road he had never seen before. Then came the sound of a musical instrument, from behind it seemed, very sweet and very short, as if it were one plucking of a string or one note of a bell, and after it a full, clear voice—and it sounded so high and strange that he thought it was very far away, further than a star. The voice said, Come. Then John saw that there was a stone wall beside the road in that part: but it had (what he had never seen in a garden wall before) a window. There was no glass in the window and no

\(^ {24}\)Lewis, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, 200.

\(^ {25}\)Ibid., 3.
bars; it was just a square hole in the wall. Through it he saw a green wood full of primroses: and he remembered suddenly how he had gone into another wood to pull primroses, as a child, very long ago—so long that even in the moment of remembering the memory seemed still out of reach. While he strained to grasp it, there came to him from beyond the wood a sweetness and a pang so piercing that instantly he forgot his father’s house, and his mother, and the fear of the Landlord, and the burden of the rules. . . . A moment later he found that he was sobbing, and the sun had gone in: and what it was that had happened to him he could not quite remember, nor whether it had happened in this wood, or in the other wood when he was a child. It seemed to him that a mist which hung at the far end of the wood had parted for a moment, and through the rift he had seen a calm sea, and in the sea an island, where the smooth turf sloped down unbroken to the bays, and out of the thickets peeped the pale, small-breasted Oreads, wise like gods, unconscious of themselves like beasts, and tall enchanters, bearded to their feet, sat in green chairs among the forests. . . . He had no inclination yet to go into the wood: and presently he went home, with a sad excitement upon him, repeating to himself a thousand times, “I know now what I want.”26

In this passage, there are a number of significant parallels to Lewis’s childhood experiences of beauty as they are outlined in Surprised by Joy, including the importance of memory in connection with Sehnsucht, the piercing sweetness and mixed emotions of the experience, and the seminal nature of the experience for the remaining course of the individual’s life. It is also significant that the explanatory note at the top of this page of Pilgrim’s Regress27 reads, “He awakes to Sweet Desire; and almost at once mixes his own fantasies with it.”28 These recurring aspects of Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht are discussed in more detail below.

Another example of Sehnsucht on display in Pilgrim’s Regress occurs when John has a conversation with a character named Neo-Angular, who tries to get him to

26Ibid., 8.

27Lewis added these explanatory notes in the third edition because of the obscure nature of the work. The top of each page features a brief line that unlocks the meaning of the allegory. Lewis did not want to do this, but felt like he had no choice. In the afterword, he states, “In the present edition I have tried to make the book easier by a running headline. But I do so with great reluctance. To supply a ‘key’ to an allegory may encourage that particular misunderstanding of allegory which, as a literary critic, I have elsewhere denounced. It may encourage people to suppose that allegory is a disguise, a way of saying obscurely what could have been said more clearly. But in fact all good allegory exists not to hide but to reveal; to make the inner world more palpable by giving it an (imagined) concrete embodiment. My headline is there only because my allegory failed.” Ibid, 207-8. He blames this failure on his own mistakes in allegory as well as on the lack of familiarity modern readers have with the genre.

28Ibid., 8, emphasis added.
forget the vision of his island. John gets mad when Neo-Angular disdainfully says that
he has never seen the vision of the Island and would never want to do so. John says to
Neo-Angular,

Then there is at least one object in the world of which I know more than you. I
tasted what you call romantic trash; you have only talked about it. You need not tell
me that there is a danger in it and an element of evil. Do you suppose that I have
not felt that danger and that evil a thousand times more than you? But I know also
that the evil in it is not what I went to it to find, and that I should have sought
nothing and found nothing without it. 29

Lewis’s statement here fits with his autobiography, in which he points out that
the pursuit of desire and beauty was not an end in itself. In fact, it carried inherent
dangers, such as lust and idolatry. The pursuit of this pleasure always brought with it the
danger of making it too important. He tells the reader clearly,

But I now know that the experience, considered as a state of my own mind, had
never had the kind of importance I once gave it. It was valuable only as a pointer to
something other and outer. . . . When we are lost in the woods the sight of a great
signpost is a great matter. . . . But when we have found the road and are passing
signposts every few miles, we shall not stop and stare. They will encourage us and
we shall be grateful to the authority that set them up. But we shall not stop and
stare, or not much; not on this road, though their pillars are of silver and their
lettering of gold.30

Pilgrim’s Regress shows a fictional fleshing out of this concern in Lewis’s understanding
of Sehnsucht.

Elsewhere, Pilgrim’s Regress illustrates Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht through
its emphasis on “Northerness,” a term he uses for his personal experience in Surprised
by Joy. Lewis consistently felt a northward pull in his moments of Sehnsucht. In
Pilgrim’s Regress, there is a pivotal moment in which John has a spiritual breakthrough
and realizes that there really is a Landlord—this is the name for the book’s concept of
God—and that the Landlord is far more important than the Island that pointed to him. At
that point, John breaks out into song. One stanza of the song says,

29Ibid., 94.

30Lewis, Surprised by Joy, 238.
Oh, for but one cool breath in seven,
One air from northern climes,
The changing and the castle-clouded heaven
Of my old Pagan times!

Here, Lewis seems to point back to the obsession of his earlier years, in which his “heaven” was informed by pagan and northern traditions of art.

Another reference to the northern pagan tradition that gripped C. S. Lewis occurs when one of the characters in Pilgrim’s Regress journeys to the furthest northern point in the fictional world of the book. In that place lives a violent king named Savage, who has taken as his queen a warrior named Grimhild. Grimhild is the name of an evil sorceress in the Norse Völsunga Saga. These Norse sagas wielded considerable influence over Lewis in his Sehnsucht-led journey to faith, as mentioned in chapter 2.

**The Great Divorce (1945).** Although The Great Divorce is also an allegory, it is more subtle in its presentation than Pilgrim’s Regress. One part of the story makes it very clear that Lewis is referencing his own journey—namely, the character in the book that the narrator calls “my Teacher.” This teacher has a “strong Scotch accent” and introduces himself as “George Macdonald.” The narrator of the story explains to the Teacher how influential his writing was on him. The narrator even tells Macdonald that he had read his Phantastes at the age of sixteen, that the book had given new life to his imagination, and that he had eventually realized that what he had experienced in Macdonald’s books was “Holiness.”31 In places, these assertions include the exact same phrasing that Lewis uses in Surprised by Joy.32 For the remainder of the book, the Teacher guides and answers questions for the narrator about heaven and the different people he encounters there.

Whereas in Pilgrim’s Regress, John’s vision of the island serves as the clearest


32On p. 179 of Surprised by Joy, Lewis says that he encountered “holiness” through Macdonald, and on p. 181, he says that the reading of Phantastes “baptized” his “imagination.”
referent to Lewis’s own experiences of Sehnsucht, in The Great Divorce, “joy” seems to be the most significant connection to Lewis’s own experience. This connection is not hard to see, given the title Surprised by Joy for his spiritual autobiography and his use of the term in many other works to refer to what he desired in moments of Sehnsucht. In The Great Divorce, people from hell take a bus trip to heaven, and those characters—who are merely ghosts in the completely solid world of heaven—interact with individuals they knew on earth who are now solid, bright citizens of heaven. The ghosts have the chance to choose or reject joy.33

Lewis’s broad concept of joy can be seen when the Teacher says to the narrator, “The choice of every lost soul can be expressed in the words ‘Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.’34 There is always something they insist on keeping, even at the price of misery. There is always something they prefer to joy—that is, to reality.”35 So, Lewis’s concept of joy represents true, ultimate reality itself. Again, in a conversation between a male ghost and the heavenly woman who was his wife on earth, she extends to him “the invitation to all joy.”36 When the man rejects joy out of pride and self-centeredness, the woman returns to her heavenly family, and angels sing of God’s provision for her: “He

33In The Great Divorce, it would be natural to think that Lewis is implying through this narrative that everyone will have a chance to be saved after death. Two points from the book show that he is not doing so: (1) For the purpose of his story, he blurs the lines between earth, heaven, and hell in the preface, when he states, “I think earth, if chosen instead of Heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, only a region in Hell: and earth, if put second to Heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of Heaven itself.” Lewis, The Great Divorce, 11. (2) In the book, he consistently shows that time is irrelevant to the decisions that ghosts make. One angel tells a ghost that “This moment contains all moments.” Ibid., 98. This is consistent with Lewis’s view of God’s relation to time in his other works, such as in the chapter “Time and Beyond Time” in C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 166-71.

34Macdonald quotes here the words of Satan in Paradise Lost, to which C. S. Lewis wrote a well-known preface: John Milton, Paradise Lost (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), preface.

35Lewis, The Great Divorce, 69.

36Ibid., 109.
fils her brim full with immensity of life: he leads her to see the world’s *desire.*”\(^{37}\) The term “joy” is central to the work, but it also interplays frequently with other Lewisian synonyms for *Sehnsucht*, and the autobiographical nature of the work is unmistakable.

**Till We Have Faces (1956).** This book is a retelling of the classic myth of Cupid and Psyche, and Lewis considered it his best book.\(^ {38}\) *Sehnsucht* is not a major theme of the book, but it does appear at key moments—often in moments that deal with heaven or the gods. The two central characters in the book are Psyche, who is so beautiful that the god Cupid falls in love with her, and her older, ugly sister Orual. After Psyche is taken away from normal human life to be joined with Cupid, she and Orual have a conversation.

“This,” she [Psyche] said, “I have always—at least, ever since I can remember—had a kind of longing for death.”

“Ah, Psyche,” I said, “have I made you so little happy as that?”

“No, no, no,” she said. “You don’t understand. Not that kind of longing. It was when I was happiest that I longed most. It was on happy days when we were up there on the hills, the three of us, with the wind and the sunshine . . . where you couldn’t see Glome [their city-state] or the palace. Do you remember? The colour and the smell, and looking across at the Grey Mountain in the distance? And because it was so beautiful, it set me longing, always longing. Somewhere else there must be more of it. Everything seemed to be saying, Psyche come! But I couldn’t (not yet) come and I didn’t know where I was to come to. It almost hurt me. I felt like a bird in a cage when the other birds of its kind are flying home.”\(^ {39}\)

Psyche’s description of her longing for death (through which she will be united with the god Cupid) strongly resembles Lewis’s own longing for beauty that drew him to God. Like Psyche, Lewis longed for more of the beauty that haunted him with desire.

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\(^{37}\)Ibid., 117, emphasis added.


And like Psyche, Lewis experienced something like hurt in the midst of the sweetness of his desire.

Later, Psyche describes this longing in more detail, using the metaphor of a distant country; this is similar to Lewis’s insatiable desire for some far country:

The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing—to reach the Mountain, to find the place where all the beauty came from . . . my country, the place where I ought to have been born. Do you think it all meant nothing, all the longing? The longing for home? For indeed it now feels not like going, but like going back. All my life the god of the Mountain has been wooing me.\(^{40}\)

In longing for the source of all beauty, Psyche was actually headed back home. In this longing, Psyche was being wooed by the god of the Mountain, and the longing itself was the sweetest thing in all her life. This is very much like Lewis’s own descriptions of the longing he experienced that drew him to the one, true God. Sweetness, longing, beauty, and a country of one’s own are all phrases Lewis frequently used to describe his experiences of Sehnsucht.

The word “joy” also appears in pivotal places in Till We Have Faces, and its meaning in those places seems to fit Lewis’s technical use of the term in discussions of Sehnsucht. After Psyche is wedded to the god, Orual—still an unbeliever herself, and a bitter one at that—tries to convince her to come home, which Psyche says is impossible. But during that difficult conversation, Orual explains that Psyche “looked up, and as our eyes met for a moment, I saw in hers unspeakable joy.”\(^{41}\) Much later, at the end of the book, Orual herself has what can only be described as a conversion experience, and joy features significantly in this account. Lewis writes,

“Did I not tell you, Maia,” she [Psyche] said, “that a day was coming when you and I would meet in my house and no cloud between us?”

Joy silenced me. And I thought I had now come to the highest, and to the utmost fullness of being which the human soul can contain.

\(^{40}\)Ibid., 75-76, emphasis added.

\(^{41}\)Ibid., 123, emphasis added.
[But Orual discovers that everything to this point has “been only a preparation.”
The god approaches to judge her.]

The air was growing brighter and brighter about us; as if something had set it on
fire. Each breath I drew let into me new terror, joy, overpowering sweetness. I was
pierced through and through with the arrows of it. I was being unmade. I was no
one. . . . The earth and stars and sun, all that he was or will be, existed for his sake.  

Again in this passage, one sees joy as Lewis’s consistent description for knowledge of
and relationship with the divine. Even in a work largely devoted to other themes,
Sehnsucht manifests itself at important moments. Clearly, the concept of Sehnsucht
was always mentally close at hand for C. S. Lewis.

_The Chronicles of Narnia (1950-1956)._ Lewis’s popular stories for children
also contain exemplifications of Sehnsucht. In _The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe_,
the four Pevensie children experience something very like Sehnsucht when they first hear
the name of Aslan—even though they have no idea who he is:

And now a very curious thing happened. None of the children knew who Aslan was
any more than you do; but the moment the Beaver had spoken these words everyone
felt quite different. Perhaps it has sometimes happened to you in a dream that
someone says something which you don’t understand but in the dream it feels as if it
had some enormous meaning—either a terrifying one which turns the whole dream
into a nightmare or else a lovely meaning too lovely to put into words, which makes
the dream so beautiful that you remember it all your life and are always wishing you
could get into that dream again. It was like that now. At the name of Aslan each
one of the children felt something jump in its inside. Edmund felt a sensation of
mysterious horror. Peter felt suddenly brave and adventurous. Susan felt as if some
delicious smell or some delightful strain of music had just floated by her. And Lucy
got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realize that it is the
beginning of the holidays or the beginning of summer.

This experience is reminiscent of Lewis’s description of his childhood brushes with
beauty, especially where the text speaks of trying one’s whole life to get back to a
beautiful dream. It is also significant that Susan’s experience was like hearing music,
since Lewis connects the experience of Sehnsucht to music in both _Surprised by Joy_ and

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42Ibid., 306-7, emphases added.

43C. S. Lewis, _The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe_ (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994),
74-75.
Pilgrim’s Regress.44

The Voyage of the Dawn Treader contains significant passages which show the outworking of Lewis’s understanding of Sehnsucht, especially as the crew of the ship comes near to the end of the world and Aslan’s country, which represents heaven. As they sail through the last sea at the edge of the world, they accidentally find out that the water of this sea is sweet. Everyone on board the ship drinks the water, and everyone is dramatically changed as a result. Their faces and everything about them is brighter. They realize that the water itself is “drinkable light.” Not only that, but their desire for food is completely taken away. This special water quenches any desire for food or other drink.45 This water fits with Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht in its sweetness and light;46 these are adjectives Lewis uses in other books to describe Sehnsucht. Not only that, the water seems to be an example of Sehnsucht through the way that it sweeps aside other desires as no longer important.

As the Dawn Treader sails on and comes closer to Aslan’s country, the depth of the water decreases until the ship can go no further. Several of the party depart in a small boat, while the ship returns to Narnia. Those who sail in the boat come to the real edge of the Narnian world, and what they experience sounds very much like Susan’s first

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44As explained, in Surprised by Joy Lewis experiences Sehnsucht through the music of Wagner, and in Pilgrim’s Regress John hears the sweet sound of a musical instrument right before he sees the island for the first time.


46“Sweetness and light” is a significant phrase in Lewis’s British cultural background through the authors Jonathan Swift and Matthew Arnold. Swift coined the phrase in his Battle of the Books, a prose satire of the Ancient/Modern controversy in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the story, the phrase “sweetness and light” is ascribed to the honey made by a bee who represents the Ancients. The point was that the ancient authors and philosophers have sweetly blessed mankind and shined light on our paths through their wisdom. Matthew Arnold copiously used the phrase “sweetness and light” in Culture and Anarchy to describe beauty and intelligence. Both of these could be seen to fit well with Lewis’s metaphor of heavenly water conveying sweetness and light through its beauty and the delight it brings to those who drink it. Jonathan Swift, Gulliver’s Travels, A Tale of a Tub, and The Battle of the Books (New York: Modern Library, 1931), 532; Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy, ed. Jane Garnett, reissue ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
experience of hearing Aslan’s name (both a smell and a sound) as well as Lewis’s own poignant experience of Sehnsucht:

It was as if a wall stood up between them and the sky, a greenish-gray, trembling, shimmering wall. . . . Then they knew that the wall was really a long, tall wave—a wave endlessly fixed in one place as you may often see at the edge of a waterfall. . . . But now they could look at the rising sun and see it clearly and see things beyond it. What they saw—eastward, beyond the sun—was a range of mountains . . . and the mountains must really have been outside the world. . . . And suddenly there came a breeze from the east, tossing the top of the wave into foamy shapes and ruffling the smooth water all round them. It lasted only a second or so but what it brought them in that second none of those three children will ever forget. It brought both a smell and a sound, a musical sound. Edmund and Eustace would never talk about it afterward. Lucy could only say, “It would break your heart.” “Why,” said I, “was it so sad?” “Sad!! No,” said Lucy.

No one in that boat doubted that they were seeing beyond the End of the World into Aslan’s country.  

Similar instances of Sehnsucht could be shown in other books in The Chronicles of Narnia, especially in The Last Battle, which depicts the final days of Narnia and much more about Aslan’s country.

Others of Lewis’s works of fiction continue to feature Sehnsucht and hold true to the pattern of its portrayal, including The Screwtape Letters and the Space Trilogy. When studied closely, Lewis’s works across multiple genres—non-fiction and fiction—show striking similarity and consistency in expressing the working of Sehnsucht in his life and in the lives of the characters he created.

**Five Main Aspects of Sehnsucht**

The task of mining C. S. Lewis’s major works for instances of Sehnsucht turned up five significant aspects that recur with remarkable consistency and frequency.  

These aspects serve as descriptors of the experience of Sehnsucht. These themes help to

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\(^{47}\)Ibid., 264-66.

\(^{48}\)As I read more of Lewis’s works and found elements of Sehnsucht in all of them, I was faced with the impression that Lewis made a point to include it in every book in some way. He seems to signal this to the alert reader through the synonymous terms for Sehnsucht used throughout this dissertation. Not only that, Surprised by Joy seems to serve as a key to unlock the meaning of this concept as it is sprinkled throughout Lewis’s works and, in a way, unites them with one consistent theme.
categorize Lewis’s thoughts on *Sehnsucht* and to assist in approaching a comprehensive understanding of Lewis’s view of the concept. For each category, the theme will be explained as well as illustrated by quotations from multiple works by Lewis.

**Beauty**

For C. S. Lewis, beauty had a special power to draw, and it began to work on him from his boyhood. He experienced attractive things in nature or through manmade art—even things of a very simple nature—and felt a rush of excitement, desire, and joy. Often this gripping experience of beauty came in the most unlikely or unsought ways, and when it was deliberately sought usually evaded the seeker. In this, it seemed completely out of control of the one experiencing it, and when the sensation departed, left the individual with a consuming desire to experience again that beauty and to know its source.

In short, Lewis shows that *Sehnsucht* is at work when people experience beauty that draws their souls toward God. In those moments, the individual may not be thinking specifically about God, but in experiences of *Sehnsucht*, beauty creates a stirring within that person that can only ultimately be satisfied by God who is the Source of that beauty. This is not to say that every experience of beauty evokes *Sehnsucht*; Lewis does not claim this. And there are certainly those whose worldview and blindness through sin work to prevent them from following the trail of beauty toward the God who made that beauty. For Lewis himself, the journey was long and winding. But God graciously chose to continually and gently draw his heart through the stirring of inconsolable desire. Lewis gives examples of this unsatisfied stirring from his earliest works.

*Spirits in Bondage* was Lewis’s first published work. It is a cycle of lyrics that he wrote during the days when his primary dream was to become a successful poet. Even

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49The specific thoughts would depend upon where in the individual’s spiritual journey he or she is at that time. Lewis’s thoughts on what or whom was drawing him would likely have been very different during his theistic (but not yet Christian) period than they were during his earlier, atheistic period.
more significantly for this project, Lewis wrote this collection while he was an atheist and a soldier experiencing the darkness of the trenches of World War I. *Spirits in Bondage* was originally published under the pseudonym of Clive Hamilton.\(^{50}\) The work unashamedly communicates Lewis’s angst, hurt, and anger with God; it is truly blasphemous in places, and purposefully so.\(^{51}\)

But most striking in the midst of this bitter atheism are statements of seeking after beauty that comes from God (or a god). “Song” (Poem XXVI) is a strong example; the following quotation is the poem in its entirety:

Faeries must be in the woods
Or the satyrs’ laughing broods—
Tritons in the summer sea,
Else how could the dead things be
Half so lovely as they are?
How could wealth of star on star
Dusted o’er the frosty night
Fill thy spirit with delight
And lead thee from this care of thing
Up among the dreams divine,
Were it not that each and all
Of them that walk the heavenly hall
Is in truth a happy isle,
Where eternal meadows smile,
And golden globes of fruit are seen
Twinkling through the orchards green;
Where the Other People go
On the bright sword to and fro?
Atoms dead could never thus
Stir the human heart of us
Unless the beauty that we see
The veil of endless beauty be,
Filled full of spirits that have trod

\(^{50}\)Clive was, of course, Lewis’s real first name, and Hamilton was his mother’s maiden name.

\(^{51}\)For example, in the Prologue to the work, Lewis writes, “Flying from the scarlet city where a Lord that knows no pity, mocks the broken people praying round his iron throne.” Or in “Ode for New Year’s Day,” he writes, “It’s vainly we are praying. We cannot, cannot check the Power who slays and puts aside the beauty that has been.” Perhaps worst of all, in “De Profundis,” “Come let us curse our Master ere we die, for all our hopes in endless ruin lie. The good is dead. Let us curse God most High. . . . Yet I will not bow down to thee nor love thee, for looking in my own heart I can prove thee, and know this frail, bruised being is above thee. . . . Thou art not Lord while there are Men on earth.” Upon encountering these lines, the reader cannot help but have a renewed gratitude for God’s grace and mercy in saving Lewis. C. S. Lewis, *Spirits in Bondage: A Cycle of Lyrics*, e-book ed. (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2005), 1, 9, 13-15.
Far hence along the heavenly sod
And see the bright footprints of God.\textsuperscript{52}

Things of beauty can lead us “up among the dreams divine,” and this beauty has to come from more than just dead “atoms.” Rather, “the beauty that we see” is the “veil of endless beauty”; in other words, it is merely a shadow or an indication of that which has infinite beauty. Lewis then goes so far as to point to God as the Source of this beauty when he mentions God’s “bright footprints.” When statements like these in \textit{Spirits in Bondage} are compared with Lewis’s statements in the same book that deny God’s existence or describe Him as unjust, it becomes clear that Lewis was a confused, wrestling individual at this point in his life. And that is exactly how he described himself in \textit{Surprised by Joy}. Beauty drew him toward God inexorably, but he continued to fight for much of the way.\textsuperscript{53}

**Light.** In some places, Lewis uses the word “light” to further describe instances of beauty that evoked \textit{Sehnsucht}. This description can be seen in the previously mentioned account from \textit{The Voyage of the Dawn Treader} in which the characters experience the transcendent, transforming sensation of drinkable light through the waters at the edge of the world. The connection between beauty and light can also be seen in another significant passage in \textit{Spirits in Bondage}. In “Dungeon Grates” (Poem XV), Lewis writes,

So piteously the lonely soul of man
Shudders before this universal plan,
So grievous is the burden and the pain,
So heavy weighs the long, material chain
From cause to cause, too merciless for hate,
The nightmare march of unrelenting fate,
I think that he must die thereof unless
Ever and again across the dreariness
There came a sudden glimpse of spirit faces,
A fragrant breath to tell of flowery places

\textsuperscript{52}Ibid., 35-36. One can see even at this early stage of Lewis’s life—he was only twenty years old when \textit{Spirits in Bondage} was published—the seeds for much of the imagery of his later fictional works. Satyrs and underwater people (“Tritons” here) feature in \textit{The Chronicles of Narnia}. “A happy isle where eternal meadows smile” foreshadows John’s island in \textit{Pilgrim’s Regress}. And “golden globes of fruit” in \textit{Spirits in Bondage} sounds very much like \textit{Perelandra}’s “wood where great globes of yellow fruit hung from the trees.” C. S. Lewis, \textit{Perelandra} (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 37.

\textsuperscript{53}See p. 44n. Lewis was a “reluctant convert,” even to mere theism.
And wider oceans, breaking on the shore
From which the hearts of men are always sore.
It lies beyond endeavor; neither prayer
Nor fasting, nor much wisdom winneth there,
Seeing how many prophets and wise men
Have sought for it and still returned again
With hope undone. But only the strange power
Of unsought Beauty in some casual hour
Can build a bridge of light or sound or form
To lead you out of all this strife and storm;
When of some beauty we are grown a part
Till from its very glory's midmost heart
Out leaps a sudden beam of larger light
Into our souls. All things are seen aright
Among the blinding pillar of its gold,
Seven times more true than what for truth we hold
In vulgar hours. The miracle is done
And for one little moment we are one
With the eternal stream of loveliness
That flows so calm, aloft from all distress
Yet leaps and lives around us as a fire
Making us faint with overstrong desire
To sport and swim for ever in its deep—
Only a moment.

O! but we shall keep
Our vision still. One moment was enough,
We know we are not made of mortal stuff.
And we can bear all trials that come after,
The hate of men and the fool's loud bestial laughter
And Nature's rule and cruelties unclean,
For we have seen the Glory—we have seen.54

Numerous words and phrases in this poem match nearly perfectly with Lewis's post-conversion descriptions of the work of Sehnsucht. In particular, the light of beauty features prominently. Beauty's power can "build a bridge of light" to lead us out of strife and storm. Not only that, beauty can send a "sudden beam of larger light into our souls" by which "all things are seen aright." In Lewis's understanding of Sehnsucht, beauty can pierce the soul with the light of true, transforming knowledge. That he would write poems like these prior to his conversion and while still angry at God is astounding, as well as demonstrative of the strong effect of beauty on the soul.

Glory. Lewis also frequently used the word "glory" to describe the beauty that

54Lewis, Spirits in Bondage, 17-19, emphasis added. These lines are the entire poem.
draws one toward God in *Sehnsucht*. In “Dungeon Grates” above, “glory” is mentioned twice, most significantly at the end of the poem. It is capitalized and described as something the author has seen in “one moment” that not only proved to him that he is made of more than mortal stuff, but that gave him the strength to endure all subsequent trials.

Further, C. S. Lewis’s sermon entitled “The Weight of Glory” does much to connect beauty to glory.\(^{55}\) Other than *Surprised by Joy*, “The Weight of Glory” explains the *working of Sehnsucht* in an individual’s heart perhaps clearer than any other work written by C. S. Lewis. In that case, the word “glory” in the title is, of course, important by itself. Another example can be found here:

If I had rejected the authoritative and scriptural image of glory and stuck obstinately to the vague *desire which was, at the outset, my only pointer to heaven*, I could have seen no connection at all between that desire and the Christian promise. But now, having followed up what seemed puzzling and repellant in the sacred books, I find, to my great surprise, looking back, that the connection is perfectly clear. Glory, as Christianity teaches me to hope for it, turns out to satisfy my original desire.\(^{56}\)

The beauty that draws men to God in the workings of *Sehnsucht* is full of light and glory. It can draw the individual toward the Source of that beauty, and it can pierce even the heart that rages against the One who has graciously given all experiences of beauty for his creatures richly to enjoy.

**Individual Desire**

C. S. Lewis often used the term “desire” or “longing” to describe *Sehnsucht*—this makes sense, since both terms are simple English translations of the German word.

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\(^{56}\)Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 39, emphasis added.
For Lewis, however, the concept is anything but simple; rather, it has several layers of meaning.

**Unfulfilled desire.** First, the desire that is spoken of in *Sehnsucht* is something that is continually left unfulfilled.⁵⁷ Lewis explains this phenomenon in a well-known passage from *Mere Christianity*:

The Christian says, “Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same.”⁵⁸

Lewis explains here that no earthly experience can fulfill humanity’s deepest desires, which fits with his experience of *Sehnsucht*, especially where he mentions the desire for his “true country.” Earthly things of beauty or pleasure are still good, but they are only meant to arouse a desire for “the real thing.” Part of the goodness (the “blessing”) of earthly desires is that they continually point beyond themselves through their failure to ultimately satisfy a human heart. Lewis had surely experienced this blessing in his own spiritual journey and eventual conversion, and he believed the influence of *Sehnsucht* could have the same effect on others.

Lewis’s argument that points from a desire unfulfilled in this world to something

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⁵⁷Of course, this is not to say that the desire is forever left unfulfilled—only that it is left unfulfilled until the seeker reaches the end of the search for joy or desire by turning to God through Christ. The desire is left unfulfilled by earthly experiences. Even for Christians, a measure of desire can linger, as believers long to be fully in the presence of the Lord—to truly live in “another world,” mentioned in the next quote from *Mere Christianity*.

beyond this world is not meant to be a deductive argument that decisively ends all debate. Though many unmarried women desire husbands, it does not mean that they will all be married one day (although it may add to the evidence that such a thing as a husband exists). Lewis’s argument for a divine fulfillment of deepest human desires is simply being presented here as an inference to the best explanation. Men often experience an emptiness or ache for something beyond what this world has to offer; the most reasonable explanation for that widely-known emptiness is that there is something that truly fills it.

**Desire itself a pleasure.** Second, for Lewis the unfulfilled desire represented by *Sehnsucht* is actually in itself a pleasurable experience—despite the lack of fulfillment. He explains in *Surprised by Joy,*

But what I never realized was that it had returned—that the remembering of that walk was itself a new experience of just the same kind. True, it was desire, not possession. But then what I had felt on the walk had also been desire, and only possession in so far as that kind of desire is itself desirable, is the fullest possession we can know on earth; or rather, because the very nature of Joy makes nonsense of our common distinction between having and wanting. There, to have is to want and to want is to have.\(^5^9\)

This idea of desire and the pleasure brought about by desire itself features somewhat surprisingly in a lengthy discussion in *Out of the Silent Planet.* Lewis’s insertion of this rather technical topic into the narrative of the Space Trilogy demonstrates again how important *Sehnsucht* was to his worldview and his understanding of God’s gracious interactions with mankind. In this passage, Ransom, the space-traveling philologist, is on Malacandra (Mars) speaking with his friend Hyoi, who is a non-human but rational creature from that planet. Hyoi is one of the *hrossa*—a species similar to a seal or otter; *hrossa* and all other creatures native to Malacandra are unfallen, lacking a sinful nature.

The *hrossa* have only a brief window of time in which they mate with their monogamous partners and then raise a small number of offspring. They do not desire

\(^{59}\)Lewis, *Surprised by Joy,* 166.
more than this, although they write poems and songs to celebrate these experiences for the rest of their lives. Ransom has difficulty understanding why, if mating and raising children is such a pleasurable experience, the *hrossa* do not desire more than a very limited number of such experiences. Hyoi, in turn, has difficulty understanding Ransom’s question:

[Ransom] “But the pleasure he must be content only to remember?”

[Hyoi] “That is like saying, ‘My food I must be content to eat.’”

“I do not understand.”

“A pleasure is full grown only when it is remembered. You are speaking, *Hman* [man], as if the pleasure were one thing and the memory another. It is all one thing. . . . What you call remembering is the last part of the pleasure. . . . When you and I met, the meeting was over very shortly, it was nothing. Now it is growing something as we remember it. But still we know very little about it. What it will be when I remember it as I lie down to die, what it makes in me all my days till then—that is the real meeting. The other is only the beginning of it. You say you have poets in your world. Do they not teach you this?”

“Perhaps some of them do,” said Ransom. “But even in a poem does a *hross* never long to hear one splendid line over again?”

Hyoi’s reply unfortunately turned on one of those points in their language which Ransom had not mastered. There were two verbs which both, as far as he could see, meant to *long* or *yearn*; but the *hrossa* drew a sharp distinction, even an opposition, between them. Hyoi seemed to him merely to be saying that every one would long for it (*wondelone*) but no one in his senses could long for it (*hluntheline)*.60

In this passage, Lewis utilizes Ransom’s unfamiliarity with Hyoi’s language to refer to his own enigmatic experiences of Sehnsucht, which simultaneously fulfilled some measure of desire while also evoking ever-stronger feelings of desire. Pleasure, according to Hyoi, is continually experienced through the memory of its initial experience. But Lewis, a creature with a fallen nature just like his character Ransom, was not satisfied with previous experiences of pleasure and thus doggedly sought the object of his great desire. This passage is one of the most striking instances of a Sehnsucht-themed discussion in Lewis’s writing, because of its technical nature—it would have been much easier to simply omit it—and because it seems wholly tangential to the story itself. Lewis

could not help but write about *Sehnsucht*.

**Different triggers for different people.** Third, Lewis’s explanation of *Sehnsucht* makes clear that this inconsolable longing is often triggered by different experiences for different people. This is why the term “Individual Desire” is used in this section. Not everyone will experience *Sehnsucht* before the same scenery or at the same place in a piece of literature, since everyone’s opinion of what is beautiful or attractive is not completely uniform. Lewis makes this clear through his description (quoted in chapter 2) in *Surprised by Joy* of the instant kinship he felt with Arthur Greeves at the surprising knowledge that both boys were gripped by Norse legend.\(^6\) Most people (especially his age) were not enthralled by what enthralled Lewis. He explained the individual aspect of *Sehnsucht* in further detail in *The Problem of Pain* (quoted in chapter 1) when he referred to “the secret signature of each soul” that corresponds to something in that soul’s Maker and that compels that soul to look for that thing throughout his or her life.\(^6\)

Lewis even touches on this individual aspect of *Sehnsucht* in *Miracles*. Again, *Miracles* is a book with a main topic far from that of this dissertation, but Lewis cannot avoid hinting at God’s drawing of mankind through desire for beauty. This quotation is from Lewis’s epilogue to the work:

> Perhaps (if I dare suppose so much) you have been led on at times while you were reading, have felt ancient hopes and fears astir in your heart, have perhaps come almost to the threshold of belief—but now? No. It just won’t do. Here is the ordinary, here is the “real” world, round you again. The dream is ending; as all other similar dreams have always ended. For of course this is not the first time such a thing has happened. More than once in your life before this you have heard a strange story, read some odd book, seen something queer or imagined you have seen it, entertained some wild hope or terror: but always it ended in the same way. And always you wondered how you could, even for a moment, have expected it not to.\(^6\)

*Miracles* is perhaps Lewis’s most technical and cerebral apologetic work. Yet,

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\(^6\)Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 130.


at the end of his case, he presses home the point by attempting to link to the reader’s experience of beauty and Sehnsucht—attempting to balance his apologetics of the head with apologetics of the heart. And again, he affirms that for each person the working of Sehnsucht may come through different means. Some “strange story,” some “odd book” may be the trigger; he does not mention Norse mythology, because that is not the trigger for every person. In Finding God: A Treasury of Conversion Stories, editor John Mulder agrees that there is variety in the triggers for those who come to faith. The experience can be a very emotional one, a primarily intellectual journey, or even a suddenly new moral awareness: “But at other times the experience seems to be aesthetic rather than moral—a glimpse of the beauty of holiness and a new way of perceiving the world and one’s place in it.”

**Choice to pursue.** Finally, Lewis’s understanding of the desire that comes with Sehnsucht includes the individual’s choice to pursue that desire. Spirits in Bondage was examined to show Lewis’s pre-Christian obsession with beauty. But the first poem in this revealing work also demonstrates Lewis’s internal struggle—the struggle between following Sehnsucht where it would lead and submitting to a cold, atheistic rationality. Lewis himself had to make a choice regarding whether or not to pursue the individual desire that called to him throughout his spiritual pilgrimage. The first section of Spirits in Bondage (which has three sections) is entitled “The Prison House,” and its first poem is called “Satan Speaks.” In the fifth stanza, Lewis places in Satan’s mouth these words: “I am the fact and the crushing reason, To thwart your fantasy’s new-born treason.”

Through Satan’s words, Lewis describes his mental and spiritual battle between submitting to “crushing reason” and listening to the “treason” brought into his life by “fantasy.” He

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had been snared by Sehnsucht through experiences specific to his own heart, personality, and tastes, but a choice still had to be made as to whether or not he would pursue that desire or ultimately reject it.

In Miracles, Lewis’s chapter on “Christianity and ‘Religion’” delineates the difference between true Christianity and a modern notion of religion—the latter possessing no real supernatural element. Near the end of this chapter, Lewis explains that a genuine search for religious truth must be open to where the evidence leads, even if that includes the miraculous. In this section, he connects this search to his own personal struggle and testimony, making this quotation relevant for the current discussion:

Men are reluctant to pass over from the notion of an abstract and negative deity to the living God. . . . You have had a shock like that before, in connection with smaller matters—when the line pulls at your hand, when something breathes beside you in the darkness. So here; the shock comes at the precise moment when the thrill of life is communicated to us along the clue we have been following. It is always shocking to meet life where we thought we were alone . . . and therefore this is the very point at which so many draw back—I would have done so myself if I could—and proceed no further with Christianity. . . . There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion (“Man’s search for God!”) suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to that! Worse still, supposing He had found us!66

Lewis honestly admits that he wanted to step off of the path on which he was traveling when he began to realize that he was being drawn toward the real, living, supernatural God. He had followed the clue of Sehnsucht since his childhood, and at some point (or perhaps many points) he was faced with the choice to continue to follow it or to abandon the search altogether.

This choice that an individual must make to follow where desire (or joy, in Lewis’s terminology) leads also appears in Lewis’s fictional works. In fact, much of the entire book of The Great Divorce portrays such choices made by the ghosts in the story:

But beyond all these, I saw other grotesque phantoms in which hardly a trace of the human form remained; monsters who had faced the journey to the bus stop—perhaps for them it was thousands of miles—and come up to the country of the Shadow of Life [Heaven] and limped far into it over the torturing grass, only to spit

66Lewis, Miracles, 149-50.
and gibber out in one ecstasy of hatred their envy and (what is harder to understand) their contempt, of joy.\textsuperscript{67}

The Dwarf Ghost, in particular, visibly wrestles with the choice to pursue the joyous object of desire:

And really, for a moment, I thought the Dwarf was going to obey: partly because the outlines of his face became a little clearer, and partly because the invitation to all joy, singing out of her [his wife, now a greatly honored saint in heaven] whole being like a bird’s song on an April evening, seemed to me such that no creature could resist it. Then he hesitated.\textsuperscript{68}

In this quotation Lewis describes the woman’s invitation to all joy through the simile of a bird’s beautiful song. Joy is connected to desire and beauty, and each individual must make a choice whether or not to pursue this desire to its End. The desire itself brings pleasure, but it also continually leaves the individual feeling unfulfilled; as it happened in Lewis’s life, this lingering lack of fulfillment can powerfully lead the individual toward God.

**Transcendence**

The third recurring aspect of *Sehnsucht* in Lewis’s writings could be described as transcendence. Encounters with *Sehnsucht* consistently cause the individual to feel transported to a place beyond earth, or to receive communication from beyond the material world, or to long for some higher pleasure beyond normal experiences, or to desire a long-lost and distant home. The idea of transcendence often seems to be behind Lewis’s use of the word “joy” in his autobiography and many of his other books, especially when he chooses to capitalize the word. “Joy” indicates for Lewis something deeper and more lasting than mere happiness; it even frequently describes something heavenly or divine—as evidenced by the quotations from *The Great Divorce* mentioned immediately above.

In *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, John’s vision of the Island represents *Sehnsucht*, the

\textsuperscript{67}Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 77.

\textsuperscript{68}Ibid., 109.
object of the pilgrim’s desire. In the explanatory notes at the top of a page in which Mr. Wisdom lectures John about his vision of the Island, Lewis summarizes, “Philosophy will not explain away John’s glimpse of the Transcendent.”\(^6^9\) This book being an allegorical representation of Lewis’s own journey, the identification of \textit{Sehnsucht} with an experience of transcendence is clear.

During his youth when he still aspired to be a poet, Lewis wrote an extended narrative poem called “Dymer.” This lesser-known work of Lewis’s is important for this discussion because it was written during some of his most intense wrestling with the Christian faith; he published it in 1926, again using the pseudonym of Clive Hamilton. In the preface to the 1950 reprinting of “Dymer,” Lewis specifically mentions \textit{Sehnsucht}:

> “From at least the age of six, romantic longing—\textit{Sehnsucht}—had played an unusually central part in my experience.”\(^7^0\)

In the text of the poem itself, Lewis often writes of transcendent experiences encountered by Dymer—who is loosely representative of Lewis. In this excerpt, Dymer is speaking:

> “The gods themselves know pain, the eternal forms.  
> \textit{In realms beyond the reach of cloud}, and skies  
> Nearest the ends of air, where come no storms  
> Nor sound of earth, I have looked into their eyes  
> Peaceful and filled with pain beyond surmise,  
> Filled with an ancient woe man cannot reach  
> One moment though in fire; yet calm their speech.”

> “Then these,” said Dymer, “were the world I wooed. . . .  
> These were the \textit{holiness of flowers and grass}  
> And desolate dews . . . these, the \textit{eternal mood}  
> Blowing the \textit{eternal theme} through men that pass.  
> I called myself their lover—I that was  
> Less fit for that long service than the least  
> Dull, workday drudge of men or faithful beast.”

> “Why do they lure to them such spirits as mine,

\(^6^9\)Lewis, \textit{The Pilgrim’s Regress}, 123.

The weak, the passionate, and the fool of dreams?
When better men go safe and never pine
With whisperings at the heart, soul-sickening gleams
Of infinite desire, and joy that seems
The promise of full power? For it was they,
The gods themselves, that led me on this way.”

Dymer here bemoans his struggle with pursuing the beauty of nature, songs, and “whisperings at the heart” which spoke of “holiness” and an “eternal theme.” The gods themselves led Dymer on this path toward transcendence, as they spoke from “realms beyond the reach of cloud.” This resonates with Lewis’s own double-minded struggle during these years of his life, as he was drawn through Sehnsucht toward something beyond merely human experience.

Lewis weaves similar experiences of transcendence into his fictional portrayals of Sehnsucht, as well. In Out of the Silent Planet, Ransom is present on the planet of Malacandra at the funeral dirge of his friend Hyoi, who has been murdered by wicked men from Earth. Lewis describes the song honoring Hyoi in these transcendent terms:

Lifting their heads, and with no signal given as far as Ransom could see, they began to sing. To every man, in his acquaintance with a new art, there comes a moment when that which before was meaningless first lifts, as it were, one corner of the curtain that hides its mystery, and reveals, in a burst of delight which later and fuller understanding can hardly ever equal, one glimpse of the indefinite possibilities within. For Ransom, this moment had now come in his understanding of Malacandrian song. . . . Through his knowledge of the creatures and his love for them he began, ever so little, to hear it with their ears. A sense of great masses moving at visionary speeds, of giants dancing, of eternal sorrows eternally consoled, of he knew not what and yet what he had always known, awoke in him with the very first bars of the deep-mouthed dirge, and bowed down his spirit as if the gate of heaven had opened before him.

It is significant that this is another transcendent experience that Lewis describes as being mediated through song; it is also significant that there is mixed in with the richness and beauty of the art a sense of sorrow—this relates to the bittersweet nature of the fifth aspect of Sehnsucht (mentioned later).

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71Ibid., 77-78 (Canto VIII, stanzas 9-11), emphasis added.

72Lewis, Out of the Silent Planet, 131, emphasis added.
Far country. One specific way in which Lewis describes the transcendent nature of Sehnsucht is through the specific longing for a “far country.” His reference to this idea through the German term das Ferne (“the far”) in Surprised by Joy has already been mentioned in chapter 2. Throughout Lewis’s references to the far country, the notion is consistently connected to heaven. Significantly, Lewis’s pre-Christian Spirits in Bondage features several such references.

From the Prologue:
“Flying from the scarlet city
Where a Lord that knows no pity,
Mocks the broken people
Praying round his iron throne.
Sing about the Hidden Country
Fresh and full of quiet green.”

From Poem XXV, “Song of the Pilgrims”:
“Shall we not somewhere see at close of day
The green walls of that country far away,
And hear the music of her fountains play?”

From Poem XXX, “Oxford”:
“We are not wholly brute. To us remains
A clean, sweet city lulled by ancient streams,
A place of visions and of loosening chains,
A refuge of the elect, a tower of dreams.

She was not builded out of common stone
But out of all men’s yearning and all prayer
That she might live, eternally our own,
The Spirit’s stronghold-barred against despair.”

And from Poem XL, “Death in Battle,” the last poem of the cycle:
“Open the gates for me,
Open the gates of the peaceful castle, rosy in the West,
In the sweet dim Isle of Apples over the wide sea’s breast. . .

Ah, to be ever alone,

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73Lewis, Spirits in Bondage, 1, emphasis added.

74Note the similarity between the title of this important poem and The Pilgrim’s Regress, Lewis’s autobiographical allegory.

75Lewis, Spirits in Bondage, 33, emphasis added.

76Ibid., 41, emphasis added.
In flowery valleys among the mountains and silent wastes untrod,
In the dewy upland places, in the garden of God,
This would atone . . .

O Country of Dreams!
Beyond the tide of the ocean, hidden and sunk away,
Out of the sound of battles, near to the end of day,
Full of dim woods and streams.”

Consistently, one can see in Spirits in Bondage that—even as he rages against
God—Lewis is seeking a home in heaven and the Source of the beauty he has
experienced through Sehnsucht. This home is found in a transcendent place, a far country
which, though he has never been there, calls him back to itself.

To the person experiencing Sehnsucht, the far country actually feels like the
person’s true home. Lewis explains this in Mere Christianity when, in discussing the
existence of desires that are never fulfilled in this world (indicating that we were made
for another world), he cautions, “I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true
country, which I shall not find till after death. . . . I must make it the main object of life
to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same.”

But the fullest explanation of the longing for a transcendent, far-off country
comes from “The Weight of Glory.” Indeed, other than the book-length treatment of the
working of Sehnsucht found in Surprised by Joy, this passage may be the fullest
explanation of Lewis’s view of Sehnsucht and its power to draw men unto God:

In speaking of this desire for our own far-off country, which we find in ourselves
even now, I feel a certain shyness. I am almost committing an indecency. I am
trying to rip open the inconsolable secret in each one of you—the secret which hurts
so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and
Romanticism and Adolescence; the secret also which pierces with such sweetness
that when, in very intimate conversation, the mention of it becomes imminent, we
grow awkward and affect to laugh at ourselves; the secret we cannot hide and
cannot tell, though we desire to do both. We cannot tell it because it is a desire for
something that has never actually appeared in our experience. We cannot hide it
because our experience is constantly suggesting it, and we betray ourselves like
lovers at the mention of a name. Our commonest expedient is to call it beauty and
behave as if that had settled the matter. Wordsworth’s expedient was to identify it
with certain moments in his own past. But all this is a cheat. If Wordsworth had

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77Ibid., 53-54, emphasis added.

78Lewis, Mere Christianity, 137, emphasis added.
gone back to those moments in the past, he would not have found the thing itself, but only the reminder of it; what he remembered would turn out to be itself a remembering. The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshipers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.\footnote{79}{Lewis, The Weight of Glory, 29-31.}

This quotation features many of the aspects of Sehnsucht explained in this chapter, such as its connection to beauty, its different triggers for different people, and its connection with memory. It begins with an extended meditation of the powerful lure of the far-off country. We have never been to this country, Lewis explains, yet each of us secretly longs for it in a way that we cannot fully explain. The scent of the flower, the echo of the tune, and the news of a far country all point to something transcendent—something deeper and richer than the temporary, lesser beauty of those earthly things. This hint of a far-off country is closely related to the next characteristic of the transcendence of Sehnsucht.

Joy points beyond itself. Just as the transcendent beauty of Sehnsucht calls the individual to a far country beyond the momentary experience of beauty, Lewis makes clear that joy is not an end in itself. There is something higher than the pursuit of joy; Lewis finally came to realize this, and he explains it in detail in two passages near the end of Surprised by Joy:

There was no doubt that Joy was a desire (and, in so far as it was also simultaneously a good, it was also a kind of love). But a desire is turned not to itself but to its object. Not only that, but it owes all its character to its object. . . . I had been . . . wrong in supposing that I desired Joy itself. Joy itself, considered simply as an event in my own mind, turned out to be of no value at all. All the value lay in that of which Joy was the desiring. And that object, quite clearly, was no state of my own mind or body at all. . . . Inexorably Joy proclaimed, “You want—I myself am your want of—something other, outside, not you nor any state of you.” I did not yet ask, Who is the desired? only What is it?\footnote{80}{Lewis, Surprised by Joy, 220-21.}
Just a few pages later, Lewis’s conversion to Christianity takes place—on the next-to-last page of *Surprised by Joy*. There, he describes the motorcycle ride during which he finally came to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And on the final page of the book, he wraps up the joy question in light of his conversion:

But what, in conclusion, of Joy? for that, after all, is what the story has mainly been about. To tell you the truth, the subject has lost nearly all interest for me since I became a Christian. I cannot, indeed, complain, like Wordsworth, that the visionary gleam has passed away. I believe (if the thing were at all worth recording) that the old stab, the old bittersweet, has come to me as often and as sharply since my conversion as at any time of my life whatever. But I now know that the experience, considered as a state of my own mind, had never had the kind of importance I once gave it. It was valuable only as a pointer to something other and outer.81

Lewis’s conversion made him see that joy was not an end in itself; it was merely a pointer to Christ Himself. But in His sovereign and patient grace, the Lord used Lewis’s experience of desire (*Sehnsucht*) for joy through beauty to draw the man to Himself. What had been an idol for Lewis ultimately led him to the true and transcendent God.

Lewis consistently describes human pleasure and enjoyment in this way, including in a book as different in subject matter as *The Problem of Pain*:

The Christian doctrine of suffering explains, I believe, a very curious fact about the world we live in. The settled happiness and security which we all desire, God withholds from us by the very nature of the world: but joy, pleasure, and merriment, He has scattered broadcast. We are never safe, but we have plenty of fun, and some ecstasy. It is not hard to see why. The security we crave would teach us to rest our hearts in this world and oppose an obstacle to our return to God: a few moments of happy love, a landscape, a symphony, a merry meeting with our friends, a bathe or a football match.82 have no such tendency. Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home. 83

Though Lewis does not mention the word “joy” here, by his descriptions it is easy to see that this discussion overlaps with the type of enjoyable experiences (“ecstasy”) that he felt through *Sehnsucht*, especially through the pleasurable but ultimately unfulfilling

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81Ibid., 238.

82As an avid soccer fan, I am compelled to point out that Lewis here refers to soccer and not American football.

nature of those experiences. If Sehnsucht did not leave us with an unfulfilled ache, we might be taught by it to “rest our hearts in this world.” But God graciously keeps us from this conclusion, while still blessing us “on the journey with some pleasant inns.” Throughout the body of his work, when speaking of Sehnsucht or related terms or topics, Lewis is remarkably consistent.

Romanticism. Lewis’s transcendent understanding of Sehnsucht can also be seen through his frequent connection of Sehnsucht to the romantic tradition, which was already mentioned. Romanticism is famous for being difficult to define; in the afterword to the third edition of The Pilgrim’s Regress (which has the subtitle An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism), Lewis himself differentiates between seven different categories that had acquired the label “romantic” by his own day.\(^8^4\) He then clarifies,

But what I meant by “Romanticism” when I wrote the Pilgrim’s Regress… was not exactly any one of these seven things. What I meant was a particular recurrent experience which dominated my childhood and adolescence and which I hastily called “Romantic” because inanimate nature and marvellous literature were among the things that evoked it. . . . The experience is one of intense longing.\(^8^5\)

The intensity of this longing, the unquenchable desire for an “unnameable something”\(^8^6\) as mediated through experiences of nature, is where romanticism connects

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\(^8^4\) Lewis, The Pilgrim’s Regress, 201. As another example, Michael Ferber’s one-sentence definition of Romanticism in Oxford’s Very Short Introduction series is anything but short: “Romanticism was a European cultural movement, or set of kindred movements, which found in a symbolic and internalized romance plot a vehicle for exploring one’s self and its relationship to others and to nature, which privileged the imagination as a faculty higher and more inclusive than reason, which sought solace in or reconciliation with the natural world, which ‘detranscendentalized’ religion by taking God or the divine as inherent in nature or in the soul and replaced theological doctrine with metaphor and feeling, which honored poetry and all the arts as the highest human creations, and which rebelled against the established canons of neoclassical aesthetics and against both aristocratic and bourgeois social and political norms in favor of values more individual, inward, and emotional.” Michael Ferber, Romanticism: A Very Short Introduction (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 10-11.

\(^8^5\) Lewis, The Pilgrim’s Regress, 202.

\(^8^6\) Ibid., 204 (within the same discussion as the previous quote).
to the strain of transcendent desire in experiences of *Sehnsucht*. “Inanimate nature” and “marvellous literature” were two of the things that evoked in Lewis a desire for something far beyond nature and literature. He steps into the scholarly discussion of romanticism again as he explains further,

One of them [a critic] described Romanticism as “spilled religion.” I accept the description. And I agree that he who has religion ought not to spill it. But does it follow that he who finds it spilled should avert his eyes? How if there is a man to whom those *bright drops* on the floor are the beginning of a trail which, duly followed, will lead him in the to *taste the cup itself*? How if no other trail, humanly speaking, were possible?\(^{87}\)

Lewis vigorously defended the tradition of romanticism against its detractors as well as against those who would use and abuse it to the point of lust and mere sensationalism. He believed that the romantic tradition, rightly understood and used, held great potential to lead men toward Christ through the transcendent, intense desires of *Sehnsucht*.

**Imagination**

The fourth consistent theme found in Lewis’s concept of *Sehnsucht* is imagination. In *Surprised by Joy*, his important discussion of the three childhood experiences that set him on the path of *Sehnsucht* are introduced as being “imaginative” experiences. In context, Lewis points this out to contrast them with the rest of his childhood mental occupations, which he says were “astonishingly prosaic.”\(^{88}\) Owen Barfield, Lewis’s friend for forty years, confirms the importance of imagination in Lewis’s life: “Lewis was in love with it [imagination]. . . . Yes, he was in Romantic love with it.”\(^{89}\)

In *The Great Divorce*, when Lewis the narrator meets his mentor George MacDonald, he gushingly explains to MacDonald what happened when he read *Phantastes*.

\(^{87}\)Ibid., 205-6, emphasis added.


Along the way, he references, as he did in *Surprised by Joy* (wherein he spoke of the “baptism” of his imagination), of the imaginative path that *Phantastes* took him on, which ultimately led to Christ:

Then, supposing that these expressions of confidence needed some explanation, I tried, trembling, to tell this man all that his writings had done for me . . . a copy of *Phantastes* . . . had been to me what the first sight of Beatrice had been to Dante: *Here begins the New Life*. I started to confess how long that Life had delayed in the region of imagination merely: how slowly and reluctantly I had come to admit that his Christendom had more than an accidental connexion with it, how hard I had tried not to see that the true name of the quality which first met me in his books is Holiness.⁹⁰

Reading *Phantastes* made a change in Lewis’s imagination, but even with this new-found depth in his reading, Lewis resisted for a long time the connection between imaginative beauty and the truth of Christianity. This resistance fits with the point above that the individual must choose whether or not to follow the individual desire through which *Sehnsucht* reaches out to him.

Lewis makes the connection between imagination and *Sehnsucht* stronger in *Surprised by Joy* in the context of his fascination and obsession with Norse mythology: “By the imaginative life I here mean only my life as concerned with Joy.”⁹¹ The capitalization of “Joy” here identifies it as the more technical “Joy” of *Sehnsucht*. The topic in these pages is his devouring of the imaginative genre of Norse mythology, which is mentioned at the beginning of the book as one of the three seminal childhood experiences that set him on the path of *Sehnsucht*. Joy is strongly linked to imagination.

**Myth.** An important feature of Lewis’s imaginative aspect of *Sehnsucht* is myth. Myth was already discussed at some length in chapter 2 in the context of the influence of Lewis’s friends, Owen Barfield, and J. R. R. Tolkien, and their views regarding the power and truth of myth. In addition, earlier in this chapter, important

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references to joy, longing, and beauty were discussed as they appear in *Till We Have Faces*, which is a retelling of the *myth* of Cupid and Psyche. But the mythic element of *Sehnsucht* shows up in numerous other works by C. S. Lewis. In an excellent chapter of *Reflections on the Psalms* entitled “Second Meanings,” Lewis explains in detail the ability of pagan myths and stories to echo the gospel—even if written (as in this case) before the life of Christ!

Plato in his *Republic* is arguing that righteousness is often praised for the rewards it brings—honor, popularity, and the like—but that to see it in its true nature we must separate it from all these, strip it naked. He asks us therefore to imagine a perfectly righteous man treated by all around him as a monster of wickedness. We must picture him, still perfect, while he is bound, scourged, and finally impaled (the Persian equivalent of crucifixion). At this passage a Christian reader starts and rubs his eyes. What is happening? Yet another of these lucky coincidences? But presently he sees that there is something here which cannot be called luck at all. . . . If Plato was in some measure moved to write of it by the recent death—we may almost say the martyrdom—of his master Socrates then that again is not something simply other than the Passion of Christ. The imperfect, yet very venerable, goodness of Socrates led to the easy death of the hemlock, and the perfect goodness of Christ led to the death of the cross, not by chance but for the same reason; because goodness is what it is, and because the fallen world is what it is. If Plato, starting from one example and from his insight into the nature of goodness and the nature of the world, was led on to see the possibility of a perfect example, and thus to depict something extremely like the Passion of Christ, this happened not because he was lucky but because he was wise.  

Lewis presses home the point with regard to myth:

And what are we to say of those gods in various Pagan mythologies who are killed and rise again and who thereby renew or transform the life of their worshippers or of nature? . . . Christians who think, as I do, that in mythology divine and diabolical and human elements (the desire for a good story), all play a part, would say: “It is not accidental. In the sequence of night and day, in the annual death and rebirth of the crops, in the myths which these processes gave rise to, in the strong, if half-articulate, feeling (embodied in many Pagan “Mysteries”) that man himself must undergo some sort of death if he would truly live, there is already a likeness permitted by God to that truth on which all depends. The resemblance between these myths and the Christian truth is no more accidental than the resemblance between the sun and the sun’s reflection in a pond, or that between a historical fact

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92This short chapter is helpful, not only because of its explanation of myth, but also because it sheds much light on second meanings in Messianic Old Testament passages.

and the somewhat garbled version of it which lives in popular report, or between the trees and hills of the real world and the trees and hills in our dreams.”

At the end of this chapter, Lewis says that we may pray with hope that men like Plato, Virgil, and others have already realized the full truth to which they unintentionally pointed in their writings. In saying this, he indicates again the ability of imaginative myth to draw men to the truth, which can occur through experiences of Sehnsucht.

For Lewis, the greatest power of myth and imagination came through his deep love for Norse mythology. It would be inaccurate to generalize from this Northern theme a principle that Sehnsucht will always come for all people through stories of this genre. Lewis explained that what tied him and Arthur Greeves together was their uncommonly shared love of Norse mythology. It has been shown that Sehnsucht is triggered in people by different instances of beauty. Lewis’s references to the pull of “Northernness,” then, in Spirits in Bondage, Surprised by Joy, Pilgrim’s Regress, God in the Dock (several of which are quoted in this chapter), and other works serve as consistent illustrations of how myth can work through the imagination to evoke Sehnsucht. Lewis’s writings make clear that, though not everyone relates to Norse mythology as he did, myth itself can be so generalized and applied.

Loss

The fifth aspect of Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht could be summarized as loss. In this, Lewis refers to a consistently bittersweet sensation that accompanied his experiences of Sehnsucht. This point has been touched on already in the explanation of Sehnsucht’s desire as being inconsolable or continually unfulfilled. But Lewis mentions loss (or similar terms) frequently enough for this to warrant its own discussion, separate from the element of desire.

Surprised by Joy contains several extended descriptions of this aspect of Sehnsucht. One such instance occurs at Lewis’s account of his first encounter with the

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44Ibid., 105-7.
book *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods*. Lewis says that even though he misunderstood the meaning of the term “twilight” in this title, he was instantly and powerfully connected in his mind to his childhood memory of reading about Balder in *Tegner’s Drapa*:

... and the distance of the Twilight of the Gods and the distance of my own past Joy, both unattainable, flowed together into a single, unendurable sense of desire and loss, which suddenly became one with the loss of the whole experience, which, as I now stared round that dusty schoolroom like a man recovering from unconsciousness, had already vanished, had eluded me at the very moment when I could first say *It is*. And at once I knew (with fatal knowledge) that to “have it again” was the supreme and only important object of desire.\(^\text{93}\)

Lewis’s feeling of desire is consistently connected with a sensation that something has been taken from him, as well as an all-consuming passion to regain that thing. He wants to get the old feeling back, but even when he is in the midst of experiencing its pleasure, there remains an enduring sense of loss and desire for more. *Sehnsucht* is surely a complicated sensation—which is probably why Lewis felt compelled to use the complex German term rather than a simple English word like “desire.” The complexity of the sensation is somewhat explained by the complexity of living in a creation that was originally good and has many sources of pleasure, but that also is thoroughly marred by sin and awaiting the completion of her redemption. Pleasure and joy point to the Creator and Source of all good things (Jas 1:17), but simultaneous pain and loss point to alienation from Him because of sin. Lewis describes well the mixture of pleasure, desire, and loss in human experience.

Lewis frequently connects his understanding of the sensation of loss in *Sehnsucht* to the poetry of William Wordsworth, who has been mentioned in other quotations in this chapter. Wordsworth holds great importance as one of the founders of the English Romantic movement (along with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whom Lewis also mentions in his autobiography and other works), which is significant for *Sehnsucht’s*

\(^{93}\)Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 73, emphasis original.
connection to Romanticism. When Lewis speaks of Wordsworth, he consistently refers to the poet’s sense of loss of some departed “glory.”

Lewis’s first serious ambition was to be a poet; Wordsworth was actually Poet Laureate of England near the end of his life. Not only that, both men were greatly influenced by nature in their personal experiences and in their writing. And there are striking similarities between their descriptions of their personal journeys, especially when one considers the title and opening lines of Wordsworth’s *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood:*  

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth, and every common sight,  
To me did seem  
Apparelled in celestial light,  
The glory and freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;  
Turn wheresoe’er I may,  
By night or day,  
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.\(^{97}\)

Similarly, C. S. Lewis, referring to his realization that his overly formal and deep study of Norse mythology had removed the “joy” from it, says, “I was in the Wordsworthian predicament, lamenting that ‘a glory’ had passed away.”\(^{98}\) And again, “Wordsworth, I believe, made this mistake all his life. I am sure that all that sense of the *loss of vanished vision* which fills *The Prelude*\(^{99}\) was itself vision of the same kind, if

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\(^{96}\)This is the later, extended title of the work. The reference to Wordsworth’s “recollections of early childhood” is reminiscent of Lewis’s three seminal childhood experiences, which he said “taught me longing—*Sehnsucht*; made me for good or ill, and before I was six years old, a votary of the Blue Flower.” The “Blue Flower” is a reference to Romanticism, of which Wordsworth is a major figure. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 7.


\(^{98}\)Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 166.

\(^{99}\)*The Prelude* was Wordsworth’s *magnum opus*, although he died before its completion. Published by his widow Mary after his death, its themes deal with the development of the author’s mind as he travels and interacts with nature. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (London: Edward Moxon, 1850), v-vi.
only he could have believed it.”

Wordsworth assisted Lewis in describing the pervasive sense of loss that he felt during his experience of Sehnsucht. Something was missing, and Sehnsucht sent him searching for it.

Clare Boothe Luce (1903-1987), influential American journalist, congresswoman, and ambassador to Italy, shares an important early experience in her life that played a part in her eventual conversion many years later. This resembles C. S. Lewis’s experience not only in the long time period involved, but also in the descriptive term “aloneness” that she uses and its similarity to Lewis’s sense of loss. She writes,

It is an experience which occurred when I was perhaps sixteen or seventeen years old. I no longer remember where it took place, except that it was a summer day on an American beach. I seem to remember that it was early morning, and that I must have been standing on the sand for some time alone, for even now I distinctly remember that this experience was preceded by a sensation of utter aloneness. Not loneliness, but a sort of intense solitariness.

I remember that it was a cool, clean, fresh, calm, blue, radiant day, and that I stood by the shore, my feet not in the waves...I expect that the easiest thing is to say that suddenly SOMETHING WAS. My whole soul was cleft clean by it, as a silk veil slit by a shining sword. And I knew. I do not know what I knew. I remember, I didn’t even know then...But whatever it was I knew, it was something that made ENORMOUS SENSE. And it was final. And yet that word could not be used, for it meant end, and there was no end to this finality. Then joy abounded in all of me. Or rather, I abounded in joy... The memory of it possessed me for several months afterward. . . . I tried to put it in some category of previous experience. I remember, I concluded that on that certain day the beauty of nature must have concurred with some unexpected flush of tremendous physical well-being. . . . Gradually I forgot it. . . .

One day, long months after I had been a convert. . . . there suddenly flooded into my mind the experience of which I speak, and my heart was gently suffused with an afterglow of that incredible joy.

Then I knew that this strange occurrence had had an enormous part in my conversion, although I had seemed to forget it completely. Long ago, in its tremendous purity and simplicity, and now, in its far fainter evocation, I knew it had been, somehow, the most real experience of my whole life.  

Luce’s account resonates with Lewis’s sense of loss; it also provides parallels to his journey through her use of “joy,” her linking of the moment to nature’s beauty, her

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100 Ibid., 167, emphasis added.

introspective analysis following the experience, and the “afterglow” of it in her memory.

**Memory.** For Lewis, closely related to the feeling of loss in *Sehnsucht* is the memory that accompanies that loss. This aspect of *Sehnsucht* overlaps with Lewis’s notion of a far country that is the individual’s true home. Even though the individual has never been to that country, there is a longing to get back home. Here, a sense of loss in *Sehnsucht* is often related to the memory of previous experiences of *Sehnsucht* and a desire to get the previous feeling again. Quotations have already indirectly referenced the importance of memory in *Sehnsucht*—including a passage from *Out of the Silent Planet* describing the Malacandrian view that pleasure and the memory of that pleasure are really the same experience.

As an additional example of his emphasis on memory (even back to childhood), see Lewis’s words in *Problem of Pain*:

> From our own childhood we remember that before our elders thought us capable of “understanding” anything, we already had spiritual experience as pure and as momentous as any we have undergone since, though not, of course, as rich in factual context.  

This chapter is about the Fall of man and not about *Sehnsucht*, but it shows again how the working of *Sehnsucht* was often in the back of Lewis’s mind and how it bubbled to the surface in his writing. There is clearly an autobiographical element to this statement, as Lewis speaks of the remembrance of pure and momentous childhood spiritual experiences.

The emphasis on memory in *Sehnsucht* is even implied in *The Screwtape Letters*. In the very last letter to his nephew Wormwood, Screwtape the demon chastises his pupil for the loss of his human patient to heaven. As Screwtape describes the entrance of the patient into heaven and his first moments there, he angrily writes,

> As he [the human entering heaven] saw you [Wormwood], he also saw Them [angels]. . . . He had no faintest conception till that very hour of how they would look, and even doubted their existence. But when he saw them he knew that he had always known them and realised what part each one of them had played at many an hour in his life when he had supposed himself alone. . . . All that they were and said

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at this meeting woke memories. The dim consciousness of friends about him which had haunted his solitudes from infancy was now at last explained; that central music in every pure experience which had always just evaded memory was now at last recovered. ¹⁰³

Significantly, Screwtape alludes to memory using musical terms, and refers to “pure experience” that consistently stayed just out of memory. This quotation, dramatically placed in the mouth of a furious demon, echoes Lewis’s descriptions of Sehnsucht in artistic terms and in the context of attempts to call pivotal experiences to memory. It is fitting that the passage is about a human being whose faith has become sight, whose Sehnsucht is now fully fulfilled in the Source of joy Himself.

This same theme emerges in the second journey of Professor Ransom from Lewis’s Space Trilogy. The planet of Perelandra (Venus) is in an Edenic state when Ransom arrives there; he ends up fighting to keep it from suffering a Fall into sin like that caused by the sin of Adam on Earth. One night during a sea journey on Perelandra, as he enjoys the overwhelmingly beautiful fragrance of an approaching island, Ransom reflects,

Warm and sweet, and every moment sweeter and purer, and every moment stronger and more filled with all delights, it came to him. . . . It was strange to be filled with homesickness for places where his sojourn had been so brief and which were, by any objective standard, so alien to all our race. Or were they? The cord of longing which drew him to the invisible isle seemed to him at that moment to have been fastened long, long before his coming to Perelandra, long before the earliest times that memory could recover in his childhood, before birth, before the birth of man himself, before the origins of time. ¹⁰⁴

The sweetness of the fragrance is reminiscent of Lewis’s description of “sweet desire” in other works, especially Pilgrim’s Regress. Also, this description of memory and longing reaches back before the ability of childhood memory to recall; the elusiveness of early memories is consistent with Lewis’s autobiographical writing on the subject. Finally, the cord of Ransom’s memory and longing on Perelandra fastens him to something before the origins of time; this calls to mind Lewis’s notion of a never-visited far country which


¹⁰⁴Lewis, Perelandra, 88, emphasis added.
is the individual’s true and greatly desired home.

**Pain.** Lastly, Lewis’s sense of loss in Sehnsucht is often dramatically described through the word “pain” or similar terms. These include forms of the words “stab,” “pang,” “wound,” or “ache.” He explains Sehnsucht’s unique mixing of this pain with joy in his autobiography: “Joy is distinct not only from pleasure in general but even from aesthetic pleasure. It must have the stab, the pang, the inescapable longing.”\(^\text{105}\) He uses these kinds of terms again at the end of his personal story in that book: “I believe . . . that the old stab, the old bittersweet, has come to me as often and as sharply since my conversion as at any time of my life whatever.”\(^\text{106}\)

The last page of Reflections on the Psalms, in the context of the Christian’s final step from time into eternity, speaks of an incurable ache that we feel today even in the midst of happy experiences:

> The Eternal may meet us in what is, by our present measurements, a day, or (more likely) a minute or a second; but we have touched what is not in any way commensurable with lengths of time, whether long or short. Hence our hope finally to emerge, if not altogether from time (that might not suit our humanity), at any rate from the tyranny, the unilinear poverty, or time, to ride it not to be ridden by it, and so to cure that always aching wound (“the wound man was born for”) which mere succession and mutability inflict on us, almost equally when we are happy and when we are unhappy.\(^\text{107}\)

Lewis’s topic is not primarily Sehnsucht here. But in speaking of the normal experience of time, he mentions that, even in happy or pleasurable moments, we experience an

\(^\text{105}\)Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 72.

\(^\text{106}\)Lewis writes about stabs of longing that connect to Paradise in *That Hideous Strength* (the third volume of his Space Trilogy), but it will be relegated to a footnote here because, humorously, the desires in question are experienced by a bear (named Mr. Bultitude) and not a human being: “The appetencies which a human mind might disdain as cupboard loves were for him quivering and ecstatic aspirations which absorbed his whole being, infinite yearnings, stabbed with the threat of tragedy and shot through with the colours of Paradise.” C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 306. “Bultitude” had been the name Lewis suggested for a bear he and his brother saw at Whipsnade Zoo, right after the motorcycle sidecar ride during which Lewis became a Christian. Joel Heck, “Chronologically Lewis,” accessed February 2, 2013, http://www.joelheck.com/chronologically-lewis.php.

“aching wound” that we were actually born for—and as before, this wound is only fully cured by stepping into eternity and the presence of God, to whom the sense of loss and desire points.

In *That Hideous Strength*, the third volume of Lewis’s Space Trilogy, Professor Ransom—back on Earth—is blessed with another enjoyment of the fragrance he smelled at sea while on Perelandra. Sitting with him during this moment is Merlin of Arthurian legend, and both men are shown to have the same type of wound that Lewis describes in connection with *Sehnsucht*:

Through the bare branches . . . a summer breeze was blowing into the room, but the breeze of such a summer as England never has. . . . Tears ran down Ransom’s cheeks. He alone knew from what seas and what islands that breeze blew. Merlin did not; but in him also the inconsolable wound with which man is born waked and ached at this touching.\(^{108}\)

Not only have Ransom and Merlin been inflicted with the “inconsolable wound,” so have all men since birth. The wound was awakened and began to ache through the experience of beauty found in the fragrance from another world.

Finally, Lewis explains the working and source of the ache more fully in “The Weight of Glory,” and in bold terms:

Apparently, then, our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere neurotic fancy, *but the truest index of our real situation*. And to be at last summoned inside would be both glory and honour beyond all our merits and also *the healing of that old ache*.\(^{109}\)

Clearly, Lewis believes that this sense of loss, memory, and pain goes back to man’s separation from God due to the Fall; we have all been “cut off,” placed outside a door that we should all be viewing from the inside. Perhaps more than any other, this quote shows how important *Sehnsucht* was to Lewis’s entire worldview; *Sehnsucht* reveals the “truest index of our real situation.” The “old ache” will only be healed when

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\(^{108}\) Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 323, emphasis added.

\(^{109}\) Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 42, emphasis added.
“summoned” into the presence of the Source of our lives and of all true joy.

These five recurring themes explain Lewis’s view of Sehnsucht and its affects on individuals who experience desire for beauty that draws them toward God. This knowledge is helpful as this dissertation moves from discussing Lewis’s fully-orbed view of Sehnsucht to an examination of its corroboration in Scripture and the writings of other Christian theologians, followed by a comparison of Lewis’s views with similar ideas found in the work of secular philosophers.
CHAPTER 4
CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS
FOR SEHNSUCHT

C. S. Lewis is not the only Christian author to have made a connection between
beauty in God’s universe and the drawing of souls to God through desire for that beauty.
This dissertation would stand on a very shaky foundation, indeed, if Lewis had been the
only one to address it—what if Lewis’s theology was aberrant or not properly founded in
Scripture? But the reality is the opposite: Scripture itself makes this connection.

Scriptural Foundations

Six important biblical truths regarding God, beauty, and mankind can be
observed that relate to C. S. Lewis’s use of the concept of Sehnsucht. First, however, it is
helpful to understand the most commonly used words for “beauty” in the Old Testament,
since verses featuring these Hebrew words will feature prominently in the following
discussion. In the English Standard Version of the Bible, there are 99 Old Testament
instances of the word “beauty” or “beautiful.” The word “beauty” in this version occurs
in English translation from 23 different Hebrew words, but 61 of the 99 instances come
from only 3 Hebrew words.¹

The first of these Hebrew words, yapheh (יָפֵה), is the most frequent at 26
appearances. Brown-Driver-Briggs’ lexicon defines yapheh as “fair, beautiful.”² Almost
all of the uses of this word in the Old Testament refer to something visually attractive,

¹This summary gathered from a Bible word study on “beauty” in the English Standard Version

²Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and
English Lexicon (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), s.v. “יָפֵה.”
although there is one use that describes an attractive singing voice (Ezek 33:32). The second most frequently used Hebrew word in this case is *yophi* (יָוֶפֶת), which is translated as “beauty” or “beautiful” 19 times in the English Standard Version. Brown-Driver-Briggs defines *yophi* simply as “beauty.” In its Old Testament usage, the word frequently conveys more of the abstract idea of beauty, often being used in metaphorical or idealistic ways. For example, more than once *yophi* speaks of a place that embodies “the perfection of beauty” (Ps 50:2 and Lam 2:15). Finally, 16 of the 99 instances of “beauty” or “beautiful” in the English Standard Version of the Old Testament come from translations of the Hebrew word *tipharah* (תִּפָּרָה). Brown-Driver-Briggs defines *tipharah* as “beauty, glory”; in its Old Testament usage, this word often refers to a radiance or even an ornamentation, conveying the emanations and evidences of true beauty.

This range of meaning for the most commonly used Hebrew words for “beauty” provides plenty of room for Lewis’s understanding of beauty as it relates to God. Lewis not only describes art or nature as being visually beautiful, he also connects beauty and glory (as seen in the previous chapter) and speaks of it in an abstract and idealistic way—specifically through his emphasis on Romanticism. This understanding of the meaning of “beauty” as it relates to the Old Testament and C. S. Lewis’s views should help in the following discussion.

**God Is Beautiful**

God Himself is the Creator, Source, and First Example of beauty. The beauty of the Lord is abundantly clear from Scripture. Psalm 27:4 says, “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in His temple.” Similarly, Psalm 50:2 states, “Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.” If God is the One who shines forth from that which is called “the perfection of beauty,”

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3Ibid., s.v. “יָוֶפֶת.”
then He must be the Source of absolutely perfect beauty. He made Zion, so its beauty has come directly from Him.

Biblical claims that God is beautiful raise an immediate question as to what these statements actually mean, especially in light of scriptural assertions that “man shall not see Me and live.” There do seem to be special dispensations of mercy in which certain biblical characters do survive the experience of seeing the Lord (Jacob’s wrestling with God in Genesis 32 and Isaiah’s vision in Isaiah 6). And though there are definitely visually attractive aspects in descriptions from visions of the Lord—as in John’s vision of the glorified Christ in Revelation 1—often, it seems that descriptions of the Lord’s beauty refer more to His character and its holiness rather than to an actual physical appearance.

This understanding fits with the Hebrew word used in Psalm 27:4. Psalm 27:4 does not use one of the three most common Hebrew words translated into “beauty” which are discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Instead, the psalmist declares that he wants to “gaze upon” the Lord’s noam (נأسم) all the days of his life. Noam is defined by the Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon as “delightfulness, pleasantness” and is variously translated as “beauty” or even “kindness.” The author of Psalm 27:4 wants to observe the pleasant, gracious character of his God, which is so beautiful to him that he will never tire of gazing upon it. In this instance, the conceptual connection between God’s beauty and His holy character can be seen.

Isaiah continues the Scriptural theme of God’s beauty in a Messianic prophecy: “Your eyes will behold the King in His beauty; they will see a land that stretches afar” (33:17). And again, the prophet says to the Lord in a prayer for Him to intervene among His people: “Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and beautiful habitation” (63:15). As in Psalm 50:2, God’s beauty is closely connected with His heavenly dwelling place.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{4}ibid., s.v. "נأسم."}\]
Beauty’s origin in God can also be seen in the New Testament through John 1:3: “All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made.” Everything other than God came from God Himself in His creative work; this includes all things beautiful. Therefore, all beauty has come directly from God’s hand and flows from His character. This biblical understanding of God as beautiful and the Source of beauty is important for Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht. His tug of beauty must be linked to some source of beauty toward which it pulls the individual who encounters Sehnsucht. The Bible identifies God as this Source.

**God Shares Beauty with Men**

The reason that mankind has experienced beauty at all is because God has graciously chosen to share it. He has not kept all beauty to Himself; He has spread beauty liberally throughout the universe, and He has spoken of beauty in His Word. Through the Bible, God helps us to recognize true beauty when we encounter it.

In Psalm 19:1, David says that “the heavens declare the glory of God.” This poem goes on to explain how creation itself “reveals knowledge” about the God who has created mankind and who is worthy of worship. David ends the psalm with a prayer that “the words of [his] mouth and the meditation of [his] heart” would be acceptable in the sight of God—showing the drawing of his heart toward his God, into deeper relationship with Him, and into closer conformity with His will and character. There is biblical evidence here for the beauty and glory of God as revealed in nature, as well as the power

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5 Of course, this logic does not mean that, since evil is part of creation, God is the author of evil. Evil was introduced into God’s perfect universe through the rebellion of Satan and into mankind’s particular experience through the sinful actions of Adam and Eve. All beauty—perfect beauty, free from corruption—was part of His creation from the beginning. Thus, all beauty that exists now, though some of it has been affected or distorted by the introduction of sin into the universe, does have its origin in God.

6 For example, in Francis Schaeffer’s *Art and the Bible* (mentioned later in this chapter), Schaeffer sets forth four helpful standards of judgment for a work of art, based on the Bible and Christian truth. Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible, The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, vol. 2, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1982), 399-403.
of that natural beauty to draw men unto the God who is its ultimate Source. Scripture supports the idea of beauty in the world as a means to touch the hearts of men, to kindle their desire for that beauty and its Source, and so to lead them toward Christ. This supports Lewis’s view of the power of Sehnsucht.

One specific way that Scripture shows God sharing beauty with men is through actually making people beautiful. This is clear, of course, through the original beauty of creation—of which mankind is the crowning piece. God created man in the honored final act of creation, and man is the only thing in creation that bears God’s own image. Along with reflecting many other aspects of God’s character, certainly the Imago Dei reflects some measure of the Creator’s beauty. And just after completing man’s creation, when God evaluated His entire creative work, He stated unequivocally and for the first time that it was “very” good (Gen 1:31).

But not only did God place beauty upon mankind from the beginning, Scripture also indicates that He continues to make—or perhaps remake⁷—people into things of beauty. Isaiah prophesies of Zion’s gloriously renewed future:

The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. (62:2-3)

Ezekiel speaks historically of God’s previous loving care for Jerusalem, His unfaithful bride: “And I put a ring on your nose and earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head” (16:12). The Lord’s love for these people led Him to establish a covenantal relationship with them and to lavish beauty upon them.

God’s bestowal of beauty upon people can also be seen in the New Testament. God shares beauty with men through making them vessels in which to carry His gospel; they become beautiful as timely messengers who bring the message of hope, salvation,

⁷“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17).
and reconciliation with God through Christ. Romans 10:15 explains this when Paul
writes, “And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful
are the feet of those who preach the good news!’” The idea of the beautiful messenger of
good news actually appears in both Old and New Testaments; here Paul quotes from a
passage found in Isaiah 52:7 and similarly echoed in Nahum 1:15. Of course, beauty in
this case does not refer to a specific physical attractiveness of the feet upon which the
messengers walk. It refers instead to the honor given to one who brings a rapturous
message of freedom and salvation.8

God is beautiful, and He has sovereignly chosen to share His beauty with men
and women, in their own creation and in the world around them. Scripture makes this clear
through its narrative of creation and through explicit statements regarding His gift of
beauty. This fits well with Lewis’s understanding of beauty as it relates to God and man.

**Nature Reflects God’s Beauty**

Psalm 19:1 referred to the heavens declaring God’s glory. Other verses
already referred to have referred to God’s beauty as it is manifested in the things He has
made. In addition, Psalm 48:1-3 describes the beauty of God’s mountain:

> Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy
mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far
north, the city of the great King. Within her citadels God has made Himself known
as a fortress.

The mountain of God’s creation is beautiful—specifically beautiful in her height. The
psalmist is clearly speaking in poetic and metaphorical and not literal terms here, but the
beauty of God’s creation is clear. The beauty that God has endued His dwelling place

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8Isaiah 52:7 is another example of an English translation of “beauty” from one of the less
common Hebrew words for the concept: *naah* (נָאָה). Brown-Driver-Briggs defines *naah* as “be comely,
befitting.” This makes sense in the light of a message of salvation that perfectly fits the need for salvation.
The one who brings the news of salvation from the Lord is honored (or called “beautiful”), because his
message is exactly what we need. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English
Lexicon*, s.v. “נָאָה.”
with leads His people to praise Him and to find refuge in Him as a fortress.

With reference to the topic, particularly striking in Psalm 48 is the placement of Mount Zion “in the far north.” Obviously, Jerusalem is not located in an extremely northern region of the earth. The *ESV Study Bible* states that the phrase “in the far north” is “apparently an idiom for where God has His throne.” Lewis’s description of his sensation of *Sehnsucht* through the descriptor “Northerness” was documented in the previous chapter. That same discussion pointed out that the individual person experiences *Sehnsucht* in different ways; however, the similar identification of beauty with elevated, northerly places in both Lewis’s corpus and in Scripture stands out in this passage.

Finally, the prophet Jeremiah speaks of the natural beauty of the earth as a gift from God’s hand. In the context of this passage, the Lord is calling faithless Israel to repentance, and He speaks of the glory of the land that He wanted to give them if only they had loyally walked with Him: “I said, how I would set you among My sons, and give you a pleasant land, a heritage most beautiful of all nations. And I thought you would call Me, My Father, and would not turn from following Me” (Jer 3:19).

This passage reiterates the point that nature itself—art from God’s own hand—reflects His beauty. This is a crucial point of agreement between Scripture and Lewis’s understanding of *Sehnsucht*, since so many of his experiences of *Sehnsucht* took place when he interacted with natural beauty. In addition, this prophetic passage in Jeremiah is significant for the present project because of its discussion of a beautiful, desirable thing in the context of a call for men to turn back to God. The longing for something beautiful is used here in service of a call of men toward God.

**Manmade Art Can Reflect God’s Beauty**

Scripture also teaches that beauty that appears in artistic creations by men points back to the beauty of God. His beauty is reflected in work; this also makes sense

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9*ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 995.
in the context of the *Imago Dei*. If human beings are made in His image, and if He creates and enjoys things of beauty, then people mirror Him in some way when they use His creative materials to make things of lesser—but still genuine—beauty. This contingent creation is what J. R. R. Tolkien referred to when he described the artistic human being as the “sub-creator.”¹⁰ If all beauty comes from God, and if the Bible specifically describes some instances of manmade art as beautiful, then manmade art is able to reflect God’s own beauty.

Isaiah speaks of the beauty of the work of man when he describes the city of Jerusalem: “Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion; put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for there shall no more come into you the uncircumcised and the unclean” (52:1). This verse is the opening statement of a prophecy of hope concerning the coming salvation of Yahweh, and it is the same passage that Paul quotes¹¹ in describing the beautiful feet of the messengers of good news. With regard to the immediate discussion, this verse clearly shows that a manmade city can be called “beautiful” by the Lord.

Isaiah gives another example of a reference to manmade beauty in Scripture, this time with regard to the art and architecture of the Temple. Sadly, it is written in response to the destruction of Jerusalem and her magnificent house of worship. The chapter is a prayer for God to intervene and change the fortunes of His people: “Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised You, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins. Will you restrain Yourself at these things, O LORD? Will You keep silent, and afflict us so terribly?” (64:11). The Temple, built by men for the purpose of worshipping a beautiful God, is itself called beautiful by Scripture.¹²

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¹¹ Paul’s quotation is in Rom 10:15.

¹² The Temple’s destruction and its coming restoration also evoke a sense of longing for beauty
Two additional references—both from Exodus 28—to manmade things which Scripture says reflect the beauty of the Lord are discussed in the next section. The identification of specific manmade pieces of art as things of real beauty in the Bible is necessary if we are to agree with C. S. Lewis that beauty through manmade art can lead men toward God. Lewis experienced this through his brother’s toy garden, through Wagnerian opera, through George Macdonald’s *Phantastes*, and through many other instances of beauty in the creative work of human beings. His belief in this area fits with biblical theology.

**God Blesses and Draws Men through Beauty**

Scripture also teaches that, as God shares His own beauty with mankind through nature and art, mankind experiences blessing. Furthermore, that blessing can be used by the Lord to draw men unto Himself. Zechariah 9:17 connects God’s beauty and blessing for mankind: “For how great is His goodness, and how great His beauty! Grain shall make the young men flourish, and new wine the young women.” In the context of God’s blessing upon His people, sandwiched between the proclamation of His great goodness and the promise of an abundant harvest that flourishes young men and women, the great blessing of God’s beauty is extolled. His beauty is manifested through His creation and His gifts, and it is a blessing to men.

Isaiah 28:5-6, in the context of God’s judgment on the proud drunkards of Ephraim (a synecdoche for the Northern Kingdom of Israel), also speaks of the blessing of God’s beauty coming upon those of His people who remain faithful and true: “In that
day the LORD of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of His people, and a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment, and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.” Among gracious gifts of glory, justice, and strength from God to His faithful remnant, He gives Himself as a “diadem of beauty.” These gifts bless and sustain them in a time of violence, oppression, and national apostasy.

Psalm 27:4 should be mentioned again here because of its particular application to this section: “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in His Temple.” In this Davidic psalm, the blessing of dwelling in the presence of God’s beauty is so important and wonderful to David that it dominates his mind and prayer life. He is going to single-mindedly persist in one primary request before the Lord—to be allowed to dwell with God forever for the purpose of inquiring of Him and unendingly gazing upon His beauty. Not only is God’s beauty clearly considered a blessing to this author, it is considered the greatest of blessings. Still further, the blessing of God’s beauty functions to draw the individual toward the Lord in this passage. David is drawn toward the presence of the Lord because of his consuming desire (Sehnsucht, perhaps) to see the Lord’s beauty for himself. He is also drawn into further relationship with the Lord through the expression of this single-minded prayer. This verse fits very well with Lewis’s understanding of Sehnsucht as a desire for beauty that draws the individual toward the ultimately beautiful God.

In Exodus 25-31, God—having just established the Mosaic Covenant at Sinai—gives detailed instructions for the established worship of the community of Israel. These instructions explain the design of the Tabernacle as well as all of the items to be used therein. In particular, chapter 28 describes the garments that are to be made for the priests to wear as they assist in relating the people to God. The commands given to Moses describing this priestly attire are instructive for this dissertation: “And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty” (Exod 28:2). “For
Aaron’s sons you shall make coats and sashes and caps. You shall make them for glory and beauty” (Exod 28: 40). Here one sees God directing the use of manmade art for a very specific purpose. The priestly garments are to be made in such a way as to convey glory and beauty. In fact, the Hebrew word for “glory” in Exodus 28 shares a lexical root with the Hebrew word for “glory” in Psalm 19:1.13 As seen, Psalm 19:1 speaks of God’s own glory as declared by the heavens. In Exodus 28, the glory and beauty do not come from the high priest himself, but are to be indicative of the character of the God to whom he is directing the people’s attention. The beauty of the garment should draw the people’s attention to God. After all, the overarching topic in this section of Exodus is the establishment of the Israelite worship of Yahweh. On top of that, the primary function of a priest is to be a mediator between God and man—to draw mankind closer to his Creator. The beauty of the elements of the Tabernacle are blessings from God that should function to draw worshippers toward the God who is the Source of all beauty.

In these Scriptural cases, the Bible clearly shows the value of beauty in pointing men toward God. Through sharing His beauty in nature and manmade art, the Lord blesses men; He can even draw them to Himself through desire for the experience of His beauty. These are crucial elements of a biblical and theological assessment of the orthodoxy of C. S. Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht.

**Beauty Is Associated with Spiritual Change or Renewal**

Finally, beauty in Scripture repeatedly demonstrates an association with spiritual change or renewal in the lives of people. This element was certainly not one that I was looking for as I searched Scripture for passages on beauty that might relate to Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht. Yet, the connection continued to appear until it could not be ignored.

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In a serendipitous moment I realized that, though I had not looked for it, this could actually be the most profound point of agreement between Scripture and C. S. Lewis on this issue. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis outlines in full detail how his inconsolable desire for beauty drew him on toward the joy he experienced in that beauty. That search persisted through twenty years of atheism. Ultimately, however, the pursuit led him to become a theist and then ultimately to convert to Christianity, which is truly the greatest instance of spiritual change and renewal. It is highly significant, then, that the Bible often puts beauty together with spiritual transformation.

The reader may have already noticed a frequent use of Old Testament prophetic books in the passages used in this chapter. By itself, the surprisingly frequent appearance of beauty in this scriptural genre seems to indicate a connection between beauty and spiritual transformation, for the prophetic books of the Bible by the nature of their genre call for repentance, renewal, restoration, and change. These books boldly decry any disconnect between the goodness of the God Israel claims to worship and the actual spiritual character of the Israelites themselves. It makes sense that the prophets would present the desirable beauty of God in the context of calls for spiritual change in the lives of His people. This beauty can be desirable for believers and unbelievers alike, as it was in Lewis’s case prior to his conversion. Certainly, prophetic calls like, “Seek the LORD and live” (Amos 5:6)\(^{14}\) can apply to those who already know Him and need simply to repent, as well as to those who do not know Him and need salvation itself.

Several verses (some already mentioned) display this connection between beauty and spiritual change: “In that day the Branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel”

\(^{14}\) Amos 5 repeatedly calls for the reader to “seek” God in order to “live.” Though Amos 5 does not mention “beauty” specifically, it does remind the reader that God “made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning and darkens the day into night” (v. 8). It also calls for “justice [to] roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (v. 24). Verse 8 features a majestic vision of God’s power in creation, and v. 24 uses a beautiful natural metaphor to express the necessary spiritual change that must take place in Israel. Again, beauty and spiritual renewal accompany each other.
(Isa 4:2); “In that day the LORD of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of His people, and a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment, and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate” (Isa 28:5); “Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion; put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for there shall no more come into you the uncircumcised and the unclean” (Isa 52:1); “You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God” (Isa 62:3); “For how great is His goodness, and how great His beauty! Grain shall make the young men flourish, and new wine the young women” (Zech 9:17).

Over and over again, the advent of beauty is announced in the context of immediate discussions or entire prophetic books that call for or predict change in the lives of God’s people. Other verses not mentioned continue the call: “All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you; the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall come up with acceptance on My altar, and I will beautify My beautiful house” (Isa 60:7). Here, the Lord uses natural imagery and metaphor to speak of His coming blessings for His people—in this case coming from areas beyond Israel’s borders. Additionally in Isaiah 60, the Lord speaks of returning beauty to His house when He renews the fortunes of His people and brings the glory and wealth of the nations to the bright light of Zion. Beauty is connected to spiritual renewal and restoration in the Bible.

Finally, Ecclesiastes 3:11 might be the single most important verse for Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht (and this dissertation) in the entire Bible. It captures in one place both the idea that God has placed beauty in the universe, and that God has also placed a desire in man’s heart that leads him on a continuous search for the transcendent—never actually finding all the answers in this life alone. The Preacher writes in Ecclesiastes 3:11, “He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, He has put eternity into man’s
heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”

In the context of the discussion, this verse practically leaps off of the page with meaning. It teaches—consistent with numerous verses mentioned—that God has endowed creation with His own beauty. The verse even says that *everything* in creation possesses beauty in some way, at some time, appointed by God Himself. But then, strikingly, the verse turns to the somewhat enigmatic statement that God has placed “eternity” into the heart of man. From the next statement that clarifies the result of this gift, it seems clear that when the Preacher describes God’s placement of eternity in man’s heart, he is referring to something other than just the fact that God made man an immortal soul. He seems to be describing an awareness, or a hunger, or even a desire.

The last statement of Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that although God has placed eternity itself in the heart of man, He has not enabled mankind to fully know all of His ways from the beginning to the end. Clearly implied is some search undertaken by the heart indwelt with eternity. Again, one sees that beauty is associated in Scripture with spiritual change or renewal; here, it takes place through mankind’s search for the beautiful and eternal ways of God. Eternity placed in the heart leads the individual to seek out God’s ways; it leads a person to try to see more of God’s beauty through His creation that is infused with it. And it seems that this search will be in some measure rewarded. But in the end, man will not be able in this life to fully understand all of God’s ways, especially through the limited medium of creation and because of the distortion of his own sinful nature.

Much of the content of this verse fits with and strengthens C. S. Lewis’s case

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15Interestingly, the very next verse (3:12) says, “I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live.” The mention of “joy” in this immediate context is significant because of Lewis’s use of the term and the title of his autobiography.

16The *ESV Study Bible* seems to concur that “eternity” is not simply saying that God made man’s soul to live forever. It describes “eternity” here as “a sense that life continues beyond this present existence.” *ESV Study Bible*, 1200.
for God’s use of the desire for beauty to draw men unto Himself. Lewis explained in
Surprised by Joy how the Lord had scattered examples of beauty in nature and manmade
art all around Lewis, beginning in his childhood. He had made everything around Lewis
beautiful in its time. And Lewis, too, had eternity in his heart; this awareness drove him
on in an insatiable search for transcendence, for Northernness, and for joy. Yet, Lewis
found that he was unable to fully understand everything about God from beginning to end
through this search. Rather, he ultimately found that the search for joy as an end in itself
was a vain pursuit. Only the God who stood behind the joy would bring true fulfillment,
true pleasure, and the satisfaction of all Sehnsucht to the person seeking joy through beauty.

C. S. Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht seems clearly compatible with Scripture,
both in the details of individual verses, as well as in the overall thrust and point of
Scripture. God is beautiful, and He desires for people to be in relationship with Him as
His children. He is “not wishing that any should perish” (2 Pet 3:9). It seems fitting, then,
that He would use desire—Sehnsucht—for His beauty to draw men unto Himself. Scripture
itself fits with Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht; this is the most important corroboration
available for his ideas. But the beliefs and writings of other Christian theologians and
philosophers may prove helpful on this topic, as well.

**Christian Theological and Philosophical Foundations**

Not only does the Bible itself speak of the power of beauty to draw men unto
God, but many influential Christian thinkers have made such an assertion. Lewis’s ideas
have much corroboration in the writings of widely read Christian theologians and
philosophers.

**Augustine**

Augustine, being a Christian heavily influenced by Neoplatonism, incorporated
some of the ideas of Plato into his thought concerning beauty. Plato’s transcendentals—
the good, the true, the beautiful, and the real—are modified and clarified in Augustine’s
thought through the theologian’s assertion that all four are found in unity in the person of God himself. All beauty flows from God. Nothing is more beautiful than God himself in his holy perfection, goodness, and glory, and every instance of beauty in the universe is tributary to the first and ultimate beauty of God.

Augustine speaks of the drawing power of this divinely-rooted beauty through indicating its “shining out” in the world. Philosophy professor Emmanuel Chapman translates Augustine in *De Natura Boni*:

> We Catholics worship God, the principle of all good great or little, the principle of all beauty great or little, the principle of all order great or little. The more measure, beauty and order shine out in created things, the more are they good, the less the shining out of measure, beauty and order, the less are they good. Measure, beauty and order are the three general goods that we find in all created things whether spiritual or material.

Augustine agrees that beauty comes ultimately from God and that this beauty shines out in both material and immaterial creation, indicating its divine Source. The shining out of this beauty indicates its power to attract and draw men toward God, with the final result of “worship.”

**John Calvin**

John Calvin is also similar to C. S. Lewis in his view of beauty as originating in God and pointing back to God. Others have written on Calvin’s relevant and helpful concept of the world as a theater for the viewing of the glory of God himself. Calvin says in his commentary on the book of Romans that “man was created to be a spectator of

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this formed world, and that eyes were given him, that he might, by looking on so beautiful a picture, be led up to the Author himself.”

So, according to Calvin, not only does beauty come from God, but the world that He has created is the means by which His beauty is experienced. The sharing of God’s beauty was worth going to the great length of creating this unfathomable universe. And Calvin says that this beauty that God has infused into the universe should lead man to God.

Calvin was particularly struck with the power of natural beauty and its omnipresence in the physical world. In the Institutes he wrote,

Yet, in the first place, wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of his glory. You cannot in one glance survey this most vast and beautiful system of the universe, in its wide expanse, without being completely overwhelmed by the boundless force of its brightness.

Essentially, wherever we look, we can see God’s glory and beauty in the natural world surrounding us, and overwhelming beauty will often function as a pointer toward our Creator. Calvin’s thought seems to fit with Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht.

**Jonathan Edwards**

Jonathan Edwards follows in Calvin’s theological tradition and has a very similar position with regard to natural beauty, namely, that it is reflective of God’s beauty and evocative of desires toward God. Diana Butler has argued that Edwards’ position on natural beauty is greatly indebted to Calvin’s position. Edwards felt that the beauty of God and his love was primary beauty, while the beauty of man and nature was secondary. Edwards not only provides still more corroborations for Lewis’s notion of Sehnsucht, but he also helps the reader understand why everyone who experiences beauty in the world does not automatically come to faith in Christ. Diana Butler summarizes,

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According to him, natural loves, “secondary” or “inferior” beauty, can be perceived, but men and women can in no way discern the primary purposes of God’s revelation in nature. Echoing Calvin’s Institutes, Edwards pondered humanity’s inability to see God’s glory: “The invisible things of God are very plainly and clearly to be seen by the things that are made; and the perfections of the Divine Being, his eternal power and Godhead, are very manifest in the works of His hands. And yet grossly absurd notions concerning the Godhead have prevailed in the world.” He concluded that “there is an extreme and brutish blindness in things of religion, which naturally possesses the hearts of mankind” as a result of the Fall. The secondary beauty of humanity and nature remain intact, but as with Calvin, they have limited use.²²

Edwards’ words here would explain why C. S. Lewis felt the “ache” mentioned when he had experiences of Sehnsucht, but still went through decades of disbelief, needed to hear the special revelation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and had to have his spiritual eyes opened to the truth by the Holy Spirit. The experience of Sehnsucht is insufficient to move an unbeliever all the way to the gospel and a relationship with God; instead, it seems that the Lord sometimes uses this secondary beauty in the service of pointing to special revelation and the gospel of Christ as revealed in the Bible.

H. R. Rookmaaker

A more contemporary Christian thinker who wrote copiously on aesthetics and beauty was H. R. Rookmaaker. Rookmaaker was a close friend of and strong influence on Francis Schaeffer. Rookmaaker was raised in the Dutch East Indies and, once he became a Christian, held strong Reformed views. He lectured widely and served as the Chair of Art History at the Free University of Amsterdam, as well as taught and ministered in one of Schaeffer’s L’abri communities. In the conclusion to his most famous work, Modern Art and the Death of a Culture, he writes in a manner consistent with C. S. Lewis’s views of beauty:

Neither art nor beauty needs to be justified or put on a pedestal. They are to be enjoyed and appreciated and practised, in love and freedom, as a joy for ever, accepted as a great gift of God. . . . It is for us to find truth and beauty for today,

constantly re-applying the truth of God’s Word to our own time and to our own contemporary situation. Only if we live in this way shall we be “salting salt” and the fruit of the Holy Spirit seen in our work.\textsuperscript{23}

Rookmaaker first explains that all the beauty that man experiences, including that in his own art, is a gift from God Himself. Following that statement, he indicates that the pursuit and use of beauty today will make believers “salting salt” to the world. Here Rookmaaker references the words of Jesus from Matthew 5:13, in which the “salt of the earth” is only worth keeping if it is still salty. Clearly, Rookmaaker understands beauty from God to be useful for drawing men \textit{unto} God; this is why he connects beauty to the concept of Christians as the salt of the earth.

\textbf{Francis Schaeffer}

Francis Schaeffer has had a massive impact on evangelicalism, and on the evangelical understanding of art in particular. In his treatise \textit{Art and the Bible}, he writes with a lofty theological vision of beauty:

\begin{quote}
Come with me to the Alps and look at the snow-covered mountains. There can be no question. God is interested in beauty. God made people to be beautiful. And beauty has a place in the worship of God. Here in the temple which Solomon built under the leadership of God Himself beauty was given an important place.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

Schaeffer sees God as having initiated the creation of manmade beauty in the Bible through His instructions to Solomon regarding the construction of the temple. Schaeffer speaks to this topic elsewhere in the same work:

\begin{quote}
The arts and the sciences do have a place in the Christian life—they are not peripheral. For a Christian, redeemed by the work of Christ and under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, the Lordship of Christ should include an interest in the arts. A Christian should use these arts to the glory of God—not just as tracts, but as things of beauty to the praise of God. An art work can be a doxology in itself.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

Although Schaeffer is saying that art should be used for \textit{more} than seeing people drawn

\textsuperscript{23}H. R. Rookmaaker, \textit{Modern Art and the Death of a Culture} (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 231, 245.

\textsuperscript{24}Schaeffer, \textit{Art and the Bible}, 381.

\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., 377.
to Christ, he does include that as one of the things it should be used for. Beauty comes from God, God desires to be worshiped through beauty, and He uses beauty to draw men unto Himself. Schaeffer’s views are consistent with C. S. Lewis’s views of Sehnsucht.

**William Edgar**

Leading Christian apologist William Edgar writes of beauty’s power to point people to Christ and even to help in defending the faith in his article “Aesthetics: Beauty Avenged, Apologetics Enriched.” More than once in the article, he references C. S. Lewis’s own views on beauty and art. He cautions in the article against assuming that the existence of beauty can be used to conclusively prove the existence of God. But, similarly to Lewis, he asserts that beauty in the world does teach about the Creator:

At the same time, to deny the correlation between the beautiful world and God seems to ignore the obvious. The Scriptures have no hesitation in making a connection between loveliness, or glory, with God’s presence . . . properly understood, beauty is a manifestation of the reality of another scheme of things, the author of being and of salvation. Beauty discloses the divine nature.\(^\text{26}\)

Edgar follows this statement with a clarion call to use beauty to strengthen evangelism and apologetics, through attracting men to the Lord and using biblical truth to ground an aesthetic that corresponds to the world.

The Bible is unashamed to compare God’s wisdom to a craftsman who forms the world (Prov 8:30). The master artist declares the newly made world to be “good,” and “very good” (Gen 1:12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Part of that approval must be aesthetic. Part of the heavens’ praise for the wonders of God must be aesthetic (Ps 89:5). The glory of the Lord revealed in redemption is also partly aesthetic, *attracting the nations* (Isa 60:1-3). Indeed, much of the Bible’s literature is beautifully crafted, as literature.

Finally, with all these biblical resources, confronting a world that is rediscovering aesthetics, we find ourselves with a marvelous opportunity for enriching the actual apologetic argument for the gospel. There is a reality to beauty because there is a transcendental ground which gives everything, including the aesthetic, meaning. . . . What more important approach to the transformation of culture could there be than articulating a Christian worldview in which aesthetics occupies its rightful place?\(^\text{27}\)


\(^{\text{27}}\)Ibid., 121-22.
Gene Edward Veith

Gene Edward Veith, currently Provost and Professor of Literature at Patrick Henry College, has written widely on Christianity, the arts, and culture in general. His book *State of the Arts: From Bezalel to Mapplethorpe* has been particularly influential. In that work, Veith discusses in detail the largely neglected scriptural passages on art that appear in God’s instructions to Moses for the building of the Tabernacle. The verses from Exodus 28 mentioned above feature prominently in this discussion.

In His instructions for the building of the Tabernacle, the Lord specifically calls out a man named Bezalel, son of Uri, and gives him special abilities, talents, intelligence, and guidance in order to complete many artistic elements of the Tabernacle project (Exod 31:1-11; Exod 35:30-36:2). Bezalel is helped in this task by other men also appointed and gifted by God for the job. From these scriptural texts, Gene Edward Veith makes many helpful observations and applications for informing a biblical theology of beauty and art. Some of these fit well with C. S. Lewis’s understanding of beauty and its ability to draw men unto God. For example,

The Lord’s specifications for the Tabernacle and later for the Temple take up a good part of the Old Testament. . . . But it pleased God to include such details in His holy Word, not only for Bezalel but for us. God, the designer and maker of the universe, clearly places great value on details of design, construction, and artifice.

Why was everything to be so lavish? The Lord tells Moses that “you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty” (Exodus 28:2 RSV). The priestly vestments . . . were to be made “for glory and for beauty.”

God was to be glorified. Only the finest, the best that human beings have to offer, is appropriate to glorify the Lord. The glory of the Tabernacle seems to have been intended as a reminder, a faint copy, of heavenly glory (Hebrews 8:5). Those dazzled by the sublimity of the Tabernacle were perhaps experiencing a glimpse of the much more dazzling grandeur of the infinite God enthroned on “as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness” (Exodus 24:10 RSV).29

In this section of *State of the Arts*, Veith points out God’s detailed concern for the physical

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28As of the time of this writing, Veith has also assumed the position of Interim President.

appearance of the Tabernacle and Temple, even down to the types of designs featured in the structure and implements contained therein. The Lord used a significant amount of written space in the Old Testament to specifically describe how the sanctuaries for His worship should look. In Exodus 28, He spells out His goal by saying that the priestly vestment should convey glory and beauty. Veith makes the same connection that C. S. Lewis does through *Sehnsucht* when he writes that the glory of the Tabernacle was pointing beyond itself—to the heavenly place of God’s dwelling, and finally, to God Himself.

**Alvin Plantinga**

Alvin Plantinga is widely regarded as the preeminent Christian philosopher of the present era. It is hard to find anyone who can match the impact Plantinga has had through his works on Reformed Epistemology. God has used his rigorous argumentation on the rationality of Christian belief to restore much respect in academic philosophy for the Christian worldview.

Years ago, Alvin Plantinga delivered a lecture, the notes for which, though technically unpublished, have been widely distributed on the Internet. The lecture was entitled “Two Dozen (or So) Theistic Arguments.” Two of those arguments relate well to this discussion of Lewis’s views. Plantinga calls the first “The Mozart Argument”:

On a naturalistic anthropology, our alleged grasp and appreciation of (alleged) beauty is to be explained in terms of evolution: [it] somehow arose in the course of evolution, and something about its early manifestations have survival value. But miserable and disgusting cacophony (heavy metal rock?) could as well have been what we took to be beautiful. On the theistic view, God recognizes beauty; indeed, it is deeply involved in His very nature. To grasp the beauty of a Mozart’s *sic* D Minor piano concerto is to grab something that is objectively there; it is to appreciate what is objectively worthy of appreciation.30

Plantinga clearly believes that heavy metal rock is anything but beautiful. On the other

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30Alvin Plantinga, “Plantinga’s Two Dozen (or So) Theistic Arguments,” 18, accessed August 4, 2014, http://www.calvin.edu/academic/philosophy/virtual_library/articles/plantinga_alvin/two_dozen_or_so_theistic_arguments.pdf. The lecture notes are hosted by the website of Calvin College, where Plantinga has taught and chaired the Philosophy Department since retiring from the University of Notre Dame. The fact that they are lecture notes also explains the unpolished grammar.
hand, he claims that Mozart’s piano music possesses objective beauty and should be appreciated as such. He argues that humans can recognize objective beauty because we are part of a universe made by a God who recognizes beauty and has beauty in His very nature. A naturalistic universe, however—one not made by a God at all (and thus, not by a beautiful God who recognizes beauty)—does not have a sufficient explanation for beauty and recognition of it. In a purely naturalistic universe, one could have thought (erroneously, according to Plantinga) that truly miserable sounds like heavy metal rock were things of beauty. Beauty and its recognition make sense in the context of a theistic worldview. Plantinga, much like C. S. Lewis, sees beauty and man’s acknowledgement of it as pointing to God—even serving as an apologetic argument for God’s existence.31

In the lecture, Plantinga points to a second argument that is relevant to this discussion. Here, he specifically refers to Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht (through the term “Nostalgia”), although with reserved agreement. He calls the argument “C. S. Lewis’s Argument from Nostalgia.” Plantinga writes, “Lewis speaks of the nostalgia that often engulfs us upon beholding a splendid land or seascape; these somehow speak to us of their maker. Not sure just what the argument is; but suspect there is one there.”32 Plantinga suspects there is value to Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht and its speaking to us of our “maker”; he simply has not investigated the matter fully. One goal of this dissertation is to make clear Lewis’s argument from that nostalgic sensation, especially as it is seen and exemplified throughout Lewis’s corpus.33

Thus, C. S. Lewis’s use of Sehnsucht to describe a desire for beauty that draws one towards God is not isolated or unorthodox in reference to Christian Scripture, theology, and philosophy. In fact, his application of this concept seems to be an almost unavoidable

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31 A similar argument is made in chap. 6 of this dissertation.

32 Ibid., 18.

33 Perhaps Plantinga will appreciate this effort!
result of a very common understanding of beauty itself. Beauty is often understood generally as a quality that evokes some response of attraction—in effect, it is desirable or pleasurable in some way; this idea features in many philosophical explanations of beauty.\footnote{For example, Edward Farley, \textit{Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic} (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 17, in speaking of the “great theory of beauty,” states that it “originated with Pythagoras and gained elaboration in Plato and subsequent Platonists” and was “then given Christian reformulation in St. Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Anicius Boethius, Duns Scotus Erigena, St. Bonavenature and Thomas Aquinas. Proponents of the great theory argue that, whatever beauty itself is, to experience it is pleasurable.”}

If it is true that God is the Source of all beauty, is it not then natural that our experience of beauty would strike us with longing—with \textit{Sehnsucht}—for greater fulfillment of that desire, for higher levels of that transcending pleasure? And would not little sips of this water gradually draw us toward the Well, where we could fully quench our thirst? This is the drawing power of beauty as Lewis sees it—the experience of beauty does not ultimately satisfy, but whets the appetite for something more.
CHAPTER 5
NON-CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR SEHNSUCHT

On January 16, 2002, satirical comedy website The Onion ran a mock news story that fits particularly well with C. S. Lewis’s understanding and use of Sehnsucht. This website would not likely be the first place most people would look for corroboration of the idea that beauty in the world might overcome atheistic arguments and draw men toward God; in fact, I must redact the title and portions of the article itself for the sake of decency. Nonetheless, in the midst of the satire, the point is there. The article, “Black Gospel Choir Makes Man Wish He Believed in All That God [Stuff]” reads,

Columbus, OH—The gloriously jubilant gospel singing that pours forth each Sunday from Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church is enough to make local resident Doug Kamin wish he believed in all that God [stuff]. Kamin, who lives two blocks from Bethel AME Church, passes the church most Sundays en route to his local Starbucks. Though he has rejected the existence of God ever since discovering Marx and Nietzsche in the 10th grade, Kamin admitted that the exuberant singing of the church choir often produces in him a feeling of longing.

Kamin first discovered Bethel AME church in May 2000, shortly after moving to the neighborhood. Long accustomed to dismissing all forms of Christian ceremony and worship as “hysterical” and “cult-like,” Kamin overheard a rendition of “The Old Ship of Zion” that led him to amend his opinion.

[Kamin said.] “Anyway, it stopped me dead in my tracks. I just stood in front of the church and let the music surround me. For that moment, I totally forgot what an artificial construct God is. . . .”

Kamin said he would love to experience a Bethel service, but expressed doubt that he would be welcome there.

“I bet they can smell an atheist a mile away,” Kamin said. “I shouldn’t taint their experience with my cold rationalism and irrefutable logic. And the fact that I’m white probably wouldn’t help matters, either.”

Kamin need not worry, said Rev. Lawrence Stovall, Bethel’s senior pastor.

“People of all colors and creeds are welcome in the house of the Lord, even non-believers like Doug,” Stovall said. “Perhaps our abiding faith in Jesus and love for

120
our fellow man will, at the very least, inspire him to quit living in his head all the
time.”¹

This article is surprising in how favorably it presents the church, their worship,
and their faith in Christ—especially in the context of the other articles and features on
this satirical and often profane website. Equally surprising is the one-sided and arrogant
manner in which the atheist character is portrayed. And the close parallels to C. S.
Lewis’s idea of Sehnsucht are significant. These factors expose the reality, as many
articles on The Onion do, that the authors of their posts are often funny, but in search of
more than just a cheap laugh; rather, they are thinking deeply and expressing those
thoughts through humor.

Many others who do not adhere to the Christian worldview have thought
deeply about the nature of beauty, the source of beauty, and what (or who) an individual
is interacting with when he or she experiences true beauty. Among them are influential
philosophers of aesthetics who have corroborated portions of Lewis’s view of the power
of beauty. This chapter examines some thinkers who have done so, with the goals of
further validating Lewis’s claims and beginning to show the apologetic value of
Sehnsucht. German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer will feature prominently here,
because of the significant parallels between his writings on beauty and Lewis’s own
concept of Sehnsucht—despite the wide differences in each man’s worldview and, in
particular, Schopenhauer’s notorious pessimism.

Socrates and Plato

Plato was as pivotal a philosopher as ever lived. Alfred North Whitehead
famously said of Plato’s influence, “The safest general characterization of the European
philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”² Part of Plato’s

¹“Black Gospel Choir Makes Man Wish He Believed in All that God [Stuff],” The Onion,
man-wish-he-believed-in-a,231/.

massive impact came through his labor in passing along many of the insights of his unpublished but highly influential master Socrates—however difficult it has proven for scholars to sort out the different views of master and student. Socrates greatly advanced the project of philosophy by identifying the primary questions that philosophy should answer, especially questions of proper definitions (i.e., What is justice? What is knowledge?). Additionally, Plato’s numerous examples of Socrates’ dialectic method have provided a means by which philosophers have pursued truth and accuracy for millennia. Together, the two men set the table for nearly all future philosophical debate by outlining many of the major philosophical issues and problems that occupy philosophers today.

Historians of philosophy lack access to Socrates’ fully-orbed concept of beauty—that is, if he had one; he consistently focuses more on his lack of full knowledge about the world than on concrete answers to questions. Despite this, it is clear from Plato’s dialogues that Socrates avidly sought to move from individual instantiations to that which is universal. Along the way, once a definition was offered, Socrates would press the definition, reductio ad absurdum, clarifying and re-forming it through his questions. Frederick Copleston summarizes, even using beauty as an example of the application of Socrates’ concept of universals:

Socrates was therefore concerned with universal definitions, i.e. with the attaining of fixed concepts . . . we may speak of a piece of gold as being “true gold,” implying that the definition of gold, the standard or universal criterion, is realised in this piece of gold. Similarly we speak of things as being more or less beautiful, implying that they approach the standard of Beauty in a greater or less degree, a standard which does not vary or change like the beautiful objects of our experience, but remains constant and “rules,” as it were all particular beautiful objects.3

Socrates’ concept of universals fits with C. S. Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht in that Lewis saw beauty as pointing beyond itself, as pointing to the true Standard of beauty, God Himself.

Plato’s more specifically outlined concept of beauty allows one to go further in connecting his ideas to those of C. S. Lewis. Plato’s foundational doctrine of the Forms seems to fit in a general way with Lewis’s concept of *Sehnsucht*. For Plato, individual and material instantiations of beauty in the world reflect in a small and imperfect way the transcendental, immaterial Absolute Beauty. The transcendentals of goodness and beauty are closely linked in Plato’s thought, and there is an ultimate source of good which “is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power.”\(^4\) Although human contemplation of the Forms is distorted—as Plato described in his well-known illustration of shadows projected on the back wall of a cave—when an individual looks at something beautiful he connects to the Form of Absolute Beauty.

Plato seems to imply that the beautiful is a more direct path to the Absolute, lending greater secular corroboration to Lewis’s view of beauty. In *Greater Hippias*, Plato makes Socrates to say,

> So we reach the conclusion that beautiful bodies, and beautiful rules of life, and wisdom, and all the things we mentioned just now, are beautiful because they are beneficial. . . . Then it looks as if beauty is the beneficial. . . . Then the beautiful is the cause of the good.\(^5\)

City University of New York professor Nickolas Pappas explains Plato’s higher view of beauty: “Nevertheless beauty is not just any Form. It bears some close relationship to the good, even though Socrates argues that the two are distinct. It is therefore a Form of some status above that of other Forms.”\(^6\)

Notwithstanding Plato’s hazy concept of the divine, for this dissertation it is significant to note his strong linkage between beauty, its beneficial nature (which is similar to the desirability of beauty discussed above), and a transcendent, ultimate reality.

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\(^5\) Ibid., *Greater Hippias*, 296 e 4-16.

On some level, Plato would agree with Lewis that beauty could draw mankind toward that which is absolute or ultimate in the universe.

**Immanuel Kant**

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was a highly influential German philosopher who has had a massive impact on modern philosophy in general and aesthetic philosophy in particular. Kant was a prolific author, but three of his most important works fully outline his critical system. They were written sequentially, *Critique of Pure Reason, Critique of Practical Reason*, and *Critique of Judgment*. *Critique of Judgment* was considered by Kant to be the capstone work that brought unity and completeness to his overall philosophical system. The first of the two major sections in *Critique of Judgment* deals with Kant’s aesthetic philosophy. His aesthetic philosophy was extremely important to his overall system, which set him apart from most other philosophers reaching all the way back to Plato.

On the surface, it might seem that Kant’s oft-discussed concept of the sublime would relate well to Lewis’s concept of *Sehnsucht*. For Kant, sublimity in nature is found in experiences of natural majesty that also elicit some measure of fear—such as a snowy mountain cliff or an approaching tidal wave. This fear often causes the observer to realize his own smallness or frailty and to look outside himself. Although these results of sublimity might seem parallel to the transcendence of *Sehnsucht*, Kant clearly divided the sublime from the beautiful. In his book *Beauty*, aesthetic philosopher Roger Scruton explains,

The distinction between the sublime and the beautiful was therefore taken up by Kant, who regarded it as fundamental to understanding the judgement of taste... The

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beautiful landscape prompts us to a judgement of taste; the sublime vista invites
another kind of judgement, in which we measure ourselves against the awesome
infinity of the world, and become conscious of our finitude and frailty.  

Kant, like C. S. Lewis, linked the experience of beauty to pleasure, albeit in the
context of his elevated, technical understanding of “judgment”: “That is beautiful which
pleases in the mere act of judging it (not in the sensation of it, or by means of a
concept).” What is most striking for the purposes of this dissertation is Kant’s
understanding of aesthetics as uniting all of philosophy. Kant is well known for his
distinction between the world of sensory experience—the phenomenal realm—and the
world of things-in-themselves—the noumenal realm. In *Critique of Judgment*, he claims
that aesthetic experience unites the two realms. Copleston elaborates, “The point he
wishes to make is that aesthetic experience forms a connecting link between the sensible
world as presented in scientific knowledge and the supersensible world as apprehended in
moral experience.”

For Kant, true, complete, and balanced philosophical wisdom is dependent
upon the ability to properly contemplate aesthetic beauty:

Now taste is at bottom a faculty for judging the sensible illustration of moral Ideas
(by means of a certain analogy involved in our reflection upon both these); and it is
from this faculty also and from the greater susceptibility grounded thereon for the
feeling arising from the latter (called moral feeling), that the pleasure is derived
which taste regards as valid for mankind in general and not merely for the private
feeling of each.

Kant, in his characteristically convoluted prose, explains here that there is a connection
between one’s ability to evaluate the beauty and goodness of a piece of art, for example,
and that same individual’s ability to evaluate the goodness of moral actions. “Taste” is
Kant’s term for this evaluative ability, which, rightly used, makes judgments that are

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12Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 255.
valid for all men and not just for the individual and his own preferences. By these lights, having developed aesthetic taste, one is enabled to make moral judgments.

Aesthetic philosopher Roger Scruton’s summary of Kant’s transcendent aesthetic system helps make the connection to Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht:

Nor had Kant’s predecessors perceived, as he perceived, that both metaphysics and ethics must remain incomplete without a theory of the aesthetic. Only a rational being can experience beauty; and, without the experience of beauty, the exercise of reason is incomplete. It is only in the aesthetic experience of nature, Kant suggests, that we grasp the relation of our faculties to the world, and so understand both our own limitations, and the possibility of transcending them. Aesthetic experience intimates to us that our point of view is, after all, only our point of view, and that we are no more creators of nature than we are creators of the point of view from which we observe and act on it. Momentarily we stand outside that point of view, not so as to have knowledge of a transcendent world, but so as to perceive the harmony that exists between our faculties and the objects in relation to which they are employed. At the same time we sense the divine order that makes this harmony possible.13

Here, Scruton clarifies that Kant did not mean to say that aesthetic experience could somehow provide knowledge of a transcendent world.14 However, Scruton does explain that, within Kant’s system, interactions with beauty pointed to a natural world created by someone other than the viewer and a harmonious order made possible by divine intervention. Only rational beings—humans, not animals—experience beauty, and this beauty indicates to them the existence and order of the world from a source beyond themselves. This pointing of beauty toward a transcendent reality—and even a divine Creator and Designer—fits well with Lewis’s understanding of beauty as it works in the one who experiences Sehnsucht.

Arthur Schopenhauer: Philosopher of Pessimism

The above heading is the title of a book on Schopenhauer (1788-1860) by

13Scruton, Kant, 100.

14Although it may seem so at first, Kant would not necessarily be at odds with Lewis on this point. At the end of Surprised by Joy, Lewis says that joy was a “pointer” to God; his claims consistently focus on Sehnsucht pointing beyond this world rather than giving specific knowledge of a transcendent world. C. S. Lewis, Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life (Orlando: Harcourt, 1955), 238.
Frederick Copleston, renowned historian of philosophy. This title certainly fits Schopenhauer, both in his worldview and in the circumstances of his life. Because of Schopenhauer’s prominence in this section, it helps to provide more background on his life.

Schopenhauer’s paternal grandmother died after having gone mad, and his father likely committed suicide. Schopenhauer himself had a terrible relationship with his own mother. Because of a violent outburst against a woman who apparently annoyed him (he pushed her down a flight of stairs), for years he had to pay damages for the permanent injuries she experienced.

Schopenhauer experienced much frustration with the academic milieu of his day—in one case, he tried to directly compete with G. W. F. Hegel (whom he bitterly opposed) with regard to scheduling of lectures; Schopenhauer failed miserably in this head-to-head competition. In 1840, he penned an essay for a contest in Denmark; he was the only person who submitted an entry, but he still lost the contest! Only in the


\[18\] Ibid.

\[19\] Schopenhauer did not mince words in communicating how much he despised Hegel. In speaking of those philosophers who followed Kant and, in Schopenhauer’s view, muddied the waters of his insight, he said, “The philosophaster’s object was not to instruct, but to befoul his hearers, as every page attests. At first Fichte and Schelling shine as the heroes of this epoch; to be followed by the man who is quite unworthy even of them, and greatly their inferior in point of talent – I mean the stupid and clumsy charlatan Hegel.” Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Basis of Morality* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), 70, emphasis added.


final ten years of his life were Schopenhauer’s ideas widespread and popular; for most of
his life he struggled in academic and literary obscurity.22 If anyone’s personal experience
could properly be pointed to as contributing to a pessimistic outlook, it was
Schopenhauer’s discouraging life.

Although other philosophers, including Plato, clearly had an effect on the ideas
of Arthur Schopenhauer, the single most important figure dominating the thought of
Schopenhauer was Immanuel Kant. Schopenhauer admired Kant, and his doctoral
dissertation “On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason” manifests
Kant’s influence over his work.23

For Schopenhauer, epistemology and aesthetics were closely linked. This
feature of his thought can be traced back to his dependence upon Kant’s notion of what is
possible to know from the world around us. As referenced, Immanuel Kant’s critical
philosophy attempted to answer the extreme skepticism of David Hume by positing a
division between one’s perceptual knowledge of things in the world and the actual state
of those things in themselves.24 According to Kant, our minds, as the means by which we
perceive the world around us, apply the categories of causality, time, and space to our
sensory perceptions. Because of the separation between what we sense (the
phenomenon) and what is actually out there (the noumenon), true knowledge of the world
around us is impossible to obtain.25

Kant had a massive impact on subsequent philosophical thought, and
Schopenhauer was just one of numerous significant philosophers constituting differing
branches that stemmed from the tree of Kant’s ideas. The German idealists—Fichte,

23Copleston, A History of Philosophy, 7:263-64.
25Marcin, In Search of Schopenhauer’s Cat, 12-14.
Schelling, Hegel, and others—^26—are perhaps the best known. There is a certain amount of irony in Schopenhauer’s intense dislike for and opposition to Hegel, since their positions could both be considered as offshoots of Kant’s work. Copleston notes, “There are indeed certain family likenesses between the system of Schopenhauer and those of the idealists.”^27

Schopenhauer saw himself as a transcendental idealist, as holding to the cream of Kant’s crop of critical philosophy and warding off those who would manipulate or corrupt it. ^28

With Kant, critical philosophy comes on the scene as the adversary of this entire method; critical philosophy conceives its problems to be precisely those eternal truths that serve to support all such dogmatic structures; it investigates their origin and finds it to be in people’s heads. They stem from forms specifically belonging to these heads and are carried around inside of them for the purpose of apprehending an objective world. . . . To achieve this result, critical philosophy must go above and beyond the eternal truths on which all dogmatism has so far been grounded; in order to make these into its objects of investigation; but in so doing, it has become transcendental philosophy. From this it follows further that what we recognize as the objective world does not belong to the essence of things in themselves, but rather only to its appearance, and is conditioned by those very forms that lie a priori in the human intellect (i.e. the brain), and thus that the world can obtain nothing but appearances. ^29

Here, Schopenhauer agrees with Kant’s philosophy in its critique of prior methods of obtaining true knowledge. Both men asserted the inability of human perception to grasp the true nature of the world—the noumenal realm. Thus, a new philosophy—a

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^28^As an example, Schopenhauer saw the ideas of Baruch Spinoza as a corrupting influence on the philosophy of Kant: “In consequence of Kant’s criticism of all speculative theology, almost all the philosophers in Germany cast themselves back on Spinoza, so that the whole series of unsuccessful attempts known by the name of post-Kantian philosophy is Spinozism tastelessly got up, veiled in all kinds of unintelligible language, and otherwise twisted and distorted.” Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Mineola, NY: Courier Dover, 1958), 2:644.

transcendental one—was needed to make human perceiving mechanisms themselves the objects of study.

Schopenhauer’s World System

Schopenhauer’s efforts at exploring and explicating Kant’s insights led to a unique solution; it was here that Schopenhauer diverged from Kant. He did so through his assertion that there was a pathway to true knowledge—albeit a very narrow one. Schopenhauer believed that one thing can be studied as it truly is: the individual’s own perceiving self. Through this unadulterated knowledge, one is able to avoid the problems Kant said were inherent in sensory perception of the outside world. Marcin explains,

And when we do this, when we strip away time, space, causality, and even individuation itself and try to get a direct and immediate understanding of what is left—we do find something—something like a tendency to exist or a tendency to act. If we were to give this something—this tendency to exist and to act—a name, we would be hard pressed to call it anything but a “will.” And that is the word Schopenhauer chose.30

Schopenhauer explained how this process of approaching true knowledge works and how his conclusion was justified:

[T]he knowledge everyone has of his own willing . . . is neither a perception (for all perception is spatial), nor is it empty; on the contrary, it is more real than any other knowledge. . . . [O]ur willing . . . is the one thing known to us immediately, and not given to us merely in the representation, as all else is. Here, therefore, lies . . . the only narrow gateway to truth. Accordingly, we must learn to understand nature from ourselves, not ourselves from nature. . . . Therefore in this sense I teach that the inner nature of everything is will, and I call the will the thing-in-itself.31

This description explains the heart of Schopenhauer’s world system, and explains the title of his magnum opus, The World as Will and Representation.

But the philosopher of pessimism did not stop there. He ran with the concept of will: “Will is the thing-in-itself, the inner content, the essence of the world. Life, the

30Marcin, In Search of Schopenhauer’s Cat, 19.

31Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation (1958), 196-97, emphasis original.
visible world, the phenomenon, is only the mirror of the will.”

And this will—or desire, especially as connected with the desire to live—keeps all men enslaved. In some ways, Schopenhauer at this point begins to sound like a post-Kantian version of Solomon the preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes:

And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. (2:10-11)

Just as Solomon was honest about the depressing, perpetual cycle of the world and mankind’s empty desires for material things that never truly satisfy him, Schopenhauer believed that the endless grinding of the will kept all men enslaved. There is a parallel element here between Schopenhauer’s diagnosis of man’s fundamental problem and the true diagnosis given by Holy Scripture. However, as seen below, the treatment offered by both is vastly different.

In addition to his indebtedness to Kant, Schopenhauer demonstrates a dependence upon Plato in his description of the will. In some way, the will—as “the inner content, the essence of the world,” connects to what Schopenhauer called the Platonic Ideas (Forms). In the unmediated knowledge that one can possess of the will, one can actually approach something like Plato’s eternal and real Forms (real in an ultimate sense, as compared to the superficial surrounding world).

What seems unclear about Schopenhauer’s system is whether the will is to be considered as a positive or negative thing for mankind. The introduction of a connection between the will and the Ideas—a high and lofty concept—seems to contradict some of Schopenhauer’s statements about the will enslaving people. Readers who are confused

\[\text{\footnotesize 32} \text{Arthur Schopenhauer, } \textit{The World as Will and Idea}, \text{ trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp} \text{ (London: Trübner & Co., 1883), 1:354.} \]

\[\text{\footnotesize 33} \text{Copleston, } \textit{A History of Philosophy}, \text{ 7:277.} \]
by Schopenhauer’s system are in good company. Copleston claims not to understand how this works: “How a blind Will or endless striving can reasonably be said to objectify itself immediately in Platonic Ideas, is something which I do not profess to understand.”

**Schopenhauerian Salvation**

Interestingly, Schopenhauer, though a pessimistic philosopher, introduces some possible ways of escape from this grinding of the will—essentially some Schopenhauerian means of salvation. He offers two different doors of escape; one is temporary, and the other is more lasting. Both have fundamental problems in their reasoning and application. The temporary means of escape is through aesthetic contemplation. The more concrete way of salvation that Schopenhauer identifies is that of ascetic living.

**Aesthetics: A temporary escape.** Aesthetic contemplation, in Schopenhauer’s view, offers a temporary respite from the slavery of the will. Interestingly, Schopenhauer illustrates the temporary nature of this rest by calling it “the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing;” just as the Sabbath ends and work resumes for six more days, aesthetic contemplation only momentarily halts the suffering caused by the will.

Schopenhauer demonstrates a great deal of philosophical imagination in arriving at this conclusion, which perhaps is appropriate in a discussion regarding aesthetics. He admits the unusual nature of his argument when he cautions the reader to “suspend his surprise” immediately following the introduction of this idea of aesthetic

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34Ibid., 278.
35Ibid., 281.
contemplation as temporarily overcoming slavery to the will. Schopenhauer conjures up this explanation of what occurs when his proposed contemplation of art takes place:

The transition which we have referred to as possible, but yet to be regarded as only exceptional, from the common knowledge of particular things to the knowledge of the Idea, takes place suddenly; for knowledge breaks free from the service of the will, by the subject ceasing to be merely individual, and thus becoming the pure will-less subject of knowledge, which no longer traces relations in accordance with the principle of sufficient reason, but rests in fixed contemplation of the object presented to it, out of its connection with all others, and rises into it.

Somehow, when a person views a work of art in a disinterested manner, he or she establishes a short-lived connection to Schopenhauer’s version of the Platonic Ideas, to that which is ultimately real. Immediately, it seems problematic, however, that Plato himself saw aesthetics as far removed from the Ideas. For Plato, the sensory world was an imitation of the Ideas, and the aesthetic world was a mere imitation of the sensory world. So, on Plato’s view of the Ideas, the arts are an imitation of an imitation. This does not seem to bother Schopenhauer, and, of course, Plato often seems to be inconsistent in exalting Beauty on one hand and decrying imitative art on the other. For the present discussion, the important idea is Schopenhauer’s linkage of aesthetic contemplation to that which is of ultimate reality. This connection is impermanent, but allows the viewer a breath of fresh air; a temporary escape from the bondage to the will. Aesthetics professor Alex Neill elaborates,

Aesthetic experience, as Schopenhauer understands it, is essentially experience in which a subject apprehends, or has intuitive knowledge of, the Ideas; this is his version of the thought, familiar in the history of aesthetic theory, that aesthetic experience involves transcendence of the particular and access to the universal.

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38 Ibid.


40 Pappas, “Plato’s Aesthetics.”

This transcendent aspect inherent in aesthetic contemplation is important for the discussion of Lewis’s concept of *Sehnsucht*. Though he has struck upon something of great value and significance in the transcendent aspect of art, Schopenhauer’s analysis is self-defeating. Its attempt at separating the contemplating individual from his or her own will defies reason and experience. Alex Neill helps to confirm this idea: “For in light of these, it is far from clear how Schopenhauer can consistently regard the functioning of intellect unconstrained by the demands of an individual will—and hence aesthetic experience, as he conceives it—as so much as possible.”42 Despite this, his notion of transcendence in art warrants comparison to Lewis’s concept of *Sehnsucht*.

**Asceticism: Denial of the will.** Asceticism, for Schopenhauer, is the ideal lifestyle, which makes sense in light of his doctrine of the will as dominating one with desire. Interestingly, he holds up Pascal as a model, stating that Pascal was right in *choosing* to live ascetically and to provide all of the needs required for his own physical existence—even refusing to allow his team of servants to make his bed and bring him meals.43 Schopenhauer, in one of many favorable references to elements of Eastern culture and religion, speaks of Hindu rulers in glowing terms because of their insistence “that a man should eat nothing that he has not himself both sowed and reaped.”44

Schopenhauer also introduces aspects of Buddhism into his worldview. This can be seen, not only in the denial of desires as mentioned, but also in an intriguing rejection of the principle of individuation—similar to Buddhism’s denial of the Western concept of the self and the existence of permanent physical or mental substance.45 In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer actually links the ascetic lifestyle to a

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42Ibid.


44Ibid.

lessening of the effect of the principle of individuation (principium individuationis) in the person who follows his teaching. Schopenhauer denies that a rich man who lives ascetically—giving up his wealth to help poor people—does so because he is compelled to by a set of particular beliefs; rather, the reason for his action “is that he makes less distinction than is usually made between himself and others . . . the suffering which he sees in others touches him almost as closely as his own.” The distinction between the wealthy man and others “only belongs to a fleeting and illusive phenomenon.”\textsuperscript{46} Schopenhauer produces an unusual alloy here, mixing elements of Kantian philosophy, Buddhist teaching, and Christian compassion for those in need.

Schopenhauer further utilizes elements of Eastern religion, stating that when humans deny their own desires and participate in “works of love,” they cause the “veil of Maya” to become “transparent.”\textsuperscript{47} Maya, which as a concept is found in multiple Eastern traditions, including Buddhism and Hinduism, is a Sanskrit word that means “veil of illusion.”\textsuperscript{48} It comes quite close to Kant’s idea of the phenomenal; maya refers to human experience of the external world, which hides the true nature of things from us. Schopenhauer’s point is that when we deny these desires and act lovingly toward others, we begin to pierce the veil that fools us into thinking we are individuals and thus come closer to the one reality of the will—even though, paradoxically, we deny the will to get there.\textsuperscript{49}

However, if all desire is bad and should be relinquished—including the desire

\textsuperscript{46}Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Idea, 1:480-81, emphasis original.

\textsuperscript{47}Ibid., 481.


\textsuperscript{49}Copleston, A History of Philosophy, 7:284-85. Copleston points out this contradiction and explains that Schopenhauer attributed it to the will’s transcendence of the principle of sufficient reason. This seems like a convenient way for Schopenhauer to wriggle his way out of an internally collapsing system.
to live—how can Schopenhauer say with certainty that one should desire to escape this bondage of the will? An almost nonsensical sentence, in this case regarding deeds done for others, illustrates this tension in his writing: “The opposite of the sting of conscience . . . is the good conscience, the satisfaction which we experience after every disinterested deed.”50 “Disinterest” implies the lack of self-interest or personal desire;51 so, how can “satisfaction” follow a “disinterested” deed? Satisfaction refers to the fulfillment of some desire. The need for satisfaction automatically denotes personal interest. This example is illustrative of the larger problem in Schopenhauer’s doctrine. As the architect of a system that advocates denying desire, how can Schopenhauer commend the desires for a temporary oasis through aesthetic contemplation and for salvation through ascetic practice? In this, Schopenhauer’s worldview fails the internal coherence test of truth.

Depressingly, the final end of Schopenhauer’s worldview—even with these ways of escape or salvation—seems to be mere emptiness. He leaves open the possibility of a monistic aspect of an afterlife, in which humans are all united in the one will. However, this is little consolation and is expressed with uncertainty.52 Schopenhauer’s doctrine is ultimately not salvific and ends as an appropriate reflection of the philosopher’s rampant pessimism.

Connection to Sehnsucht

In his view of aesthetic experience as offering respite from the endless pain and meaninglessness of the world, Schopenhauer taps into a theme that can be found in

50Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Idea, 1:482, emphasis original.

51See comments on Kant (upon whom Schopenhauer was extremely dependent) and his notion of “Disinterest” in James Shelley, “The Concept of the Aesthetic,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed January 23, 2015, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetic-concept/. Kant’s categorical imperative—in which moral duty must be accomplished completely apart from any personal self-interest, is related to this disinterest, especially in the manner already addressed through which Kant connected moral and aesthetic judgment.

the writings of noteworthy Christian thinkers, including C. S. Lewis.

**Touching ultimate reality.** In *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, Lewis uses allegory to illustrate his own spiritual journey to faith. In the afterword, he speaks of a desire that he experienced as a child. He was “dominated” by this *Sehnsucht* during his childhood and adolescence. Behind this desire he mentioned an

*unnamed something*, desire for which pierces us like a rapier at the smell of a bonfire, the sound of wild ducks flying overhead, the title of *The Well at the World’s End*, the opening lines of *Kubla Khan*, the morning cobwebs in late summer, or the noise of falling waves.53

These experiences of beauty on earth have an “unnamed something” to which they point, a reality higher than earthly experience. Before his conversion, Lewis saw this only as indicating something unnamed, but he was spurred on in his journey toward God by this wordless proclamation.

In the same way, Schopenhauer draws a line from his notion of aesthetic contemplation to an experience of the Platonic Ideas. Martin Seel sums up Schopenhauer’s view: “His basic thesis is . . . that the subject of aesthetic intuition *abandons* the world of empirical appearances in favour of a contemplation of Platonic ‘ideas.’”54 Setting aside the confusion as to how the Will is linked to the Ideas, the similarity to Lewis’s idea comes into focus: the goal for Schopenhauer is to get past mere earthly experience and make contact with the highest reality. For both men, aesthetic contemplation is an important road to this destination.

**Unfulfilling nature.** In *The Weight of Glory*, Lewis spends much time answering the question of which desires are appropriate for motivation in living the

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Christian life. Along these lines, he speaks of each person’s natural desire for a “far-off country” and how we experience this desire in many manifestations:

I am trying to rip open the innsolable secret . . . the secret which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence. . . . Our commonest expedient is to call it beauty and behave as if that had settled the matter.”  

He continues,

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. . . . For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.

There is a powerful similarity between this portion of Lewis’s sermon and Schopenhauer’s idea of the aesthetic respite from the grinding of the will—namely, the temporary and unfulfilling nature of both. Neither thinker states that salvation can ultimately come through aesthetic experience. Both men underscore the fleeting nature of this experience through beauty. Nevertheless, both Schopenhauer and Lewis acknowledge an almost mystical link between experiences of beauty and an ultimate reality beyond the sensory world.

**Desire for union.** Continuing in *The Weight of Glory*, Lewis speaks about the powerful ways in which believers in Christ will be changed—actually made to participate in the glorification of Christ. And he links Christian longing for this miraculous work of God to experiences of beauty in this life:

Ah, but we want so much more—something the books on aesthetics take little notice of. . . . We do not want merely to see beauty. . . . We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.

Schopenhauer sounds very similar when he states concerning the aesthetic

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56Ibid., 30-31.

57Ibid., 42.
oasis that “knowledge breaks free from the service of the will, by the subject ceasing to be merely individual, and thus becoming the pure will-less subject of knowledge. . . . [This subject] rests in fixed contemplation of the object presented to it . . . and rises into it.”58 Again, there is a mystical aspect to this idea for both Lewis and Schopenhauer, but clearly both believe that beauty is not limited to external sensory experience, but can profitably be entered into by the subject. In doing so, there is a (however distant or shadowy) connection to that which is beyond this world.

The extended treatment of Schopenhauer’s world system in this section is due to the similarities between his and C. S. Lewis’s understanding of the working and power of beauty—especially in light of the vast differences between the rest of their worldviews. Lewis was a Christian author and apologist whose writings have strongly influenced multiple generations of evangelicals; Schopenhauer was a dark and pessimistic philosopher whose Eastern-influenced views bordered on nihilism. Yet, they both say something similar about beauty and mankind’s interaction with it, which points to an incredible opportunity for Christian philosophy, evangelism, and apologetics—as seen in the next chapter.

**Mark Rothko**

Mark Rothko (1903-1970) is known as a modern Abstract Expressionist painter and not as a philosopher, but several factors support including him as the last thinker in this section. First, all serious, thoughtful artists could be considered philosophers, especially since aesthetics is a branch of philosophy.59 Second, for much of his career, Rothko wrote frequently about the ideas behind his work, forcefully calling for new directions in modern art. In doing so, he expressed a significant amount of his own


59Along these lines, Rothko himself argued, “If you have a philosophical mind you will find that nearly all paintings can be spoken of in philosophical terms.” Mark Rothko, *Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel Lopez-Remiro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 127.
aesthetic philosophy. Third, there are significant similarities between the aesthetic philosophies held by Mark Rothko and Arthur Schopenhauer—and some connection between their views and those held by C. S. Lewis. In a way, Rothko’s art and aesthetic could be seen as a fleshing out of some of Schopenhauer’s ideas explained above—especially in their references to the lessening of the importance of the individual and to art touching the transcendent.

Rothko, like Schopenhauer, led a difficult life, his Russian Jewish family moving from Russia (an area which later became Latvia) to escape hardship when he was ten years old. His father died soon after the family’s arrival in the United States. Rothko’s art did not become lucrative for him until late in his career. In addition, he struggled with depression for many years until—while a well-known, highly regarded artist—he took his own life at the age of 66.60

Despite these tragic aspects of his life, Mark Rothko’s art and his aesthetic philosophy display some elements parallel to C. S. Lewis’s view of the power of beauty in art. Rothko was fiercely concerned about the meaning and interpretation of his art, one time even returning a monetary advance he had been given and withdrawing murals he had made for the new upscale Four Seasons restaurant in New York City because he did not like the association of his work with an upper-class lifestyle.

Significantly, Rothko felt that his art (and all art) should only be concerned with themes that were transcendent. In a famous letter to the New York Times after one of the newspaper’s critics expressed his “befuddlement” at an exhibition by Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, the two men wrote,

It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well-painted. This is the essence of academicism. There is no such

thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless.  

Rothko connects timeless subject matter with tragedy; this resonates well with C. S. Lewis’s understanding of Sehnsucht as eliciting elements of both memory and loss.

Rothko attributed particular importance to the concept of an archetypal myth, in similar fashion to Lewis’s emphasis on an overarching myth that really is true.

[Rothko] once claimed that in 1940 he had stopped painting for a year to study myth, a characteristically hyperbolic statement that may even be true. . . . By January 1942, Rothko probably had been involved in his myth project for about two years; but he had yet to exhibit any of these new paintings.

English professor James E. B. Breslin summarizes Rothko’s resultant view of these archetypal myths:

“Without monsters or gods, art cannot enact our drama,” Rothko wrote in [his essay] “The Romantics Were Prompted.” “When they were abandoned as untenable superstitions, art sank into melancholy.” Modernism entails loss—the loss of collective myth, social community, religious tradition, transcendent meaning, heroic action. “Doesn’t it make you feel lonesome?”

Rothko’s views here fit well with C. S. Lewis’s use of pagan, mythological symbols and characters to connect to transcendent truth through “collective myth.” The two men would not have described the archetypal myth in the same terms (although Rothko, a lapsed Jew, did sometimes use explicitly Christian symbols, including the cross). However, the use of mythic art to connect to transcendence is the similarity in view here—and it is brought into sharper relief through the wide differences in overall worldview held by the two men.

Art historian Robert Rosenblum wrote of Rothko’s “passionate belief in art’s magical power to save souls and to open transcendental vistas.”

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62Breslin, Mark Rothko, 160.

63Ibid., 174.

emphasized the tragic element in art, he also sought some idea of salvation through its beauty. One of the ways Rothko intentionally tried to open “transcendent vistas” was to paint on massive canvases in order to engulf the viewer. The largest paintings in the Rothko Chapel, discussed next, are eleven feet by fifteen feet in size. Rothko’s reasoned,

I realize that historically the function of painting large pictures is something very grandiose and pompous [pomposity being something Rothko detested]. The reason I paint them, however—I think it applies to other painters I know—is precisely because I want to be intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view or with a reducing glass. However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn’t something you command.65

Rothko explained his methodology even more fully at a lecture in November 1958, in which he described a “recipe” for achieving his desired results with art. The ingredients given echo Rothko’s statements regarding a tragic element in art, as well as Lewis’s emphasis on romanticism and desire:

The recipe of a work of art—it’s ingredients—how to make it—the formula.

1. There must be a clear preoccupation with death—intimations of mortality—tragic art, romantic art, etc., deals with the knowledge of death.66

2. Sensuality. Our basis of being concrete about the world. It is a lustful relationship to things that exist.

3. Tension. Either conflict or curbed desire.67

4. Irony. This is a modern ingredient—the self-effacement and examination by which a man for an instant can go on to something else.

5. Wit and play—for the human element.

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65Rothko, *Writings on Art*, 74, emphasis added.

66As mentioned previously, there is a connection between Rothko’s emphasis on the tragic and Lewis’s idea of loss often found with *Sehnsucht*. However, Christian theology differs from Rothko’s philosophy in that the tragic element is ultimately superseded by the comical (in the dramatic sense) victory of Christ over sin and the reconciliation of all things in Him (Col 1:20).

67This third point—and not the second one about lust—is where the connection can be drawn to Lewis’s *Sehnsucht*. Lewis consistently separated *Sehnsucht* from lust or sexual desire. Rothko’s idea of tension, or curbed desire, closely resembles Lewis’s idea of *Sehnsucht* in art as an “inconsolable desire” that is still itself desirable.
6. The ephemeral and chance—for the human element.

7. Hope. Ten percent to make the tragic concept more endurable.68 Some of Rothko’s ingredients are hazy in their meaning; for example, he does not explain in the lecture what he means by “the human element.” However, his recipe overlaps with C. S. Lewis’s notion of the power of beauty in art through shared emphases on looking beyond this mortal life, as well as mixing hope with pain or loss.

The Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, is perhaps Mark Rothko’s most well-known work. Rothko’s patrons in this effort were the extremely wealthy de Menil family, who had moved from France to Texas during World War II. John and Dominique de Menil were Roman Catholics who quickly became leaders in Texas in both the arts and political activism. Their chapel project reflected these emphases69 as well as an ecumenical spirituality. They commissioned Rothko, a nominal but very “spiritual” Jew, to provide artwork for the chapel, and they gave him so much control over the project that the original architect left the project in frustration—Rothko was obsessive about proper lighting for his art.70

In contrast to the Four Seasons project that he withdrew from in anger, Rothko was thrilled about the chapel commission. He took inspiration for the octagonal shape of the chapel from a Byzantine chapel he had seen in person, and his goal was to bring together eastern and western traditions in a place for spiritual contemplation.71 Sadly, Rothko took his own life before the chapel was completed and dedicated in 1971.72

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68Rothko, *Writings on Art*, 125-26. These points are from a transcription of the recording of the lecture, which was delivered at the Pratt Institute.

69The activism side is evidenced through the Rothko Chapel’s placement of a sculpture outside the building in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as through numerous events the site has hosted for the advancement of equality and human rights.


71Ibid., 465.

unusual paintings had been completed, however, prior to his death. The Rothko Chapel works look so much like blank, dark canvases that many visitors, upon entering the large room where they are displayed, ask, “Where are the paintings?” It is difficult to avoid the thought that the darkness and emptiness in the paintings convey some sense of the inner struggle and depression Rothko was battling at the time. The paintings likely were spiritual experiences for Rothko, although far more tragic than hopeful.

The Rothko Chapel is seen by many as a site for ecumenical contemplation, a center for civil action, and a place for viewing the work of a modern master. Critic Julia Davis writes,

> It is easy to understand how viewers speak of the “subliminal” or “transcendent” qualities of the Houston Chapel murals. There seems to be hardly anything in them to grasp onto. At least in Claude Monet’s *Waterlilies* the viewer can always return to nature, to the shapes of the lilies and the reflections on the water. In Monet’s art, one can find the way back to nature and the world. Rothko’s Houston Chapel paintings invite a different sort of participation. His murals invite the viewer to lose themselves in the paintings, thereby losing themselves to themselves, in themselves. . . . Art in churches, religious art in general, is not the endpoint. One must not get stuck on the art object, but on what the art object is trying to evoke, or point towards.”

Thus, Rothko’s work and worldview, although vastly divergent from C. S. Lewis’s on many levels, has significant points of intersection with both Lewis’s and Schopenhauer’s aesthetic philosophies. Similar to Schopenhauer and the Eastern elements of his worldview, Rothko viewed some loss of the individual as a positive goal. His work was oriented this way so strongly that he was frequently asked if he was a Zen Buddhist. He deliberately painted on massive canvases, eventually forsaking


75See the connection made in the preceding section that quotes Lewis as saying that we want “to be united with the beauty we see . . . to become part of it.” Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 42.

76Rothko, *Writings on Art*, 126.
distinguishable forms altogether in his work, one of his goals being the loss of the
individual viewer into the work itself.

On the other hand, Rothko is in general agreement with both Schopenhauer
and Lewis in his understanding that interaction with beauty in art can potentially lead to
some experience of ultimate or transcendent reality. Although this does not come
anywhere close to the key tenets of the Christian worldview, it does establish an important
commonality that increases the strength of Lewis’s point that desire for beauty can draw
men to God.

The reader may ask at this point how Rothko or Schopenhauer can be considered
as corroborators of Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht, when huge portions of their work, not
to mention the circumstances of their lives (including rejecting Christ), are in direct
conflict with Lewis’s Christianity. But it is precisely because the rest of their worldviews
are in such disagreement with Lewis’s worldview that the resonance of their views on
beauty is so powerful. Their agreement shows that there is something deep and powerful
about man’s response to beauty that stems from the way God has made mankind.

To clarify, the fact that both Rothko and Schopenhauer did not ultimately follow
the trail of beauty to faith in Christ does not mean that Sehnsucht lacks power to draw
men toward God. Evangelical theologians do not deny the power of Christian preaching,
though countless individuals have sat through decades of sermons and remained
unconverted. Though every soul that contemplates beauty does not confess Christ as
Savior, there is an inconsolable desire for beauty in every human heart that, if God so
chooses, He can use to draw the individual toward His saving grace. The power of
Sehnsucht is deeply rooted in the Imago Dei placed in all men, as the next chapter further
explains.
CHAPTER 6
SEHNSUCHT’S USEFULNESS: EVANGELISM
AND APOLOGETICS

Chapters 1 and 2 referenced Bright Shadow of Reality, the important literary examination of Sehnsucht written by English professor Corbin Scott Carnell. In Walter Hooper’s massive third volume of C. S. Lewis’s Collected Letters, there are four letters from C. S. Lewis to Carnell. The letters show Lewis’s side of correspondence between the men that took place between 1953 and 1958. The second of these letters, written from Magdalen College on June 25, 1954, addresses a difficulty with evangelism that Carnell was struggling with at the time, as well as helps the reader understand Lewis’s overall approach to evangelism and apologetics:

Dear Carnell,

Your letter finds me in the middle of exams, and an adequate reply is impossible. If you are losing your faith in argument, why trust the arguments that lead you to do so? (This skepticism about reason under-cuts itself). Some people can be converted on rational grounds, but more can’t. All rests with God, and one must not get flustered. If in a particular case He doesn’t use you or me as His instrument, no doubt He has excellent reasons. No general conclusion follows.

Yours,

C. S. Lewis¹

Even in this brief and clearly hurried letter, Lewis powerfully reminds the Christian of the true source of success in any evangelistic or apologetic encounter. This point is important to remember throughout this chapter in the midst of discussions regarding the apologetic power of beauty. Although rational arguments can assist in the evangelistic task, the entire endeavor is dependent upon the power and work of the Holy

Spirit. No one will be saved by merely hearing brilliant and rational arguments, just as no one will be converted simply by viewing the most beautiful vista the world has to offer. Rather, as Paul said, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Cor 3:6). God is sovereign over every human soul, and He is sovereign over every evangelistic and apologetic encounter. He graciously chooses to use Christians to speak His Word, but He is by no means dependent upon human ability or knowledge. This not only reminds believers to approach evangelism with humility and faith in God’s power (rather than on human methods or knowledge), it gives believers the peace of knowing that the eternal fate of a human soul does not hinge on any person’s performance in apologetic conversations.

Not only does Lewis’s letter put all apologetic approaches in their proper perspective, it demonstrates again his belief in the extraordinary power of arguments that are not purely rational. Arguments of the heart can reach individuals that will not respond to predominantly cerebral arguments. Lewis even asserts that “more” people cannot be converted on rational grounds than can be converted through those means. If this is true, then understanding the value of beauty and Sehnsucht for overcoming objections to the gospel is important to the evangelistic task of the Great Commission. This chapter explains and illustrates the usefulness of Sehnsucht for both evangelism and apologetics.

**Sehnsucht’s Usefulness for Evangelism**

An extended account of C. S. Lewis’s personal story of the attractive power of beauty has already been given, as well as other shorter testimonies like that of Whittaker Chambers and Clare Boothe Luce. It will be helpful here, however, to expand the case

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2The account of the Lord’s message being spoken through a donkey in Num 22 should be sufficient to illustrate this point.

with further examples of those who have experienced something like *Sehnsucht* and its tug toward the God who scattered beauty across His universe. Not all of the accounts in this chapter are from individuals who ultimately made the choice to convert to Christianity; in fact, some are from people who continued to deny key aspects of Christian truth. The contrast in these instances conveys more power to the testimony of beauty’s draw toward transcendence, since an acknowledgment of transcendence often flies in the face of the rest of these individuals’ worldviews.

**The Beauty of God**

Chapter 4 examined in detail the scriptural evidence for C. S. Lewis’s view of beauty and *Sehnsucht*. However, other than the Psalmist’s stated desire to see God’s beauty (Ps 27:4), the evidence was mostly propositional rather than testimonial. It is appropriate to offer two testimonies of life-changing encounters with God’s beauty, one from each testament of the Bible.

Admittedly, the following are direct encounters with God, so the element of longing for what is behind the beauty in these accounts is not present. This section should be understood as an extension or wider application of *Sehnsucht* and the power of beauty. In each case, the experience of God’s direct presence and beauty leaves the individual dramatically changed—which fits well with the frequent scriptural association (drawn out in chap. 4) of beauty with spiritual renewal or change.

**Old Testament: The vision of Isaiah 6.** The beginning of Isaiah’s prophetic ministry is dominated by the account of his vision of the throne room of God. The vision is clearly one of overwhelming glory, beauty, and power:

> In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above Him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!” And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have
seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” (6:1-8)

Isaiah’s vision focuses on the overwhelming glory of the Lord. As already demonstrated, glory and beauty are frequently connected in Scripture. The vision of God in His glorious power, beauty, and holiness first affects Isaiah with an intense knowledge of his own sin and uncleanness in light of the infinite holiness of his King.

After seeing the Lord in His glory, Isaiah even states that he is “lost.” This is similar to C. S. Lewis’s own sense of loss when experiencing desire for transcendent beauty. Isaiah connects the loss to his own sinful nature and lips. Lewis often speaks of loss in the context of longing for a distant country that is one’s true home. The common thread that unites both could be the loss of relationship with God that all of mankind has suffered as a result of sin. The distant country could be the place in which mankind dwells with God—formerly Eden, now heaven for those who believe in Christ.

Later in Isaiah 6, the prophet experiences grace and forgiveness when a seraph touches his lips with a coal from the altar, which represents an atoning sacrifice. Once his guilt has been removed, he is filled with desire. In this case, the desire is to answer the call of the Lord to be sent on God’s mission. Although this desire should not be called Sehnsucht, it is significant in this passage that, after the prophet has experienced a lofty vision of God’s glory and beauty, he is filled with desire to be drawn into God’s mission—without even knowing yet what that mission entails. Isaiah’s eager service to the Lord is part of his desire to know and to be unified with the glorious God who has graciously forgiven him.4 This desire fits with Lewis’s previously discussed statement that mankind wants “to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.”5

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4In addition, Jesus’ prayer in John 17 speaks in detail of the unity of the believer with God.

As is the case with most Old Testament saints, it is not known from the book of Isaiah when exactly the prophet was converted, becoming a believer in the true God. However, within the larger context of Scripture and especially the work of Christ, the sacrificial altar from which the coal is taken must be seen as representative of Isaiah’s forgiveness and reconciliation to God through the cross of Christ. It is therefore significant that this element in the story is immediately preceded by a gripping vision of God in His beauty and glory. Beauty can draw men toward God, filling them with desire to be reconciled with Him, to be in right relationship with Him, and to be used by Him.

New Testament: Paul’s conversion in Acts 9. Before he became an apostle and author of thirteen books of the Bible, Paul was known as Saul and was one of the early church’s most ardent persecutors. An extremely zealous Jew, Paul believed that he was doing God’s will by attempting to stamp out the divergent sect of Jews who claimed that Jesus was the crucified and resurrected Son of God. He believed this until he personally experienced an incredibly pivotal and powerful vision of Jesus in His resurrected glory:

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. . . . So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” (Acts 9:1-9, 17-20)

Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus is not often pointed to as an example of divine beauty. However, in this passage, Scripture describes his vision as “a
light from heaven.” In Acts 26, Paul describes the same event to King Agrippa and says that Jesus Himself “appeared” to him (26:16). The vision of light in this case is a vision of Jesus in His resurrected glory.

Chapter 3 showed C. S. Lewis’s connection of the beauty of *Sehnsucht* to light. Although light can be so bright that it is blinding (as it was in Paul’s case), such brightness does not indicate the lack of beauty and glory that is usually associated with light—in Scripture and in human literature in general. In fact, the word translated “brightness” in Paul’s description of this light in Acts 22:11 is *doxa* (δόξα), which is often translated “glory” and was discussed in chapter 4 in that context. Indeed, John’s intense vision of Jesus in Revelation 1 is clearly a glorious description of a beautiful, risen Christ, but it also describes Jesus’ face as “like the sun shining in full strength” (1:16).

This vision is so transcendent, so supernaturally powerful, that it knocks all of Paul’s party to the ground (Acts 26:14). More powerful still is the change it makes in the persecutor’s heart. Paul does not respond to Jesus with anger or pride; rather, he immediately calls Jesus “Lord” (Acts 9:5), and the rest of his life is radically changed through this personal vision of the glorious and beautiful Christ. Paul is filled with passionate desire from then on to know and be united to the Source of the light he saw that day, even to the point of offering up his life in service to this King (2 Tim 4:6).

Isaiah and Paul serve as examples of the power of seeing God in His beauty; such a vision can move an individual toward repentance, faith in Christ, and usefulness in the Lord’s service. God chooses when and with whom to use such visions, but when He does, their usefulness in drawing people to Christ cannot be denied. Christians must keep their eyes open for the Lord’s work in miraculous ways, and they must be faithful and ready to speak the true gospel to anyone to whom God may have revealed Himself through miraculous means.  

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6For example, many stories of this nature have recently come from missionaries and new believers in countries that are officially closed to the gospel and missionary efforts. Individuals steeped in
Natural Beauty Observed

Like C. S. Lewis, many have confessed that experiences of beauty in the natural world have caused their hearts to leap with desire for whatever lies behind that beauty. This makes sense from a theological perspective based on the scriptural evidence that God as Creator has infused nature with beauty.

Jonathan Edwards. Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) has already been discussed with regard to his massive influence and his corroboration of C. S. Lewis’s views on beauty. However, his personal testimony of conversion also contains references to glorious beauty in nature:

I had a variety of concerns and exercises about my soul from my childhood…I had particular secret places of my own in the woods, where I used to retire by myself; and was from time to time much affected.

The first instance that I remember of that sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things that I have lived much in since, was on reading those words, 1 Timothy 1:17. “Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever, Amen.” I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was, and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be rapt up to him in heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in him for ever!

From about that time, I began to have a new kind of apprehensions and ideas of Christ, and the work of redemption, and the glorious way of salvation by him. An inward, sweet sense of these things, at times, came into my heart; and my soul was led away in pleasant views and contemplations of them [this emphasis added]…

And as I was walking there, and looking up on the sky and clouds, there came into my mind so sweet a sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God, that I know not how to express.7

In these excerpts from his “Personal Narrative” of his conversion, Edwards—similarly to Lewis—describes how beauty in nature “affected” him and touched his soul,_________

Muslim culture and religion have been called by God in vivid dreams to seek out a believer in Christ or a Bible, and they have come to faith in Jesus as a result. It is reasonable to believe that there are elements of Sehnsucht in these vivid dreams that set unbelievers on journeys toward Christ. This phenomenon is an example of the contemporary evangelistic power of visions from God. One such miraculous story is told in thorough detail in Nik Ripken and Gregg Lewis, The Insanity of God: A True Story of Faith Resurrected (Nashville: B & H, 2013), 265-68.

even from childhood. He shows how—although his experiences in nature were not 

salvific and should not have been mistaken for saving grace—they were part of an early 

“awakening” that eventually culminated in his conversion. Not only that, once he did 

believe in the gospel, he saw the beauty and majesty of his Savior reflected throughout 

creation. Just like Lewis, Edwards discovered that the joy experienced in the beauty of 

nature was a pointer to the God who created the natural world.

Dorothy Day. Dorothy Day (1897-1980) has become a hero to many on the 

political left, especially to those who identify with Catholicism. Day’s pacifism, socialism, 

and friendliness with Marxists were highly controversial in the United States, but, 

importantly, she rejected the atheistic element often associated with the latter of these ideas. 

For many years, she served as the editor of The Catholic Worker. For the purposes of 

this dissertation, there is significance in her sustained struggle with fully affirming her 

Catholic faith. Beauty in nature continued to draw her in this direction, despite the 

vehement objections of her common-law husband, Forster Batterham. Batterham enjoyed 

and loved nature, but wanted nothing to do with religion or belief in God. Their differing 

responses to the same natural phenomena illustrates again that different people experience 

Sehnsucht through different things, and that no experience of beauty guarantees a 

response of faith in God. Day writes,

But it was impossible to talk about religion or faith to him. A wall immediately 

separated us. The very love of nature, and the study of her secrets which was 

bringing me to faith, cut Forster off from religion…

His ardent love of creation brought me to the Creator of all things. But when I cried 

out to him, “How can there be no God, when there are all these beautiful things,” he 

turned from me uneasily and complained that I was never satisfied.8


satisfaction with beauty in nature is reminiscent of Lewis’s oft-quoted words in The Weight of Glory: 

“Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards 
promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We 

are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, 

like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is 

meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.” Lewis’s statement that people are
Though Batterham had not intended for their shared love of nature to lead to her toward faith in Christ, the power of creation’s beauty over Dorothy Day’s heart was inexorable. In what she called her “notes,” Day sounds quite Lewisian in the way she connects beauty to “joy”: “It was the glories of creation, the tender beauty of flowers and shells, the songs of birds, the smile of my baby, these things brought such exultation, such joy to my heart that I could not but cry out in praise of God.”

Ultimately, Dorothy Day would fully commit her life to Christ and Catholicism, choosing to baptize her daughter in that tradition. This decision led to the end of her relationship with Forster Batterham. However, she tirelessly devoted the rest of her life to helping the poor and homeless in the ways that she thought best. She has been designated a “Servant of God” by the Roman Catholic Church—a title meaning that an individual is being considered for possible Catholic sainthood.

**Ethel Waters.** As an African-American, legendary blues singer Ethel Waters (1900-1977) was a pioneer in the entertainment industry. She had many well-known performances on Broadway and was nominated for an Academy Award for her supporting role in the movie *Pinky* (1959). In the 1950s, Waters sang at many of Billy Graham’s evangelistic crusades. Though she claimed to have been a wild little girl, she saw beauty while at church that impacted her life and ultimately led to her salvation:

> Though dancing, being chased by the boys, and mysteries of human birth all fascinated me, my greatest interest, when I was eleven, lay in the Church. Though I was a Catholic, I recognized, as I said, that Louise’s little Protestant churches had something. I’d watch the grownups praying and would get the same feeling they had of elation, exaltation, of being carried above and beyond oneself.

> *The beauty that came into the tired faces of the very old men and women excited me.*

> All week long so many of them were confused and inarticulate. But on Sunday, in the church, they had no difficulty expressing themselves both in song and talk. The

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too easily pleased is the opposite of Forster Batterham’s objection that Dorothy Day was never satisfied. But Day’s determination to find the Maker of nature’s beauty runs parallel to Lewis’s search for whatever (or whomever) it was to which joy, beauty, and Sehnsucht pointed. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 26.

emotion that had invaded them was so much bigger than they. Some would rock. Some would cry. Some would talk with eloquence and fire, their confusions and doubts dispelled. And, oh, those hymns!

[On the last night of a revival meeting at her church.] Nobody had come that night to the meeting, nobody but the very old people who were always there. I was praying hard and hopefully, asking God, “What am I seeking here? What do I want of You? Help me! If nothing happens, I can’t come back here any more!”

And then it happened! The peace of heart and of mind, the peace I had been seeking all my life.

I know that never again, so long as I live, can I experience that wonderful reaction I had that night in the little church. Love flooded my heart and I knew I had found God and that now and for always I would have an ally, a friend close by to strengthen me and cheer me on.

I don’t know exactly what happened or when I got up. I don’t even know whether I talked. But the people who were there that night were astounded. Afterward they told me that I was radiant and like one transfixed. They said that the light in my face electrified the whole church. And I did feel full of light and warmth [emphasis added].

For Waters, the beauty that drew her toward the Lord was both manmade and natural—the natural beauty displayed on the very faces of the worshipers. Although American culture would not often locate beauty in tired, old faces, Waters is speaking here of the noticeable difference in the countenances of these worshippers when they came together at church. She indicates that the beauty in their faces showed their confidence and exaltation in the context of corporate worship, and this beauty transcended and shone through the wrinkles and blemishes of old age. Waters’ testimony illustrates again Lewis’s point that Sehnsucht shows up in different ways for different people. Not only that, Waters account comes full circle at the moment of her conversion: once she had experienced God’s love, her own face glowed with a radiance that seemed to light up the whole church! Just like the worshipers whose faces had attracted Waters to Christ, once she believed in the gospel, her countenance displayed a glorious and desirable beauty. This desirable beauty is associated here again with light.

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10Ethel Waters and Charles Samuels, His Eye is on the Sparrow (New York: Doubleday, 1951), quoted in Mulder, Finding God, 247-49. The beauty that Waters speaks of in this quote overlaps two of the categories used in this section—both natural beauty (the beauty of the human faces) as well as manmade beauty (the hymns and other songs)
Natural Beauty Discovered

In each example of natural beauty in the previous section, the individual experienced beauty through his or her sensory perception. In most cases, this beauty is described as being seen, although it can also be experienced through perceptions like hearing the song of a bird, feeling a cool breeze, or smelling a fragrant flower. However, another category of natural beauty is usually not immediately present to the senses. This category is found through scientific research and discovery. It could be described as discovered natural beauty.

Scientists begin with beauty. Interestingly, scientists—both Christian and non-Christian—have frequently noted the beauty that can be found in the design of the universe. This factor has actually played a part in the search for major scientific answers. Some leading scientists, when approaching a problem, check for the beautiful solution first. In The Evidential Power of Beauty, Thomas Dubay gives several examples, most notably the discovery of the double helix structure of DNA. James Watson, Francis Crick, and Maurice Wilkins have “spoken of how beauty guided the three of them in their discoveries: ‘So we had lunch, telling each other that a structure this pretty just had to exist.’”

Richard Feynman, Nobel Laureate in physics mentioned briefly in chapter 1, remarked that “you can recognize truth by its beauty and simplicity.” Two contrasting quotes from Francis Crick (mentioned in connection with DNA) may help to illustrate the power of natural beauty from a scientific perspective.

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(1) Christianity may be OK between consenting adults in private but should not be
taught to young children.\textsuperscript{13}

(2) An honest man, armed with all the knowledge available to us now, could only
state that in some sense, the origin of life appears at the moment to be almost a
miracle, so many are the conditions which would have had to have been satisfied to
get it going.\textsuperscript{14}

Although Crick’s worldview led him to mock Christianity and discourage
others from teaching it, when he was “honest,” he had to admit that the scientific evidence
regarding life’s origin pushed him away from the purely naturalistic explanation and
toward a miraculous one. As he had noted with regard to the elegant structure of DNA,
the design of the universe that miraculously enabled life to exist points to something
supernatural behind the beauty Crick had discovered. The scientific truth about the
amazingly designed universe pushes the objective observer toward belief in a beautiful
Designer. The image of God in mankind is involved in this perception of beauty, as
humans discover ever-increasing portions of the truth placed by the One who \textit{is} Truth.

In their book \textit{The New Story of Science}, philosopher Robert Augros and
theoretical physicist George Stanciu write of the surprising importance that beauty is to
determining the direction of scientific inquiry: “All of the most eminent physicists of the
twentieth century agree that beauty is the primary standard for scientific truth.”\textsuperscript{15} They
emphasize the point even further when they explain that “beauty is so central a standard
in physics that it takes primacy even over experiment.”\textsuperscript{16} Physics Nobel Laureate (1969)
Murray Gell-Mann (who is a humanist) corroborates this view:

\begin{quote}
[F]requently a theorist will \textit{throw out} a lot of data on the grounds that if they don’t
fit an elegant scheme, they’re wrong. That’s happened to me many times. Oh, the
theory of the weak interaction [one of his areas of notable discovery]. There were
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{13}Francis Crick, quoted in Matt Ridley, \textit{Francis Crick: Discoverer of the Genetic Code} (New


\textsuperscript{15}Robert M. Augros and George N. Stanciu, \textit{The New Story of Science} (Lake Bluff, IL:
Regnery Gateway, 1984), 39.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 40.
nine experiments that contradicted it—all wrong. Every one. When you have something simple that agrees with all the rest of physics and really seems to explain what’s going on, a few experimental data against it are no objection whatever. Almost certain to be wrong.¹⁷

Understood in the context of the scientific method’s focus on experimentation in both hypothesizing and verifying discoveries, this statement is significant. Some of the world’s most highly honored scientists look for beautiful solutions first. This expectation of finding beauty naturally leads to the question: who or what is behind this beauty? If all of the universe is the result of unguided, chance interactions between molecules, why would beauty be so prevalent that it could reliably serve as a guide to scientific investigations? The law of entropy should lead scientists to look for chaos and disorder, not order and beauty. What or whom is overcoming the natural workings of that law?

Examples of discovered beauty. Having heard from scientists on the overall prevalence of discovered beauty, some specific examples will make the matter clearer. In The Evidential Power of Beauty, Thomas Dubay gives example after example of beauty in nature found through scientific investigation. One such example is the variety and types of orchids:

Elegant as are the thousands of species of flowers throughout the many differing climates in the world, there is one family that tops them all, not only in their seemingly endless varieties and stunning variations, but also in the almost unbelievable number of species. There are approximately thirty-five thousand kinds of orchids, not to mention those yet to be discovered. . . . The divine sense of humor appears in some of the species that remarkably “portray” animals in the visual impact of their blooms: a wasp, an extravagant butterfly, a flying duck, even swans, doves, frogs, miniature men. The flower of one species mimics a laughing gnome, another, a bearded hillbilly. . . . To maintain, as materialists must, that thirty-five thousand exquisite works of art (each one of which has numberless “originals”) are due to random chance, and not to an artist, invites ridicule.¹⁸

Simply looking at and experiencing these types of flowers through sensory perceptions certainly is an experience of natural beauty. But scientists have encountered another level of beauty altogether when, through scientific investigation, they have found out that


there are such an abundance of types of orchids. Not only that, but the surprising
resemblances of some of these orchids’ blooms to other beings in nature adds another
layer to the beauty portrayed by these exquisite flowers. As Dubay concludes, this multi-
layered beauty discovered through botanical investigation points to a divine Artist.

Another example of discovered beauty Dubay elucidates is buried still deeper,
requiring more investigation to unearth. It comes from the mathematical unity that
undergirds the physical world. This underlying structure—which ultimately boils down
to physics—is impossible to experience through any merely sensory perception. But
through scientific and mathematical means, deep beauty has been found here, pointing to
the existence and work of a transcendent Power:

One of the most mysterious and awesome traits imbedded in the visible universe is
its mathematical makeup. . . . . [A]t the beginning of the thirteenth century an Italian
mathematician, Leonardo Fibonacci, discovered and wrote about a most curious
numerical sequence that has astonishing characterizations in plant life. He found
that in this sequence, now named after him, “each new number is found by adding
the previous two numbers together. It looks like this: 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55,
89…” Surprisingly, as one goes on with this sequence, the ratio between a number
and its next higher one more exactly approaches the ratio 1:1.618, which is the
Golden Ratio that “the Greeks used to determine the aesthetically pleasing
proportion in their art and architecture.”

Fascinating as this is, botanists have discovered something still more intriguing
about these numbers. Throughout nature we find the phenomenon of phyllotaxis,
“which is the manner in which plant parts such as leaves, scales, and flowers are
arranged in spiral patterns,” such as we notice in the heads of daisies and
sunflowers, in pineapples, and in the trunks of palm trees. “When the spirals going
in each direction are counted, the numbers in almost every case are adjacent
Fibonacci numbers.” When one asks the question “Who or what causes this?”
science is silent. Unless one is driven by an ideological premise, the spontaneous
answer is that obviously a consummate mathematician is at work. This
phenomenon cannot be a chance occurrence repeated trillions of times each day.19

Dubay segues into apologetics, pointing out that a naturalistic ideology causes many
scientists to remain silent regarding the source of this widespread mathematical beauty.
He is correct in denying that the innumerable repetitions of this same pattern of numbers
each day are completely due to chance coincidences. Rather, this consistent beauty
points to a transcendently beautiful Source.

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Intelligent design. Many of Dubay’s arguments in The Evidential Power of Beauty overlap with the focus and goal of proponents of Intelligent Design. Often misunderstood and misrepresented, Intelligent Design is a scientific theory separate from the biblical doctrine of creation. Leading the charge for Intelligent Design is the Discovery Institute, which explains that the theory “holds that certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection.”

One recurring theme of Intelligent Design is the idea of the anthropic principle, which claims that the existence of the extremely restrictive conditions necessary for human life in the universe points to a Designer who deliberately guided the universe to meet those conditions in order to sustain human life. Not only that, the anthropic principle draws further impact from the fact that still more restrictive conditions must be met for mankind to be able to observe and note the tuning of the universe required to enable human life. Yet, all of these conditions have been met—which is so improbable in a universe governed by chance that it nears impossibility.

Intelligent Design proponents refer to this phenomenon as the fine-tuning of the universe. Robin Collins offers several examples:

1. If the initial explosion of the big bang had differed in strength by as little as 1 part in 10^60, the universe would have either quickly collapsed back on itself, or expanded too rapidly for stars to form. In either case, life would be impossible.

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21 One of the key texts for the anthropic principle is Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay Richards, The Privileged Planet: How Our Place in the Cosmos is Designed for Discovery (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2004). Many naturalists respond to the argument based on the anthropic principle by pointing out that proponents of Intelligent Design are begging the question, using the reality of human life to prove what simply happened by accident and caused human life. In other words, they claim that of course things are this way, because if they were not, humanity would not be here to study it. The naturalist believes that there is explanation that does not involve finely-tuned design—that this is simply how things came into existence by chance. But in cases not involving cosmology, if we stumbled upon something showing far less evidence of design, we would immediately infer a designer. The naturalist’s worldview commitments and presuppositions often affect his interpretation of the data.
2. Calculations indicate that if the strong nuclear force, the force that binds protons and neutrons together in an atom, had been stronger or weaker by as little as 5%, life would be impossible.

3. Calculations by Brandon Carter show that if gravity had been stronger or weaker by 1 part in 10 to the 40th power, then life-sustaining stars like the sun could not exist. This would most likely make life impossible.

4. If the neutron were not about 1.001 times the mass of the proton, all protons would have decayed into neutrons or all neutrons would have decayed into protons, and thus life would not be possible.

5. If the electromagnetic force were slightly stronger or weaker, life would be impossible, for a variety of different reasons.22

Many other widely published fine-tuning arguments have been advanced, such as the necessity of the earth’s particular tilt on its axis, or the incredibly small window of the earth’s distance from the sun required to sustain life on Earth.23 Discovery Institute Fellows Benjamin Wiker and Jonathan Witt have explained further how the design inherent in nature does not just indicate a Designer, but indicates a universe that is filled with meaning and purpose. In A Meaningful World: How the Arts and Sciences Reveal the Genius of Nature, they show how Intelligent Design overlaps with this paper’s concept of discovered beauty and C. S. Lewis’s notion of Sehnsucht:

We do indeed know a lot about nature, and that we can know this much is the result of it having an intrinsic, intelligible order that we could discover. That we can know even more—that we have not yet plumbed the depths of nature’s order, that we continue to uncover layers of surprising complexity and beauty, that the universe proves itself again and again to be ingeniously wrought in a way accessible to the scientific enterprise—is a great sign that nature is not pointless but meaning-full, a work not of chance but of genius.24

Beauty, complexity, and order all point, not to chance, but to genius. This sort of beauty discovered by science can draw men toward the transcendent God who has engineered this beautifully complex and ordered universe.

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One specific example of this ordered beauty given by Wiker and Witt is the periodic table of the elements:

Against this materialist claim, we again offer the evidence of genius, studying the string of geniuses who discovered and assembled the periodic table of elements and arguing that a materialist account of the human mind fails to account for such extraordinary mental feats. Second, the periodic table itself is a masterpiece of order, precision, and intellectual beauty, an order that appears designed for both life and discovery. Chemistry, rather than being that which everything can be reduced to, seems to point upward toward life, as if meticulously crafted for just such a purpose. Finally, in the way the order of the elements has wrung from great scientific minds their best efforts and only then yielded up its secrets, the genius of the elements would seem also to have had in mind not merely life, but specifically the development of human genius.25

Wiker and Witt point to evidence for the anthropic principle within chemistry, indicating that the chemical world seems to have been built up from its most basic structures for the purpose of sustaining life. There is purpose, meaning, and beauty in both the chemical world and in the ingenious tabular way that scientists made in God’s image have expressed their understanding of that world.

**Personal testimony: Antony Flew.** In the discussion thus far, theistic or Christian authors have written of the power of beauty discovered through science to point and draw men toward God. But without a real example of such drawing having happened, this claim holds little water. Antony Flew’s personal testimony strengthens the case.

Antony Flew (1923-2010) was a leading and forceful atheist philosopher who famously debated Christian philosopher William Lane Craig in 1998 and wrote *God, Freedom, and Immortality.*26 In that work, Flew argued that the burden of proof lay on theism rather than on atheism; he claimed that the rational default position was the latter.

However, in the process of publicly debating and privately spending time with Christian apologist Gary Habermas, Flew developed a friendship with Habermas that

25Ibid., 27.

resulted in some revealing conversations. Flew, despite his reputation as a stalwart of philosophical atheism, wrestled for years with the rationality and strength of certain evidences for God’s existence. In 2004, Flew confessed to Habermas that he had renounced atheism and become a theist, or more specifically, a Deist.27 Flew never publicly acknowledged the truth of the gospel before he died, but the arguments he identifies as holding particular sway over his mind are significant for the purposes of this section. The following exchange took place in an interview Habermas conducted with Flew after his acceptance of theism:

Habermas: You mention a number of trends in theistic argumentation that you find convincing, like big bang cosmology, fine-tuning and intelligent design arguments. Which arguments for God’s existence did you find most persuasive?

Flew: I think that the most impressive arguments for God’s existence are those that are supported by recent scientific discoveries. I’ve never been much impressed by the *kalam* cosmological argument, and I don’t think it has gotten any stronger recently. However, I think the argument to intelligent design is enormously stronger than it was when I first met it.

Habermas: So you like arguments such as those that proceed from big bang cosmology and fine-tuning arguments?

Flew: Yes.28

When one of the preeminent atheistic philosophers of this age was asked what arguments led him to renounce atheism and embrace belief in God, he pointed primarily to evidence associated with Intelligent Design. This testifies to the great power of orderly beauty found through scientific discovery and to its ability to draw men toward the God who designed and built that beauty into His universe.

To clarify, Flew does not give evidence that he is experiencing any longing or desire when he encounters evidence from Intelligent Design. The point here is not to

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27 It is significant to note that C. S. Lewis took a similar incremental step in his own journey, moving from atheism to mere theism. He held to this intellectual position for one or two years (the exact timeline is debated) before eventually accepting Jesus as God and becoming a Christian.

28 Gary Habermas and Antony Flew, quoted in William Lane Craig and Chad Meister, ed., *God is Great, God is Good: Why Believing in God is Reasonable and Responsible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010), 231.
claim that either Intelligent Design or Sehnsucht are aspects of the other, or that they are the same thing. Rather, the goal is to show the overlap between Sehnsucht’s beauty as a pointer to God with the beautiful order that points scientists toward a Designer. Scientists of widely varying worldviews have used the term “beauty” to describe the order, elegance, and simplicity of many scientific solutions and discoveries. To connect this to Sehnsucht is certainly an extended application of Lewis’s concept, but an application that shows how deeply and richly God has scattered beauty across the cosmos.

Due to the nature of this section, the discussion sometimes has had an apologetic tone. This blurring of topics is also due to the fact that evangelism and apologetics cannot always be hermetically separated from one another; they are both crucial elements of the overall task of winning individuals to faith in Christ. More detailed elucidation of the apologetic usefulness of Sehnsucht follows in the second major section of this chapter.

Manmade Beauty

In Surprised by Joy and other works, C. S. Lewis did not limit his accounts of experiencing Sehnsucht to beauty as revealed in nature. Rather, he explains many instances in which he felt inconsolable desire when interacting with manmade art—whether literature like MacDonald’s Phantastes, music like Wagner’s opera, or even crafts as simple as his brother Warnie’s toy garden. But Lewis is not alone in experiencing a tug toward God through manmade beauty in art.

Charles Finney. Charles Finney’s (1792-1875) theology and revivalist legacy are biblically problematic and highly controversial. However, his conversion account does exemplify some elements consistent with Sehnsucht and beauty drawing the individual toward God. In fact, Finney’s account contains some overlap between the first and third categories discussed here, because he speaks of a vision of Christ (the first category above) as well as the beauty of manmade art—in this case, music. Finney writes that during his extremely intense and drawn out struggle with accepting the gospel
I went to my dinner, and found I had no appetite to eat. I then went to the office, and found that Squire W had gone to dinner. I took down my bass-viol, and, as I was accustomed to do, began to play and sing some pieces of sacred music. But as soon as I began to sing those sacred words, I began to weep. It seemed as if my heart was all liquid; and my feelings were in such a state that I could not hear my own voice in singing without causing my sensibility to overflow. I wondered at this, and tried to suppress my tears, but could not. After trying in vain to suppress my tears, I put up my instrument and stopped singing. . . . [Later that evening, after Finney was left alone again,] There was no fire, and no light, in the room; nevertheless it appeared to me as if it were perfectly light. As I went in and shut the door after me, it seemed as if I met the Lord Jesus Christ face to face. . . . I have always since regarded this as a most remarkable state of mind; for it seemed to me a reality, that he stood before me, and I fell down at his feet and poured out my soul to him. I wept aloud like a child, and made such confessions as I could with my choked utterance. . . . I must have continued in this state for a good while. . . . But I know, as soon as my mind became calm enough to break off from the interview, I returned to the front office, and . . . as I turned and was about to take seat by the fire, I received a mighty baptism of the Holy Ghost.  

Finney’s account is unique in that he speaks of his heart being overwhelmed by the music he played, as well as by a subsequent vision of Christ. Not only that, his story stands out because the manmade beauty he experiences in art comes as he is performing it himself. The emphasis however, is not on Finney’s particular skill, but on the “sacred” character of the words and music. Although in this account Finney seems to be experiencing a multitude of sensations and mental battles, the element of emotional release at the playing of the music is significant in connection with his unsettled, searching spirit at that time. He longed for resolution of this spiritual struggle, a longing which resonates with Lewis’s inconsolable desire found in Sehnsucht. Not only that, Finney’s uncontrollable weeping and outpouring of confession fits with Lewis’s connection of Sehnsucht with a deep sense of loss.

**Billy Sunday.** Billy Sunday (1862-1935) was a famous baseball star who became an evangelist and shared the gospel with millions of people. At a pivotal moment in his life, Sunday was greatly affected by manmade beauty through music, which led to his conversion to Christianity. Not only that, as often appears in connection with Lewis’s

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concept of *Sehnsucht*, there is a strong element of memory in Billy Sunday’s important experience of manmade beauty. Lewis’s three seminal childhood experiences of beauty remained fixed in his memory and crucial to his understanding of *Sehnsucht*; sometimes he would experience the thrill of this desire again simply through remembering former moments of *Sehnsucht*. Memory is an important part of Sunday’s story:

Twenty-nine years ago I walked down a street in Chicago in company with some ball players who were famous in this world (some of them are dead now), and we went into a saloon.

It was Sunday afternoon and we got tanked up and then went and sat down on a corner. I never go by that street without thanking God for saving me…

We sat down on a curbing. Across the street a company of men and women were playing on instruments—horns, flutes and slide trombones—and the others were singing the gospel hymns that I used to hear my mother sing back in the old church, where I used to go to Sunday school.

*And God painted on the canvas of my recollection and memory a vivid picture of the scenes of other days and other faces* [Following this, a man invited Billy Sunday to the Pacific Garden Mission].

I arose and said to the boys: “I’m through. I am going to Jesus Christ. We’ve come to the parting of the ways,” and I turned my back on them. Some of them laughed and some of them mocked me; one of them gave me encouragement, others never said a word.

Twenty-nine years ago I turned and left that little group on the corner of State and Madison streets and walk to the little mission and fell on my knees and staggered out of sin and into the arms of the Savior.\(^{30}\)

Billy Sunday was in the midst of drunken reveling, but on that Sunday when he heard the music, he was struck with vivid memory of childhood experiences and filled with desire to change his life and return to something he had left behind. This resonates with Lewis’s connection of *Sehnsucht* to memory, loss, and beauty through music. It is also instructive to note here that Sunday was invited by an unidentified man to the Mission. He did not come to faith in Christ by simply hearing beautiful music. He was struck with memory and desire, and *then* he was invited to hear the gospel—at which point he was saved. **Experiencing *Sehnsucht* is not a sufficient condition for salvation; there still must**

be gospel proclamation and response through repentance and faith in Christ.

**William Wainwright.** William Wainwright is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Among other important books on the philosophy of religion, he has written *The Oxford Handbook for Philosophy of Religion.* \(^{31}\) For someone so rationally minded and gifted in philosophical reasoning, his account of committing to the Christian faith is striking for what he says really drew him to his decision. It was not a tight argument for God’s existence, nor a brilliant apologetic defense of the faith.

Wainwright began an undergraduate degree in literary studies at Kenyon College with the hope of becoming a poet. Kenyon was an Episcopal school and thus expected students to attend chapel services:

What affected me was the Book of Common Prayer, and the church’s worship—not only in its order and beauty but also its theological substance. In the service, abstract theological truths and credal formulae acquired resonance, engaged my imagination, came alive. As a result, I was confirmed in my sophomore year and have remained active in the Episcopal Church since then, serving many times on the vestry, on diocesan committees, and as warden. \(^{32}\)

Though Wainwright would eventually become a brilliant and respected philosopher, he was brought to faith through his interaction with the Book of Common Prayer and the musical worship within the college’s chapel services. As instances of literature and music, both are manmade beauty that helped draw Wainwright toward faith in Christ. The philosopher saw no conflict between this and an intellectual life; rather he emphasizes in this quote the unity and harmony between the truths communicated and the art used to communicate them. Finally, Wainwright echoes Lewis’s emphasis on

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imagination in *Sehnsucht* when he speaks of his own imagination being engaged through beauty prior to his confirmation in the Episcopal Church.

**Malcolm Muggeridge.** As a British literary figure who defended Christian belief, Malcolm Muggeridge (1903-1990) was often viewed as a successor to C. S. Lewis. Muggeridge’s journey to faith was similar to Lewis’s in that he, too, had an atheistic background and was led toward God through manmade beauty. Another similarity between the two men was their affinity for elements of Catholicism; Muggeridge and his wife actually joined the Catholic Church late in life.

Early in life, Malcolm Muggeridge was sympathetic to Communism. However, when he was sent to Moscow as a journalist working for the *Manchester Guardian*, he became disillusioned with Communism when he saw the actual results of its implementation in the lives of people. He was particularly frustrated with how journalists in the West sometimes falsely reported how wonderful conditions were for people living under Soviet rule. These experiences came into play in the following moving account of how Muggeridge saw Christ in many simple yet beautiful things through his numerous journeys across the world. In this account from his *Jesus Rediscovered*, he speaks to Christ directly, calling Him “You”:

> And You? I never caught even a glimpse of You in any paradise—unless You were an old, colored shoeshine man on a windy corner in Chicago one February morning, smiling from ear to ear; or a little man with a lame leg in the Immigration Department in New York, whose smiling patience as he listened to one Puerto Rican after another seemed to reach from there to eternity. Oh, and whoever painted the front of the little church in the woods at Kliasma near Moscow—painted it in blues as bright as the sky and whites that outshone the snow? That might have been You. Or again at Kiev, at an Easter service when the collectivization famine was in full swing, and Bernard Shaw and newspaper correspondents were telling the world of

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34For example, C. S. Lewis’s belief in purgatory is well-known. Beyond this, Lewis scholar (and Catholic university professor) Joseph Pearce has demonstrated Lewis’s many Catholic tendencies in *C. S. Lewis and the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003).
the bursting granaries and apple-cheeked dairymaids in the Ukraine. What a congregation that was, packed in tight, squeezed together like sardines! I myself was pressed against a stone pillar, and scarcely able to breathe. Not that I wanted to, particularly. So many gray, hungry faces, all luminous like an El Greco painting; and all singing. How they sang—about how there was no help except in You, nowhere to turn except to You; nothing, nothing that could possibly bring any comfort except You. I could have touched You then, You were so near—not up at the altar, of course, where the bearded priests, crowned and bowing and chanting, swung their censers—one of the gray faces, the grayest and most luminous of all.\(^{35}\)

John Mulder describes Muggeridge’s narrative here as evidence of the author’s “dawning awareness of the only alternative to human despair.”\(^{36}\) As Muggeridge looks back on numerous life experiences—corroborating Lewis’s connection of memory and Sehnsucht—he vividly remembers instances of beauty that he observed, often in the most unlikely or unexpected places. And as many of these testimonies have done, he associates this beauty with light or luminosity. Muggeridge realizes that when he saw these simple yet beautiful things in the world around him, he was catching glimpses of Christ—the One he would eventually acknowledge as his God and Savior.

This account is similar to Ethel Waters’ account in which she speaks of beauty that is both natural and manmade. It is also reminiscent of Lewis’s broad strokes in describing Sehnsucht evoked by

that unnameable something, desire for which pierces us like a rapier at the smell of a bonfire, the sound of wild ducks flying overhead, the title of The Well at the World’s End, the opening lines of Kubla Kahn, the morning cobwebs in late summer, or the noise of falling waves.\(^{37}\)

**Application**

Beauty possesses great potential to draw men unto belief in God and even unto the gospel of Christ, whether that beauty is found in God Himself, in natural beauty observed, in natural beauty discovered, or in manmade beauty. But how does that impact


Christian obedience to the Great Commission? What difference does this make in evangelistic witness?

First, it is important to remember what was stated at the outset of this chapter: any amount of success in evangelistic endeavors will come only through God’s own power and work. With regard to the drawing power of beauty, in many instances Christians might not play any part, because God may have already been revealing His presence and power through experiences of beauty that the unbeliever has had while not interacting with an evangelistically minded Christian. The truth of Romans 1:20 is certainly not dependent upon the immediate presence of any Christian: “For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.”

In these cases, the responsibility of the Christian is simply to be ready to share the true gospel with those who have experienced Sehnsucht in one form or another and have been thus primed for the gospel. This readiness would involve being able to lucidly explain the biblical doctrine of creation, a biblical understanding of beauty, and how the Christian worldview provides the best explanation of the human heart’s desire for beauty.

Second, because of the power of beauty to draw unbelievers toward God, Christians should pray for lost people along these lines. The Church of Jesus Christ should ask the Lord of the harvest to send more laborers into His harvest (Matt 9:38), but also that He will use the beauty of nature and art to open the eyes of those to whom those laborers go. Based on this dissertation’s biblical analysis, both of these would be prayers according to God’s revealed will.

Third, Christians should not fail to study both the natural world and human culture. Through the beauty found in each, both can help the evangelist communicate using the heart language of many who do not yet know Christ. The apostle Paul models this himself when he quotes from Greek culture twice in his address to the Athenian Areopagus in Acts 17. Christian evangelists can and should utilize elements of beauty in
human culture to point to the beautiful God whose image placed on mankind inspires these artistic creations. This use of resources is by no means limited to specifically “Christian” art and culture. Much art produced by individuals with non-Christian worldviews can be used in this way, as the next chapter demonstrates.

Fourth, churches should actively seek to present opportunities for unbelievers to experience moments of Sehnsucht. The Christian tradition has vast wealth of resources to draw from in music, architecture, painting, literature, and more. Even those opposed to Christianity acknowledge this, as the next section illustrates. Churches should actively encourage and develop musicians and artists in general—not only for worship, but for evangelism. Churches should be seeking to present musical performances at a high level of technical skill. Smaller churches may simply be unable to do so; nevertheless, they may be able to partner with other local churches to produce artistic presentations, or they may simply organize trips to attend excellent productions. The next chapter shows that art does not have to be made or performed by Christians in order to point viewers toward God through beauty. Pastors must realize that Christian use of the arts should not be limited to worship services or seen as superfluous and unnecessary; instead, arts for the glory of God should be viewed as important tools in the Christian task of evangelism and discipleship.

Finally, in general, those seeking to lead others to faith in Christ should actively point to beauty. As Lewis stated in the letter that opened this chapter, many will not be converted through rational argumentation. And even those who may be greatly impacted by rational argumentation might also be drawn by their heart’s desire for beauty. Lewis himself certainly demonstrated both rational and Romantic propensities. Thus, evangelists should actively draw the attention of unbelievers to natural and manmade beauty around them. And evangelists must be alert for statements or signs from seekers that indicate the workings of Sehnsucht on their hearts; this can only be done through relational investment in the lives of those who do not yet know Christ. No human being knows what the Holy
Spirit may use to open the spiritual eyes of a particular person, but Christian evangelists can fully entrust every soul to the sovereign God who loved them enough to send His Son to die for them.

**Sehnsucht’s Usefulness for Apologetics**

C. S. Lewis’s concept of *Sehnsucht* not only holds value for evangelism, but also for the Christian task of apologetics. Every believer in Jesus Christ is called to “honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3:15). As noted, however, the tasks of evangelism and apologetics are not completely separated from one another. Often, conversations in which the gospel is being shared will weave back and forth and blur the lines between the two. Indeed, numerous points relevant for apologetics have already been made in the previous section on evangelism. However, Ted Cabal’s succinct statement establishes a helpful understanding of the difference between the two Christian assignments: evangelism transitions to apologetics whenever an individual says “no” to the gospel. At that point, the Christian must move beyond the simple explanation of the gospel and “make a defense” for that hope. Lewis’s concept of *Sehnsucht* can assist in apologetics for the Christian faith in two primary ways: undermining naturalism and strengthening Christianity’s case based on the correspondence test of truth.

**Sehnsucht’s Undermining of Naturalism**

Lewis’s concept of *Sehnsucht* can help to undermine naturalism because naturalism is unable to explain *Sehnsucht* or any sense of awe, wonder, or joy at an experience of beauty. Naturalism has difficulty grounding the concept of beauty, which makes it difficult to properly explain exemplifications of beauty which are widely recognized as aesthetically pleasing, even across cultural and worldview boundaries.

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Genesis 1:27 states, “So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” According to the biblical doctrine of the Imago Dei, mankind is the crown of God’s creation, because every human person reflects something of the being and nature of God. Although the Bible does not clearly explicate the full implications of this doctrine (including what it does and does not mean), it is at least apparent that humans reflect the image of God at the points wherein they differ from the rest of creation. One of these is in the act of creating things. Beavers may build dams, but they do not construct works of art or enduring contributions to culture and technology.\textsuperscript{39} This difference means that as human beings exercise their God-given abilities to create (or sub-create, in Tolkien’s terms), they honor the Creator and reflect His work in a lesser way. This connection between God’s work of creating beauty and man’s appreciation and imitation of that divine work is key to understanding the common bond between shared experiences of aesthetic pleasure among mankind.

**Natural beauty.** There is often a remarkably consistent recognition of natural beauty in the world and universe, regardless of the philosophical and worldview differences of human observers. Virtually everyone in their right mind who looks up at a brilliant full moon, or observes the *aurora borealis*, or arises early to see the sunrise acknowledges the undisputed beauty of these phenomena. Christians or theists are not the only ones who make these claims. Many atheists wholeheartedly acknowledge the beauty of the universe at the same places Christians do, and they even avidly seek and study that beauty.

Atheists do not have a fundamentally different vision of what is beautiful than Christians or any other normal group of people do. There are plenty of people who experience aesthetic appreciation in nature who also believe that the universe is a collection of chemicals brought together accidentally and continuing to interact by chance alone.

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\textsuperscript{39}This insight brought to my attention by James Parker, “Introduction to Philosophy” (classroom lecture notes, 28500—Introduction to Philosophy, Fall 2005).
These philosophical naturalists understand that there was no purpose guiding the making of geological shapes (such as at the Grand Canyon)—either at their original formation or their continued development, no hand guiding the formation of the moon or the working of its phases, no grand design in the beauty of the *aurora borealis*, and no planned effort in assembling the color palette found in a sunrise. They also understand their perception of aesthetic value to simply be chemicals (their own bodies) interacting with other chemicals, with no ultimate meaning or design. They believe that the very eyes with which they view the sunset are the results of innumerable biological accidents—not the goal of a designer to enable aesthetic and other perceptions.

As an example of this worldview commitment, see DNA scientist and Nobel Laureate Francis Crick’s clear opening statement to his book *The Astonishing Hypothesis*:

> The Astonishing Hypothesis is that “You,” your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. As Lewis Carroll’s Alice might have phrased it: “You’re nothing but a pack of neurons.” This hypothesis is so alien to the ideas of most people alive today that it can truly be called astonishing.\(^\text{40}\)

Crick’s hypothesis is not only alien to the ideas of most people, but it is also alien to the *experience* of most (if not all) people. And, as is discussed below, naturalists like Crick often do not live as if this hypothesis is true, either.

Although differences of taste and preference certainly exist, there are assuredly things in nature which virtually everyone would agree demonstrate beauty. Yet, in light of their worldview commitments, it is difficult to see how naturalists could explain the collective human sense of wonder, awe, appreciation, and desire (or *Sehnsucht*) at beauty in nature. How do randomly-arranged chemicals respond to other randomly-arranged chemicals in this way? How does one explain the similar reactions of billions of different collections of chemicals (in human form) to other collections of chemicals (in the form of \(^\text{40}\)Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul*, reprint (New York: Scribner, 1995), 3.)
things in nature) when there is no physical, chemical, or electrical interaction between the
humans and the objects of observation (other than the perception of light, sound waves,
and smells)? This discussion points out the deficiency of the naturalistic worldview in
dealing with human experience of anything beyond the immediately physical and
chemical world.

A naturalist might reply here that reactions of wonder to things of beauty in
nature are simply constructs of culture, responses engrained by the previous generation
teaching to react in these ways to certain things in nature. Aesthetic appreciation is
merely a product of human culture, not a response to something transcendent found in
and through physical items in the world. Two rebuttals may be made to this suggestion:
first, this objection loses much force when considering again the widespread wonderment
at certain things in nature (such as the stars in the sky) that occur across greatly divergent
cultures and background.

Second, the objection must also be countered with the point that these positive
evaluations of beauty in nature must have had a point of origin in human history
somewhere along the way, and the most common sense understanding of this is that people
responded positively to some objective exemplification of beauty—the thing to which
people still respond today. Beauty in nature shows a glimpse and echo of the ultimate
beauty of the Creator, and it is this objective standard of beauty to which those created in
His image respond. This real beauty is also that which can evoke the sensation of
Sehnsucht in the observer.

To be clear, it is not being argued that Sehnsucht will necessarily be evoked in
the hearts of all people who stand before the Grand Canyon, for example. In fact, C. S.
Lewis was clear that what brings forth the reaction of Sehnsucht in the human heart differs
from person to person, as chapter 3 demonstrated. There is a great difference between an
individual’s simple acknowledgement of something as beautiful and the evocation of
inconsolable desire for that beauty in the heart of the individual—but naturalism has
difficulty explaining *either* phenomenon. In this argument against naturalism, *Sehnsucht*—especially in light of the testimonies shared in the first half of this chapter—explains how *strong* and life-changing a person’s reaction to beauty can be. Naturalism struggles to explain the widespread occurrence of these sorts of testimonies.

In his book, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, Richard Dawkins—who has been referred to as “Darwin’s Rottweiler”\(^1\)—attempts to reconcile mankind’s experience of beauty with a naturalistic worldview. Interestingly, Dawkins candidly admits why he wrote his book:

A foreign publisher of my first book confessed that he could not sleep for three nights after reading it, so troubled was he by what he saw as its cold, bleak message. . . . A teacher from a distant country wrote to me reproachfully that a pupil had come to him in tears after reading the same book, because it had persuaded her that life was empty and purposeless. He advised her not to show the book to any of her friends, for fear of contaminating them with the same nihilistic pessimism...But such very proper purging of saccharine false purpose; [*sic*] such laudable tough-mindedness in the debunking of cosmic sentimentality must not be confused with a loss of personal hope.\(^2\)

Dawkins wanted to keep readers of his books from descending into total despair— from going down the same road as Friedrich Nietzsche, who dove headlong into the implications of naturalism and fully embraced nihilism. To avoid this, Dawkins asserts that the ultimate meaninglessness of the universe on its grandest scale should not lead to nihilism; on the contrary, within human interactions, we do create meaning and can observe the poetry of the universe. The term “poetry” is frequently used in his book.

Dawkins points out multiple aspects of the universe as objects for further study and awe, such as the incredible complexity in one human cell or the amazing improbability of a planet coming into being that could support life. At times, taken out of context, his

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\(^1\)The story of the origination of this nickname, coined by Charles Simonyi (who donated the money for Dawkins’ endowed chair at Oxford and thus gave Dawkins a great platform for his views), can be found in Peter S. Williams, *I Wish I Could Believe in Meaning* (Southampton, UK: Damaris, 2004), 99.

argument could easily be used in support of Intelligent Design! He even says, “But we as
individuals are still hugely blessed. Privileged, and not just privileged to enjoy our
planet. More, we are granted the opportunity to understand why our eyes are open, and
why they see what they do, in the short time before they close for ever.” Dawkins looks
at the scientific evidence and sees that humans are obviously “blessed” and “privileged,”
but comes to the conclusions that no transcendent individual has actually given the
blessing or granted the privilege, and each person’s participation in this cosmic accident
permanently ends when we close our eyes.

Dawkins goes so far as to explain the brain’s interaction with the universe in
terms of virtual reality and states at the end of his book that

we can get outside the universe. I mean in the sense of putting a model of the
universe inside our skulls. . . . A big model, worthy of the reality that regulates,
updates, and tempers it . . . where Einstein’s noble spacetime curve upstages the
curve of Yahweh’s covenantal bow and cuts it down to size. Dawkins’ blasphemy does little to alleviate naturalism’s movement towards despair, as
his attempt at supplying hope and meaning seems contrived and arbitrary. This hopeful
language seems out of sync with much of the rest of his corpus, in which he would
advocate a ruthlessly naturalistic approach, regardless of the conclusion. He tries to
comfort despairing naturalists with the exhortation to manufacture some sort of meaning
from poetic patterns in the universe (though he admits the whole universe is pointless),
thereby soothing human need for purpose with our inherent sensitivity to beauty. Unlike
Nietzsche, Dawkins sees the edge of the pit of despair and recoils from it.46

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43This statement is full of irony, given the title of The Privileged Planet, the Intelligent Design
text previously mentioned.

44Dawkins, Unweaving the Rainbow, 5, emphasis added.

45Ibid., 312.

46This illustration based on Nietzsche’s experience is taken from Parker, “Introduction to
Philosophy.”
The irony here is that Nietzsche himself can be used to point out the inconsistency and weakness of Dawkins’ position. Nietzsche said, “When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one’s feet. . . . Christianity is a system, a whole view of things thought out together.”47 Although Dawkins is not primarily talking about Christian morality (although morality does come up in *Rainbow*), it is clear that the level of meaning ascribed to the universe in the Christian worldview is what is lost in Dawkins’ view—and it has been sensed by his readers. Yet, though he has loudly repudiated a Christian worldview, Dawkins wants to borrow Christian intellectual and spiritual capital, arbitrarily assigning meaning within a technically meaningless universe.

Dawkins’ attempt here falters because he does not provide sufficient reason for which his naturalism does not slip into nihilism. Indeed, readers are able to sense the logical conclusion of his propositions. Why else would enough people respond so strongly to his previous writings that he would feel compelled to pen *Unweaving the Rainbow*? Peter Williams points out that, unfortunately for Dawkins’s defense, the problem is not in his science but in his “cold [atheistic] philosophy;” this is “a natural enough mistake for someone who constantly confuses science with philosophy.”48

Dawkins’ defense of naturalism also struggles because his concept of beauty and meaning is arbitrary. Without a standard of beauty—as Christianity has in the character of God Himself—it is difficult to understand what makes the complex patterns and immense scope of the universe beautiful. Further, how can Dawkins state that these patterns are a good thing and worthy of study and wonder if ultimately they are the result of innumerable cosmic accidents? At the most basic level, why should meaning be sought out or expressed by people? By Dawkins’ lights, the complete lack of human

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existence would not make the universe any worse (or better, for that matter). How can
beauty be important or worthwhile then?

**Manmade beauty.** The Christian understanding of beauty as originating in
God Himself and being echoed in His creatures through their bearing of His image also
does well to explain the shared human appreciation of aesthetic value in manmade art.
Although the elements of taste and preference are likely weightier factors here than in
observation of natural beauty, there are still numerous works of art that would virtually
universally be acknowledged as things of beauty—if not in their messages (which are
often religious and thus controversial), then in the skill displayed in their making.
Relevant examples could be Michelangelo’s *Pietà* or the music of Beethoven. As image-
bearers of God, we inherently recognize when even a manmade object or sound whispers
to us of the beauty of the One who created us.

By contrast, naturalism again is hard-pressed to explain shared experience of
and reaction to sensory beauty in art. If the ultimate purpose and end of the universe is
without meaning, how could individual works of art have any value at all—including
aesthetic value? In addition, since meaning is conveyed from designer to thing designed,
if lives are without meaning, then created art is pointless as well. Incidentally, one can
see the impact of this inevitable slide of naturalism into nihilism when observing modern
art—as in the work of Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol.

The question for naturalism must be: where does the shared acknowledgement
and response to obviously valuable works of art come from if human beings are all just
chemicals manipulating chemicals? What is the source of the spark that moves most
people when they observe powerful works of art? Dawkins’ attempt at dodging the bullet
of despair falters with regard to manmade beauty, as well.

Interestingly, this point can also be made through the back door—through the
quests for redemption as found in the dark *noir* genre in American film. Hibbs discusses
author Graham Greene—an influential pioneer in American noir—specifically noting how the shadow of Greene’s fiction proves the sunshine that exists in the larger world in which it is placed:

His characters often bespeak damnation rather than redemption…characters exist on the dangerous edge of things, where the language of redemption and damnation borders on the unintelligible. Even where absent or dissipating, that code of redemption haunts the characters and the drama. *By marking its absence, Greene renders it present.*”

Not only do people collectively respond with wonder and enjoyment at beauty in artistic creations, they collectively respond with horror, sadness, or longing at ugliness or darkness in art. This response betrays the desire within almost every person for good to win out over evil, for problems to be resolved, and for injustices to be made right. The shared dislike of artistic ugliness is best explained by the Christian worldview and the image of God within each human being. Naturalism has difficulty explaining why evil or disorder is undesirable, so it also struggles to explain shared negative reaction to pain and chaos. David Taylor summarizes, “So what will rescue us from all this ugliness? God, of course. But what about God gives us hope in the midst of so much ugliness? A fundamental attribute of God: that He is beautiful.”

**Daniel Dennett.** Other naturalists besides Richard Dawkins have attempted to explain the human tendency to connect beauty with God. Daniel Dennett, one of the leading New Atheists, did so in his book *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon.* Throughout the book, he works to show how science can explain the natural human bent toward religious impulses. In one section, he specifically cites the art that Christianity and other religions have given the world, openly acknowledging the beauty of structures like the Hagia Sofia and European cathedrals. In context, he is discussing

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his view that all religions—although they may have done some good and are loved by their adherents—are myths and therefore should not be propagated. He ends this excerpt by decrying the myriad ways in which “love” for one’s own religion has caused violence and war:

It is surely no accident that the language of romantic love and the language of religious devotion are all but indistinguishable, and it is similarly no accident that almost all religions (with a few austere exceptions, such as the Puritans and the Shakers and the Taliban) have given their lovers a cornucopia of beauty to ravish their senses: soaring architecture, with decoration applied to every surface, music, candles, and incense. The inventory of the world’s great works of art is crowned by religious masterpieces. . . . Thanks to Christianity, we have the Hagia Sofia and the cathedrals of Europe . . . Bach’s Saint Matthew Passion and Handel’s Messiah and those miniature marvels the Christmas carols are among the most rapturous love songs ever composed, and the stories they set to music are themselves compositions of extraordinary emotional power. The film director George Stevens may not have been exaggerating when he called his 1965 movie on the life of Jesus The Greatest Story Ever Told. . . . We have been given a lot to love, and not just spectacularly beautiful art and stories and ceremonies. . . . The fact that so many people love their religions as much as, or more than, anything else in their lives is a weighty fact indeed. . . . There may well be nothing more wonderful than love, but love is not enough. A world in which baseball fans’ love of their teams led them so to hate the other teams and their fans that murderous war accompanied the playoffs would be a world in which a particular love, pure and blameless in itself, led to immoral and intolerable consequences.51

In this section, Dennett capitalizes on the wide scope of meaning associated with the English word “love,” blurring the lines between love for one’s religion, love for one’s sports team, and romantic love. He explains that much beautiful art in the world is an outgrowth of religious love. Dennett then connects this overly broad concept of love to the instinct for finding a mate that he believes has been ingrained in human beings through evolutionary processes. This sort of forced equivalency hurts his overall argument. Further, Dennett’s argument throughout the book tends toward self-defeat, as discussed below.

Denis Dutton. In The Art Instinct, philosopher Denis Dutton has written a

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51Daniel C. Dennett, Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon (New York: Penguin, 2006), 251-54. Devotees of Puritan literature, like Arthur Bennett, ed., The Valley of Vision (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), may take significant issue with Dennett’s statement, even apart from his lumping of Puritans in with the Taliban.
book-length explanation of the draw toward beauty from an evolutionary and naturalistic perspective. Dutton looks at how Darwinian evolutionary theory has “enriched and revitalized” so many other fields of study, and concludes that aesthetics should benefit, as well. To that end, he works to fit his aesthetic philosophy into a Darwinian framework, but this is a difficult task from the beginning.

Two significant problems hinder Dutton’s work. First, he frequently makes assumptions that ultimately give the impression that the project as a whole is begging the question. For example, Dutton writes,

Far from being derived from sets of cultural conventions, the enjoyment of narrative fiction shows clear evidence of Darwinian adaptation, for instance, in how even very young children can rationally deal with the make-believe aspects of stories, distinguishing story-worlds from each other and from reality with a high degree of innate sophistication. Not only does the artistic structure of stories speak to Darwinian sources: so does the intense pleasure taken in their universal themes of love, death, adventure, family conflict, justice, and overcoming adversity.\(^52\)

So, very young children can understand made-up stories and differentiate them from reality. How does that indicate Darwinian adaptation? If anything, it points away from Darwinian adaptation and toward the biblical doctrine of the image of God. Children have a level of intelligence, rationality, and appreciation of story far more than any animal, and those elements of their nature have been placed there by God as a reflection of Himself. In no animal do we find appreciation of make-believe stories. It looks as if Dutton has begged the question regarding the truth of Darwin’s theory and then tried to shoehorn Darwinian adaptation onto children’s appreciation of stories. This type of begging the question recurs in the book.

Second, *The Art Instinct* suffers most of all from the difficulty of believing its main premise. This difficulty is found in the problem of beauty and artistic creation for natural selection. It is one thing to say that every living creature today has come into being by natural selection working through the principle of the survival of the fittest; it is

something else entirely to claim that painting or filmmaking or composing music
somehow has developed from a trait that made human ancestors the fittest for survival.

Yet, Dutton repeatedly makes statements that highlight the strength of this
objection to his view. In particular, he does so with regard to the distinction between
human art and the scribbling of animals:

A word about animals. Some readers will notice that while animals appear in this
book to illustrate generic evolutionary processes, they are completely absent from
explanations of the high-order adaptations involved in the human art instinct. This
is a deliberate omission. Animal lover though I am, I am bound to say that it does
chimpanzees no favors to promote their delightful scrawls to the status of art in the
distinctly human sense defined in chapter 3.53

Chapter 3 includes a twelve-point description of distinctive features found in human art—
not really a definition.

One further quote expresses this same distinction:

*The Art Instinct* is a book about human beings and the peculiarly human impulses
and drives that underlie our culture. It is entirely in the Darwinian spirit that we
respect other animals as the astonishing creatures they are, with purposes precisely
suited to their lives. From beaver dams to African termite mounds to New Guinea
bowers, animals construct stunning objects and put on spectacular performances.
*Animals, nevertheless, do not create art.*54

Dutton’s clarifications here actually strengthen the case against his argument.
It is simply too unreasonable to believe that animals make art, so Dutton draws a solid
line—not dotted, but *solid*—between the constructions and projects of animals and the
fundamentally different works of art made by humans.

Interestingly, Dutton does not sound like an evolutionist. Within an
evolutionary system, how do animals have “precisely suited” purposes? From his
worldview perspective, why does he not call humans “animals” as many other evolutionists
do? Dutton, by drawing this hard distinction, has essentially appropriated the concept of
*Imago Dei* and slipped it into his system. This strong distinction between mankind and

53Ibid., 7.
54Ibid., 9.
animals and the creations of each is borrowed capital from a biblical worldview. Dutton does not have the basis for this distinction within his naturalistic system.

**Response to Dennett and Dutton.** Both arguments from Dennett and Dutton suffer from a self-defeating tendency. Timothy Keller points out this weakness in reference to Dennett’s book, in his apologetic work *The Reason for God*. Dennett and other evolutionary naturalists state that all religious impulses are due to some evolutionary background and benefit. Somewhere in mankind’s distant past, they claim, man’s survival was benefited by such impulses, so they cannot be trusted to lead to truth. Religious impulses can only be trusted to identify something that (at some point) helped men survive and thrive. But at this point, the naturalist has cut away the ground beneath his own position. Keller explains,

> In the last part of Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* he admits that since we are the product of natural selection, we can’t completely trust our own senses. After all, evolution is interested only in preserving adaptive behavior, not true belief . . . . I don’t believe Dawkins or other evolutionary theorists realize the full implications of this crucial insight. Evolution can only be trusted to give us cognitive faculties that help us live on, *not* to provide ones that give us an accurate and true picture of the world around us. . . . Evolutionists say that if God makes sense to us, it is not because he is really there, it’s only because that belief helped us survive and so we are hardwired for it. However, if we can’t trust our belief-forming faculties to tell us the truth about God, why should we trust them to tell us the truth about anything, including evolutionary science?\(^55\)

Interestingly, C. S. Lewis makes an argument along the same lines in *Miracles*.\(^56\)

Thus a strict materialism refutes itself for the reason given long ago by Professor Haldane: “If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true . . . and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms” (*Possible Worlds*, p. 209). . . . But Naturalism, even it if is not purely materialistic, seems to me to involve the same difficulty, though in a somewhat less obvious form. It discredits

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our processes of reasoning or at least reduces their credit to such a humble level that it can no longer support Naturalism itself.\textsuperscript{57}

Daniel Dennett and Denis Dutton try to explain human interaction with beauty (and by extension, any influence of beauty toward a beautiful Creator) in terms of evolutionary developments. They work hard to show that beauty does not point to the existence and creative hand of a beautiful Maker, and that any God-ward response of humans to beauty is not indicative of any deep truth about God.

Rather, these authors explain, human responses to beauty (and for Dennett, any human religious impulses) are the result of evolutionary instincts that at some point in human development helped the species survive. However, in this claim, they cut off the evolutionary basis for their own ability to reason, since, if their view is true, the development of their own mental capacities was the result of evolutionary processes and therefore cannot be counted upon to arrive at truth—only to demonstrate something which at some point in their history helped their species survive. In this, the naturalistic attempt at explaining human responses to beauty is self-defeating. The desire for beauty that draws the individual toward God as described by C. S. Lewis and as documented by many others in human history looks to be difficult for naturalism to explain.

\textit{Sehnsucht, Christianity, and the Correspondence Test of Truth}

The correspondence theory of truth, “narrowly speaking . . . is the view that truth is correspondence to a fact.”\textsuperscript{58} To the philosophical layperson, correspondence is simply the idea that if something is really true, it will match up with what is seen in the actual world. In the case of beauty and human response to it, the question must be asked whether naturalism or Christianity provides the better explanation based on the experience


of people in the real world. Closer to home, do naturalists *themselves* live as if their views are true? Do their views pass a correspondence test of truth? Does it fit with what we see, and can it really be lived out? This test is where philosophy’s rubber must meet the road.

Naturalism has a challenge in explaining the widely shared human response to beauty. Humans *do* recognize and stand in awe of natural and manmade beauty, but naturalism—lacking the doctrine of *Imago Dei*—struggles to account for the human reaction to aesthetic value in nature. Christianity, on the other hand, provides a better explanation of these things. The concept of *Sehnsucht* as articulated by C. S. Lewis and as corroborated by many Christian and non-Christian sources fits well with the common human response to beauty, as well as with human beings’ common and natural turn from that beauty toward God. Anthony O’Hear’s comment sums this point up well: “Aesthetic experience *seems* to produce the harmony between us and the world that would have to point to a religious resolution were it not to be an illusion.”59 The evidence certainly does not seem to point to the universe as a meaningless collection of molecules.

The biblical understanding of beauty as made by God and pointing to God has been explained and illustrated in detail in previous chapters. Human beings from widely varying cultures, backgrounds, and time periods have agreed that to contemplate beauty is to touch something transcendent. This consistency across varied backgrounds is due to the fact that the image of God is upon *all* men, setting them apart from every animal and hardwiring them to enjoy beauty, create beauty, and connect beauty to their Creator.

So, when Arthur Schopenhauer, Mark Rothko, and others speak about beauty in ways that line up (at certain points) with C. S. Lewis and the Bible, they are showing continuing evidence of the image of God upon them. Their views are not *completely* biblical or true, because of the noetic effects of the fall and the influence of other false

worldviews. Yet, elements of the truth come through as they grasp at it, fingers slipping, yet apprehending some of the reality about beauty and its relationship to God.

In contrast, the simple facts that Dawkins wrote *Unweaving the Rainbow* and Dutton wrote *The Art Instinct* show their uneasiness with the inevitably nihilistic direction of naturalism’s core tenets. Both men continually use words like “poetry,” “nobility,” and “grandeur” in a desperate attempt to infuse real *meaning* into a universe in which they have denied meaning a basis for existence. They revolt against the *reductio ad absurdum* of their own views. As a result, their naturalism has difficulty passing the correspondence test of truth.

Strong statements have been made by evolutionary naturalists regarding this difficulty. Some atheistic or naturalistic philosophers are frank enough to describe their personal motivations for holding to their own philosophy, regardless of where the evidence truly leads. Others openly mourn the lack of meaning or transcendence found in their worldviews. Both types of statements express naturalism’s lack of correspondence to human experience in the world. Influential philosopher Bertrand Russell spoke of his desire for beauty and even something transcendent, but his lack of finding it:

The centre of me is always and eternally a terrible pain—a curious wild pain—searching for something beyond what the world contains, *something transfigured and infinite—the beatific vision—God*—I do not find it, I do not think it is to be found—but the love of it is my life—it’s like passionate love for a ghost. At times it fills me with rage, at times with wild despair, it is the source of gentleness and cruelty and work, it fills every passion that I have—*it is the actual spring of life within me*. I can’t explain it or make it seem anything but foolishness—but whether foolish or not, it is the source of whatever is any good in me. . . . At most times, now, I am not conscious of it, only when I am strongly stirred, either happily or unhappily. I seek escape from it, though I don’t believe I ought to. *In that moment with you by the river I felt it most intensely.*60

The internal sensation Russell describes here sounds strikingly like Lewis’s *Sehnsucht*, including its elements of beauty, pain, loss, and inconsolable desire. Russell even says that any good in him comes from the love for this infinite something that he does not

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believe he will find. This sounds like the account of someone who chose to reject the God-ward call of Sehnsucht, but who continued to feel its tension and desire. His worldview did not fulfill his deepest needs and longings.

With similar honesty, atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel writes,

I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope that I’m right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.61

World-renowned physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking has candidly stated, “The odds against a universe like ours emerging out of something like the Big Bang are enormous. I think there are clearly religious implications.”62 He has also written, “It would be very difficult to explain why the universe should have begun in just this way, except as the act of a God who intended to create beings like us.”63 Yet, in the face of the evidence and his own admission of where it points, Hawking has declared himself an atheist.64 There is an obvious dissonance here between the assessment of where the evidence points and the actual worldview and lifestyle chosen by the individual. Correspondence to the real world is lacking.

In summary, a naturalistic or atheistic view of the world leaves a hole in human experience, unable to accept the direction of the evidence of both scientific investigation and experiences of beauty. Not only that, naturalists struggle to explain the unmistakable truth that every human inwardly senses, even if it is suppressed: true beauty does exist,


and it brings with it truth and goodness and meaning. Beauty points inevitably to God, and His image placed upon people enables them to enjoy and to echo it in their own artistic sub-creations. Naturalism, however, leaves us looking for a suitable explanation of these things. In apologetic work, Christians must rigorously explain the propositional truth of the gospel, but they also must not fail to demonstrate this truth by pointing to examples of God’s gift of beauty.

**Objections to *Sehnsucht*’s Apologetic Value**

There are critics who have denigrated the apologetic value of *Sehnsucht*. However, since Lewis used so many different terms for the concept, those who discuss the topic often do so using varying terminology. Often, Lewis’s argument is called the “argument from desire.” For example, this is the descriptor used by Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli in *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* and by Alister McGrath in *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis*. Other times, the argument is referred to in terms of “joy,” which can be seen through the title of Joe Puckett’s *The Apologetics of Joy*. Many of these treatments focus specifically on Lewis’s previously mentioned statement in *Mere Christianity*: “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”

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67 Some readers may wonder if I am unjustifiably conflating an argument from *Sehnsucht* with arguments from joy or desire. First, Lewis’s interchangeable use of the terms as demonstrated in chap. 3 shows that the conflation is supported by his writings. Second, both McGrath and Puckett refer to *Sehnsucht* in the context of joy or desire. McGrath references *Sehnsucht* multiple times in his chapter on the argument from desire. Puckett, in his index, has the following entry for the term: “*Sehnsucht* (i.e. Joy).” Joe Puckett, Jr., *The Apologetics of Joy: A Case for the Existence of God from C. S. Lewis’s Argument from Desire* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013).

Though Lewis’s use of the phrase “most probable” points more toward an inductive argument or an inference to the best explanation, in *The Apologetics of Joy*, Puckett offers both inductive and deductive versions of Lewis’s argument from desire. Interestingly, Puckett actually uses a deductive argument from desire formulated by John Beversluis. Beversluis, a philosophy professor, has written a chapter critiquing Lewis’s argument from desire in his *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*. The book’s publisher markets Beversluis’ work as “the only critical study of C. S. Lewis’s apologetic writings.”

Beversluis’ deductive version of Lewis’s argument from desire is:

1. Nature makes nothing in vain; that is, every natural desire has an object that can satisfy it.
2. Joy is a natural desire, but not for any natural object because no object in the natural world can satisfy it.
3. Therefore Joy is a desire for an object beyond the natural world and that object must exist.

This dissertation relies much more on inference to the best explanation rather than on a deductive argument from *Sehnsucht*, but Beversluis’ version is helpful in understanding the substance of the argument to which he is objecting and how that relates to the current project.

The first response to Beversluis’ critique of Lewis can be offered prior to listing any specific objections made by Beversluis. This response is simply that Beversluis has likely misunderstood Lewis. Lewis, although a very rational thinker, did not view or use *Sehnsucht* as part of a deductive argument for the existence of God or heaven. Again, he used the phrase “most probable” in the *Mere Christianity* quote. Alister McGrath, in evaluating Beversluis’ treatment of Lewis’s argument from desire, says that Beversluis

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70 John Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, rev. ed. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2007), 41. Puckett seems to agree with this deductive formulation; he only breaks it down into smaller pieces.
has “misunderstood” Lewis and his analysis is “somewhat misleading and superficial” because of this deductive mistake.  

**Begging the question.** One of Beversluis’ primary objections to Lewis’s argument from desire is that Lewis has begged the question. Beversluis believes that Lewis unjustifiably assumes that there exists a supernatural fulfillment of this special desire for joy. He states that Lewis could not possibly know that every other natural desire has a means of natural, earthly satisfaction:

How could Lewis have known that every natural desire has an object that can satisfy it before he knew that Joy has one? . . . I can know that every natural desire has an object that can satisfy it only if I know that each of them has one individually. That is, the truth of the universal proposition “Every natural desire has an object that can satisfy it” is contingent on a host of particular propositions about particular natural desires whose truth must be discovered first.  

In a parallel way, this objection sounds similar to an objection to Intelligent Design posited by some naturalists, who claim that—though this universe is uniquely fine-tuned in its ability to sustain life, it could be one of countless universes. They ask, how could anyone know how many universes there are? Just because the evidence in this universe seems to indicate a designer does not mean that all possible universes point that way; for Beversluis, just because all known human desires except for joy are naturally fulfilled does not mean that there is a supernatural fulfillment of the desire for joy.

Both the multiverse response and Beversluis’ objection are appealing to silence and ignorance, rather than to evidence and knowledge. The evidence of beauty, as well as the fine-tuning of the universe, point to a beautiful Designer who reflected Himself in His creation. To appeal to things that humanity knows nothing about is to move the discussion away from the evidence. Plus, as Puckett points out, “Beversluis blinds himself by his own empiricist commitments. He seems to assume that we must be able to

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71 McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis*, 105, 123.

know about *every possible* object that exists in the world before we can conclude that Joy is not satisfied by anything on earth.”73 Peter Kreeft has responded to Beversluis on this point, as well, writing that Beversluis’ point “amounts to saying that only through sense experience and induction is any knowledge possible, that there is only *a posteriori* knowledge, no *a priori* knowledge. This is Positivism, or at least, Empiricism.”74

**Running from joy.** Another of John Beversluis’ key objections to the power of *Sehnsucht* is Lewis’s urge to turn away from whatever direction joy was pointing him. In *Surprised by Joy*, he writes of the “terror” he felt when he had embraced theism without yet becoming a Christian:

> It may be asked whether my terror was at all relieved by the thought that I was now approaching the source from which those arrows of Joy had been shot at me ever since childhood. Not in the least. No slightest hint was vouchsafed me that there ever had been or ever would be any connection between God and Joy. If anything, it was the reverse. I had hoped that the heart of reality might be of such a kind that we can best symbolize it as a place; instead, I found it to be a Person. For all I knew, the total rejection of what I called Joy might be one of the demands, might be the very first demand, He would make upon me. There was no strain of music from within, no smell of eternal orchards at the threshold, when I was dragged through the doorway. No kind of desire was present at all.75

Beversluis asks of this terror, “If God is really Joy’s ultimate object, and if all desire is ultimately desire for him, why, when Lewis was brought face to face with him, did he cease to desire him and search for a way of escape?”76 He objects that Lewis is inconsistent as to whether or not the desire is really *desirable* or not.

This objection is another point where Beversluis seems to misread Lewis. First, as chapter 2 demonstrated, Lewis speaks in *Surprised by Joy* of his mental vacillation as he wrestled with a rationalistic worldview and the Romantic call of joy.

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76Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search*, 56.
Not only that, his poetry cycle *Spirits in Bondage* clearly shows a struggle between Lewis’s desire for the source of beauty on one hand and his theological doubts on the other. Finally, Beversluis’ objection seems to belie a basic misunderstanding of the internal wrestling that many people experience prior to conversion to Christianity. Puckett rightly responds, “The problem for Lewis was not the Joy itself. It was his pride and fears getting in the way.”

This type of pre-conversion struggle is by no means unique to Lewis.

**Denial of Sehnsucht.** One final objection posed by Beversluis is addressed in this dissertation: the example of those who deny any experience of *Sehnsucht*. Beversluis writes,

> What about people who have no interest in or are indifferent to nature, music, and literature? What about people who have no idea what you are talking about when you try to explain Joy to them? What about severely mentally handicapped or autistic people? . . . [What about] those people who cannot find the desire within?78

This objection is another indication that an inductive argument or inference to the best explanation is the better choice for the use of *Sehnsucht*’s apologetic power. An inductive approach leaves more room to handle objections like this through simply pointing to direction of the evidence provided by the overall experience of humanity. This choice is not meant as an admission that only some people can experience *Sehnsucht*; it is simply the choice to pursue a line of argument that will likely have greater success.

Puckett responds to Beversluis’ objection here by pointing out that no one *has* to pursue *Sehnsucht* or even acknowledge when they feel it: “First, whatever desires God may instill in us, they are not coercive. Just because something may be natural does not mean it must always be inevitable. As long as their cognitive faculties are working

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78Ibid., 53, 55.
properly, human beings will have free will.” Many people go through life experiencing very little wonder, awe, or transcendence, simply because they have allowed themselves to be easily satisfied with material things, poor entertainment, and cheap thrills. Significantly, the point was made in chapter 3 from Lewis’s own writings that the choice must be made to pursue Sehnsucht.

**Sehnsucht, experience, and authority.** One final potential objection—not found in Beversluis—should also be considered here. Some critics of Sehnsucht may come from within the Christian camp, objecting that this approach will lead to many theological errors. For example, if someone sees a photograph of a homosexual couple at their wedding ceremony and is deeply struck by the “beauty” they see in such a picture, does this mean that the church has opened the door to sexual immorality by positing an argument from Sehnsucht? Does beauty in the eye of any beholder then determine truth or morality?

First, it must be stated clearly that the final authority for Christian truth is the Bible alone. Human experience—no matter how beautiful, profound, or widespread—can never trump God’s Word as revealed in Scripture. Sehnsucht is simply a tool that God can use in leading people toward Himself and the message of salvation in Christ alone.

Second, Lewis’s argument does not claim that either Sehnsucht or beauty is a determiner of truth. Beauty observed in art or nature is simply another witness to the truth, and desire for that beauty can point men toward the God who infused His creation with reflections of Himself. The authors mentioned in this section who have written on Lewis’s argument from desire see it an argument for God’s existence, or alternatively, for the existence of a heavenly world. Neither Lewis nor this dissertation claim that experiences of beauty should be used to answer a wide range of theological questions. Having studied the apologetic value of Sehnsucht and some possible objections to its

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70Puckett, *The Apologetics of Joy*, 68.
power, the next step is to examine how some specific pieces of art succeed or fail in evoking *Sehnsucht*. The goal of chapter 7 is to connect these works of art to Lewis’s description of *Sehnsucht* and to make applications to the church in her art and in the development of her artists.
CHAPTER 7
ANALYSIS OF SEHNSUCHT IN FILM AND MUSIC

Having observed the power of beauty and Sehnsucht in evangelism and apologetics, the final step in this dissertation is to review specific pieces of art in order to identify examples of the themes that Lewis frequently identified with the experience of Sehnsucht. These examples should be helpful to the church in both creating and utilizing art for the sake of pointing people to Christ.

This section only focuses on manmade beauty through art. Although beauty in the natural world has been discussed at length thus far, God has no need of my counsel, and He has already completed His work of creation, anyway. So, this research can have no impact on the creation of natural beauty. Also, personal experiences of natural beauty can be very different based on lighting, weather conditions, and other variables, so it would be difficult to compare and evaluate that sort of experience of beauty. For these reasons and for the sake of brevity, this chapter focuses on manmade beauty in art. In particular, art in the form of film and music are examined.

Why Film and Music?

There are several reasons to narrow this discussion to film and music, which are discussed next.

Appropriate Scope

Simply, the length of this project does not allow for every form of art to be analyzed with regard to Sehnsucht. Inherent in such a task would also be the debate over what really constitutes art; for example, is cooking a form of art? Can food bring the
sensation of Sehnsucht? Some might answer in the affirmative. However, these questions are beyond this dissertation. Selecting film and music helps to appropriately narrow the scope of the discussion.

**Symbolic Aspect of Film**

Film offers great potential for causing man to think about God and the beauty that has come from Him. In some cases, through the nature of film, the director is even able to symbolically portray the sacred or the presence of God without words explicitly stating the supernatural presence. Conventions exist in cinema that let viewers know that the human characters are interacting with something or someone who is set apart. Art history professor James Elkins explains, using the movie Twister as an example:

In one scene, Jo and Bill spot a tornado, and the soundtrack plays a wordless chorus . . . to signal their awe. (Wordless choral music is a traditional signal of the sacred in a wide range of modernist music and film, from Schönberg’s Moses und Aron to The Omen). . . . The tornadoes in Twister work as religious objects exactly because their religious significance is never made explicit.

As Elkins indicates, through intuition or through training, audiences often recognize certain signals and symbols within films. These signs enable the subtle connection of beauty and other elements of film to the supernatural or even to God.

**Film’s Resemblance to Real Life**

Film surpasses nearly every other art form in its resemblance to real life; the only competitor it has here is theater, an art form experienced by far less people. Paintings and sculptures can capture individual moments and show particular encounters between divinity and humanity, but they lack the forward movement of time. Music and literature can tell stories of God intervening in human circumstances, but without the

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1For example, in their anthology of philosophical aesthetics entitled Arguing about Art, Professors Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley include an entire section (two essays) on “The Art of Food?” Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley, eds., Arguing about Art (New York: Routledge, 2007), 5-51.

visual aspect of daily human experience. Dance can visually represent a story that progresses through time, but normal life does not involve choreographed moves from point A to point B. Film, on the other hand, can portray human encounters with beauty in a way that is more like actual human experience than other art forms. Because of this likeness to life, the medium of film possesses unique potential to evoke Sehnsucht as people personalize and internalize their experiences while watching movies.³

Film’s Combination of Media

Film combines multiple elements of other art media. Cinematic experiences are amalgamations of photography, theater, music, and literature (especially the element of story, or even myth).⁴ Because of the multi-sensory, multimedia nature of cinema, films are able to reach the hearts of viewers through a variety of means, often simultaneously.

As people view films, their minds can actually be fooled to the point that they will flinch or scream because of the lifelike nature of the image on the screen. Does any other art form evoke such a visceral, sometimes even involuntary reaction? Does any other artistic medium get adrenaline pumping like film does as it inevitably tugs the viewer into the story? No—film is so much like life that people often react as if the events were literally happening in front of them instead of on a screen. In this way, film holds great potential for portraying beauty and evoking desire for God that would draw men toward him.

Popular Nature of Film and Music

The medium of film reaches the masses, both domestically and internationally.

³For the present purposes, this category also includes television. Although cinematic purists may object, no attempt will be made here to draw a significant distinction between the movie theater experience and viewing a movie at home on a television or other device.

⁴Other artistic expressions—like sculpture and costume design—are also often incorporated into film, not to mention the medium of drawing in films that are partially or fully animated. The point is that many types of art work together in a cinematic experience.
According to one textbook introducing the arts, cinema is “the most familiar and the most easily accessible art form.”\(^5\) This accessibility is significant in light of Mark 6:34, when Jesus “saw a great crowd, and He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” Jesus cared for every individual that made up the enthusiastic crowds that followed Him, regardless of some of the poor reasons for which they did so. Even though actors on the theater stage present living human flesh as well or better than film, film is cheaper to experience and thus more accessible to the average person. In addition, the experience of film can be broadcast into the home through the television, accessed over the internet, delivered through the mail, picked up at a Redbox, or taken on a trip on an iPad. No other artistic genre can claim both a strong resemblance to the experience of normal life and mass market accessibility.

The numbers back up this claim. A report published by the Motion Picture Association of America shows that 1.34 billion movie tickets were sold in the United States and Canada in 2013; over two-thirds of the people above the age of 2 in both of those nations attended the cinema that year.\(^6\) “Movie theaters continue to draw more people than all theme parks and major U.S. sports combined.”\(^7\) Just as Jesus came to where people were, film reaches the common person; it is ubiquitous in Western culture, and its reach is extensive throughout the world.\(^8\) Jesus was not born to a mighty human king, to live in a posh palace. He was born to a poor, young girl who was betrothed to a seemingly insignificant carpenter. His arrival was not announced to the wealthy and the intelligentsia. Rather, the heralding angels came to the shepherds, dirty and sleeping in


\(^7\)*Ibid.*, 10.

\(^8\)Global box office receipts in 2013 totaled $35.9 billion, up 4 percent from 2012. *Ibid.*, 3.
the fields. *Jesus came to save ordinary people.* The Lord is willing that none should perish (2 Pet 3:9), and the value of film in this regard is its popular nature as a form of art. Here is a wide open door for gospel proclamation. Film is a strategic genre in its clear representation of life and in its availability to such a wide range of persons.

The popular nature of music is also indisputable. Music is ubiquitous, especially through continued developments in technology. For example, although playing music while driving the car is not new, cars can now play streaming music, music through connected mobile devices, or music from the car’s own internal hard drive. Most retail stores have strategically selected music playing while consumers shop. Television commercials are almost always set to music. And in 2013, the iTunes store sold its 25 *billionth* song.⁹ People of all ages, backgrounds, and nations create and enjoy music, and these activities reflect the image of God upon mankind. Even illiterate people who cannot enjoy literature can experience beauty through music. Its wide reach and emotional range make music a powerful medium for evoking desire for beauty that leads toward God.

**Films Evoking Sehnsucht**

Admittedly, both of the following sections analyzing particular works of art have significant personal and subjective elements to them. Some amount of subjectivity is inherent in any evaluation of art or beauty. Additionally, it has already been demonstrated from Lewis’s own words that the experience of *Sehnsucht* is triggered by different things for different people. Thus, the following analysis is not intended to indicate that *Sehnsucht* will be experienced by every viewer or listener. Rather, the goal of this analysis is to study films and pieces of music of varying genre that, based on Lewis’s characteristics of *Sehnsucht* and my viewing experiences, seem to hold great potential for evoking *Sehnsucht.* Varying genres will be utilized for the purpose of

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showing the versatility of film and music, as well as the extensive potential for the use of these media in pointing men to God’s beauty and the gospel of Christ.

**Eucatastrophe and Film**

J. R. R. Tolkien’s concept of the “eucatastrophe” is helpful in film analysis. Although Tolkien was a philologist and author and not a filmmaker, his expertise on the power of story is clearly applicable to cinema. Tolkien formed a new word by adding the Greek prefix *eu-*, meaning “good,” to the word “catastrophe.” By this term, Tolkien means a sudden turn of events by which the story arrives at the “happy ending.”

With relevance for this dissertation, he explains,

> The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. . . . The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the Incarnation. The story begins and ends in *joy*.  

The story of mankind has been in a downward spiral since Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the fruit in the Garden of Eden. At that point in history, creation itself was marred beyond mankind’s ability to repair it, and sin, sickness, and death became the inevitable experience of each member of the human race. The human race was hopeless on its own. But, after four hundred years of prophetic silence at the end of the Old Testament, in a sudden and miraculous turn of events, God stepped into the human situation and came to redeem man as only He could. He did this through His Incarnation, which became the eucatastrophe of human history. God putting on human flesh and descending to earth provided a joyful hope for rescue from humanity’s suicidal rebellion.

However, as Jesus’ Incarnation unfolded, “He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him” (John 1:11). Jesus was unjustly accused and murdered by those He came to save, and for three days it looked as if all hope was lost again as the Son

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11 Ibid., 366, emphasis added.
of God lay in the grave. Yet, the Incarnation of Jesus held its own eucatastrophe, as the Father raised up His Son in victory, and Satan, sin, and death were ultimately defeated.

Significantly, both Tolkien and Lewis use the word “joy” in connection with the gospel and salvation in Christ. In addition, a strong association can be made between film and Tolkien’s concept of the eucatastrophe. The typical “Hollywood ending” sounds remarkably similar to Tolkien’s “happy ending” or the turn to “joy” found in fairy-stories. The classic movie plot arc that most people enjoy watching involves a hero or heroine who, when all hope seems to be lost, is able to come up with an almost miraculous way to save the day and bring about the joyous ending.

In this more common eucatastrophe of countless films, the protagonist rides into the sunset with the former damsel in distress, and the antagonist gets the judgment that the audience knows he deserves. Similarly, in the story of the Incarnation, Jesus miraculously rises from the grave, defeats death, takes His rescued bride (the church) to be with Him forever, and sends Satan into the lake of fire for eternal torment. Many films contain this key theme of eucatastrophe and the echo of the overarching story of creation, fall, and redemption. With regard to the present dissertation, parallels can be demonstrated between Tolkien’s idea of eucatastrophe and Lewis’s concept of *Sehnsucht*—especially through its elements of myth, light, and the mixing of loss and joy.

**The Superman Franchise**

In this case, because of its fecundity for analysis, consistent symbolism across multiple films, and highly popular nature, the Superman franchise is analyzed rather than just one film about the defender of Metropolis. Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel, the creators of the Superman character, were Jews living in the United States.12 The native names for Superman and his father are Kal-El and Jor-El, respectively, and it does not take an

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advanced understanding of biblical languages to see the reference to the Hebrew word for “God” in the second part of each name. Interestingly, many Messianic and even Christian themes exist in the Superman franchise, as is discussed in this section.

In Superman’s back story, the humanoid alien is sent by his father as a very young child to Earth from his home planet Krypton—which is destroyed immediately after the child leaves. He is adopted by an American family and grows up as a normal kid, except that he gradually discovers he has superhuman abilities and is nearly invincible. He eventually becomes Earth’s superhero, masking as an awkward newspaper reporter and falling in love with Lois Lane. Superman feels a strong connection to the human race, and he uses his powers for good, rescuing people from natural disasters and from many villains—most chiefly Lex Luthor, who exploits Superman’s one weakness (the radioactive substance kryptonite) at every opportunity. In several of the films, Superman and other characters often learn lessons about selflessness and personal sacrifice, love, morality, and human nature.¹³

Throughout the movie franchise, Superman often functions as a Christ-figure. In the first film, Superman (1978), the character’s deceased biological father speaks to him via holographic image, saying, “I have chosen Earth for you. . . . Live as one of them, Kal-El. . . . They can be a great people . . . they wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent you, my only son.”¹⁴ These statements are also echoed in the more recent Superman Returns (2006), further establishing their importance to the character and the franchise. From the point of his arrival on Earth, Kal-El is here for a reason: he brings light and power from another world to change humanity for the better. The parallels to God the Father sending

¹³For example, Superman Returns, film, directed by Bryan Singer (Los Angeles: Warner Bros., 2006).

His Son Jesus to redeem humanity are quite clear; the language of “my only son” would seem to indicate that this parallel was intentional.

Messianic references within the Superman franchise could take up much more space in this dissertation, but two more examples will suffice. At the beginning of Superman Returns (2006), Superman has been absent for five years, searching for the remains of his home planet. While he is away, Lois Lane becomes disillusioned with his absence and writes an article entitled “Why the World Doesn’t Need Superman.” Superman returns and tries to reconnect with Lois. In a pivotal scene where Superman has picked up Lois and flown several thousand feet into the air, he looks at the earth below and says to her, “You wrote that the world doesn’t need a savior, but every day I hear people crying for one.”

In an interview with Stephen Skelton, author of The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero, director Bryan Singer—who in 2014 openly identified himself as bisexual—clearly indicated the intentional connections he made in his film between Superman and Jesus Himself:

Skelton: About Superman Returns, Time magazine wrote, “ Earlier versions of Superman stressed the hero’s humanity…. The Singer version emphasizes his divinity. . . . He is Earth’s savior: Jesus Christ Superman.” However, certainly Richard Donner’s Superman: The Movie stressed the parallels to Christ. Do you see your version as different or similar in that regard?

Singer: It celebrates that notion. These stories are told in so many different ways. From Sunday School to pop culture. . . . But if you’re going to have lines like Marlon Brando saying, “I send them to you—my only son,” and they’re being spoken with absolute seriousness, then when you carry it forward and you have him return after five years, face an immeasurable conflict and then. . . . I mean, if you’re going to tell that story, you’ve got to tell it all the way. You’ve got scourging at the pillar, the spear of destiny, death, resurrection—it’s all there.

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15 Singer, Superman Returns.


Singer refers here to Jesus’ scourging under Pontius Pilate, His piercing by the Roman spear, His crucifixion, and His resurrection. All of these true events are very clearly reflected in the climax of Superman Returns. Superman’s nemesis Lex Luthor has used kryptonian crystals to create a giant new landmass in the Atlantic Ocean that will dramatically raise sea levels, kill countless people, and make him very powerful and wealthy. The land mass is growing quickly and endangering many lives, but it is crippling to Superman because it contains kryptonite. In this environment, Luthor and his henchman brutally beat a weakened Superman, stab him with a sharp piece of kryptonite, and throw him in the sea to die. Superman is rescued. Then, after recharging his powers through exposure to the sun, he sacrifices himself, using every bit of his strength to lift the landmass from the ocean and hurl it into space.

At that point, the most significant references to Christ in the movie—if not in the entire franchise—take place. Superman falls backwards toward Earth, arms outstretched, in an obviously cruciform position. He lands on the planet and is taken to a hospital, where no treatment can revive him. Finally, after days in a hospital bed while dead or comatose, Superman is visited by Lois. She whispers in his ear and kisses him, and he revives soon afterwards. The echoes of Christ’s death and resurrection are unmistakable. Singer openly acknowledged this:

Singer: I remember sitting with one of my writers and we were watching the visual effects of him falling to Earth. And his hands are extended and he falls to Earth in that very . . .

Skelton: It’s the crucifixion pose; it’s beautiful; it’s fantastic.

Singer: Yes. And he [the writer] looked at me—and he went to Catholic school, it’s very interesting—and he said, “Are we? Are we . . .? Is this too on the nose?” And I said, “If we’re telling this story, we’re going to tell this story. Some parts are going to be subtle. But this one is not . . . . Either we’re going to have him float down kind of in the position [of the crucifixion] or not. . . . But if there was ever a time to hammer it home, this is it.”

In his book, Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies, Roy Anker states
that the story of Superman is essentially a retelling of the story of Christ. Of course, the writers and directors in these cases have told a great story about a hero in order to make both a work of art and some money (and not with some evangelistic purpose). In the process, they have admittedly borrowed from the Hero and great story of the universe. But in God’s sovereignty and common grace, this appropriation of the gospel narrative can come full circle in pointing to the beauty of the Christian myth.

**Superman and Sehnsucht.** In its mythical element, the Superman franchise serves as an example of a film that can evoke *Sehnsucht*. As demonstrated in chapter 3, imagination and myth were consistent aspects of Lewis’s understanding of the desire for beauty that could point toward the Creator. And the filmmakers who have portrayed Superman have consistently drawn upon the factual Christian myth of Christ’s arrival on earth, perfect moral character, suffering and sacrifice on behalf of men, and rising to glory. Not only that, the Superman movies often very neatly fit the pattern of Tolkien’s eucatastrophe, especially Singer’s recent film.

Anker points out that many who left the cinema after greatly enjoying the first Superman movie were happier than those who typically leave church services, though the real Jesus story is shared in these houses of Christian worship: “It is no less amazing that if many viewers, religious and secular alike, had been told beforehand that *Superman* was a Jesus story—significantly, not the Jesus story—most would not have bothered to go see it.”

Many who throw up walls of defense as soon as they hear the name of Jesus or familiar religious symbols might listen to the gospel if it is told through the beauty and symbolism of a completely separate story. This speaks again to the power of *Sehnsucht,*

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19 Ibid.
through providence and sovereign grace, to point toward God even when the artist is not a Christian.

One scene in *Superman Returns* has consistently evoked *Sehnsucht* or something near it in me. It is particularly gripping and even rapturous in light of its resonance with three things: Jesus as the Super-Man, His rescue of men, and a human response of worship and celebration for that rescue. At the start of *Superman Returns*, during Superman’s extended hiatus, the human race has had to endure alone the forces of nature and man’s own self-destructive tendencies, and many people beyond Lois Lane have become jaded toward Superman. But a horrible accident and an amazing rescue change all of this.

Lois is aboard a large jetliner along with many journalists for an important event that is receiving huge media attention. Part of this event goes terribly wrong, and the huge plane loses stability and hurtles toward earth, with no hope of regaining controlled flight. After a five-year hiatus, this is the exact moment at which Superman returns.

Superman rockets through the sky and reaches the plane. Even with his remarkable strength, stopping the plane’s nosedive is difficult and slow, and the plane is headed straight for a baseball stadium full of fans. Just as the players and fans look up in fear, Superman gets the plane under control and gently sets it down on the baseball diamond. The entire event is viewed all over the world because of the members of the media on board the plane, and the euphoria that erupts—in the stadium and at television screens everywhere—at the sudden return of Superman and this immediate, amazing rescue is tremendous.

Multiple times, upon watching this powerful scene in the movie, I have been emotionally overwhelmed, continually connecting the raw, unleashed emotion of this scene to the exuberant worship of Christ because of His amazing, eucatastrophic rescue of sinners. Worship of the Super-Man should be euphoric; the redeemed have been saved from far worse than earthly death, and His salvation is offered to all men. In the beauty of this rescue and the subsequent outburst of praise, *Superman Returns* imaginatively
echoes the glory of the true redemption myth of Christianity, and the joy of that scene points to the rescuer and his return—just like Lewis’s “joy” pointed to the God who created beauty and offers rescue to mankind.

_Bella (2006)_

In stark contrast to films of the superhero or fantasy genre, _Bella_ is a simple, evenly-paced film that emphasizes realism and normal, ordinary life. _Bella_’s film production company was Metanoia Films; “metanoia” (μετάνοια) is a Greek word meaning “repentance.”20 This small organization was formed by the movie’s director (Alejandro Monteverde), its star actor (Eduardo Verastegui), and a lawyer friend who wanted to be involved in making films with Christian meaning (Leo Severino). All three of these men, similar to J. R. R. Tolkien, are devout Roman Catholic believers,21 and their art reflects this commitment.

Verastegui plays José, one of the primary protagonists in the film; the actor walked a particularly interesting path prior to playing the role. He had risen to great fame in Mexico, acting in soap operas, singing, appearing in a music video with Jennifer Lopez, and contributing to the stereotype of an unfaithful “Latin lover.”22 As he studied English, his Christian language tutor prodded him regarding his relationship with God and the value of the art he was making. Verastegui was greatly convicted and contemplated giving up everything and becoming a priest in the South American jungle—until a priest told him that Hollywood was also a jungle and needed Christian witness, as well.23

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Bella contains two central characters. José is a former soccer star who, on the cusp of international recognition and great wealth, accidentally struck and killed a young girl with his car. This ended his career and buried him in guilt. Presently, José is working as the lead chef in his brother’s restaurant in New York City. Nina, the other central character, works as a waitress at the same restaurant—until she is fired by José’s brother for tardiness. As she disappointedly leaves, José follows her, neglecting the restaurant in order to help and comfort Nina.

José soon finds out that Nina was late to work because she is pregnant. Nina informs José that she plans on aborting the baby. Most of the rest of the film takes place during that same day, as José enters into Nina’s struggle to find a new job (sacrificing his own employment in the process), comforts her through platonic companionship, and takes her to spend refreshing time with his own extended family. He gently steers her toward keeping the baby, and the audience knows that his own horrific past weighs heavily on his mind in this regard. The movie ends in a flash forward in which José visits Nina a few years later. José has a young girl at his side—whom Nina gave birth to and José adopted—and her name is Bella.24

In the film, José serves as a Christ-figure in several ways, first in the way in which he enters into Nina’s real-life situation—even laying aside his financial security to do so (his own brother fires him when he leaves the restaurant to follow Nina). This is reminiscent of how Christ laid aside the privileges of heaven in order to enter fleshly existence (Phil 2:1-11). The film is unique in that it moves almost in real-time, emphasizing ordinary human life. There are no superpowers or bizarre circumstances in this film; Bella is believable as the portrayal of a normal day. The filmmakers make a point to showcase regular elements of life and the city the characters live in, highlighting José’s loving (but not romantic) investment in Nina.

José also symbolizes Christ in the way that he kindly and patiently engages Nina. When she mentions her plan to abort her child, he does not react with anger or disdain; rather, he continues to listen and walk with her. He extends love and mercy to her, even as he flashes back to his own tragedy and struggles with the weight of his own guilt. This could be symbolic of Jesus’ mercy extended to mankind as He bore the weight of sin on the cross.

Finally, José functions as a Christ-figure with regard to the child, Bella. Through his conversations and patience with Nina, he saves the child’s life and ultimately chooses to adopt and raise her. Along the way, he gives up his job and a certain amount of freedom in taking on the responsibility of raising a little girl. José’s sacrifice gives Bella life and enables her growth into maturity, much like Christ’s sacrifice gives eternal life and enables sanctification. In addition, José’s choice to become Bella’s adoptive father points to Christ becoming the only Way for men and women back to their Heavenly Father, who in love has adopted each believer in Christ (Eph 1:4-5). These echoes of the gospel are moving and powerful, as is the overall effect of the film. The film’s power was evidenced by the fact that it won the People’s Choice Award at the Toronto International Film Festival, the largest film festival in the world, and turned a profit of 37 million dollars.

However, the impact surrounding the film was not limited to mere popularity and profit. In the process of making this film, Eduardo Verastegui was instrumental in

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25 *Superman* and *Bella* present contrasting Christ-figures. In both films, there is an incarnational aspect of the Christ-figure through an entering in to the circumstances of those in need. However, in *Superman*, the Christ-figure is a warrior, fighting and even sacrificing himself on behalf of those in need, while in *Bella*, the Christ-figure is kind and merciful, extending grace and generosity. Both images are true of Jesus. Different films can help illustrate different aspects of Christ’s work of redemption.

greatly changing the lives of two families:

*Bella*'s creators hope the film will affect the abortion debate and directly influence women considering abortions. The film has already had an indirect effect on two pregnant women. Researching his role at an L.A. abortion clinic before the shooting, Verástegui persuaded a Latino couple to keep their baby, whom they named Édardo.

Verástegui also learned that a friend in Florida wanted his girlfriend to abort their child. Seven hours before the procedure, Verástegui talked to him over the phone and offered to adopt the child. He sent the friend a video of an abortion. The couple kept their baby girl—and named her Bella. “I was going to pay $800 to destroy this miracle,” her father said.27

These anecdotes show that, at least for Verastegui, the story of the movie echoes a deeper understanding of the gospel that rescues lives—spiritually and physically—and brings grace to broken people. And this conviction affects the lives of people around him.

Interestingly, the *New York Times*’ review of *Bella* labeled the movie “saccharine” and stated that the movie “wears its bleeding heart on its sleeve.” Reviewer Stephen Holden calls the movie “ludicrous,” but does not give any reason for this judgment other than a happy ending to the story.28 These factors seem to indicate a large degree of cynicism on the part of the reviewer. This treatment of the movie is unfair, however, because *Bella*, unlike many other movies made by Christians, does not wrap up neatly and perfectly at the end. José does not fall in love with Nina and complete a nuclear family; Nina does not even raise her own child. The story simply portrays a man who has experienced great personal tragedy, yet is filled with hope, love, and respect for life. This man, who still wrestles mightily with his own guilt, attempts to bring redemption to a broken pair of lives, and in the process experiences a renewal of his own. This is not ludicrous; it is the type of experience for which people go to the movies.

Holden’s cynicism likely reflects a deeper reaction on his part, not to the story


itself, but to the worldview communicated by the story. This points again to the power of this medium for conveying transcendent truth and beauty, for though the Times reviewer reacted against it negatively, the film’s receipt of the Toronto People’s Choice Award (while competing against Oscar-winning movies) demonstrates its resonance with a large number of people.

**Bella and Sehnsucht.** The transcendent, poignant beauty of Bella is found in José’s choice in the midst of his own pain and Nina’s disappointment. This intersection of pain, hope, and joy is where the film fits C. S. Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht. Lewis very consistently spoke of Sehnsucht with descriptors like pain, loss, and inconsolable desire. Again, the word Sehnsucht means “longing.” In experiences of this kind of beauty, there is often a strong desire for something that was lost—whether a far country, a distant memory, or something else—mixed with hope and desire to possess that thing again.

*Bella* tells a realistic story of a man who has experienced the pain of accidentally killing a child, the loss of a fabulous career and an exciting life that he craved, and the relational withdrawal that resulted from these life events. When he sees another person suffering loss and facing difficulty, José faces his own pain and through it is inspired and motivated to bring hope and life to her situation. His inconsolable desire for restoration of his past leads him to make a beautiful, selfless decision in the present. As the viewer watches this unfold, he or she may personally identify with José’s pain of past decisions, mistakes, or sins and thereby be drawn toward the God who can bring redemption and renewal to ordinary, fallen people. The loss and beauty of this redemptive story resonates with viewers, and by that resonance points them to a redeeming God.

**Henry Poole Is Here (2008)**

Although it featured several well-known actors, *Henry Poole Is Here* was not a big hit at the box-office. Part of this may be due to it only being given a limited release. The film stars Luke Wilson as Henry Poole, who as a young single man has just been
diagnosed with a terminal disease. In response, he attempts to move back into the house of his childhood for some comfort, but the current owners are unwilling to sell their home. Henry instead buys a house in the same neighborhood, gathers a large quantity of frozen pizzas and alcohol, and shuts himself away from the rest of the world. Hopeless and depressed, Henry waits to die.

But Henry’s middle-aged Roman Catholic neighbor Esperanza will not leave him alone. She wants to be Henry’s friend, and she especially becomes interested in his home when she believes that she sees the face of Jesus in a water stain on the stucco of Henry’s house. Henry is annoyed at this occurrence. During this time, Henry slowly gets to know his next-door neighbors, a single mother named Dawn and her daughter, Millie. Millie has gone mute, having not spoken at all since her father left the family a year prior. Henry relates well to Millie’s desire to withdraw from people, and eventually he and Dawn develop a slow-moving romantic relationship.

The intensity of the movie picks up dramatically, however, when four amazing events happen in connection with the water stain—events that are clearly meant by the filmmakers to be seen as supernatural. First, the stain begins to inexplicably show a red drop, which Esperanza and her friends believe is blood. Later, testing done by the Catholic Church confirms that it is blood. Second, neither the blood nor the stain can be removed by Henry, even with strong chemicals. Third, Millie, the young mute child, touches the wall and suddenly is able to speak again. Fourth, a girl with extremely bad eyesight that Henry knows from the supermarket suddenly enjoys 20/20 vision after touching the stain on the wall.

Crowds immediately begin to gather at Henry Poole’s house. Henry gets very angry, grabs a large tool, and while the crowd watches in horror, destroys his own wall and the stain. But in doing so, Henry weakens the structure of his home, and part of the

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29 Henry Poole is Here, film, directed by Mark Pellington (Beverly Hills: Lakeshore Entertainment, 2008).
roof collapses and falls on him.

Henry wakes up in the hospital, and while he has been under the care of the doctors, his physical health has been reviewed. He is told that he does not have a terminal disease after all. With his life, hope, and faith (in a minimal sense) restored, Henry is able to start over and enjoy the relationships he has with his neighbors.

Although a very different genre than *Superman Returns*, *Henry Poole Is Here* also fits with the pattern of Tolkien’s eucatastrophe. The storylines of both films feature a sudden turn of events that brings joy. For the vast majority of the movie, the viewer believes that Henry is doomed, and the demolition accident does not seem to help his situation. But this accident leads to a surprising revelation that changes everything. When things are darkest for Henry, the stain on the wall becomes the means for one more miracle and an entirely new start. One might even say that Henry’s life was given back to him through the mysterious stain.

*Henry Poole Is Here* and *Sehnsucht*. The film does not directly answer some lingering questions about the water stain and its resemblance to the face of Jesus (as if anyone knew His physical features, anyway), but the test results confirming the red drop as blood and the miraculous events in connection with the face prove that there is something supernatural, something transcendent going on. Not surprisingly, some reviewers took the director to task for what they called “a flimsy plot”30 or “inspirational kitsch.”31 Significantly, though, well-known film critic Roger Ebert gave it 3.5 out of 4

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stars and said, “I fell for it.”

The film holds potential for evoking Sehnsucht through these clearly transcendent elements as well as the eucatastrophic news that Henry’s life has been spared. C. S. Lewis described Sehnsucht as inconsolable desire for the transcendent reality that was behind the beauty of this world. He was gripped by an inner knowledge that in these moments of longing, what he looked for was beyond the realm of normal, natural human experience. Henry Poole Is Here clearly attempts to point the viewer in that direction through the mysterious stain and the miraculous events surrounding it.

Chapter 3 described Sehnsucht in transcendent terms, including two elements that can be found in Henry Poole Is Here. The first relevant element is the functioning of joy as a pointer beyond itself. For Lewis, the joy he felt when experiencing this desire was pleasurable, but it was not ultimately satisfying and consistently pointed him beyond itself to something bigger and more important. By the end of his quest when he professed faith in Christ, he realized that this joy was pointing to God throughout his journey. In Henry Poole Is Here, through the miraculous and mysterious elements of the plot as well as the sudden joyful turn at the climax, the filmmakers point beyond ordinary human existence. The story and the stain beautifully point the audience beyond a merely naturalistic and materialistic view of the world, and thereby open viewers to a possible experience of Sehnsucht.

The second element of Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht that fits with Henry Poole Is Here is romanticism. Chapter 3 explained that Lewisian connection, specifically noting Lewis’s devotion to the “Blue Flower” by the age of six. As previously noted, the “Blue Flower” featured prominently in a novel by early romantic author Novalis. Within romantic literature, this flower ultimately became symbolic for the transcendent

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longing of the genre.

The stain on the wall in *Henry Poole Is Here* is mysterious, possessing both natural and supernatural elements. It seems to have been formed just by some chemical or substance coming into contact with the wall of the house, but several supernatural events show that this circumstance is not merely natural. The stain begins to function in the story in a way similar to the Blue Flower in romantic literature—pointing people beyond their earthly sorrows and sufferings, changing their lives, and bringing transcendent hope. In these ways, *Henry Poole Is Here* possesses potential for pointing men and women to God through its quiet but powerful beauty.

*Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977)

*Close Encounters of the Third Kind* enjoyed much acclaim from critics, as well as success at the box office. Through the film, director Steven Spielberg had a great affect on the science fiction genre of cinema. The movie stars Richard Dreyfuss as Roy Neary, an ordinary electric lineman whose life is changed by a genuine experience with a UFO. Roy Neary is not the only one who encounters the aliens. A single mother named Jillian Guiler and her three-year-old son Barry also have multiple brushes with the unnamed extra-terrestrials. About halfway through the film, Barry is actually abducted by the aliens, although Barry clearly *wants* to go with them. Many other lesser characters also encounter the aliens, and a select group of people (including Roy Neary and Jillian Guiler) are inexorably drawn through subliminal mental images toward a meeting with the aliens atop Devil’s Tower in Wyoming. Roy’s obsession with the aliens and the tower causes him to behave extremely strange—to the extent that his wife Ronnie takes their children and flees to her sister’s home.

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34 *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, film, directed by Steven Spielberg (Culver City, CA: Columbia, 1977).
At the climax of the film, Roy Neary, Jillian Guiler, and other seekers converge on Devil’s Tower, along with many government and military officials. There, they await the approach of the alien spaceships. When the spaceships arrive, the humans communicate with the aliens using a predetermined set of five tones in a major scale, along with corresponding lights on a large electrical board. The aliens respond, in massive volume and great beauty, expanding the musical theme and overwhelming the humans with the power and richness of the music and light show. This climactic scene is striking within the science fiction genre because it is not pervaded by a sense of foreboding or fear, but rather by a sense of wonder and even hope.

At the end of the close encounter, many of the aliens come out of the massive mother ship and interact with the humans. They choose one human to travel with them—Roy Neary, who is very excited to join them. Roy Neary clearly sees this departure as the end result of the mental tugging that he has been unable to shake throughout the film.  

Close Encounters of the Third Kind and Sehnsucht. In this film, light is a prominent symbol of the presence of the aliens, just as light was a symbol of Sehnsucht for C. S. Lewis. It is only in the last few minutes of the movie that the audience sees the physical forms of the aliens, when they emerge from the mother ship. Prior to that, powerful and sometimes beautiful lights mark the presence of these beings that transcend earthly human experience. There is a strong connection between light and the transcendent in this film. In fact, Roy Neary’s first encounter with the alien light is so powerful that half of his face is burned. But as it was with Lewis and Sehnsucht, Neary’s encounter

\[35\] Spielberg was not married and had no children when he made Close Encounters. Interestingly, in a 2005 interview, Steven Spielberg said that after becoming a husband and father, his perspective on the ending of the film was very different. “Today, I would never have the guy leaving his family and going on the mother ship. I would have the guy doing everything he could to protect his children.” Ethan Aames, “Interview: Tom Cruise and Steven Spielberg on ‘War of the Worlds,’” Cinema Confidential News, June 28, 2005, accessed April 24, 2015, http://web.archive.org/web/20080206185633/http://www.cinecon.com/news.php?id=0506281.
with the alien light only leaves him longing for more—to see and experience them in person. He has an obsession to have an even closer encounter with them. He repeatedly exclaims about his subliminal images of the tower: “This is important.”

In addition, multiple characters in the film demonstrate great joy at their encounters with the aliens. Roy Neary, Jillian Guiler, and Barry all want to see these visitors, and when they do, they are visibly happy. In his first vision of an alien, little Barry laughs with delight and even chases after the creature. Before they abduct him, Barry calls out to the aliens, inviting them into his home. When he is returned to his mother by the aliens soon afterward, Barry is in perfect health, and he is very sad to see the creatures go. Jillian Guiler, although strongly desiring the return of her son, is very happy to understand the meaning of her subliminal visions (which point her to the tower) and finally to see the aliens arrive. Roy, once the aliens choose him and begin to touch his body in curiosity, looks back at his fellow humans with clear joy and delight as he boards the mother ship.

These elements connect well with Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht, especially in the context of experiences of being drawn toward something transcendent through beautiful light and music. The utilization of beauty in music and light in Spielberg’s final scene is significant for the purposes of this dissertation, as these artistic elements seem to function in the film as a universal language—even beyond the bounds of our own planet. Spielberg’s science fiction film fits well with Lewis’s concept of beauty strongly drawing men toward something beyond ordinary human experience.

*Children of Men (2006)*

*Bella* and *Henry Poole is Here* were of a much more realistic genre than *Superman Returns* or *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. The final film to be studied is once again of a fantastic nature, but in contrast to the upbeat, sometimes campy feeling of the superhero genre or the hopeful and wondrous feeling of *Close Encounters*, this film is an extremely dark, post-apocalyptic movie. Yet, in the end, it may contain the greatest
potential for evoking *Sehnsucht*.

*Children of Men*\(^{36}\) is based on a book of the same title written by P. D. James,\(^{37}\) James was a professing Christian most famous for her detective stories. Her Christian worldview manifests itself in the story in various ways, even in spite of the influence of the film’s director, Alfonso Cuaron, who changed certain elements that clearly demonstrated James’ worldview.

P. D. James preferred a subtle approach to the manifestation of her Christian worldview. Speaking of James’ detective series, Ralph Wood states,

> Her chief detective . . . is a confirmed skeptic. She does not want to confine her hero within her own convictions, nor to impose them on her readers. James is an artist whose moral instruction is conveyed indirectly through aesthetic appeal, not a prophet who seeks our conversion by directly declaring the divine Word.\(^{38}\)

But as stated, with reference to the Superman franchise, this subtlety may open far more people to the beauty and message of her art.

Since the focus of this section is the genre of film, the following is an outline of the plot of Cuaron’s movie, not James’ book. *Children of Men* takes place in a post-apocalyptic England in the year 2027. For eighteen years, no one on earth has given birth to a child, and no scientist can explain this universal infertility. Once the hope and promise of future generations is removed, the world rapidly descends into chaos. Ironically, many commit suicide or turn to violence against others. The only country that has any semblance of order is England, and this order is costly, for the nation in many ways resembles a fascist state like Hitler’s Germany. Refugees from other countries are often treated as less than human and sometimes killed. Terrorist bombings are frequent, and there are rumors that some bombings are perpetrated by the government in order to scare people into obedience.

\(^{36}\) *Children of Men*, film, directed by Alfonso Cuaron (Hollywood: Universal, 2006).


Theo, played by Clive Owen, is a low-level bureaucrat who has become comfortable with his despair. Through his estranged wife he is rapidly pulled into an incredible situation—an African refugee named Kee has inexplicably become pregnant, and Theo is called upon to help escort her to safety. Safety is hopefully to be found in a secretive, even mythical, group known as the “Human Project;” the British government could be a threat to both mother and child. To get Kee to safety, Theo must escort her through a refugee camp and even a battlefield. In this brutal environment, Kee gives birth to her baby, with Theo assisting. The film is R-rated; explicit language and shocking violence have an overwhelming affect throughout. There is a heavy darkness—visually and spiritually—that dominates the majority of the story, up until a climactic scene near the end. That incredible scene is highly significant for this discussion.

In one of the most beautiful and moving cinematic sequences I have ever experienced, Theo is escorting Kee and her newborn baby through a pitched urban battle between British soldiers and rebels. The baby shows her discontent with this situation by screaming, which quickly attracts attention to her. Suddenly, as people begin to hear and notice the first new life in the world in eighteen years, they are drawn to the child. Theo and Kee walk with the child through a partially-destroyed building, as refugees stare in awe and reach out to touch this incredible miracle and sign of hope.

Then, soldiers from both sides of the battle catch sight of the child and immediately stop fighting. They freeze and make way for the trio to move to safety, staring, kneeling, and even crossing themselves (in Roman Catholic fashion) in amazement and thankfulness. As the arrival of this one child brings peace, hope, and meaning, the picture of hope and echoes of the Incarnation are unmistakable and gripping. While viewing the film and while relating it to others, I dealt with waves of emotion beyond that felt in almost every other cinematic or even artistic experience. It was Sehnsucht—inconsolable longing at the viewing of deep beauty. A few moments after this memorable scene, Theo successfully delivers Kee and the baby to the Human Project, but he dies
from a bullet wound that the audience is unaware of until just before he expires.

_Children of Men and Sehnsucht._ C. S. Lewis sometimes portrayed the beauty of _Sehnsucht_ through the metaphor of light. In chapter 3, this was demonstrated through the examples of the sweet, drinkable light in _The Voyage of the Dawn Treader_ and Lewis’s poems in _Spirits in Bondage_. One of the primary ways in which _Children of Men_ intersects with _Sehnsucht_ is through a contrast between extreme darkness and the Light of the world. Even though Cuaron changed elements of the story,\(^39\) this contrast is unavoidable. The great majority of the film, with its vulgarity, violence, gray scenery, and hopelessness, is representative of the situation in the real world as a result of the effects of sin. With all of mankind’s government, science, technology, and wealth, the human race in _Children of Men_ is hopeless in the face of infertility, just as man has no remedy of his own for the problem of sin. The vast majority of the movie is oppressively difficult to watch, full of darkness and desperation.

As an analogy, the person who is fully asleep in a completely dark room can be overwhelmed by the brightness of a light turned on without warning. The light shines that much brighter for him because of the darkness in which he has been dwelling. In the same way, the sudden appearance of the baby in _Children of Men_ comes as a light piercing the darkness of the previous 90 minutes of film. This powerful contrast of light bears much potential for evoking _Sehnsucht_ in viewers.

The appearance of the baby in the midst of the war zone is a surprise to all, immediately bringing light and hope to mankind’s destiny. Hostilities cease at the arrival of this child. In the same way (though His birth was prophesied), Christ’s Incarnation

\(^{39}\)Two of Cuaron’s key changes include: first, a more favorable presentation of the widespread euthanasia that occurs as a result of the ubiquitous infertility and, second and more significantly, different circumstances surrounding the birth of the child. In James’ original novel, the child is actually born to Theo’s estranged wife. In Cuaron’s movie, Kee jokes about being a virgin. Although probably _directly_ dishonoring to the Incarnation and Christ, this joke seems to _indirectly_ point to and honor the larger narrative of redemption echoed by the movie. In the film, Kee eventually says that she has no idea who the father is.
surprised humanity, yet His arrival brought eternal life and the light of God to mankind. And through the impact of the Prince of Peace, “[T]hey shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Isa 2:4). Ralph Wood offers a helpful synopsis: “Like the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation, The Children of Men warns that wrath and destruction are already upon us—but only in order to offer a way out, the way of divine deliverance.”

The opinions of different reviewers of Children of Men varied with regard to Cuaron’s use of James’ original tale. One strong opinion was voiced by Anthony Sacramone, editor of First Things journal, who called Cuaron’s treatment an “act of vandalism,” because of his use of P. D. James’ “Christian fable” as a “graceless . . . cinematic axe” to protest “the Bush administration, the war in Iraq, border policing, and Homeland Security.” Although Cuaron’s work was clearly politically charged, the fact that James’ powerful picture of the Incarnation shines through in spite of the distortion of her story again strengthens the case for the use of film in showing the beauty of the gospel.

Moving forward, a film like Children of Men can show the glory and beauty of the Incarnation in a more powerful way, perhaps, than The Nativity Story (although there is value in this film), because the extreme spiritual darkness surrounding humanity today is vividly illustrated in Children of Men by the darkness of infertility, murder, profane language, war, and death. This darkness accentuates the glory of the light. Children of Men also portrays situations and characters that modern audiences might more easily

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42The Nativity Story, film, directed by Catherine Hardwicke (Los Angeles: New Line Cinema, 2006). Interestingly, it came out the same year as Children of Men.
relate to than to people who lived two thousand years ago—Joseph, Mary, or shepherds in a field near Bethlehem.

Finally, as has been alluded to with regard to Superman, Children of Men has some advantage over a film like The Nativity Story in that many unbelievers might not watch a film that overtly tells the story of Christ’s birth, but many of them will go to see a movie that is set in the future and contains action, suspense, and popular actors. Children of Men can demonstrate the beauty and light of the Incarnation to this unreached group of people.

Initially, though, this may seem surprising—the glory of the Incarnation coming through in a film that easily earned its R-rating? But isn’t that just like God? The selection of Mary and Joseph was a surprise. The ones to whom God would entrust the care of His Son looked like fornicators to most around them, and Jesus’ full lineage has several individuals with sordid pasts. God is gracious, and He redeems fallen humanity. He speaks truth and communicates love through imperfect preachers, prophets, and films.

A multitude of other films could have been cited in this section. The Lord of the Rings Trilogy features much powerful imagery of light piercing through darkness, as well as multiple Christ-figures at different points in the narrative.\(^43\) The Passion of the Christ portrays Jesus’ torture and crucifixion—ending with the eucatastrophic moment of His resurrection.\(^44\) It’s a Wonderful Life is featured on the Vatican Best Films list;\(^45\) that film portrays the powerful sense of loss felt by its main character’s wish that things in his life had turned out differently. This sensation of loss is ultimately replaced by a renewed

\(^{43}\)The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (2001), The Two Towers (2002), and The Return of the King (2003), film, directed by Peter Jackson (Los Angeles: New Line Cinema).

\(^{44}\)The Passion of the Christ, film, directed by Mel Gibson (Los Angeles: Newmarket Films, 2004).

desire for that which has true, transcendent value.\footnote{It’s a Wonderful Life, film, directed by Frank Capra (New York: RKO Radio Pictures, 1946).} Certainly, God can use desire for piercing light and the beauty of Sehnsucht to draw men unto Himself through cinema and music.

**Music Evoking Sehnsucht**

As with film, music has great potential for stirring sensations of desire for beauty within the listener. Arthur Schopenhauer, whose aesthetic ideas were compared to Lewis’s concept of Sehnsucht in chapter 5, actually believed that music was the highest art form, giving the listener the closest possible contact with the Platonic Ideals. He wrote, “Accordingly, music, if regarded as an expression of the world, is in the highest degree a universal language that is related to the universality of concepts much as these are related to the particular things.”\footnote{Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Mineola, NY: Courier Dover, 1958), 1:262.}

Well-known Catholic theologian Hans Küng has written on transcendence in music, specifically the classical compositions of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791). Although he acknowledges that Mozart was by no means a deeply committed church attender in *Mozart: Traces of Transcendence*, Küng does establish Mozart’s Catholicity in the book and shows how his faith empowered his composition. Mozart biographer Hermann Abert agrees, describing the composer as “a loyal member of the Catholic church until the very end of his life.”\footnote{Hermann Abert, *W. A. Mozart*, ed. Cliff Eisen, trans. Stewart Spencer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).} Küng’s description of Mozart’s music sounds very much like the immediately previous section on *Children of Men* and its light-filled, symbolic picture of Christ’s birth:

And if we start from there, from the fact that this Mozart did not write divine music, nor demonic music either, but rather a music which was humane in every respect,
then the mystery of this music lies in the fact that it constantly makes audible both the light and the dark, joy and sorrow, life and death. However, neither side stands neutrally in equilibrium over against the other and through the other, but the darkness is always transcended and done away with in the light.\textsuperscript{49}

Further, Küng’s description of the connections in Mozart’s work between beauty and religion fit well with Lewis’s concept of \textit{Sehnsucht}. Specifically, the following statement resonates well with Lewis’s belief that even non-religious art can point men toward God through beauty:

Truly, more than any other music, Mozart’s music—though it is not heavenly music but completely earthly music—seems to show in its sensual yet unsensual beauty, power and clarity, how wafer-thin is the boundary between music, which is the most abstract of all arts, and religion, which has always had a special connection with music. For both, though they are different, direct us to that is ultimately unspeakable, to mystery. And though music cannot become a religion of art, the art of music is the most spiritual of all symbols for that “mystical sanctuary of our religion,” the divine itself. In other words, for me Mozart’s music has relevance for religion not only where religious and church themes or forms emerge, but precisely through the compositional technique of the non-vocal, purely instrumental music, through the way in which his music interprets the world, a way which transcends extra-musical conceptuality.\textsuperscript{50}

Küng, although biased strongly toward the superiority of Mozart’s corpus, would agree with Lewis in the mysterious pointing of \textit{Sehnsucht} through beauty toward the Creator of beauty. Many who agree with this connection claim a special place or ability for the medium of music.

The music of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) is also widely considered to express great transcendence. Chapter 1 featured a brief reference to Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli’s simple argument that since Bach’s music exists, there must be a God.\textsuperscript{51} The famous twentieth-century theologian Albert Schweitzer, who was also a world-class organist, specifically used the term \textit{Sehnsucht} when describing how Bach’s music expressed the composer’s desire to leave this life and go to heaven:

\textsuperscript{49}Hans Küng, \textit{Mozart: Traces of Transcendence} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 19.

\textsuperscript{50}Ibid., 33-34.

\textsuperscript{51}Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, \textit{Handbook of Christian Apologetics} (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994), 81.
This robust and healthy man who lived surrounded by the affection of a great family, this man who embodied energy and activity, who even had a pronounced taste for the frankly burlesque, felt at the bottom of his soul an intense desire, a Sehnsucht for eternal rest. He knew, if any mortal ever did, what nostalgia for death was. Never elsewhere had this nostalgia for death been translated into music in a more impressive way . . . in death Bach celebrates the supreme liberation; and describes in lovely spiritual lullabies the peace that at this thought invades his soul; or again, his happiness is translated into joyous and exuberant themes of a supernatural gaiety. We feel that his whole soul sings in this music, and that the believer has written it in a sort of exultation.\(^2\)

Schweitzer does not mean to claim here that Bach was suicidal or had despaired of life. He actually explains that Bach had a wonderful family and professional life. Instead, Schweitzer outlines what sounds very much like C. S. Lewis’s own description of Sehnsucht as longing for a “far country.” Lewis explained this as a desire to get back to a place he had never visited. And Schweitzer states that Bach was able to express this beautiful and haunting desire through his music.

For example, Bach’s music often features a particular musical element that nudges the listener toward the transcendent. This musical feature fits quite well with Tolkien’s idea of the eucatastrophe through the manifestation of a somber mood, pierced by a sudden and final turn towards joy. The element, not unique to Bach, is known as a Picardy third—or tierce de Picardie—and refers to the use of a major chord on the final chord of a section or composition written in a minor key.\(^3\) To perform the Picardy third, the third note of the minor scale is raised one musical half-step in order to form a major chord as the piece or section concludes.

This technique, after the previous entirety of the piece has been dominated by a somber or melancholy minor key, achieves the effect of a sudden resolution, of a turn from darkness to light. The Oxford Companion to Music agrees, “The effect is pleasant, as of a


\(^3\)Although a Picardy third does not technically have to be located in the final chord of the section or composition, this is the normally understood meaning of the term. The origin of the descriptor “Picardy” for this technique is uncertain. Brian Dunbar, Practical Music Theory: A Guide to Music as Art, Language, and Life (Rochester, MN: Factum Musicae, 2013), 328.
bright ray breaking through the clouds as the sun sinks.” Bach is commonly known by classically-trained musicians to have used the Picardy third quite frequently; my own professor of piano in college explained the Picardy third utilizing the music of Bach. In fact, in Book I of Bach’s *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, all but one of the twenty-four works composed in a minor key end with this swift and final turn to pleasantness, resolution, and peace. This feature is a small taste of *Sehnsucht*, and contributes to Bach’s reputation as a transcendent composer, whose own deep faith informed and inspired his composition.

This section examines in fuller detail two contrasting pieces of music—one composition written by a modern composer, but in the classical style, and one piece of rock music. These pieces have been chosen not only because of their significant ability to evoke *Sehnsucht*, but because they are written in highly contrasting musical styles. Just as was intended in the use of varying genres of film, this contrast is meant to demonstrate the versatility of music to point men to God through desire for beauty.

*Aurora Awakes*

*Aurora Awakes*, composed by John Mackey (born 1973), is an eleven-minute piece written for wind ensembles. The piece won the prestigious American Bandmasters Association Ostwald Award in 2009. Mackey composes in the classical style, but consistently with twentieth-century harmonies. The chords in *Aurora Awakes* are rich, full, and multi-layered. Mackey is not hesitant to utilize dissonance and even to let it linger, but *Aurora Awakes* does not possess the jarring and unpleasant qualities of twentieth-

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century atonal composers like Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg. In the case of *Aurora Awakes*, the dissonance truly contributes to the overall beauty and impact of the piece.

Mackey’s piece is entirely instrumental, but its title is filled with meaning in its reference to the Roman goddess of the dawn. On Mackey’s website, the imagery evoked by the piece is explained:

Aurora . . . is a mythological figure frequently associated with beauty and light. . . . *Aurora Awakes* is, thus, a piece about the heralding of the coming of light. Built in two substantial sections, the piece moves over the course of eleven minutes from a place of remarkable stillness to an unbridled explosion of energy—from darkness to light, placid grey to startling rainbows of color.\(^{58}\)

It is not difficult to see how a piece that aurally suggests the progression from darkness to dawn could evoke the sensation of *Sehnsucht*, especially with Lewis’s frequent connection of *Sehnsucht* to light.

I experienced a moving live performance of *Aurora Awakes* on June 6, 2011, in Alumni Memorial Chapel at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The seminary was hosting the Sacred Winds Ensemble for a performance entitled “The Word Became Flesh.” Through the program guide and spoken explanations at certain intervals throughout the evening, Music Director Scott Bersaglia essentially asked the audience to associate the Incarnation of Jesus Christ with every musical piece on the program.

Bersaglia’s choice of *Aurora Awakes* was excellent for an event called “The Word Became Flesh.” To strengthen the connection, the program notes for this section of the evening’s performance included a quotation of John 1:1-13, which speaks of Jesus’ “coming into the world” as the arrival of the “true Light, which enlightens everyone.”\(^{59}\)

The note accompanying *Aurora Awakes* quotes Hebrews 1:3-4:

He [Jesus] is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature, and He upholds the universe by the Word of His power. After making purification

\(^{58}\)Ibid.

for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name He has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Upon hearing this piece that night (and several times since), I experienced overwhelming worship of the true God, albeit through a piece of music named for a mythological goddess! C. S. Lewis himself was happy to use pagan imagery and symbolism if it helped to point men to the true God; *Till We Have Faces* is a book-length example of this exact practice. This broad approach to the use of art for the gospel opens up countless “secular” works for redemptive use, especially art like *Aurora Awakes* that may powerfully evoke a desire for beauty.

“Magnificent”

“Magnificent” is a rock song by the band U2 on their 2009 release, *No Line on the Horizon*. Formed in Dublin in 1976, U2 consists of four members—known as Bono, The Edge, Adam Clayton, and Larry Mullen. Although the band has had plenty of public moments of profane language and varied controversies, they are widely known for infusing their openly Christian themes into their music. Lead singer Bono has been particularly overt in acknowledging his personal Christian faith. The band is considered by many to be the most popular band in the world today, so the potential for spiritual impact from their music is massive.

*No Line on the Horizon* was U2’s twelfth album. Beeson Divinity School professor Steven Harmon said that the album was “the most thoroughly Christian thing

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they’ve done yet.” Harmon went on to note that the most Christian thing about the album was not individual lyrics or references, but the overall eschatological themes throughout the album. Musically, *No Line on the Horizon* is a creative and somewhat experimental mix of anthemic arena rock (including “Magnificent”), variations on the funk genre, and slower ballads.

The previous musical piece discussed, *Aurora Awakes*, was entirely instrumental, although the title of the piece provided some contextual meaning. The evocation of Sehnsucht in listening to that piece came largely through its rich harmonies, gradual crescendo, and powerful climax. In the case of *Magnificent*, the evocation of Sehnsucht instead comes primarily from the clear pointing of its words to God and His magnificence. However, the driving power and soaring melodies of the music do contribute to its overall power and evocative beauty.

“Magnificent” features an underlying, simple disco beat. The song was originally entitled “French Disco” before the title was changed. “Magnificent” is the theological highlight of a strongly Christian-themed album. It is worth listing an extended portion of the words:

I was born to be with you / In this space and time / After that and ever after I haven’t had a clue / Only to break rhyme / This foolishness can leave a heart black and blue / [Chorus] Only love, only love can leave such a mark / But only love, only love can heal such a scar [End Chorus] / I was born / I was born to sing for you / I didn't have a choice but to lift you up / And sing whatever song you wanted me to / I give you back my voice / From the womb my first cry, it was a joyful noise [Chorus] / Justified till we die, you and I will magnify / The Magnificent / Magnificent.

I heard this song performed live by U2, and it is the most worship-oriented song

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I have experienced in mainstream rock music. Additionally, the images in the song’s music video affirm this view of the song as an act of worship. Listening to “Magnificent” can be a moving experience, both through the openly God-centered words and through the soaring, anthemic arcs of the music.

“Magnificent” is able to evoke Sehnsucht through the beauty of its melody. In addition, the theme of the song’s lyrics fits Lewis’s description of Sehnsucht in its transcendence. How many other popular rock songs speak of justification through the love of God, followed by the believer’s response of worship directed to the Magnificent One who redeemed him? This theme transcends the vast majority of the subject matter of other songs in its genre, and it does so through a very attractive and enjoyable piece of music. Finally, the song reached around the world through the immense popularity of the band that recorded it. “Magnificent” and Aurora Awakes display the power and versatility of music to draw men unto God through desire for its rich, transcendent beauty.

**Art without Sehnsucht**

Much art holds little potential for evoking Sehnsucht. The lack of this potential may be due to many reasons, some of which are elucidated here. And significantly, even art fashioned by Christians with the explicit goal of communicating their beliefs can fall far short of drawing the soul toward God through true beauty. This section examines three types of art that largely fail to exhibit characteristics that could evoke Sehnsucht.

Again, this analysis clearly contains a significant element of subjectivity and potential for disagreement from other viewers. In particular, films contain many different moments of experience within a single viewing of the piece of art. Thus, even a poorly made film that, as a whole, does not point the individual toward God, might have one powerful scene that, taken by itself, could evoke Sehnsucht in the viewer. As a result, the

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66Ibid. There is no element of romantic “love” between two people in the video. Instead, Bono’s hands and the hands of other actors are frequently raised toward heaven. Also, at the moment Bono says, “I give You back my voice,” he deliberately looks upward.
goal in this section is to evaluate the following films as entire works, not making absolute claims and not implying that the evaluative judgment applies to every individual moment within the films.

**Art of Apathy or Mere Profitability**

Many films seem to be made merely for their value in distracting audiences with entertainment. Many films in the action genre fit this description. Inane dialogue, loose and disorganized plots, and numerous explosions and fight scenes characterize this category of film. Often little is beautiful, or uplifting, or transcendent in this type of artistic endeavor. Of course, there may still be laudable elements in these films—such as technical production, sound editing, computer graphics and effects, or soundtrack. And this section is not meant to claim that all fun or silly art is somehow evil. But often the primary goal of many films seems just to be the making of money for the film studio. Of course, all professionally-made films are subject to this financial factor; some just manifest it much more than others.

In particular, the *Transformers* action movies are relevant here. The large budget, loud, and violent films were based upon a children’s toy line begun in the 1980s. One can see the financial motivation for these films from the start; the very concept for the art grew *out of* a line of merchandise. The films, directed by Michael Bay and produced by Steven Spielberg, were often panned by critics with statements like,

> Get ready for big explosions, loud noises, and almost no story . . . *Age of Extinction* [the fourth *Transformers* film] is lazy hackwork. It isn’t just narratively incoherent. It’s one of the tackiest and crassest blockbusters I’ve ever seen, wasting no opportunity to shamelessly plug products such as Bud Light, Chevy, and Beats by Dr. Dre. It doesn’t even try to conceal its cynicism.\(^\text{67}\)

Yet, a *fifth* film in the franchise is scheduled to be released in 2016. This extending of

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the series probably has a lot to do with the incredible profitability of the films. And as
the reviewer noted, the movies even became long commercials, advertising multiple
products used by the characters.

The reviewer used the term “cynicism” to describe the attitude demonstrated
by the filmmakers. Such a cynical, apathetic approach toward the making of art, seeing it
primarily as a way to make money, often leads to a lack of compelling beauty or lasting
value. Films of this nature are very unlikely to evoke Sehnsucht, with such a lack of
beauty and transcendence.

In Art and the Bible, Francis Schaeffer offers four criteria for judging the value
of a work of art: technical excellence, validity, intellectual content (worldview), and
integration of content and vehicle. The criterion of validity bears particular relevance for
this discussion of apathetic, money-driven art. Schaeffer writes,

Validity is the second criterion. By validity I mean whether an artist is honest to
himself and to his world-view, or whether he makes his art only for money or for the
sake of being accepted. If an artist makes an art work solely for a patron—whether
that patron is the ancient noble, or the modern art gallery to which the artist wants
access, or the modern art critics of the moment—his work does not have validity.
The modern forms of “the patron” are more destructive than even that of the old
noble.68

Films and other art that are made with primarily financial motivation can be bereft of
beauty and crippled in their ability to truly impact viewers. This is not to say that big
summer blockbusters cannot possibly have any merit. The point is simply that, the more
that financial and other invalid motivations influence the making of art, the more they
limit the ability of that art to evoke Sehnsucht and point men toward God through beauty.

Nihilistic Art

As has been stated, art does not necessarily have to have an evangelistic purpose
or be made by Christians in order to evoke Sehnsucht. In this universe, having been

68Francis A. Schaeffer, Art and the Bible, The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer, vol. 2,
2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1982), 399, emphasis added.
created by a beautiful and transcendent God, it is common for this beauty to pierce through even in the midst of artwork that is driven by an anti-Christian worldview. C. S. Lewis implied this himself when he said that God “sent the human race what I call good dreams.” In chapter 6, philosophy professor and art critic Thomas Hibbs’ book *Arts of Darkness* was referenced briefly in pointing out how some films that are very dark can still point to beauty and light through the consequences or guilt that their wicked characters experience. The presence of beauty, goodness, and transcendence can be found in many places, since the order of this world has been established by God Himself.

However, there are works of art where virtually no redemptive value can be found—that is, other than the inescapable fact that an image-bearer of the Creator is creating *something* and thereby pointing to God’s gifts of life and creativity. The worldview content of these types of art is so nihilistic that there is little to no possibility of beauty (or especially *Sehnsucht*) being found in these works. Hibbs explains as much in his book through the contrast between film *noir* and neo-*noir*.

Although much of the film *noir* genre does display elements of conservative morality through the consequences for sin that characters must inevitably endure, many neo-*noir* films attempt to upend the natural order of the world, portraying characters who—like Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*—are not subject to the rules of morality or consequences. Neo-*noir* often features plot elements in which certain characters are able to totally disregard standards of morality and not answer for their actions. As an example of neo-*noir*, *The Usual Suspects* (1995) “explodes the classic *noir* assumption that no one wins.”

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71Ibid., 93.
because in this branch of *noir*, there can be a character who wins—even through ruthless evil.

It is more difficult to approach goodness, beauty, and *Sehnsucht* through neo-*noir*, since it allows for and even celebrates “the invulnerable, demonic artist who resides beyond good and evil.”72 Another example given by Hibbs is feminist neo-*noir*, as it combines a largely nihilistic view of the world with female characters who wantonly kill and sometimes combine sexual behavior with violence.73 The tendency toward nihilism is clear within this sub-genre.

This is not to say that Christians cannot use films in the neo-*noir* sub-genre to point to truth, light, and beauty. Speaking of the lack of a “way out” of the darkness offered by the film *Taxi Driver*, Hibbs states,

The paradox of the film is that, if we can make these judgments about it, we must be resorting to some conception of what is natural and healthy independent of the film itself. The film deploys arts of darkness not to shed light but just to show us the darkness; indeed it is unclear from what perspective the filmmakers hope to make any sort of judgment on the world of the film.74

Although many neo-*noir* films give audiences little to no internal material by which *Sehnsucht* will be evoked, when examined externally, this absence again resonates in human hearts with a turning away from ugliness and a desire for beauty.

**“Christian” Art without Transcendence**

Finally, there is also art that is made by Christians and intentionally labeled “Christian” that falters in evoking *Sehnsucht* because it fails to communicate a strong sense of transcendence. In films like these, it is not necessarily the case that there is no beauty present, because often the gospel itself is shared. There is no more beautiful

72Ibid.


74Ibid., 115.
message. However, unfortunately, too often the narrative in which the Christian message is packed often robs God’s truth of some measure of its beauty. In some cases, certain elements of these films may be trite, silly, or unrealistic. These features can cause Christian films to stumble in conveying transcendence and drawing men to God through beauty.

The unrealistic nature of many Christian films is a significant problem for their ability to grip audiences and point them to Christ. It might be the case that these filmmakers are trying so hard to make a “family-friendly” film that will not be rejected by other Christians that they feel the need to filter out certain narrative points that might make the story more believable or realistic. The ironic thing about this tendency is that the Bible itself is definitely not rated G, or even PG. The Bible does not sanitize or sugarcoat stories; it presents human sinful nature in its full darkness, but—as previously inferred—that realistic look at the darkness shows the Light to be that much brighter.75

Christian filmmakers may also make plot narrative decisions based on a desire to showcase the beauty, truth, and goodness of Christianity. But through a narrow focus on goodness, they often fail to do justice to the gritty, difficult, and complex nature of real life. When this happens, such films do not strike viewers as transcendent, but as pie-in-the-sky fairy-tales.76 Unfortunately, stories like this may demonstrate an acceptance of prosperity gospel theology more than an acceptance of the true gospel.

Proponents of the prosperity gospel often make the error of teaching the second half of the gospel while neglecting the first half. The first half of the gospel openly declares man’s sin, his failure to keep God’s law, and his resultant condemnation

75This statement is not meant to imply that every event described through the written Word in Scripture should be explicitly portrayed in cinema. Many sexually sinful stories in the Bible could easily become pornographic if shown on film. The point is simply that narratives in Christian films should be realistic, including the way they portray human sinful nature.

and separation from God. The second half of the gospel speaks the hopeful message of God’s forgiveness, grace, salvation, and sanctification based upon the perfect life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul makes clear in the book of Romans that law must precede grace. Otherwise, people do not realize their need for Christ.

Prosperity gospel theologians often focus on happiness, positivity, health, and wealth so much that they omit (intentionally or not) important Bible truths regarding sin and guilt. When Christian filmmakers focus too much on the “happily ever after” within their films, they rob the gospel of much of its transcendent beauty by not showing what Christ saves men and women from, and by omitting the stark contrast between darkness and light. In addition, when everything in the lives of Christian characters wraps up perfectly with little or no sacrifice by the end of the story, these films do injustice to the ongoing battle between the flesh and the Spirit in the life of the Christian (Rom 7, Gal 5), or the role of suffering in sanctifying believers (Jas 1:2-4). These plot elements lessen the beauty of such films, and therefore their ability to evoke Sehnsucht and draw men unto God.

The recently released Christian film God’s Not Dead (2014)\textsuperscript{77} may serve as an example. The film was aggressively marketed to churches and widely released in theaters, ultimately grossing $62 million worldwide while only costing around $2 million to produce.\textsuperscript{78} The film contains several concurrent storylines, which all converge at the end of the film at a Christian concert by “The Newsboys” in the town where the characters live. The central story, however, is about a college freshman named Josh Wheaton who is confronted by a militantly atheistic philosophy professor named Jeffery Radisson. In his first philosophy lecture, Radisson effectively forces his entire class to sign a statement

\textsuperscript{77}God’s Not Dead, film, directed by Harold Cronk (Scottsdale, AZ: Pure Flix Entertainment, 2014).

saying that “God is dead.” Everyone signs the statement except for Wheaton, who is then told that he must defend his position through three subsequent lectures.

For Christian viewers, there is value to these lectures from an apologetic standpoint; Wheaton does a remarkably good job (for a college freshman!) at exposing inconsistencies and fallacies in popular atheistic thought, and he overwhelmingly wins the vote of his entire class—defeating and embarrassing his philosophy professor. The film strains believability through these debates—both in the professor’s rabid obsession with ruining Josh Wheaton’s semester and even future career, and in Josh’s meteoric rise from shock and confusion to overwhelming victory in his apologetics debate.

Well-established Christian film critic Steven Greydanus said in his review of the film,

In this world [within the film], there are only two kinds of people: true believers—or at least seekers—with no moral faults, and non-believers, with no redeeming qualities. . . . Non-believers can have redemptive arcs, but believers don’t need to change. There’s no real worldview clash here. Radisson’s less an actual atheist than a bogeyman who finally reveals that atheists are just angry at God. Josh takes risks, but his faith costs him nothing of value. Ultimately, he wins everything—the debates, the support of his whole class, even a shout-out from Christian rockers “The Newsboys” on stage—while Radisson is defeated and crushed in every way possible: destroyed by Josh in front of his class, by his girl in front of his peers, and then comes God’s biggest trick of all—smash!79

This “smash” that Greydanus mentions occurs when Professor Radisson is walking down the street later in the day after his humiliation by Josh Wheaton. The professor has clearly been shaken by the debate and has reflected on the words of his Christian mother, who died of cancer when he was twelve years old. He leaves his office to walk to the Christian concert, and as he is crossing the street, a car runs a red light and crashes into him, flinging him into the air. Two pastors get out of their car at the intersection; one realizes right away that the Professor’s lungs are filling with blood, and the other leads

79Steven Greydanus, “God’s Not Dead,” Decent Films, April 12, 2014, accessed February 3, 2015, http://decentfilms.com/blog/godsnotead-vid. This is a video review, part of Greydanus’ one-minute long series of “Reel Faith in 60” movie reviews. He writes in the same posting “I took two minutes to talk about this one, and still got in less than half of what bothered me about it.”
the professor to Christ just before he dies.

The conversion of any unbeliever is an event of glorious grace and mercy. Not only that, all Christians must beg God for the salvation even of those most opposed to the Christian faith. However, this plot element in the film was possibly the worst decision of the filmmakers. Ultimately, it weakens the apologetic impact of the film, because the atheist only converts when confronting his imminent death. Not only that, much apologetic value is likely lost on any viewing unbelievers through their revulsion at this scene. The film ends up—probably unintentionally—saying, “Don’t go against Christians and God, or you will get hit by a car or some other judgment. But, you could still get saved!” This attempt at showing mercy (the pastor speaking with the professor specifically mentions God’s mercy in preventing the professor from dying instantly) comes across as manipulative and even ugly. Another Christian film reviewer agreed, “The film’s entire last act also takes on the sense of Christian filmmakers converting and killing their enemies in effigy, then throwing a massive party in the Staples Center to celebrate.”

Although the production quality of the film is good, these plot and character elements greatly weaken its apologetic impact and its call toward the transcendent beauty of the gospel. As several reviewers noted, it mainly succeeds at affirming the beliefs of Christians who view it. Though this is not a bad thing, some of the opportunity to challenge the beliefs of non-Christians was missed through a story that might have emphasized the victory of Christians through suffering and by the transcendent power and beauty of the gospel.

Christians attempting to show the beauty of their faith and to point men toward Christ would do well to consistently show both darkness and light, both law and grace, both sin and gospel. Sehnsucht is often evoked by light, and particularly by light that pierces through deep darkness. Portrayed in art, this beauty grips human hearts because it

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reflects the beauty of the true Christian myth of forgiveness and grace through the
sacrifice of God’s Son. The words of one rock band—appropriate in a chapter on film
and music—distill the ideas of C. S. Lewis well on this important contrast between
darkness and light when they sing, “The shadow proves the sunshine.”

81Jonathan Foreman, “The Shadow Proves the Sunshine,” CD, performed by Switchfoot on the
album Nothing is Sound (Sparrow/Columbia, label no. 5205122000, 2005). For Lewis’s impact on the
CHAPTER 8
CONCLUSION

This dissertation has moved in multiple Christian disciplines, including philosophy, theology, evangelism, apologetics, and aesthetics. Part of this wide range stems from C. S. Lewis’ own extensive knowledge and impact.

The Encyclopedic C. S. Lewis

Though his primary field of study and expertise was medieval and renaissance literature (this was the chair he occupied at Cambridge University), his thought and influence have extended well beyond this arena. In fact, his books outside his main area of expertise are his most widely known and treasured works. Many Christians who love the works of Lewis are not at all aware of The Personal Heresy, Medieval and Renaissance Literature, Spenser’s Images of Life, or several other books and collections of essays that showcase his literary knowledge. As stated in chapter 2, Lewis’ versatility in multiple fields and genres is remarkable.

Philosopher

Although he was not technically an academic philosopher, Lewis has had a great impact on Christian philosophy. It is not true that he had zero training in this field; one of his degrees was in “Greats,” which is a combination of ancient history and philosophy. Not only that, his first teaching position was in the domain of philosophy; he substituted for E. F. Carritt at Oxford for one year while the professor was out of the country. When Oxford hired Lewis permanently, they did so because he combined some
ability to teach philosophy with his primary field of English.¹

One of the most powerful skills in Lewis’ arsenal was his ability to take
difficult, erudite topics and put them into terms and illustrations that enabled the layman
to understand them. Philosophy needs more writers who have this ability and a desire to
use it, rather than the desire to sound more intelligent through convoluted language.
*Miracles* and *The Abolition of Man* are good examples of Lewis’ ability to deal with
major problems in philosophy in a way accessible to most readers.

**Apologist**

Through works such as *Mere Christianity, The Problem of Pain*, and *Miracles*,
C. S. Lewis became arguably the most influential Christian apologist of the twentieth
century. Incidentally, Jerry Walls points out that this unabashed defense of orthodox
Christianity did not endear Lewis to many on the campus of Oxford who did not agree
with his worldview or appreciate his popular-level writing.² But Lewis did not let this
bother him. He had journeyed through twenty years of atheism, and having found the
God who was behind the joy of *Sehnsucht*, he openly shared the gospel and worked to
defend the faith that he had found. As a result, his writings have overcome the objections
of many hearts to the truth and bolstered the faith of many believers.

**Artist and Aesthete**

In addition to his ability as a philosopher and apologist, Lewis was also a
brilliant artist, as evidenced by his literature for children and adults. Through *The
Chronicles of Narnia, Till We Have Faces*, the Space Trilogy, and other works, he
demonstrated an astonishing breadth of skill in creating worlds which draw in readers,
fire their imaginations, and show them deep beauty that often fills them with desire for


²Ibid., 14.
something beyond this world.

Not only was Lewis an excellent author in his own ability, he has had a great impact on other authors and artists who have been inspired by his example. His participation in the Inklings group alone has impacted literature, through his relationships with J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Owen Barfield. His writings about beauty, on stories, and literary criticism also offer much insight into the creation of beautiful and excellent art.

**Lewis and Sehnsucht**

As a philosopher, apologist, artist, and aesthete, Lewis presented a compelling vision of desirable beauty that pointed men unto God, sometimes calling it Sehnsucht and sometimes using other terms for it. However, though the terms varied, the principle was consistent, and the importance of this concept to his overall worldview should not be underestimated. Chapter 3 demonstrated a sampling of how important this inconsolable desire was to his personal testimony of salvation, his worldview, his creation and evaluation of art, and his understanding of how God can draw mankind to Himself. A great many more examples could have been given in that section.

Juxtaposing Lewis’ consistent references to Sehnsucht with his formidable reputation as a thinker and debater, a picture emerges of a man who was passionately and holistically engaged in his faith and with his God. Lewis’ thoughts and emotions were fully committed to these pursuits. Humphrey Carpenter and Austin Farrer speak to this in Carpenter’s book *The Inklings*:

He was both a debater and a poet—“poet” in the sense of imaginary writer. . . . The poet was, of course, always present to assist the debater. Though the logic of Lewis’s Christian apologetics may be fallible, the imagination of the writing with its

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3See the essay collection: C. S. Lewis, *On Stories and Other Essays in Literature* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1982).

brilliantly-conceived analogies is itself enough to win a reader to his side. As Austin Farrer expressed it, “We think we are listening to an argument; in fact we are presented with a vision; and it is the vision that carries conviction.”

Lewis held cerebral arguments and appeals to the heart in a faithful balance, encouraging and demonstrating the use of both in evangelistic and apologetic encounters. In this, Lewis provides an important reminder and a solid example to Christians today.

The Church

Chapter 4 included a reference to the theology and aesthetics of Dutch author and art history professor H. R. Rookmaaker, who had a great influence on Francis Schaeffer. In Our Calling and God’s Hand in History, H. R. Rookmaaker writes,

Many evangelicals look quite negatively at culture. That is their culture, to be negative about culture. For this very reason we at L’Abri have felt that we ought to try to make a small contribution towards change. That is why we have a concert as part of this L’Abri conference in the USA, and we do not see it as a little added extra, a little ornament or diversion. . . . We were approached by someone who asked, “Why do you have this? What does a concert have to do with Christianity?” I would say, “Everything! It’s our lifestyle.”

The next important point to make when we think about Christianity and culture is that we should never aim at being a subculture. In a way it is unavoidable to become a subculture. As soon as you have a group of people together who have their own customs, you have a kind of subculture, which in itself is not something bad. But I think we should not aim for it; the Christian’s task is to be part of all of culture. What we do is not for our friends but for the world, the nation, the culture in which we are placed. Christ said, “You are the salt of the world.” He wants us to be “salting salt,” so that we can act in conservation against corruption.

Rookmaaker stresses here the importance of Christians not sealing off their own art and culture from the culture of the rest of the world. God has sent Christians to make disciples as they go into the world and to have the effects of salt and light on the culture. Making hard distinctions between “Christian” and “secular” art encourages an unhealthy separation that often effectively keeps Christian salt in the shaker.

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As demonstrated in this dissertation, Christians have rich resources of theology and multiple popular forms of art available that offer excellent opportunities for evoking within unbelievers a desire for the transcendence behind true beauty. That desire can set unbelievers on a course that, in God’s providence, can lead them eventually to faith in Jesus, as it did for C. S. Lewis. Along the way, believers must watch for God’s work in the hearts of non-Christians and be faithful at Spirit-led moments to speak the explicit gospel and to call for repentance and faith in Jesus.

In the apostle Paul’s letter to Titus, he writes to the young pastor who has been given the task of leading the relatively new churches on the island of Crete. Repeatedly in this letter, Paul emphasizes that Christians should practice what they preach—that their beliefs should lead to conscious, premeditated good works in order to glorify God, refute false teaching, and point the culture around them to Christ.

In Titus 3, Paul hammers home this point: “The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.” The word for “people” in Greek is anthropos (ἀνθρωπός), which in the Holman Christian Standard Version is translated “everyone.” Paul is expanding the scope of the impact of Christian good works beyond the church. He explains here that Christians do good works for the benefit of all men. This point is obviously relevant for Christian compassion ministries and other practical ways in which believers benefit the human race, meet needs, and alleviate suffering.

The context of the rest of the book of Titus includes much about leading people away from false teaching and toward the true gospel. In this light, the command to be devoted to good works includes the idea that Christian good works do not benefit all men just through meeting practical needs, but through pointing to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Evangelism is a “good work” that benefits all of mankind. This wider cultural benefit is no less relevant for the Christian “good work” of producing art that glorifies God and calls
men to Him through beauty. For this reason, Christians must not separate themselves and move into a cultural ghetto; rather, Christians must openly speak of beauty in the world and create beautiful things for the world in hope that God will use Sehnsucht to draw men unto Himself. Popular film and music are particularly fertile grounds for this task.

A few years ago, I witnessed a powerful and creative example of Christians using music to evoke a desire for transcendence from an audience. This experience occurred at a rock concert at the House of Blues in Orlando, Florida. The concert was not on a Sunday, and the House of Blues is by no means a Christian venue. The event was also not billed as a Christian concert. However, the band that played that evening was Switchfoot. The members of Switchfoot are widely known as Christians; they are one of the few rock bands to have crossed over into wide general notoriety without eliminating the Christian content of their music and without compromising their witness through immoral lifestyles.

Near the end of a talented and engaging performance, the band did something that gripped me with emotion, simply because of its power and creativity in getting the audience to think along the lines of the gospel. Switchfoot played “Meant to Live,” one of their most well-known songs. The piece is a heartfelt cry for something beyond this earthly existence, with echoes of the lessons of the book of Ecclesiastes. The song includes lines like “dreaming about providence,” “we were meant to live for so much more,” “we want more than this world’s got to offer,” and “everything inside screams for second life.”

At the end of the piece, the lead singer led the audience in singing a very simple melodic refrain that was not featured in the recorded version of the song. This refrain repeated the theme of the song. The audience obliged, repeatedly singing, “We were meant to live.” As this refrain continued, the band got up one-by-one and left the stage. Finally, the lead singer turned the microphone around so that it faced the audience,

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7Jonathan Foreman and Tim Foreman, “Meant to Live,” performed by Switchfoot on the album The Beautiful Letdown, CD (Columbia/Red Ink, label no. 379464, 2002).
and he slowly exited. As a result, the audience was left singing into the microphone, forced to listen to their own words and to contemplate the fact that they were meant to live for something more than earthly possessions and pleasure.

The message was subtle: no explicit mention of the gospel was made. But the moment was both beautiful and creative, and inherent in the words were a longing for the transcendent. Neither the band, the concert, or the venue were labeled as “Christian.” Many people—a large portion who would not have been in the audience had “Christian” labels been applied to the event and the performers—were touched by this simple moment. Christians can and should be part of the same culture as everyone else, pointing to the gospel, proclaiming the beauty of their God, and drawing men unto Christ through Sehnsucht for what lies behind that beauty.
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ABSTRACT

C. S. LEWIS’S CONCEPT OF SEHNSUCHT: PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS, AESTHETIC ANALYSIS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EVANGELISM AND APOLOGETICS

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C. S. Lewis’ concept of Sehnsucht as inexpressible longing for beauty holds much promise for Christian aesthetics, evangelism, and apologetics. In his autobiography, Surprised by Joy, and many of his other works, Lewis shows how desire for beauty can draw individuals toward God. This dissertation fully develops Lewis’ concept of Sehnsucht within the framework of his life story as well as his writings. The dissertation then explores the corroboration of Lewis’ concept within both Christian and secular philosophical contexts. Once this foundation has been laid, the potential of Sehnsucht for opening hearts to the gospel of Christ and overcoming objections to faith in Him is outlined. Finally, the dissertation aesthetically analyzes specific films and pieces of music in search of common elements that may evoke Sehnsucht, as well as elements that may prevent it from being experienced.
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