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Freud's Last Session

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CREDITS

IN THEATERS
December 25, 2023

HOME RELEASE DATE
TBD

CAST
Matthew Goode as C. S. Lewis; Anthony Hopkins as Sigmund Freud; Liv Lisa Frie as Anna Freud; Jodi Balfour as Dorothy Burlingham; Orla Brady as Janie Moore; David Shields as Weldon; Stephen Campbell Moore as JRR Tolkien; Rhys Mannion as Young C.S. Lewis; Pádraic Delaney as Warren Lewis; Tarek Bishara as Jacob Freud

DIRECTOR
Matt Brown

DISTRIBUTOR
Sony Classics

REVIEWER
Paul Asay

MOVIE REVIEW

It's Sept. 3, 1939, and the world stands at a precipice.

Nazi Germany invaded Poland just two days before. Britain and France have issued an ultimatum to Hitler to withdraw his troops by 11 a.m. A refusal will mean war.

But as the world's nations prepare to march headlong into horror, another conflict brews in the heart of England itself—a clash between two of the 20th Century's most formidable minds.

C.S. Lewis, the 41-year-old Oxford don and author of *The Pilgrim's Regress*, readies himself for a train ride into London. He tells Janie Moore, his longtime housemate, that he'll have plenty to tell his host.

"No one tells a man like him anything," Janie says.

In a green London neighborhood, Dr. Sigmund Freud, the famed Austrian neurologist and the father of modern psychoanalysis, frets over the arrival of his pain meds. Suffering from cancer of the jaw, Freud knows he's dying, and the pain can sometimes be interminable. But he's looking forward to his visit from young Lewis.

"The Christian apologist?" Freud's daughter, Anna, asks.

"Ya," the atheist Freud says. "There's a lot to apologize for."

One man, nearing his end, stares into black oblivion, certain that there is no God to save him, no immortal soul to fly toward heaven. The other man—still years away from his greatest works—knows what that oblivion looks like. For years he saw it too, before he saw the Light.

They meet at Freud's door. Freud welcomes Lewis in, grumbling at his tardiness. And soon, the battle is joined.

"Why someone of your supreme intellect would suddenly abandon truth and then embrace a ludicrous dream?" Freud thunders. "An insidious lie?"

“And what,” Lewis counters, “If it *isn’t* a lie?”

And so it begins. As millions of people prepare for war, two men engage in a quiet, leathered library. The stakes aren’t tied to land or political ideology, but rather to the state of the soul.

And as such, the stakes are high indeed.*Note:* Freud’s Last Session *gives moviegoers a fictional meeting between the two scholars—but it draws heavily from real biographical information and their own voluminous writing. This review will focus primarily with the movie itself—but will also include biographical anecdotes that weren’t included in the movie, in order to give* Session *greater context.*

POSITIVE ELEMENTS

Obviously, Freud and Lewis disagree with an issue of upmost importance. Both would likely agree with the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, where he says that if the Christian faith has no salvific merit, “We are of all people most to be pitied.”

But their disagreement, while sincere and spirited, is done within the context of respect and, ultimately, friendship. They may strenuously differ, but they still care for each other—and they show it. When Lewis suffers a panic attack during a bomb scare, Freud calms his fears. When Freud’s prosthetic jaw causes him unendurable pain, he turns to Lewis for help.

Admittedly, their conversation has its moments of vitriol. Freud, especially, can be biting in his criticism of Lewis’ faith. But again and again, he calls Lewis “my friend,” and that becomes more true, not less, as their conversation goes on. Their amicable relationship feels like an important example for us today, living in such fractious times: We can hold fast to what we believe in without hating those who believe differently.

Anna Freud’s devotion to her father is striking—to the point that, in flashback, she risks imprisonment and torture to keep her father out of Nazi hands. And while that devotion certainly has some troublesome wrinkles (which we’ll get into soon), let’s at least acknowledge that it’s rooted in respect and love.

SPIRITUAL ELEMENTS

Freud's Last Session is based on Armand Nicholi's book *The Question of God*, wherein the author compares and contrasts the writings of Lewis and Freud in detail. As such, the film never leaves that central question. I'll not detail every spiritual element found in the film. But here's some of what you can expect.

The film delves into the spiritual backgrounds of both central characters here.

When Freud asks if Lewis' parents "injected you with this fairy tale of faith," Lewis says that his faith actually was buried with his mother. He had a difficult relationship with his father, and he gradually fell away from any sort of belief in God. The movie shows us a few snippets of how he returned to faith: He has a critical talk with friend J.R.R. Tolkien (author, of course, of *The Lord of the Rings*). At Tolkien's urging, Lewis investigates the voracity of faith and finds that the Scriptures aren't the collection of fairy tales he imagined them to be.

"I'm perfectly convinced that whatever the gospels are, they aren't myths," Lewis tells Freud. "They aren't artistic enough. They're clumsy. Most of the life of Jesus is left completely unknown to us." Writers who were trying to fabricate a legendary figure? Who were trying to paint a picture of a *fictional* Son of God? "Wouldn't allow that to happen," Lewis says.

"You're convinced of Christ's existence because of bad storytelling?" Freud quips.

Freud himself was raised in a deeply religious, albeit conflicted house. His father was a devout Jew. His nanny was Catholic, and she took young Sigmund to Mass every Sunday. When Freud crossed himself at the dinner table after a very Jewish prayer, Freud's father fired her on the spot.

"You must pray for your father so he can go to heaven," the nanny pleads as she's thrown out.

"There is no heaven!" Freud's father thunders.

"Not for you!" the nanny fires back. Once the nanny's gone, Freud's father makes him promise not to pray for him. "Ever."

Throughout their conversation, Lewis admits difficulties in his faith—most especially the problem of pain. "I don't know" where pain fits in, Lewis tells Freud. It would seem to require either a God not entirely powerful or not entirely good, he suggests. But then Lewis asks (as he would outline in a later book) the questions, "What if God wants to perfect us through suffering? Make us realize that happiness, real happiness, eternal happiness can only come through Him?"

Freud and Lewis then move on to discuss more than why God allows pain. They touch on the necessity of free will; the relationship between God and Satan; the nature of joy; the nature of sin; the relationship of pagan myth to Christian truth; and plenty of other topics. Freud questions what makes Lewis' Christ different from all the other "Christs" that Freud encounters in his own practice. Lewis wonders why religion makes plenty of room for science, "but science makes no room for religion?"

Freud admits to Lewis that he is "a passionate disbeliever who is obsessed with gods and worship—yours included." He calls John Bunyan (author of the classic Christian book *The Pilgrim's Progress*) a literary giant, and his library is filled with statues and idols from all manner of religions. But Freud he has reserved a special spot for the Catholic St. Dymphna, patron saint of "the mad and the lost," he tells Lewis.

And on it goes. Each man seems a bit of a spiritual paradox. Lewis kids Freud for invoking the name of God at one point. Freud sees Lewis panic in a bomb shelter and demands to know, if he believes in an immortal soul, why he seemed so terrified. They mention pagan gods and religious leaders. And when they enter a church together, Freud knows more about the saints depicted there than the priest. Lewis admits that faith has often been used "as a weapon."

SEXUAL CONTENT

Freud famously made sex the center of his psychoanalysis. And when he first brings up the subject, Lewis wonders why it took him so long.

“Sexuality is the font of all happiness, my friend,” Freud says.

“Oh, there’s much more to happiness than that,” Lewis tells him. “Sex is one of many God-given pleasures. … in fact it’s not the most lasting.”

“Ah, it took you less than a minute to bring God into sex,” Freud jokes. “Most fascinating.”

Sex is indeed an important topic here, and the debaters concentrate especially on homosexuality. While Freud argues that there’s nothing wrong with homosexual relationships, and that sex should not be hindered, Lewis argues otherwise. “We infantilize [sex],” he says, “turning it into the lie that sex under any circumstances is perfectly normal and healthy. There is a sexual code running through the Old and New Testaments that sex is to be shared between two people who are committed to each other.” Freud argues that such thinking is the result of cherry-picking Scripture, and he suggests that keeping people from sex before marriage is like keeping a musician from playing with an orchestra, then trotting him on stage for his first concerto.

But Freud’s own thoughts are not so clear-cut as he might suggest.

Throughout the film, it’s fairly obvious that his own daughter is in a lesbian relationship—one that Freud refuses to acknowledge. And he uncomfortably acknowledges to Lewis that, in his own field of psychoanalysis, lesbian tendencies are inherently related to the woman’s relationship with her father.

Freud himself seems to have an unhealthy attachment to Anna. When a male suitor comes to discuss courting his daughter, Freud rejects the matter, saying that Anna’s much too young to “experience any sexual feelings.” (By 1939, Anna is in her early 40s.) He insists that Anna’s entire being be wrapped up in his well-being. Anna accepts this, for the most part, much to the annoyance of her apparent lover, Dorothy Burlingham. (We see the two hold hands at one point.)

When Anna tries to tell her father of her own erotically themed dreams, he tells her to stop—wanting to ignore their subtext. But he, too, dreams of Anna. We see a snippet of that dream or hallucination, where Anna and an androgynous other are both statues embracing in an intimate manner, with one covering Anna’s breast with his/her hand.

Note: Anna Freud did indeed have a lifelong relationship with Dorothy, though Anna herself always denied it was a sexual or romantic one. A psychoanalyst herself, she advocated barring homosexuals from becoming psychoanalysts.

But Lewis, Freud believes, has his own sexual skeletons. We see flashbacks of a “friendship” he struck up with the mother of a war buddy of his, and it’s this woman, Janie, whom Lewis talks with before leaving for Freud’s house. When Lewis says that he lives with his brother, Warren, Freud leans in. “Just your brother?”

“It’s complicated,” an uncomfortable Lewis says. It’s assumed that their relationship is platonic now, but when Freud asks if it might’ve been otherwise when he lived with her as an atheist, Lewis tells him, “My private life is exactly that.”

Note: There’s been speculation about the nature Lewis’ relationship with Janie Moore, who was 27 years older than Lewis and with whom he lived between 1918 and the late 1940s, when Janie was hospitalized. But Lewis himself referred to Janie as his “mother,” and his letters reveal simply an affectionate friendship.

We hear references to masturbation, oral fixation and a “castration complex.”

VIOLENT CONTENT

We see some pretty horrific flashbacks to Lewis' experiences in World War I, including the death of Janie's son, Paddy. (Paddy had made Lewis promise to take care of his mother if he died.) Both are involved in a charge across no-man's land; blood spatters their faces as comrades fall around them, and an explosion eventually throws them both into a pit. Lewis survives, injured, but Paddy lies dead. A young Lewis screams as he's surrounded by the corpses of Allied and enemy soldiers.

In a hospital, shrapnel is removed from someone's foot. We hear a young Lewis tell a visiting Janie that he still has shrapnel in his chest; it's too close to his heart for the doctors to remove it.

Freud has metal in his own mouth, in the form of part of a prosthetic jaw. When his mouth begins to bleed and the pain grows too unbearable, he asks Lewis to help him remove it (a sign of the growing intimacy between the two men). It's a painful, bloody process.

[*Spoiler Warning*] Freud sometimes takes out a red pill and looks at it. In a flashback, we see him give the pill to Anna before his daughter is dragged away by the Nazis—an out, Freud suggests, in case it all becomes all too unbearable. We learn later that the pill, if taken, is a method of suicide: He confesses to Lewis that he plans to do himself in when the pain becomes too unbearable, shrugging off Lewis' moral warnings. In real life, Freud—with the help of a doctor—committed suicide 20 days after this fictional meeting took place.

We hear that Germany's invasion of Poland killed 20,000 people in its first two days.

CRUDE OR PROFANE LANGUAGE

We hear some sporadic mild profanity: One use of "b–ch," one of "b–tard" and two of "d–n." We also hear a use or two of the British profanity "bloody." God's name is misused three times.

DRUG AND ALCOHOL CONTENT

Freud offers Lewis a drink, which he initially declines. "Well, I'm going to have one, because I need one." Lewis then agrees to a whiskey. When Freud pours out the libations, he sprinkles morphine into his glass.

It's not the first time Freud takes morphine. The drug is apparently necessary to combat the pain in his jaw. As Lewis and Freud talk, Anna races to various pharmacies to find more of it.

Lewis smokes, and we see him smoking with other friends in flashbacks. He and others (members of his famous Inklings group) drink at a bar.

Despite his cancer, Freud smokes a cigar—quipping that it's his "only sexual pleasure left."

OTHER NEGATIVE ELEMENTS

Freud asks Lewis to take his dog for a walk; we see the dog urinate on a bush. We hear Hitler on the radio talking about the "annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe."

CONCLUSION

Debates can be fun. They can be useful. But according to data, they're rarely that effective in changing a person's mind—at least on the spot. And when it comes to spiritual matters, it's hard to argue someone into heaven.

We see that dynamic at work in *Freud's Last Session*. When Lewis walks out of Freud's house, he's on the cusp of his greatest theological works: *The Problem of Pain* would be published a year later. His radio talks that formed the basis of *Mere Christianity* came in 1941. He introduced *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to the world in 1950. Certainly, Freud (as depicted fictionally here) was unsuccessful in getting Lewis to abandon the "insidious lie" of faith.

Freud's own opinions may move just a touch toward the end. Perhaps Lewis planted a tiny seed in Freud's mind—a seed that, if Freud had had a few more years, or decades, could have grown into something more.

But that seed, if it existed, would be more question than answer—and the same one that Lewis wrestles with, too: *What if I'm wrong?*

I don't think that question was never far from Lewis' mind. That question led him away from atheism to deism to, ultimately, Christianity. He continued to address it again and again—grounding his faith in unshakable reason. Being unafraid to ask such questions forged him into the great apologist he became.

Questions, more than answers, can be catalysts for change. We're a skeptical species, and we distrust pat answers. But when someone encourages us to ask difficult questions and then to answer those questions ourselves, that is where change takes root. That is where, I believe, faith can grow and strengthen.

Freud's Last Session excels in asking such questions—difficult ones for both believer and agnostic. It leans into the paradoxes that its two prime characters embody, and it thus may help us see our own internal inconsistencies. But this film is more than just an intellectual exercise. It's a gripping, entertaining story with a couple of powerhouse performances, particularly from Anthony Hopkins as Freud.

That said, the film comes with more problems than you'd think, given that it's really based on two guys talking. Flashbacks to Lewis' wartime experiences, dalliances with Freud's fascination with sex as well as his daughter's fascination with another woman might give one pause before queuing up to see this film.

And then there are those pesky questions. They're healthy inquiries, I believe—but they can be challenging, too. Freud, even in the twilight of his life, is depicted as a man of powerful intellect and passionate opinion. When he tells Lewis about how his little grandson died of tuberculosis at the age of 5 and talks about "what a wonderful plan for God, to kill a little boy," we, like Lewis, are confronted by the anguished mysteries of faith.

But whether posed by Freud or not, those questions are ones that we Christians all ask. Or, at least, questions we all should. Our faith is not one that turns away from grim truth, but faces them with open eyes and open hands.

The movie begins with a quote from John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*: "As I walk'd through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place, where there was a Den." Freud references that quote as he welcomes Lewis into his "den," suggesting that he is the lion that lurks within.

But Lewis already walked in the wilderness of this world. As do we. And with God, the lion holds no terrors we've not already seen.

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PAUL ASAY

Paul Asay has been part of the Plugged In staff since 2007, watching and reviewing roughly 15 quintillion movies and television shows. He's written for a number of other publications, too, including Time, The Washington Post and Christianity Today. The author of several books, Paul loves to find spirituality in unexpected places, including popular entertainment, and he loves all things superhero. His vices include James Bond films, Mountain Dew and terrible B-grade movies. He's married, has two children and a neurotic dog, runs marathons on occasion and hopes to someday own his own tuxedo. Feel free to follow him on Twitter @AsayPaul.

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