



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 22
Number 4

Article 4

4-15-2000

From Isolation to Community: Ransom's Spiritual Odyssey

Devin Brown
Asbury College, KY

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brown, Devin (2000) "From Isolation to Community: Ransom's Spiritual Odyssey," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 22: No. 4, Article 4. Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol22/iss4/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSUTM

Online Summer Seminar 2023

August 5-6, 2023: Fantasy Goes to Hell: Depictions of Hell in Modern Fantasy Texts

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2023.htm>



From Isolation to Community: Ransom's Spiritual Odyssey

Abstract

Explores Ransom's transformation from a position of isolation at the beginning of *Out of the Silent Planet* to his position as Head of the community of St. Anne's in *That Hideous Strength*.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Ransom; Lewis, C.S. Space Trilogy (*Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, *That Hideous Strength*)

From Isolation to Community: Ransom's Spiritual Odyssey

Devin Brown

THE three books that comprise C. S. Lewis's *Space Trilogy* were published over a span of seven years, appearing in 1938, 1943, and 1945. In this series, the key figure, Dr. Elwin Ransom, Cambridge don, undergoes a dramatic change in character and by the end is a very different person than he was at the beginning. Certainly one aspect in Ransom's growth, one which has been well noted by other critics, is the challenge of overcoming his fear. Near the end of the first novel, the great Oyarsa of Mars tells him, "You are guilty of no evil, Ransom of Thulcandra, except a little fearfulness. For that, the journey you go on is your pain, and perhaps your cure: for you must be either mad or brave before it is ended" (142). David Downing has commented on Ransom's passage from fearfulness to courage in the chapter aptly titled "Cosmic Voyage as Spiritual Pilgrimage" from his book *Planets in Peril*, a critical study of the Ransom trilogy (104). Chad Walsh has suggested that Ransom's one overriding sin is "anxiety" (86) and proposes that "the womb of space" brings forth a rebirth in which Ransom exchanges faith for knowledge and thereby learns "to live without fear" (91). In his correspondence, Lewis himself made it clear that the first book in the trilogy tells the story of Ransom's spiritual childhood (Green and Hooper 179). A second component in Ransom's spiritual development, one which is less explicitly depicted but one which I would suggest is just as central, is the journey he makes from radical isolation to deep community.

In the second chapter of *The Great Divorce*, the Lewis character gives us a haunting description of Hell and the inhabitants who live there. A fellow passenger on the bus ride up to Heaven explains the reason for the great empty neighborhoods that they can see down in the gray town below them:

They've been moving on and on. Getting further apart. They're so far off by now that they could never think of coming to the bus stop at all. Astronomical distances. There's a bit of rising ground near where I live and a chap has a telescope. You can see the lights of the inhabited houses, where those old ones live, millions of miles away. Millions of miles from us and from one another. Every now and then they move further still. (21)

In this passage, we can hear echoes of Genesis 2.18—the suggestion that it is neither good, nor God’s plan, for man to be alone. But isolation, one which grows both wider and deeper, seems to be the malaise of modern society—whether ours or the one mirrored in the novel—where people live without the unifying force of God’s Holy Spirit.

It is appropriate then that the very first image we have of the character who will become the main focus of Lewis’s space trilogy is of a man walking by himself, isolated and alone in the empty countryside. In the opening chapter, whether by chance or destiny, Dr. Elwin Ransom soon meets up with the two wicked scholars Weston and Devine, and he describes his solitariness to them: “On a walking tour,” Ransom explains, “you are absolutely detached. You stop where you like and go on when you like. As long as it lasts you need consider no one and consult no one but yourself” (*Out of the Silent Planet* 16). Devine’s probing—“But can even you just disappear like that? No wife, no young, no aged but honest parent or anything of that sort?” (17)—elicits the following reply from Ransom: “Only a married sister in India. And then, you see, I’m a don. And a don in the middle of a long vacation is almost a non-existent creature, as you ought to remember. College neither knows nor cares where he is, and certainly no one else does” (17). When Devine presses him, “Do you really mean to say that no one knows where you are or when you ought to get back, and no one can get hold of you?” (17), Ransom nods in agreement.

Here we find the first expression of the theme which says that to be unconnected to others, to live in isolation, is almost not to be alive at all, to be—as Ransom says—almost non-existent. Later, in a private conversation Devine tells Weston that Ransom “will not be missed for months, and even then no one will know where he was when he disappeared. He came alone. He left no address. He has no family” (19).

Lewis, whether consciously or sub-consciously, may have had in mind Charles Dickens’s most famous protagonist, Sydney Carton from *A Tale of Two Cities*. Early in the novel, Carton makes his famous pronouncement: “I care for no man on earth, and no man on earth cares for me” (115). Carton, like Ransom, also undergoes a striking spiritual transformation as he makes his own journey from utter isolation to a divine connectedness. Over the course of Lewis’s three novels, Ransom will progress from, in his own words, the state of being “absolutely detached” (*Silent* 16), to belonging completely “to someone else” (*That Hideous Strength* 113).

Here at the beginning of his spiritual development, Ransom is much like the Jane Studdock that we meet early in the third volume of the series, *That Hideous Strength*. Both are characters who want, or think that they want, just to be left alone. Lewis describes Jane's thoughts:

She would not get "mixed up in it," would not be drawn in. One had to live one's own life. To avoid entanglements and interferences had long been one of her first principles. Even when she had discovered that she was going to marry Mark if he asked her, the thought, "But I must still keep up my own life," had arisen at once and had never for more than a few minutes at a stretch been absent from her mind. (72)

During the long journey which will take him in the first book to the planet Mars and later, in book two, to Venus and back again, Ransom will find that many of his fundamental views about life will be challenged and subsequently changed, and one of the most important changes will be his view about the importance of community.

Ransom's trip to the red planet, Malacandra, and his introduction to community which follows, come about as if by accident. He is drugged and taken by force in Weston's space ship, out of isolation and into contact. The supposed reason for Ransom's abduction is so that he can be offered to the Sorns, one of the three races which inhabit Malacandra, who on Weston and Devine's first trip requested a human. The real purpose behind the chain of events that draw him in has to do with the transformation of Ransom's character and ultimately with the rescue of Earth itself. Ransom's reaction to the first sight of the Sorns who come to meet the spaceship is, on the surface, a response to the fear that he is about to be killed, but on a deeper level it stems from, I would propose, his aversion to the sense of otherness, to the prospect of an encounter with beings who are radically different than himself. We read:

Six white things *were* standing there. Spindly and flimsy things, twice or three times the height of a man. His first idea was that they were images of men, the work of savage artists; he had seen things like them in books of archaeology. But what could they be made of, and how could they stand?—so crazily thin and elongated in the leg, so top-heavily pouted in the chest, such stalky, flexible-looking distortions of earthly bipeds . . . like something seen in one of those comic mirrors. [. . . W]ith a shock that chased the blood from his cheeks he saw that they were alive, that they were moving, that they were coming at him. (*Silent* 45)

Ransom's physical reactions to this sight are symbolic of his stance toward the adventure that he has become an unwilling part of and of his stance toward

the involvement that will end his isolation. Lewis writes: “He planted his feet, bent his back and resisted donkey-fashion. Now the other two were both in the water, pulling him, and he was still on the land. He found that he was screaming” (46).

Suddenly a shark-like creature provides the chance to escape this meeting with the Sorns, and Ransom flees. As he tries to fall asleep that night, all alone on an alien world, Ransom’s complete solitariness is highlighted. We read a description full of images of togetherness:

. . . he thought of men going to bed on the far-distant planet Earth—men in clubs, and liners, and hotels, married men, and small children who slept with nurses in the room, and warm, tobacco-smelling men tumbled together in forecastles and dug-outs. The tendency to talk to himself was irresistible . . . “We’ll look after you, Ransom . . . we’ll stick together, old man.” (50)

This night of total isolation is followed by Ransom’s first step towards community, his first connection with the other. The next morning he comes face to face with an inhabitant of the planet, a *hross* named Hyoi. Lewis describes the battle that takes place, both within Ransom and the creature, between the desire to make contact and the desire to remain separate:

Neither dared let the other approach, yet each repeatedly felt the impulse to do so himself, and yielded to it. It was foolish, frightening, ecstatic, and unbearable all in one moment. It was more than curiosity. It was like a courtship—like the meeting of the first man and the first woman in the world; it was like something beyond that; so natural is the contact of sexes, so limited the strangeness, so shallow the reticence, so mild the repugnance to be overcome, compared with the first, tingling intercourse of two different, but rational species. (56)

This first contact is completed when Hyoi offers Ransom a drink:

Supporting the shell in its two arms, it extended them towards Ransom. The intention was unmistakable. Hesitantly, almost shyly, he advanced and took the cup. His finger-tips touched the webbed membrane of the creature’s paws and an indescribable thrill of mingled attraction and repulsion ran through him; then he drank. (56)

Ransom soon becomes a welcomed member in the *hross* society. His full inclusion as a member of the community is completed when he is invited to join in the hunting of a *hnakra*, one of the same species of fierce water animals that allowed for Ransom’s earlier escape. Even as they prepare for the hunt,

Ransom perceives that his time living in the close-knit village has already begun to bring about a transformation of his character. We read, “. . . there was something in the air he now breathed, or in the society of the *brossa*, which had begun to work a change in him” (77).

Later, in the final volume of the series, Ransom will serve as the focal point for a tightly bonded community. In preparation for that role, he is first shown a model of community here on Malacandra and allowed to become a part of it. After Ransom joins in hunting and killing the *hnakra*, we are given this window into his thoughts:

When he recollected himself they were all on shore, wet, steaming, trembling with exertion and embracing one another. It did not now seem strange to him to be clasped to a breast of wet fur. The breath of the *brossa* which, though sweet, was not human breath, did not offend him. He was one with them. [. . .] They were all *hnau*. They had stood shoulder to shoulder in the face of an enemy, and the shapes of their heads no longer mattered. (80-81)

If Ransom's first step towards community comes as a result of his inclusion in Hyoi's village, his second step comes as he is introduced to the larger planet-wide community, a step which is initiated by his encounter with Augray, who is a Sorn and thus one of the very creatures that Ransom has been running from since he first set foot on Mars. Lewis describes Ransom's first morning in the Sorn's house: “Ransom awoke next morning with the vague feeling that a great weight had been taken off his mind. Then he remembered that he was the guest of a Sorn and that the creature he had been avoiding ever since he landed had turned out to be as amicable as the *brossa* . . .” (97).

Ironically, it is the Sorn who, except for external appearances, is most like Ransom. Augray is a scholar and lives in Malacandra's version of an ivory tower, high above the handramits, where he himself is for the most part alone with his books and his learning. If real life is meeting, as a chapter title in the final volume of the trilogy will suggest, Ransom has one step further to go into community here on Malacandra, one last encounter, and he himself perceives this: “Nothing then remained to be afraid of in Malacandra except Oyarsa . . . ‘The last fence’” (97).

By the start of the second book, *Perelandra* (also known as *Voyage to Venus*), Ransom is already a very different man from the loner we met at the beginning of *Out of the Silent Planet*, making his departure for Venus quite different than his abduction to Mars. Lewis, who inserts himself as the character who helps

Ransom with the preparations for this second journey, writes: "I got to know a lot more about Ransom than I had known before, and from the number of odd people whom he recommended to my care, 'If ever I happened to be able to do anything,' I came to realize the *extent and intimacy of his charities*" (28, emphasis added).

In the space of a novel, Ransom has gone from being a loner whom no one would miss or even know was gone to being a member of a tightly interdependent community whose bonds are broad and intimate. On Venus, Ransom will witness first hand other facets of community. He will be shown the unfallen, undivided communities of humans and beasts, of woman and man, of God and humans, and even the communion between created being and the created physical world. In a key encounter with the giant crawling insect which the Un-man has summoned from the deep recesses of the planet, Ransom is able to overcome the last vestiges of his separateness. At first he sees the creature as hideous and is filled with feelings of complete rejection:

[...] then [...] something else came up out of the hole. First came what looked like branches of trees, and then seven or eight spots of light, irregularly grouped like a constellation. Then a tubular mass which reflected the red glow as if it were polished. [...] Horrible things followed—angular, many jointed legs [...] a huge, many legged deformity [...]. (181)

However, after he destroys the Un-Man, the evil spell of alien-ness is lifted, and Ransom is able to see the creature in an entirely new way, one which transcends the limits of narrow, individual perspective:

Ransom [...] turned to face the other horror. But where had the horror gone? The creature was there, a curiously shaped creature no doubt, but all loathing had vanished clean out of his mind, so that neither then nor at any other time could he remember it, nor ever understand again why one should quarrel with an animal for having more legs or eyes than oneself. All that he had felt from childhood about insects and reptiles died that moment. [...] Once, as he had sat writing near an open window in Cambridge, he had looked up and shuddered to see, as he supposed, a many coloured beetle of unusually hideous shape crawling across his paper. A second glance showed him that it was a dead leaf, moved by the breeze; and instantly the very curves and re-entrants which had made its ugliness turned into its beauties. At this moment he had almost the same sensation. (182)

Here a mystical sense of the union of all living things comes over Ransom. Lewis may have been remembering a parallel experience which takes place in

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. After shooting the albatross, the Mariner wears the dead bird around his neck, a symbol of his alienation from the rest of creation. The sea is becalmed and the ship sits isolated in a stagnant sea.

The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea. (lines 123-6)

Later, when the Mariner is finally able to see the sea creatures not as slimy but as beautiful, the spell breaks and the dead albatross falls away:

Oh happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware. (ll. 282-5)

Near the end of the poem, Coleridge expresses the sense of community and the realization which both Ransom and the Mariner come to know:

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all. (ll. 614-17)

In the penultimate chapter of *Perelandra*, Ransom is shown a world that remains one world, undivided and unfallen, a community of which he is now a part:

He glanced round. Romping, prancing, fluttering, gliding, crawling, waddling, with every kind of movement—in every kind of shape and colour and size—a whole zoo of beasts and birds was pouring into a flowery valley through the passes between the peaks at his back. [. . .] Flaming plumage, gilded beaks, glossy flanks, liquid eyes, great red caverns of whinneying or of bleating mouths, and thickets of switching tails, surrounded him on every side. (203)

The great hymn of praise follows, praise of the Great Dance in which each member has a part. The words provide a transcendent vision of unity, and in them one can hear echoes of Coleridge:

“In the plan of the Great Dance plans without number interlock, and each movement becomes in its season the breaking into flower of the whole design to which all else has been directed. Thus each is equally at the centre and none are there by being equals, but some by giving place and some by receiving it, *the small things by their smallness and the great by their greatness*, and all the patterns linked and looped together by the unions of a kneeling with a sceptred love.” (217, emphasis added)

Returning home with all he has learned, Ransom will raise up a special community that will take on the powers of darkness in a cosmic struggle. In the third book, *That Hideous Strength*, Ransom is absent for the first third of the novel. Instead we meet someone who is beginning her own journey from isolation to community—Jane Studdock. Just as Ransom was introduced to a community of very diverse beings who formed the unified societies of Malacandra and Perelandra, Jane will join the company which has formed around Ransom. In this community every member, from mice to bears to MacPhee to Merlin, has a unique and valuable role to play. In this sense the “menagerie,” as MacPhee calls it (190), that forms around Ransom resembles the society described by St. Paul in I Corinthians 12—one body made up of many parts.

While he begins his spiritual odyssey in isolation, a condition which he thought that he relished, Ransom ends it in a state of community, with deep and enduring ties—connections not only to the circle of human and animal friends that live with him, but also to the angelic host that inhabit the heavens. In the end, Ransom has learned, as the title of chapter fourteen from *That Hideous Strength* suggests, that “real life is meeting.” This, perhaps, is a lesson that Lewis himself learned over the course of his own life. Of his early years, Lewis wrote: “I am a product of long corridors, empty sunlit rooms, upstairs indoor silences, attics explored in solitude, distant noises of gurgling cisterns and pipes, and the noise of wind under the tiles. [. . .] My real life [. . .] was increasingly one of solitude” (*Surprised* 10-11). However, later in life he wrote to a publisher: “My happiest hours are often spent with three or four old friends in old clothes tramping together and putting up in small pubs—or else sitting up till the small hours in someone’s college rooms, talking nonsense, poetry, theology, or metaphysics, over beer, tea, and pipes” (Barratt 20).

The mature Lewis asked, “Is any pleasure on earth as great as a circle of Christian friends by a fire?” (Coren 46). But we are sure that he already knew the answer.

Works Cited

- Barratt, David. *C. S. Lewis and His World*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987.
- Coren, Michael. *The Man Who Created Narnia: The Story of C. S. Lewis*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.
- Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1985.
- Downing, David. *Planets in Peril: A Critical Study of C. S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1992.
- Green, Roger Lancelyn, and Walter Hooper. *C. S. Lewis*. New York: Harcourt, 1976.
- Lewis, C. S. *Out of the Silent Planet*. New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996.
- . *Perelandra*. New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996.
- . *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*. New York: Harvest Books, 1955.
- . *That Hideous Strength*. New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996.
- Walsh, Chad. *The Literary Legacy of C. S. Lewis*. New York: Harcourt, 1979.