

## *Shadowlands* (1993): Grief as a process of life, sickness and death

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### Summary

Grief, which is a normal reaction to the loss of a loved one, is a stressing life event of first order. The death of one's spouse is perhaps the most stressing situation that a person has to go through in their life. *Shadowlands* portrays the life of the Irish writer C.S.Lewis and his relationship with the American poet Helen Joy Davidman until she died of bone cancer. Through marvellous imagery we are offered a thought-provoking view of the pain that accompanies loving another.

*Keywords:* Grief, Pain, Suffering, Family, Religion.

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### Technical details

**Title:** *Shadowlands*

**Country:** Great Britain

**Year:** 1993

**Director:** Richard Attenborough

**Music:** George Fenton

**Script:** William Nicholson

**Cast:** Anthony Hopkins, Debra Winger, Joseph Mazzello, Edward Hardwicke, John Wood, Michael Dennison, James Frain, Robert Fleming, Roddy Maude-Roxby and Andrew Hawkins.

**Color:** color

**Runtime:** 131 minutes

**Genre:** Biography, Drama, Romance

**Production Companies:** Price Entertainment, *Shadowlands* Productions and Spelling Films International.

**Synopsis:** The film is a biopic about the writers C.S. Lewis and Helen Joy Davidman between 1952 and 1960.

**Awards:** Nominated for Oscar for the best actress (Debra Winger) and best adapted script (1993).

### The film.

*Shadowlands* (1993) by Richard Attenborough tells a story of love, a story played out in the 1950s by C. S. Lewis (Anthony Hopkins) and Helen Joy Davidman (Debra Winger).

Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963), known as C. S. Lewis – by his friends as Jack and as Jack Lewis in the film (Figure 1)- was a professor of literature at Oxford University and a great writer. Although he was born in Belfast into a Catholic family, for a large part of his life he was an atheist. He later returned to Christianity, although within the Anglican Church, and went on to become a greater defender of the faith<sup>1</sup>.

Helen Joy Davidman Gresham Lewis (1915-1960) (Figure 2) was an American writer and poet of Jewish ascent. She was a communist and, like C.S. Lewis himself, an atheist who later returned to the bosom of the church owing to the influence of her husband<sup>1,2</sup>.

The film addressed here is a remake of the film made for TV, with the same title and script-writer, *Shadowlands* (1985), which was directed by Norman Stone.



Figure 1: C.S. Lewis in reality and in *Shadowlands*, interpreted by Anthony Hopkins

After several years of writing to each other, Joy visited Lewis in 1952 and the following year, after she had divorced the then also writer William Lindsay Gresham, she moved definitively to England with her sons David and Douglas Gresham, although only the latter appears in the film. The movie also has certain other historical lapses<sup>3</sup>.



Figure 2: Helen Joy Davidman in reality and in *Shadowlands* interpreted by Debra Winger

The relationship between Joy and Lewis became more intense after she moved to London, although not departing from the bounds of a purely intellectual friendship. In 1956, Joy was diagnosed with bone cancer; after a brief respite, she eventually died. In the interim period to two fell in love, were married at the hospital and -during Joy's respite and the improvement in her condition- they visited Hertfordshire [this fact is fiction since in real life they spent their honeymoon in Greece<sup>3</sup>].

The film portrays Lewis as a cautious professor who lives “within his own prison”; he reads profusely “to know he is not alone” and organises his private life in such a way that nobody can disturb him. This is because he knows that the joy of true love

somehow also passes through the bitter taste of pain. In those years Lewis was very popular in the academic world of Oxford. He lived friendship as “one of the main courses in life’s banquet”. He was held to be a great educator and a successful novelist, especially for his *Chronicles of Narnia*. However, in the film in hand Attenborough fully dissects Lewis, his bountiful and yet tragic meeting with Joy; with love and with death. Indeed, that supposed loneliness of Lewis was tragically broken by the arrival of Joy Gresham who, unlike him, was pure vitality. Initially Joy’s death knocked his profound convictions askew, although later his encounter with suffering finally helped him to mature. He was already aware of the theory and, indeed, in 1947 he had written a book entitled “*The Problem of Pain*” (Figure 3). Along the film, we see Lewis defend, in his lectures, two main ideas concerning pain: “suffering is the chisel of God to perfect mankind” and he insists that it is precisely suffering that “launches us into the world of others”. Nevertheless, it is only when he suffers the pain of the death of a loved one that he begins to understand the true reach of his beliefs.

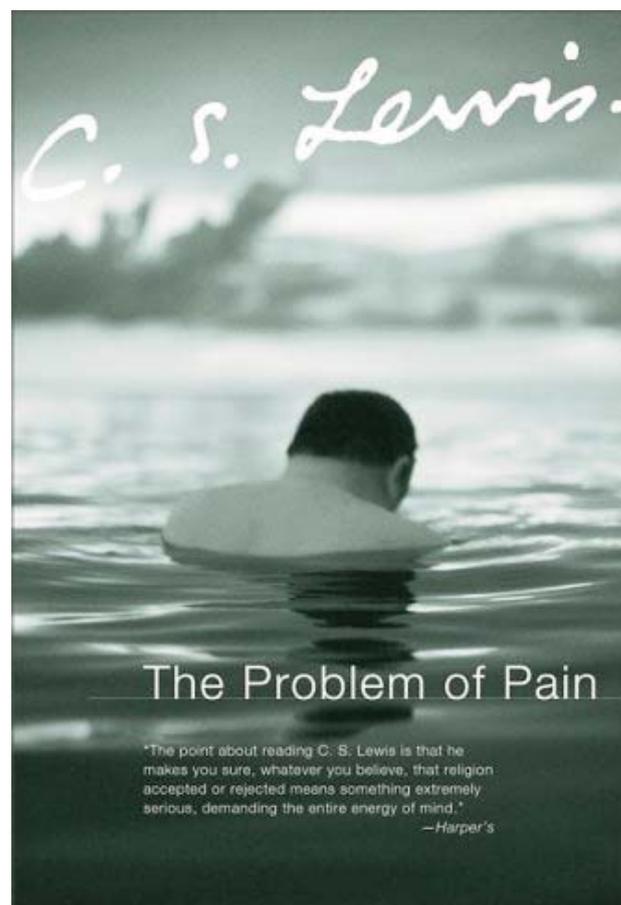


Figure 3: Cover of the American edition by Harper-Collins of *The problem of pain*.

## The Cinema and Palliative Care

During the twentieth century medicine made more progress than at any previous period in the history of humankind. It has generated such an increase in life expectancy that chronic illness began to be considered an important alternative in health care. This is the sphere of palliative care.

The Basic Units (Family doctor and people with degrees in nursing) of primary care teams are privileged elements of the health care system in Spain in the sense that they are able to help people during the different phases of their life cycle. The confidence of patients in their doctors and nurses along their lives, the opening up to family intimacy through home visits, facilitates an interpersonal acquaintance and offer therapeutic support. Where such links are decisively strengthened is in the terminal phase of illness, since palliative care reinforces the idea that one is not attending a patient but “a patient with a terminal illness (and his/her family surroundings)”. This final chapter in the lives of our patients affords health professionals an extremely rich experience, together with a better understanding of the respective cases for future reference.

The Terminal Syndrome is seen as the final evolutionary stage of progressive chronic illnesses. The main elements underlying the attention of primary care workers in terminal illness are the same as those that drive good professional conduct but they acquire special relevance in the context of the terminal disease. Although all human situations require care, the terminal phase, the *total pain*, demands more than any other; it is a unique opportunity with which to explore in depth the roots of what is most human in our species<sup>4</sup>. Observations made of sick people are the first means that medicine had to gain insight into disease. Nothing can replace teaching better than the patients themselves<sup>5</sup>.

The cinema is the great teacher of our times<sup>6</sup>. The close-up has been one of its great aesthetic and human innovations, because in real life it is an infrequent privilege and the cinema has rendered it accessible and communicable to all. It has uncovered its possibilities, which previously had lain reduced to personal experience. However, in Palliative Medicine this “infrequent privilege” is not so infrequent and, indeed, is common.

We the health professionals form part of the treatment meted out to patients owing to our positive

attitude, the determination not to give up, our availability, and our offer of comforting intensive care. This tight relationship with the patient and his/her family makes us privileged in close-up situations, because we accompany our patient up to their death. We share their biography, unrepeatable in first person and with it their intimacy. We learn from our patients so much that, eventually, we can apply such learning to other patients.

The cinema has enabled us all to view a distant world; it has brought the world together and made us see that it is made up of an incredible number of individuals. It has provided us with a view of what is close, immediate in detail, and has fostered realisation, previously reserved for a reduced repertoire of real experiences. However, the most innovative and decisive contribution of the cinema is probably the relationship between the spectator and the actors.

The cinema offers “stories”; it makes us think about them, relive them, empathise with the characters, understand the internal logic of the story, the alternatives; and that experience of life offers us a light to understand the actual *discovery* of the reality we live in<sup>7</sup>.

Cinema is born of literature, but absorbs it; it incorporates it and recreates. In *Shadowlands* we hear and see the thoughts of C.S. Lewis. Julián Marías wrote<sup>6</sup>. *It is terrifying to think about what the world -subjected to so many manipulating force-, would be if there were no cinema; a cinema that leads us to face the true reality of our lives; a cinema that shows us what life is and how it happens, and makes us imagine, design, and bear in mind the unlimited diversity of life and the need to choose the road we wish to tread.*

### The cinema as a humanistic resource for educating affection in the terminal phase of the disease

It would not be out of place to suggest that the cinema is the instrument *par excellence* of the sentimental education of our times. To attend our patients, as health workers, with excellence we need to seek an anthropological perspective of illness that will allow us to understand the patients within their own illness. And since the health sciences are mainly practical, our anthropology must be active and should pervade our clinical activity. Humanism and anthropology are for us not a cultural appendix or interesting complement to our academic formation but a necessary perspective in order for us to be professional in our work; a source

of knowledge and a base upon which we can adopt a stance as regards our professional activities. All the resources available to health workers -humanism and techniques, positive science and art- are synergistic pathways of the diagnostic and therapeutic arsenal available to the professional. *Learning to integrate scientific progress within a humanist context to place it in the service of the patient would be the nucleus of this process; a true return to the origin, assimilating a present replete with useful technology*<sup>8</sup>. Philosophy, palliative care and the cinema become interlinked, showing us *how to see* through views of the human drama of falling ill and dying, contributing to our knowledge of people, the development of sensibility (the ability to observe and perceive), of creative ability (the association of ideas, reflections, new ways of thinking), and of the expressive dimensions (exteriorization of feelings and emotions)<sup>9</sup>. Calling upon good sentiments, emotion, has been a resource used to infuse humanism in many films. One of the basic characteristics that differentiate human beings from animals is sensibility, the capacity to do good, feel compassion, emotions... The cinema thus becomes a first-order teaching resource<sup>10</sup>. In sum, good cinema is an “art of light”<sup>11</sup>; it offers a view that humanises, and is a means to show what reality is like and what it means. It thus enriches us all.

### What can we, as health workers, learn from the characters in *Shadowlands*?

In the case of Lewis, one could say that the losses form part of life, just as the spring follows winter. *I not only live each endless day in grief, but live each day thinking about living each day in grief. We live in the shadowlands. Sun is always shining somewhere else*<sup>12</sup>.

Richard Attenborough presents this biopic about the Irish writer as a mixture of the joyous and tragic encounter of humans with life and death (Figure 4). The topic of pain runs through the film, which shows the events that occur up to the death of the loved one and recounts the written testimony of grief in the author's *A Grief Observed*<sup>12</sup> (Figure 5).

The first part of the film described the meeting of two people with very different paths through life, especially as regards the “losses” that occur along their lives.

Lewis is presented as a cautious professor who lives “locked up within himself”. He reads a lot - “we read to know that we are not alone”- and his private life is untouchable. Despite his forceful insights,



Figure 4: The meeting in England between Jack and Joy

he is afraid of opening up to others, allowing himself to be led by emotions or human passions, be they noble or otherwise. This is because he knows that the joy of loving passes –one way or another- through the bitterness of pain. *The most intense joy lies not in the having but in the desiring. Delight that never fades, Bliss that is eternal, is only yours when what you most desire is just out of reach. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.*

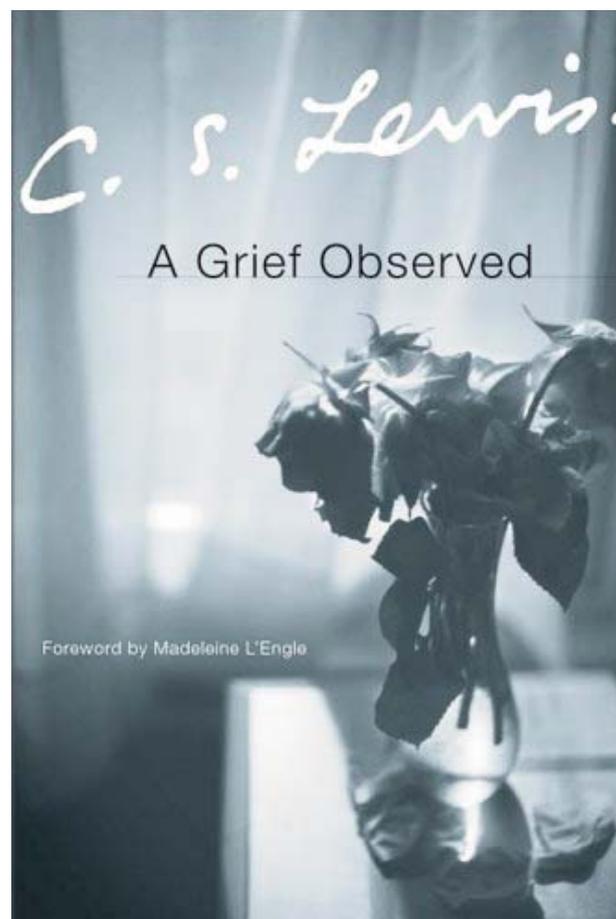


Figure 5: Cover of the American HarperCollins edition of *A Grief Observed*

The untimely death of Lewis' mother when he was 9 taught him to "protect himself from losses". He writes about the pain<sup>13</sup> in 1940 and tells us that: *that the only purpose of the book is to solve the intellectual problem raised by suffering; for the far higher task of teaching fortitude and patience I was never fool enough to suppose myself qualified, nor have I anything to offer my readers except my conviction that when pain is to be borne, a little courage helps more than much knowledge, a little human sympathy more than much courage, and the least tincture of the love of God more than all... I write, of course, as a layman of the Church of England, but I have tried not to assume nothing that is not professed by all baptized and communicating Christians.* And we see him in the film giving lectures about two key ideas: suffering is God's chisel to perfect humankind, and he defends the position that suffering is what launches us into the world of others. Nevertheless, it is when Lewis has to suffer the pain of losing a loved one that he sees the true reach of his own ideas.

In those days, Lewis participated in a lively discussion group formed by writers from the academic world of Oxford (Figure 6) and considered, and lived, friendship as *a main course in life's banquet*<sup>14</sup>.



Figure 6: Jack's lectures

However, in the film Attenborough dissects –with profound incisions– Lewis' joyful and yet tragic encounter with love and death. Indeed, the supposed tranquillity of Lewis was tragically broken in his relationship with Joy Gresham who, unlike him, was pure vitality. At first Joy's death undermined his profound convictions but his tangle with suffering eventually served to allow him to mature. It is very difficult to fully fathom Lewis' rich personality but his human and intellectual acumen comes through strikingly well in the film. In this sense, the very subtle and contained characterisation done by Anthony Hopkins is masterly; as indeed is that of Debra Winger, who

was nominated an Oscar for the film.

The exquisite rendition, with a gentle rhythm, allows a solid definition of the characters and atmospheres. Also, Attenborough studiously avoids the tendency to incur in the excess melodrama that would be typical of the story through a point of view in which reflection always prevails over sentimentalism.

The formal beauty of the movie is a reflection of a deep truth: dignity, transcendence and the capacity to love, solidarity and the sacrifice of human beings<sup>15</sup>.

The character of Joy exhibits the experience of losses –divorce, gender violence, poverty– but she becomes involved in life; she is spontaneous; she uses humour; she lives in reality; she calls a spade a spade –*Bill's an alcoholic. He's compulsively unfaithful. And he's sometimes violent*– It is she who tells Lewis that he has surrounded himself with people less able than himself so that, thanks to his genius, he can always emerge victorious from any dialectic dispute.

For Jack, everything is reduced to discourse (Figure 7); he lacks all earthly experience. And this is what Joy wants from him: she wants him to tell her about his experiences. Lewis remembers Joy. What was she like? *Her mind was lithe and quick and muscular as a leopard. Passion, tenderness and pain were all equally unable to disarm it. It scented the first whiff of cant or slush; then sprang, and knocked you over before you knew what was happening. How many bubbles of mine she pricked!*<sup>16</sup>.

### Illness and reality

Going to a meeting, Joy accompanies Jack to see his rooms at Magdalene College in Oxford. She makes gestures of pain *I'm just a little exhausted*. Some

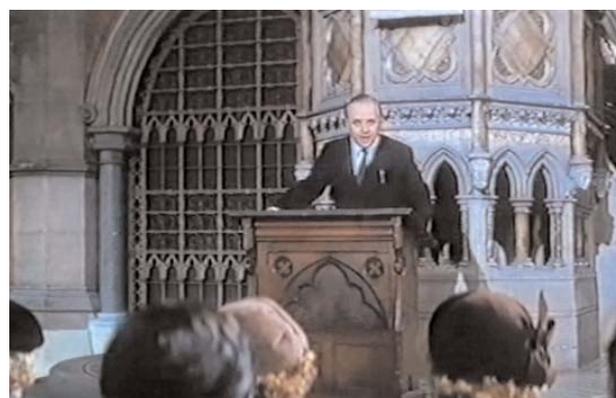


Figure 7: For Jack, all is reduced to discourse

days later we see her fallen to the ground (Figure 8); on trying to reply to a call from Jack she fractures her right femur.

In one of his lectures, Jack says *Yesterday, a friend of mine, a very brave good woman collapsed in terrible pain. One minute she was fit and well next minute she was in agony. She's now in hospital, and this morning I was told she's suffering from cancer. Why? See, if you love someone, you don't want them to suffer. You can't bear it. You want to take their suffering onto yourself. If even I feel like that why doesn't God?*



Figure 8: Joy falls down after fracturing her right femur

Joy copes with the diagnosis with realism and even with a sense of humour. *Jack, I have to know how bad it is. They won't tell me. That's because they're not sure themselves. Please. I don't know any more than they do. Before Douglas gets here, I need to know. They say you're going to die. Yes. Thank you. What do you say? I'm a Jew, I'm divorced, I'm broke and I'm dying of cancer. Do you think I get a discount?* (Figure 9). Before Jack's gaze, Joy says *You seem different. You look at me properly now.* And Jack replies *I don't want to lose you. I don't want to be lost.*

It is this loving relationship that allows Jack to be introduced to the mystery of pain. Only in this way can the apparently meaningless event be turned into an experience of goodness. Joy makes Jack's life take on meaning and yet theirs is a relationship in which death is all pervasive. For Jack now, reality is not something that can be controlled but instead a surprise against which he is constantly unarmed; he has an innocence that allows him to enter reality confidently and hopefully.

With Joy, for the first time in his life Jack experiences suffering in the first person. The experience of the death of his mother led him to seek security and he did not accept the suffering. Now, his love



Figure 9: .... Yes. Thank you. What do you say? I'm a Jew, I'm divorced, I'm broke and I'm dying of cancer. Do you think I get a discount?

for Joy allows him to face himself and share a destiny with her that ends up being common to both. It is thus the loving relationship that allows Jack to enter the mystery of pain.

When they receive the results of the medical tests, the prognosis is of months or weeks, *well, we take what we can get. Thank you my love, What for? For all of it.*

It is from this point that we are shown a way of **living with illness**. We are taught to focus not on the disease but on hopeful life, day by day. This is why we see so little medical presence in the film. What is important is everyday life. What makes Jack's life happy is his love for Joy. He therefore feels that it is worthwhile going through the suffering. Only thus can he be happy. It is hard to understand but that is it. What stops a man from breaking down in the face of bad things –suffering and pain are bad- is the love that upholds him, and it is love that changes him. Joy consistently highlights the goodness of their relationship, but does not forget about death

When they share the view of the beautiful “Golden Valley” (Figure 10), Jack says that that is all he needs: *Let's not spoil the time we have*, to which Joy replies *Let me just say it before this rain stops and we go back. That I'm going to die. And I want to be with you then too. The only way I can do that is if I'm able to talk to you about it now. I'll manage somehow. Don't worry about me. I think it can be better than that. I think it can be better than just managing. What l... What I'm trying to say is...the pain then is part of the happiness now. That's the deal.*

Joy is a fount of realism who again helps Jack to get his head around reality in the proper way, without forgetting any of its factors however painful they may be. This is why he says that pain is part of happiness and should not be censored. Simply taking



Figure 10: Jack and Joy in the "Golden Valley"

this into account, the relationship can be more real. And it is worth living life in the first person since the pain that forms part of it places us in the dilemma of having to live it or not. ***We live in the shadowlands. Sun is always shining somewhere else around a bend in the road over the brow of a hill.***

Jack must decide; it is his freedom that is compromised in the response. He observes his colleagues and he sees them hide within their safe surroundings, like he used to. Now he faces up to reality in freedom, to share his life with Joy. *Only torture will bring out the truth. Only under torture does he discover it himself. The tortures occur. If they are unnecessary, then there is no God or a bad one. If there is a good God, then these tortures are necessary. For no even moderately good Being could possibly inflict or permit them if they weren't. Either way, we're for it!*<sup>2</sup>.

Faced with a new relapse, Jack and Joy fit the house up suitably so that she can be present and share their daily activities. Joy's son, Douglas, asks Jack: *Can't you do something?* There is no answer.

The end draws nigh. *For those few years H. and I feasted on love; every mode of it - solemn and merry, romantic and realistic, sometimes as dramatic as a thunderstorm, sometimes as comfortable and unemphatic as putting on your soft slippers. No cranny of heart or body remained unsatisfied. If God were a substitute for love we ought to have lost all interest in Him. Who'd bother about substitutes when he has the thing itself? But that isn't what happens. We both knew we wanted something besides one another - quite a different kind of something, a quite different kind of want. You might as well say that when lovers have one another they will never want to read, or eat - or breathe!*<sup>2</sup>.

### The last night

*Yet H. herself, dying of it, and well knowing the fact, said that she had lost a great deal of her old horror at it.*

*When the reality came, the name and the idea were in some degree disarmed... It is incredible how much happiness, even how much gaiety, we sometimes had together after all hope was gone. How long, how tranquilly, how nourishingly, we talked together that last night! And yet, not quite together. There's a limit to the "one flesh." You can't really share someone else's weakness, or fear or pain... She used to quote, "Alone into the Alone." She said it felt like that. And how immensely improbable that it should be otherwise! Time and space and body were the very things that brought us together; the telephone wires by which we communicated. Cut one off, or cut both off simultaneously. Either way, mustn't the conversation stop?*<sup>12</sup>.

In the scene that precedes Joy's death (Figure 11), the physical pain is not well controlled. *I'm tired Jack, I wanna rest. I just don't wanna leave you... You have to let me I'm not sure that I can. Will you take care of Douglas? ... He pretends that he doesn't mind... You've made me so happy. I didn't know I could be so happy. You're the truest person I've ever known.*



Figure 11: Joy suffers

### Joy dies (Figure 12).

One of the most moving scenes at the end of the film shows Douglas and Jack weeping together. The boy admits that he does not believe in heaven but he adds: *I sure would like to see her again* (Figure 13). The most primitive human urge is that of seeking eternal life. The boy intuitively feels that death does not have the last word about human life. *There's nothing more contrary to reason than to accept that you will never see the person you love again, never embrace them again, never kiss them again.... It would be forcing people to deny their most human desire!*<sup>16</sup>.

*I cannot talk to the children about her. The moment I try, there appears on their faces neither grief, nor love, nor fear, nor pity, but the most fatal of all non-conductors, embarrassment. They look as if I were committing an indecency. They are*



Figure 12: ...and dies



Figure 13: Jack embraces a Douglas, while they weep together

*longing for me to stop. I felt just the same after my own mother's death when my father mentioned her. I can't blame them. It's the way boys are<sup>12</sup>.*

C.S. Lewis, in *A Grief Observed*, wrote about his adaptation to grief. His reflections enrich our knowledge of this phase of life.

*And then one or other dies. And we think of this as love cut short... bereavement is a universal and integral part of our experience of love... We don't really want grief, in its first agonies, to be prolonged...we confuse the symptom with the thing itself... bereavement is not the truncation of married love but one of its regular phases—like the boneyoon... we accept the pains as a necessary part of this phase... But we are not at all—if we understand ourselves—seeking the aches for their own sake. The less of them the better ...The better in every way. For, as I have discovered, passionate grief does not link us with the dead but cuts us off from them.*

*For me at any rate the programme is plain. I will turn to her as often as possible in gladness. I will even salute her with a laugh. The less I mourn her the nearer I seem to her.*

*An admirable programme. Unfortunately it can't be carried out. Tonight all the bells of young grief have opened*

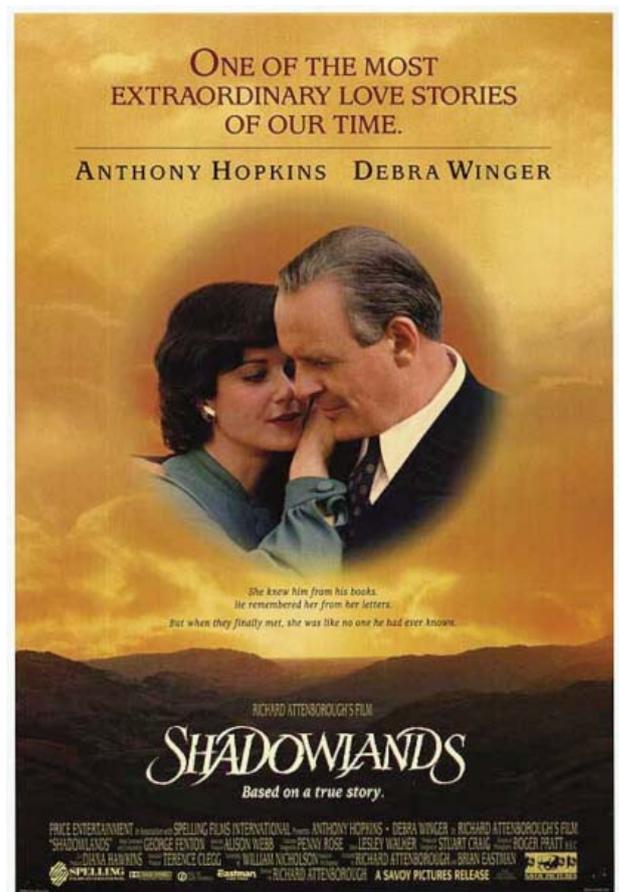
*again; the mad words, the bitter resentment, the fluttering in the stomach, the nightmare unreality, the wallowed-in tears. For in grief nothing 'stays put.'*

*One keeps on emerging from a phase, but it always recurs. Round and round... They say 'The coward dies many times'; so does the beloved.*

*I thought I could describe a state; make a map of sorrow. Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a state but a process. It needs not a map but a history, and if I don't stop writing that history at some quite arbitrary point, there's no reason why I should ever stop.*

*Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape... Did you ever 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.*

*Still, there are the two enormous gains—I know myself too well now to call them 'lasting.' Turned to God, my mind no longer meets that locked door; turned to H., it no longer meets that vacuum—nor all that fuss about my mental image of*



American poster with Joy and Jack

ber. My jottings show something of the process, but not so much as I'd hoped. Joy said: *I am at peace with God. She smiled, but not at me. "Poi si tornb allò eterna Fontana"*<sup>12</sup>.

Pain will always be a mystery in the lives of human beings. Jack has not solved the problem of pain for us but he has shown us a way to live with it, doing so in the first person. Enhancing this attitude in our patients and their relatives enriches our reality since if we cannot give years to live, we can give life to the years.

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