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Description automatically generated with medium confidenceWhen “Men without Chests” Rule the World**

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Teaching young people to think rightly about themselves and the world is not enough. Ideas matter but they amount to little if the desires of one’s heart are pulling him in another direction. It is rare that someone chooses to act solely on the basis of a set of well-reasoned arguments; one’s desires and affections play a significant role in determining the shape of one’s life. Given the skill of our modern world’s appeal to the eye and to the heart, we should not be surprised that the heads and the hearts of many of our students are pulling in different directions.

This understanding is behind C. S. Lewis’s warning in The Abolition of Man that modern education is creating “men without chests”, that is, people without properly trained and ordered affections or desires. Lewis asserts, “Without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism…The head [must rule] the belly through the chest – the seat…of the emotions organized by trained habits into stable sentiments.”

Lewis gives us the imaginative version of this argument in his novel That Hideous Strength. At the center of the story is a newly-married couple, both of whom have received modern educations, who live in a small university town which is undergoing enormous changes as the ideas taught in many classrooms of the university are being acted upon and taken to their logical conclusions by a small group of men called the “Progressive Element”.

Mark Studdock, the young husband and a fellow at the university, is being courted by this group of men to join their enterprise centered in an institution called the N.I.C.E., the National Institute for Coordinated Experiments. Mark is well along the road to becoming a “man without a chest”, and Lewis makes clear that his education has played a major role in this.

…in Mark’s mind hardly one rag of noble thought, either Christian or Pagan, had a secure lodging. His education had been neither scientific nor classical – merely ‘Modern’. The severities both of abstraction and of high human tradition had passed him by … He was a man of straw, a glib examinee in subjects that require no exact knowledge…and the first hint of real threat to his bodily life knocked him sprawling.

No noble thoughts came to him at a moment of crisis because his education had been devoid of training in right sentiments.

In this fantasy in which images speak even louder than words, the institute into which Mark is being drawn is run by the disembodied head of a renowned scientist with a swollen brain protruding from its skull kept alive in a sterile lab by being connected with tubes to some complicated medical machinery. This vivid image of a “man without a chest” makes periodic pronouncements from its drooling mouth and supposedly presides over the institute’s project of taking over the human race and reconditioning it. The goal is to produce a Technocratic and Objective Man who will lead civilization into a new age. Mark must be trained to be like the Conditioners who do the Head’s bidding.

In The Abolition of Man Lewis says that modern educators have “misunderstood the pressing educational need of the moment. They see the world around them swayed by emotional propaganda…and they conclude that the best thing they can do is to fortify the minds of young people against emotion…[They don’t understand that] the right defense against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments. By starving the sensibility of our pupils we only make them easier prey for the propagandist when he comes. For famished nature will be avenged and a hard heart is no infallible protection against a soft head.” Mark’s earlier education had been along these lines and had prepared him for membership in the N.I.C.E.

Mark’s final training for acceptance into the institute consists of time spent in a place called the Objectivity Room the purpose of which is to destroy all natural human emotions and reactions in him and produce “objectivity”. This training is based on the premise that all natural feelings are subjective and are merely chemical phenomena. Mark’s trainer tells him:

Friendship is a chemical phenomenon; so is hatred… one must go outside the whole world of our subjective emotions. It is only as you begin to do so that you discover how much of what you mistook for your thought was merely a by-product of your blood and nervous tissue.

In the Objectivity Room Lewis gives us another vivid image of these ideas. It is a high, narrow, windowless room lit by a single bright cold light. It is ill-proportioned, lop-sided; there are no right angles  
and everything is a bit off. Hanging on the walls of the room are paintings which at a glance seem ordinary but which contain perverse or grotesque details such as a Last Supper with beetles crawling all over the table. Mark is to be left alone in this room for a prolonged period which will supposedly kill his affinity for harmony, balance, and order. One’s ideas of beauty as well as goodness are meant to be written off as merely subjective.

Lewis points out in The Abolition of Man that once the Conditioners (such as those leading the N.I.C.E.) have moved everything that pre-modern man considered to be objective into the category of the subjective, there is really nothing left but the will of some to have power or control over others.

It is in Man’s power to treat himself as a mere ‘natural object’ and his own judgments of value as raw material for scientific manipulation to alter at will … The real objection is that if man chooses to treat himself as raw material, raw material he will be: not raw material to be manipulated, as he fondly imagined, by himself, but by mere appetite, that is, mere Nature, in the person of his de-humanized Conditioners.

His time in the Objectivity Room does not have the desired effect on Mark. His heart is not completely dead, and he finds himself reacting against “the built and painted perversity of this room” and longing for the “Normal”, as he called it. “As the desert first teaches men to love water, or as absence first reveals affection, there rose up against this background of the sour and the crooked some kind of vision of the sweet and the straight.” Enough humanness remained in Mark to save him and turn him around.

As the N.I.C.E. is pursuing its program to take over the university and the town, Mark’s wife Jane is driven to seek safety among a very different community of people living together in a large manor house on a hilltop in a village called St. Anne’s. In his portrayal of this community Lewis gives us a picture of the Normal, “the sweet and the straight”. This house is surrounded by lush gardens and a stone wall. Whereas at the N.I.C.E. animals of all kinds are kept in pens to be used for experimentation, the animals at St. Anne’s are cherished “servants and playfellows”. The beauty, warmth, and sheer homey-ness of this place is a welcome contrast to the sterile, cold, and ugly place called Belbury where the N.I.C.E. is housed.

This community is presided over by a very different kind of head, a Director who rules over others with full awareness that he is under the rule of Someone infinitely higher than himself and who knows that there are fixed realities both visible and invisible to which he and the rest of the company must conform. Jane meets with this man in the room where he is confined as an invalid. It is called the Blue Room and is a visual antithesis of the Objectivity Room. It has many windows that let in the light of day, and it is warmed by a fire on a hearth. Its predominant color is blue. There was a “clear beauty in the colours and proportions of the room” which had the effect of calming and comforting Jane who had arrived at St. Anne’s in a state of extreme fear. She had come as well with a strong determination to stay in control of herself, not to be “taken in”. But in this room before this kind, strong-hearted Director both of these states melt away; “her world was unmade.”

In this room the reshaping of Jane’s affections begins. Her modern ideas about marriage and equality are immediately challenged as the Director explains how little love and equality have to do with each other. As she lives in this company where obedience to something higher than oneself is taken seriously, she sees true equality in the absence of class distinctions and the willingness of each member to share in the work and serve the needs of others. She is at first taken aback by seeing her former charwoman Ivy in this company being treated as an equal by the others, and she discovers that she is not quite so modern as she thought she was. She eventually surrenders “that prim little grasp on her own destiny, that perpetual reservation, which she thought essential to her status as a grown-up, integrated, intelligent person,” and she begins to experience delight and joy in a myriad of simple things outside of herself. Most importantly, she comes to see Mark and her marriage with new eyes, and when the two are reunited at the end of the story, their marriage begins anew on a much stronger footing as both have learned important lessons about the eternal verities to which one must conform in order to be fully human.

In this day many might consider the attempt to train the affections to be interference in an area of a young person’s life that should be allowed to develop freely and naturally. This is, however, interference which young people desperately need. It’s what G.K. Chesterton had in mind when he said that education is interference. “Education is violent because it is creative,” says Chesterton. “It is as ruthless as playing the fiddle; as dogmatic as drawing a picture; as brutal as building  a house. In short, it is what all human action is: it is interference with life and growth.” The old hymn reminds us that, just like a fiddle, our hearts need to be properly tuned: “Come, Thou Fount of every blessing, tune our hearts to sing Thy grace.” Teachers and parents can participate in the task of tuning hearts by, among other things, filling the imaginations of those under their care with images of things that are truly noble and lovely, “sweet and straight.” Who, having seen both, would choose Belbury over St. Anne’s?