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Love's Alchemy: Jane in *That Hideous Strength*

Abstract
Notes that many students have trouble with the ending of *That Hideous Strength* because of Jane's submission to Mark. Argues that the ending is inevitable and that Jane, in discovering *caritas*, "relinquished selfishness, not self."

Additional Keywords
Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Jane Studdock; Lewis, C.S. That Hideous Strength; Love in C.S. Lewis; Women in C.S. Lewis; Annalee Peoples

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LOVE'S ALCHEMY: JANE IN *THAT HIDEOUS STRENGTH*

JANICE NEULEIB

For the last two years I have been teaching *That Hideous Strength* in my Fantasy Literature course. Although my students like the novel better than do many of the critics,[1] perhaps because of my own enthusiasm for it, almost all of the women, and some of the men, are outraged by the ending. Though not all women in those classes consider themselves "liberated," none likes Jane's submission to male dominance at the close of the action. These young women's arguments go something like this: Jane is the perfect example of the modern woman. Her mind works exactly as do our minds, albeit we do not have dreams which mirror actual events. How can Lewis dare to create a woman who reflects our inner reality and then cheat us by making her into a medieval female who bows to religious authority and in doing so bows to the masculine as it is represented in her husband? We will not submit; why did you make us like this book?

And that is exactly the point. I did not make them like the book. They did so because it provides a sense of completeness which satisfies the human desire for symmetry. However much these students may object to Jane's submission, they have to admit that artistically they are satisfied by the ending. A great dance has been moving through the novel and has come to a close with the meeting of the two characters who have been leaning toward and away from each other throughout the course of the tale. The microcosmic dance that is the marriage of Mark and Jane is reflected in the macrocosmic visits of the eldils just before Ransom's ascension. It is the completion of the marriage dance which gives the satisfaction at the end of the novel. Jane is a part of a universal system, and her actions, when they are good, reflect that system.

She is also a most convincing and believable woman. It is no wonder that many of the theses and dissertations, as well as many published works, on Lewis are written by women. I should imagine part of the reason is that Lewis is a writer, even if he is a man, who takes women seriously. Archetypes are all very nice, and one does like to see oneself occasionally as a White Witch or as a Dark Temptress, but it is even more fun to find a work of art that presents a woman or girl who thinks and acts just like any woman or girl really thinks and acts. Jane is not alone, though, among Lewis' characters in her role as everywoman. Lucy, Orual, and the Green Lady are all central figures in respective Lewis stories. In fact, except for *Out of the Silent Planet* and *The Magician's Nephew*, most of the plots of Lewis' fictional works hang on the integrity of a female. That is pretty heady reading for those of us who had to watch Dick climb trees in first grade readers and wait at home with Penelope in high school lit classes.

Perhaps it is this emphasis on the female mind in his novels that causes women to become so distressed when Lewis seems to adopt the "traditional" Pauline interpretation of the woman's role in marriage. The modern generation of readers, at least those in my classes, seems to have less tolerance for an author's personal attitudes and ethics than had the generations preceding. In the *Allegory of Love*[2] Lewis makes a rather famous argument for the frequent seriousness of Chaucer when his readers have taken him to be in jest. The same might be said of Lewis. The temptation is to say that since he understands women so well, he could not possibly mean what he says at the end of *That Hideous Strength*. Readers suppose that perhaps he is just ending the novel this way to give a happy ending to a story that has been leading inexorably to an eucatastrophic close.

Actually, the internal evidence shows that Lewis meant Jane's transformation at the end of *That Hideous Strength* to be consistent with her characterization throughout the novel. Jane is a realistic heroine in a "modern fairy-tale for grown-ups." It is the paradox of this role which offers both appeal and confusion to Jane's would-be admirers. She is trying to be a professional woman caught up in academic life, but she is also a psychic heroine enmeshed in a cosmic romance. Because Lewis gave her these dual roles, he had to maintain a believable dissonance when displaying Jane's character. From the beginning of the novel, Jane is both an inheritor of the Tudor ability to dream real events and a poor harmless drudge trying desperately to regain enthusiasm for a dissertation topic gone stale. The dreams win Jane's attention despite her determination to ignore their demands on her inner life.

Because of these overwhelming demands on her emotional life, Jane is often unable to maintain the stoic calm she imagines to encompass her "real self." When she tries to work on Donne's poem, she finds her mind returning to her married life rather than turning to the subtleties of the poet's diction and meter. Her question to Donne is, however, an interesting one. The poet tells the implied reader not to hope for mind in women. Jane turns the idea around and asks whether any man really does hope for mind in women. Jane seems to have asked the exact question which the whole novel asks about marriage. Can there be marrying at all until the minds marry?

At the end of the novel, when Jane turns to Mark, the reader is led to believe that for the first time, the minds of the two young people may indeed be going to meet. The microcosm of their lives has been enfolded in the macrocosm of the war against the dark eldila. It is important that the two lovers meet just as the approach of the spheres has ended. The lines in the Donne poem which precede "Hope not for mind in women" are "That loving wretch that swears/ Tis not the bodies marry, but the minds,/Which he in her angelic finds,/Would swear as justly that he hears,/In that day's rude hoarse minstrelsy, the spheres." When Mark finds Jane at the close of *That Hideous Strength*, he has just come through the real music of the spheres and is ready to find Jane in both mind and body. Jane submits only when Mark is no longer a rude, arrogant person, finally unlike the narrator in "Love's Alchemy."[3]

He has been transformed by a new kind of love; the alchemy of that love has infinite possibilities for both Jane and Mark. Their old love had been at best Eros, at worst no love at all. In *The Four Loves*, Lewis makes a distinction between Eros and Venus. Eros is the grand passion. It is the passion which has killed innumerable heroes and heroines in countless tragedies throughout literature. When one reads a story about Eros, it is supposed to be impossible not to feel that this love was worth dying for. Lewis, however, cautions against such a course of the Christian. To commit suicide, or to give up one's children, or even to break a promise to a longtime friend is anything but admirable for one who has placed his trust in God. It isn't very admirable for anyone else either. Thus Eros can be a temptation even for the person who marries the object of that love. The love itself can overwhelm more important commitments.

Venus, on the other hand, is sexuality. Lewis points out that Lucretius thought that sexuality should not be tainted with Eros because grand passion lessened the fineness of the pleasure.[4] Lewis does not agree with "that austere voluptuary," of course, but he does argue that Venus is perfectly acceptable in marriage even when Eros is momentarily absent or has never been there at all. Jane's problem is that she is not much interested in either Eros or Venus. She is much too interested in Jane to come out of herself for either passion. Her second problem is that Mark is interested, most of the time, only in Venus. The two young people have neither a Christian nor a Pagan marriage. *That Hideous Strength* begins with the word "matrimony"; very shortly thereafter the reader knows that Jane's marriage is not what it ought to be. She speculates that perhaps all the talk prior to their marriage was just a preliminary to the sex act for Mark. Jane's disinterest in the physical aspect of love becomes clear when she cannot get back to her dissertation topic, the "triumphant vindication of the body." Lewis says that she believes that by concentrating she will be able to "force herself back into her lost enthusiasm for the topic." Scholarship has many virtues, but usually it does little to fan the flames of physical passion.

It is not Victorian prudishness, however, which keeps Jane from enjoying Venus. She prides herself on being a modern woman who is able to speak of anything without a blush. Yet her desire to be an independent person, mature and needing no one, leads her into a sort of coldness that was probably not equalled by Victorian ladies. Lewis shows Jane's rejection of physical pleasure as subtly as he had shown Ransom's acceptance of it in *Perelandra*. In that novel Ransom glories in the taste of fruits from the local flora and luxuriated in the cool shower from a bubble tree. Jane, on the other hand, breaks down when Mrs. Dimble asks her if she hates being kissed. Rather than give the stern "Of course not" she intends, she falls crying into Mrs. Dimble's arms. Then Lewis says that Jane remembered the long forgotten pleasure of being petted and pawed, a pleasure "contrary to her whole theory of life." Obviously, for Jane physical enjoyment and comfort represented a denial of her personal independence. It seems that in Jane's case, the need to be a free woman kept her from being a warm human being. Jack Haynes says in his article on "Eros in *That Hideous Strength*" that the novel contains a marriage manual. He then proceeds to choose the passages in the novel which embody that manual.[5] The trouble with Jane is that she is not ready to read the manual until the end of the novel.

Mark, on the other hand, had all the apparent freedom afforded men in our society, but he was afflicted with the common ailment often suffered by the male in western culture. He wanted more than anything to be a part of the power structure which he perceived in his immediate environment. Had he wanted power less, he would have been much more likely to have seen the absurdities and horrors of the NICE group. Lewis creates the impression of Mark's particular weakness in several ways throughout the novel. He mentions that in childhood Mark even felt left out of the inner circle of his sister and her friend. His whole life became a search for the powerful people within whatever sphere of reference he found himself. Not until he was faced with the ultimate horrors of the N.I.C.E. was he able to see how corrupt and ugly it really was.[6]

Between the two young people, Lewis manages to embody the chief ills, as he saw them, of fallen human nature; the first, a desire for independence at all costs, including one's relationship with God; the second, a will to power which ignores all morality. Yet in one of the few scenes in the novel where they are together, Lewis takes pains to show that neither Jane nor Mark is very bad. Mark does not really lie to Jane about Belbury, nor does Jane see her own silence about the dreams as a deception. Both fail to communicate and spend the evening posing like a young peacock and his peahen. "And so, all evening, the male bird displayed his plumage and the female played her part and asked questions and laughed and feigned more interest than she felt. Both were young, and if neither loved very much, each was still anxious to be admired."[7] (I wonder how Lewis knew about the many painful hours a young woman spends listening to proud young men who never realize how they bore her?)

Here we are back to love again. It is not until Jane meets the Director and begins the strange submission which so upsets my students that she begins to consider her love for Mark. At first, she is outraged that she be asked to get her husband's permission to join the group at St. Anne's. At last, however, she decides that she ought to give the love she feels for the Director to Mark. That idea might seem immoral until we go back once more to *The Four Loves*. It is neither Venus (not, of course, one of the four loves) nor Eros that finally moves Jane to regret her treatment of Mark. Until the end, she has been acting out of selfishness, certainly not out of love of any kind. At the end she begins to act with Charity. Lewis explains that when Love of God enters, then all other loves can thrive, too. "When God arrives (and only then) the half-gods can remain. Left to themselves they either vanish or become demons. Only in His name can they with beauty and security 'wield their little tridents.' "[8] It is that Charity which causes Jane to turn to Mark at the end of the novel. She joins in the Dance to the music of the spheres as one of God's creatures acting a part in the great movement of an ongoing creation.

Mark returns to her and takes his part in the dance because he has chosen the "natural" rather than the broken and twisted. He does not really realize the religious implications of his choices, but he acts "not in moral terms at all," which act Lewis says is the same thing as having "his first deeply moral experience."[9] The choice of order over disorder is for Mark the choice of hierarchy over involvement in politics. At the end of the novel Mark realizes the role of both the courtly lover and the Christian husband and realizes how far his actions have been from both those roles. In the end his humility is the key to Jane's submission.

At the close of the novel, Jane and Mark are finally about to experience Eros because they have first found Charitas. The dance, or universal symmetry, which Lewis is proposing in the Perelandra Trilogy reaches its close with the ascension of Ransom and the conception of the new Pendragon. Admittedly, Jane's individuality and independence are altered by a new order, an order which demands that she become a mother and that she be loved by her husband. We might remember, however, that Ransom tells her to stop having dreams, not to stop thinking and being an individual. What Jane does receive is the affection of her husband, a joy she has not had before. Admittedly, Lewis has put her on a pedestal, but it is not a very high one. The sort of free and generous giving and receiving which is envisioned at the end of the novel is, of course, not often part of our fallen world. But the end of the novel achieves transcendence over the twisted and brutal and allows the open and generous to conquer, at least for a time. That hideous strength is the strength of the dark eldils; it can be broken only by Charity.

Jane relinquishes her prim individuality and accepts a combination of spiritual and physical voluptuousness that had been denied to her before. In the passage in which she first met the Pendragon, she was overcome with a sense of being "undone." It is that undoing which brings her finally to her willed submission at the close of the fairy tale. She is not a romance heroine who goes off to be the center of an unreal dream. Rather she finally possesses both her mind and body because she has become willing to give and receive Charitas. There may be mind in woman, and in man, too, when both have heard the music of the spheres and have grown able to give generously of their carefully guarded individuality. Jane relinquishes selfishness, not self.

and keep her ways with all your might....
For at last you will find the rest she gives,..
Then her fetters will become for you a strong protection,
and her collar a glorious robe....
From blossom to ripening grape my heart delighted in her;
My foot entered upon the straight path;
From my youth I followed her steps.

Unless both images are kept in balance, either will become a very destructive model for human relationships. Even if one consciously tries to avoid the idolatry of unconditionally adoring and obeying a human being, partial realization of the model still tends toward psychological stunting, a permanent child-state on the part of the subordinate one, and pride and exploitation on the part of the superordinate; too often, even violence. The Arthurian Erec is an example of the kind of ugliness that erupts when a man who has been given this much power is threatened. (The story has a happy ending--the teller clearly admired Enide's behavior--but such cannot be counted on in life.)

The courtly-love ideal of the Lady whose every whim is obeyed by her adoring knight probably arose out of an instinctive awareness that the Enide ideal needed correction. Though the counter-ideal may have helped somewhat to raise the status of women, who in many respects were chattels, by itself it is no better; Chrétien's Queen is no improvement on his Erec.

Nor can these ideals be dismissed as too far removed from concrete daily life to matter. They still influence us. C. S. Lewis himself seems to have played a filial Knight to Janie Moore's Lady, and his too-ready obedience no doubt contributed to her degeneration into an impossible tyrant. (I do not fault him for taking a share of domestic labor, which was only fair, but for letting himself be subject to her whims.)

Of course the results of adoring and obeying a human being are not all painful. Adoration is rapturous; it is gratifying to think of oneself as loving so devotedly. Obedience releases one of certain anxieties of maturation, the need to make crucial decisions and take responsibility for one's life. And even when ill-considered it can help to develop a true obedience, to God.

The potential evils of domination and submission did not escape Lewis, who knew the danger of idolatry and the fact that we need protection from one another's fallenness. Let lovers play at domination and submission, he says, provided they remember that they are playing, enacting, the ultimate relationship. This counsel can well be rounded out with the complementary image. Let her submit like the Handmaid of the Lord to the lifegiving inflow of the Spirit. Let him submit like one taking the Strait Gate and the Narrow Way back to the divine womb to receive rebirth. Let them, if they feel so inclined, put paper crowns or paper chains upon one another, enjoy the theatrical, and not forget its significance.

* * *

An impulse to command or to yield submission in an erotic relationship ought to be overcome, like any other baneful effect of the Fall, in favor of a confident mutuality. An impulse to command or to yield submission may helpfully be carried out, in a spirit of play and mutuality.

Which? I am not ready to pronounce *ex cathedra* in favor of either. Readers are invited to give opinions.

* * * *

Glen Goodknight will be guest editor for *Mythlore 24* while I relax a bit and catch up on some things. I expect to return as editor with Number 25.

Mythprint will reappear in April 1980; see inside front cover for further information. Back issues of *Mythprint* may now be ordered.

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NOTES

[1]Critical opinion varies tremendously on this novel. Clyde S. Kilby and William Luther White both agree that it is not the best of the Lewis fictions; Green and Hooper, however, point out that although Lewis said that the critics hated the novel, many Lewis enthusiasts adore it. Clyde S. Kilby, *The Christian World of C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969) p. 107; William Luther White, *The Image of Man in C.S. Lewis* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 134; Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis, a Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1974), pp. 177-179.

[2]C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 164.

[3]C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York: MacMillan, 1966), p. 16.

[4]C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), pp. 148, 149.

[5]Jack Haynes, "Eros in *That Hideous Strength*," *Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society*, 5 April 1974), 2-4.

[6]*That Hideous Strength*, pp. 299, 300.

[7]Same, p. 89.

[8]*The Four Loves*, p. 166.

[9]*That Hideous Strength*, p. 299.