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Abstract

Notes that critics have complained about the “pettiness” of evil characters in Lewis’s works, implying that Lewis was unable to create evil characters of “abstract grandeur.” Argues that Lewis’s decision was “a conscious philosopher’s choice.”

Additional Keywords

Good and evil in C.S. Lewis; Lewis, C.S.—Portrayal of good and evil

A NOTE

on Moral Concepts in Lewis' Fiction

by Margaret L. Carter

The evil of Screwtape and Weston, the goodness of Ransom and his Company, have aroused some unfavorable comment. Many critics seem convinced that C. S. Lewis's fictional portrayals of good and evil are petty. Hooper, in the introduction to *Christian Reflections* (p. viii), quotes Graham Hough as saying, "Screwtape seems to have been aiming at rather small targets and to have been decidedly lacking in the historical imagination," and W. W. Robson as complaining of the same work's "general moral pettiness." Brian Aldiss' *Billion Year Spree* (p. 213) comments on the Un-Man in *Perelandra*, "Lewis gives us nastiness and a dose of horror . . . [but] no real evil."

Aldiss feels that the demon-possessed Weston is presented on a level with a "naughty boy." Of *That Hideous Strength* the same critic (p. 214) says, "It is hard to believe in the Christians . . . subscribing to both a high moral creed and a love of a bucolic little England."

Implicit in such remarks is the misconception that the supposed "pettiness" reflects a failure of imagination or failure of nerve on Lewis's part. These critics seem to want Good and Evil with capital letters, flaming in abstract grandeur -- and they apparently believe Lewis would have written thus had he been able. I wish to show that Lewis had no such intention, that his good and bad characters faithfully reflect the center of his Christian world-view. Scenes of tragic grandeur would have been alien to his whole concept.

The "pettiness" of Screwtape, the Un-Man, and the N.I.C.E. seems particularly offensive to these critics, who are infected with Romantic notions of the nobility of pride and rebellion. Lewis's opinion of these notions might well be summarized by his remark in *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (p. 95) that "Mere Christianity commits every Christian to believing that 'the Devil is (in the long run) an ass'." Along the same line, in *The Great Divorce* (p. 72) he has MacDonald say, "The whole difficulty of understanding Hell is that the thing to be understood is so nearly Nothing." The Un-Man's behavior, rather than revealing a creative failure, seems calculated to display that nothingness. Ransom, for instance, notices that the demon-animated Weston uses intelligence as a mere tool that is laid aside when not needed -- for intelligence is in itself a good thing, which can only be perverted, not originated, by the Devil. And is not the Un-Man's pastime of tearing apart small animals paralleled by one of Lewis's comments on *Paradise Lost*?

From hero to general, from general to politician, from politician to secret service agent, and thence to a thing that peers in at bedroom or bathroom windows, and thence to a toad, and finally to a snake -- such is the progress of Satan.

(Preface to *Paradise Lost*, p. 99)

Nor would Screwtape's "rather small targets" have disturbed Lewis. In Lewis's Christian philosophy, an orthodox following of Matthew 5:28, a sin's effect on the individual sinner is more important than its spectacular visibility. *Mere Christianity* (p. 87) reminds us:

One man may be so placed that his anger sheds the blood of thousands, and another so placed that however angry he gets he will only be laughed at. But the little mark on the soul may be much the same in both . . . The bigness or smallness of the thing, seen from the outside, is not what really matters.

This attitude toward evil is a consequence of Lewis's reverence for the sacramental value of the individual soul. The whole essay entitled "The Weight of Glory" amplifies this subject. Its theme is best concentrated in the admonition, "It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses You have never talked to a mere mortal." (*The Weight of Glory*, p. 14-15) Because each Christian's body is a living temple for the Holy Spirit, our Christian neighbor is the holiest object we can ever encounter, next to the Blessed Sacrament Itself. Hence the most commonplace action of the most obscure person may be of eternal importance. Any deed not sinful can be done to the glory of God. In virtue, as in sin, the spectacular is not necessarily the significant. (Recall the lady of glorious sainthood, in *The Great Divorce*, who was in life an unknown Englishwoman.) Lewis gives an example in *Mere Christianity* (p. 85): "When a neurotic who has a pathological horror of cats forces himself to pick up a cat for some good reason, it is quite possible that in God's eyes he has shown more courage than a healthy man may have shown in winning the V.C." Ransom's kitchen garden and menagerie in *That Hideous Strength* provide the setting for the practice of this kind of virtue.

A particularly appropriate setting, Lewis might say, considering a remark in one of his letters that "a housewife's work . . . is surely in reality the most important work in the world. What do ships, railways, mines, cars, government etc. exist for except that people may be fed, warmed, and safe in their own homes?" (*Letters of C. S. Lewis*, p. 262) From many different angles he asserts the central importance of the ordinary human being, making it clear that the actions of one person would be of greater, not less, interest to him than the actions of a group. He contends that "the collective life is lower than the personal and private life and has no value save in its service" (*The Weight of Glory*, p. 32). While the "collective" will someday disappear, each human soul has the potential for eternal life.

In line with the Biblical warning that "the last shall be first," Lewis shows a consistent preference for "small targets" over the grandly impressive. Study of his entire body of writings (rather than his fictional works in isolation) reveals this preference to be a conscious philosophic choice.

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