

A Greek Tragedy Observed

By Laura Hillger

Madeleine L'Engle writes, "Each experience of grief is unique" (Lewis xiii). However, she also articulates that there are basic similarities in the experiences of all people grieving for the loss of true love. As L'Engle read *A Grief Observed* by C. S. Lewis, she observed the difference of losing a spouse after only a few years of marriage compared to the long marriage she enjoyed before her husband's death. Lewis entered his marriage with the knowledge that his wife, Joy, would likely be taken from him within a few years. Another literary example of a spouse knowingly going to their death is present in the play *Alcestis* written by Euripides. In all experiences of death, every moment of grief is unique to the individual, while the range of emotions and experiences are often similar, especially when the circumstances surrounding the death are similar. Lewis and Admetos both experience doubts in their faith, feel the loss of their spouse as losing part of themselves, and question their ideas of the afterlife.

For anyone with a belief in God or the gods, death forces a confrontation with faith.

Lewis writes what he discovered when faced with death:

When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of need in [God], so happy that you are tempted to feel his claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise you will be-or so it feels-welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slamming in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. (Lewis 5-6)

Lewis searched for God to answer the question “why.” He wanted God to explain why death and grief are pushed upon to His people. During our moments of grief, the answer given, if there is one, seems completely incomprehensible. We feel like God locks the door to us and forces us to suffer as if He were some type of “Cosmic Sadist” (30). Admetos experiences a similar separation from God with the death of his wife Alcestis. The Chorus articulates his separation:

As usual, God is silent. And lets it all happen. Must it happen? ...Even if God answered our prayer, how would we hear it? How would we recognize his word? We must pray. God only seems to be silent because we are so deafened by our own babble. (Euripides 19-20)

While Admetos does not suggest that God might be evil as Lewis implies, he does struggle with the same inability to understand why God let Alcestis be taken from him while in her youth. He also considers that we may not have the ability to understand the answer God gives us to this question.

This similarity is not the only one to be observed in grief. Both Lewis and Admetos experience the loss of their wives as a loss of a part of themselves. Admetos almost gruesomely describes that, “the nerves of the married man, his very entrails, all his arteries are woven into the body of his wife” (Euripides 84). This deep connection results in an even more painful separation. Lewis describes his marriage as, “One flesh. Or if you prefer, one ship. The starboard engine has gone. The port engine must chug along somehow till we make harbor” (Lewis 33). While they had worked together during their marriage, Lewis is now left to the task alone. When

Joy left this world, he was left to carry the burden of the entire “ship” using only the portion of himself that she did not take with her to the grave. “Do you know, dear, how much you took away with you when you left? You have stripped me even of my past, even of the things we never shared” (61).

After working through many levels of grief, both husbands are able to see the hope that still lies ahead of them. With Alcestis’ return from the dead, Admetos is overjoyed. He states that “[he has] taken the full measure of grief and now [he has] found happiness even greater. [He has] found it and recognized it” (Euripides 103). He was able to work through some of his sadness and realize how much Alcestis truly meant to him. His faith is also strengthened in God as the Chorus proclaims, “See how God has accomplished what was beyond belief. Let this give man hope” (103). While Admetos’ hope returns with the return of his wife, Lewis regains hope despite that fact that he may never see Joy again. He rejects the idea that families will enjoy happy reunions on the other side. However, he accepts the plan that God has for him and no longer senses that locked door between himself and God. Instead he receives a quiet answer to his question, “Peace, child; you don’t understand” (Lewis 69).

C. S. Lewis and the character Admetos experience similar instances of grief, having both lost their wives early in marriage and with preparation. While each experience of grief is unique, these two widowers undertake a similar series of emotions due to the similar circumstances surrounding the deaths. In *A Grief Observed* and *Alcestis*, the grievers both experience doubts in their faith, a feeling that they have lost apart of themselves, and questions about the afterlife. Even while other grievers deal with differing situations, the emotions of grief can be comprehended by all.

Bibliography

Lewis, C. S. *A Grief Observed*. New York: Harper Collins, 2001.

Euripides. *Alcestis*. Trans. Ted Hughes. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.