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On the Nature of Evil: The Cosmic Myths of Lewis, Tolkien and Williams

Abstract
Examines the works of Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams for what they have to say about the nature of evil in their fiction, particularly as it relates to Christian scripture and eschatology.

Additional Keywords
Evil, nature of, in C.S. Lewis; Evil, nature of, in Charles Williams; Evil, nature of, in J.R.R. Tolkien
Like all Christians, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams had to reach a dialectic in order to accept the presence of evil in a world created by an omniscient and beneficent God. Each developed that dialectic in a different way. For Lewis, the confrontation with evil and his explanation for its existence comes in *The Screwtape Letters* (1943) and shows that Lewis was well acquainted with Hell. The antithesis is revealed in Lewis' *The Great Divorce* (1945), an extraordinary narrative of a journey through the Heaven of Lewis' own intellectual vision; however, it was the so-called "Ransom Trilogy" ("Out of the Silent Planet", 1943, *Perelandra*, 1944, *That Hideous Strength*, 1946) that both codified and clarified Lewis' cosmology. For Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* became the vehicle through which the writer could add support to the old myths and recreate new ones which would strengthen the Christian Apocalyptic vision and prove mythopoetically Biblical eschatology. For Williams, his novels reflect how power, the power of good and evil, the power of love, the power of objects and things, can be a vehicle for the essential goodness or for its antithesis which misuses and perverts power. All three attempted to use fantasy as the language through which the problems of and the identification of good and evil could be solved and pinpointed. Each accomplished his end in his own manner.

The theories of the nature of evil extend over the boundaries of many sciences or subject matters. They occupy a place in metaphysics and literature. They are of fundamental importance in all the moral sciences, ethics, economics, politics, and law. They appear in all of the sciences of human behavior such as psychology and sociology, and, to a lesser degree, in the natural sciences, though it is treated differently and is of less importance. In that part of theology in which C.S. Lewis concerns himself which goes beyond metaphysics and moral philosophy, we meet with the concept of infinite goodness and purity -- the goodness and purity of a supreme being -- versus the concept of infinite evil -- the evil of Satan -- and we then face the problem of how God's goodness is to be understood by man and how the ultimate evil is to be explained in the face of this infinite goodness. The theological problem which is traditionally called the problem of evil concerns the whole universe in its relation to the divine. How, then, are we to understand the existence to evil in a world created by a God who is omnipotent and perfectly good?

In Lewis' trilogy, this problem of the explanation of evil is accomplished by allegorically creating an Eden, Perelandra, before corruption, a creator. Maleldil the Young, and an excuse for evil in the best eildia of Thulcandra. Lewis explains the existence of evil in worlds in which the God reigns by assigning actuality and truth to all the myths. If there exists a God with servants and prophets and followers, there must also exist an infinite evil with its prophets, servants, and followers. This can be accepted if the myth of the struggle between God and Satan is fact. As Ransom contemplated the existence of the King and Queen of Perelandra "he wondered also whether the King and Queen, though doubtless the first human pair of this planet, might on the physical side have a marine ancestry. And if so, what then of the man-like things before men in our own world? Must they in truth have been the wistful brutalities whose pictures we see in the popular books on evolution? Or were the old myths truer than the modern myths?" (Lewis, Per-
The horrible things began happening. A
spasm like that preceding a deadly vomit
twisted Weston's face out of recognition. As
it passed, for one second something like the
old Weston reappeared — the old Weston,
starling with eyes of horror and howling,
"Ransom, Ransom! For Christ's sake don't let
them —" and instantly his whole body spun
round as it he had been hit by a revolver-
bullet and he fell to the earth, and was
there rolling at Ransom's feet, slavering and
chattering and tearing up the moss by hand-
fuls. (Pere, p. 96)

On Venus, too, Ransom was the Christ figure,
the only intellect against the diabolical Un-Man. Ransom
says, "I know you are feeling the absurdity of it. Dr.
Elwin Ransom settling out single-handed to combat the
powers and principalities. You may even be wondering
if I've got megalomania." (Pere, p. 23) On Earth, the
obvious protagonists were a small group of Christians
headed by the resurrected Merlin and the Fisher-
King, the resurrected Ransom. The antagonists were
the group from N.I.C.E., backed by the bent eldils of
Thulcandra. All of the qualities of evil seem to be
represented by the National Institute of Coordinated
Experiments in general and by its Deputy Director,
Wither, in particular. He is an old man, signifying the
age of evil and its activity since the fall; he is obese,
showing the powers of evil to be weak and
watery, paralleling the darkness of evil versus
the light of good; he is, like evil, self-centered; and
he is vague, symbolic of the amorphous quality of
evil.

Myth, faith, and death are all a part of the
theology created by Lewis. In truth, Lewis uses the
universe to extend the idea that the Hebrew, Greek,
Roman, and Medieval myths are realities. "All the
things which appeared as mythology on Earth are
scattered through other worlds as realities." (Pere, p.
23) Unlike some Christian theologians, the Martians
and Lewis do not look upon death as evil, but simply
as one of the ways in which Maleldil works. Ransom
explains faith in Maleldil's ways to the green lady
and, in so doing, explains Christian faith.

In all these other matters what you call
obeying Him is but doing what seems good in
your own eyes also. Is love content with
that? You do them, indeed, because they are
His will, but not only because they are His
will. Where can you taste the joy of obeying
unless he bids you do something for which
his bidding is the only reason? When we
spoke last you said that if you told the
beasts to walk on their heads, they would
delight to do so. So I know that you under-
stand well that I am saying. (Pere, p. 118)

The green lady replies, "We cannot walk out of
Maleldil's will: but he has given us a way to walk out
of our will." (Pere, p. 189)

Whereas Out of the Silent Planet treats the
quality and truthfulness of myth and Perelandra the
temptation of good by evil, That Hideous Strength
concerns the actual war between the forces of good
and evil. It is the evil Eldila of Earth who control the
powers and principalities. You may even be wondering
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Earth until the end would protect their mission. Yet now it was revealed to Ransom that this law had been broken by the evil men in their contamination of the unfallen worlds, Mars and Venus. As the sides take shape, it is also revealed that the power of Maleldil could unmake all of Thulcandra, but it is His intention to work through a man. They use Merlin, a man who understands the good and evil use of magic, thus proving that God can create good out of evil.

Finally, the isolation of the Earth has allowed evil to become the dominant force on Thulcandra. All of its manifestations point to Lewis' personal philosophy as to the nature of evil. He contrasts the scientific viewpoint, Weston's, with the humanistic philosophy, Ransom's. It is easy to see what Lewis equates with scientific explanations and theories. Weston verbalizes the scientist's basic premise: "You cannot be so small-minded as to think that the rights or the life of an individual or of a million individuals are of the slightest importance in comparison to this."

Lewis is also conscious of the corruptive powers of organized religion. It is impossible, he says, to do much evil in the name of good. Ransom "had been haunted by a conscientious scruple as to whether it might not be his duty to undertake their religious instruction: now, as a result of his tentative efforts, he found himself being treated as if he were the savage and being given a first sketch of civilized religion." The centuries of control of the Earth by the bent eldila have also fostered evil ideas and instincts upon mankind.

At last it dawned upon him that it was not they, but his own species, that were the puzzle. That the hrosos should have such instincts was mild by comparison: but the close that it the instincts of the hrosos so closely resembled the unattained ideas of that far-divided species Man whose instincts were so deplorably different.

If we are to believe in devils and witches and bent eldila, and does Lewis, we must see some outward sign of their works: in their contamination of the world, in their making evil men. Lewis does not believe in the myths that so delighted Tolkien. Much of what Tolkien had to say concerning Biblical eschatology and the Apocalypse stemmed from this same interest in the received myths of Christianity. Lewis, indeed, had never underestimated the power of myth; in fact, like Tolkien he was forever recalling the northern stories, especially the myth of the dying god Balder. He immediately recognized the tremendous role myth played both in language and literature, but he did not believe in the myths that so delighted him. For Lewis, these myths were beautiful.
and moving but ultimately untrue. As he ultimately expressed it to Tolkien, myths are "lies and therefore worthless, even though breathed through silver." (Carpenter, The Inklings, p. 46) It was Tolkien's argument, though, that carried the day and eventually led Lewis to his discussion of Myths in the trilogy. Myths for Tolkien were not lies. All words, in fact all language is mythic. Objects that we are familiar with like trees and stars were named by primitive peoples whose outlook and view were different from the outlook and view of Lewis and Tolkien. To Tolkien, the world was alive with mythological beings. To them the whole world was, as Tolkien put it, "myth-woven and elf-patterned." (The Inklings, p. 46) It then followed for Tolkien, and this is the argument that eventually convinced Lewis of the truth of Tolkien's statements concerning myths, that since man is of God and ultimately not a liar, man's works and ideas reflect eternal truth. Man might pervert his thoughts into lies, and this became a central issue for Tolkien in The Lord of the Rings, but in the end since he comes from God not only his abstract thoughts but also his imaginative inventions must be true. In practicing mythopoetics, as Tolkien peopled his world with elves, goblins, and dragons, the sub-creator actually fulfills God's purpose. All myths, both pagan and Christian, are never just lies; there is always that element of truth in them.

Biblical eschatology and Providence are Christian myths which are interlinked. The first is a study of and a recognition of endings -- death, judgement, heaven and hell, and the second is faith in the ultimate divine control over the whole of history. Since eschatological myths forecast an end, that is accepted. For Tolkien, Providence and Providence also presuppose certain notions about time and its function in the history of the world. The Lord of the Rings contains an analogical world in its third age. These ages, Tolkien makes it clear, is of God and ultimately not a liar, man's works and ideas reflect eternal truth. Man might pervert his thoughts into lies, and this became a central issue for Tolkien in The Lord of the Rings, but in the end since he comes from God not only his abstract thoughts but also his imaginative inventions must be true. In practicing mythopoetics, as Tolkien peopled his world with elves, goblins, and dragons, the sub-creator actually fulfills God's purpose. All myths, both pagan and Christian, are never just lies; there is always that element of truth in them.

"Good and ill have not changed since yesteryear; nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves and another among Men." (Tolkien, The Two Towers, p. 41, hereafter as TT) For Tolkien, good and evil struggles for supremacy until the end of things, and it is that struggle which is the story of The Lord of the Rings. Reflecting Christian myth, evil is strong because it always comes from good, but it is always misshapen, a perversion of God and His creation.

The happy ending of Tolkien's myth is accomplished by a kind of four headed composite hero: Gandalf, Aragorn, Frodo, and Sam. Gandalf has the power of good in his whiteness purified in his struggle with the Balrog. Aragorn has the kingly qualities necessary for the rider upon the white horse in the nineteenth chapter of Revelation. Frodo is the one called to suffer, the Christ-like figure who is sure of his end but not quite sure of his abilities. Sam's part in the downfall of evil turns our attention away from the apocalyptic images and suggests that ultimately the world may be saved not just by the overwhelming grace and power of God but by a grace that is simple and humble in its redemptive suffering.

Aragorn, however, is also the anciently promised one, the kingly incarnation of Christ. He is the constant reminder that the glory is always in the end of time. Not only is he strong in battle, but he is also, as Legolas and Gimli witness, the King of the Dead. At Minas Tirith he also fulfills another fragment of the ancient myth by bringing back Faramir, Eowyn, and Merry from the brink of death. When the White Crown is finally placed on his head, it is clear to all that he is revealed for what he is, and Tolkien's description of the event is messianic in its imagery.

Tall as the sea-kings of old, he stood above all that were near; ancient of days he seemed and yet in the flower of manhood; and wisdom sat upon his brow, and strength and healing were in his hands, and a light was about him. And then Faramir said: "Behold the King!" (RK, p. 246)

Tolkien gives us an even more significant basis for hope in the pattern of little victories which prefigure good's ultimate triumph. Tom Bombadil's rescue of the Hobbits from the barrow-vights, the Old Forest, Mount Caradhras, Fangorn, Helm's Deep, Isengard, the Pelennor Fields, Cirith Ungol and the White Gate of Mordor and Mount Doom itself are all stories that are structured in the same mythic manner. Despair is abruptly transformed into joy by a sudden and unexpected display of power, either the power of Tom or Treebeard or Aragorn or most often Gandalf. It is the wizard who offers the best hope because he has been purified in his movement from Gandalf the Grey to Gandalf the White. The supreme miracle of Gandalf becomes the sign of signs that the apocalypse is at hand and that he is ready to play his providential role. In Khazad-dum the Balrog drags Gandalf down "far, far below the deepest delving of the Dwarves" where "the world is gnawed by nameless things" of which even Sauron the Dark Lord does not know. Then Gandalf pursues the Balrog to the highest peak, Durin's Tower, and is able to cast him down. Finally darkness takes Gandalf, and he dies. The great miracle is that he returns from the dead, is healed in Lothlorien, and then reappears to Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli. Aragorn cries, "Gandalf! Beyond all hope you return to us in our need!" (TT, p. 98) "The Dark Lord has Nine: But we have One, mightier than they: the White Rider. He has passed through the fire and the abyss, and they to apostasy, the final times are full of intense suffering for the faithful who are often drawn toward despair. The chief architect of their torment in the Christian myth is the Antichrist. Sauron is Tolkien's version of that "monster of iniquity, who will treacherously attack his weak unsuspecting neighbors, but who will be smitten and destroyed by the power of God in a resounding disaster." (H.H. Rowley, The Relev­ance of Apocalyptic, p. 32)
Both kinds of hope, the kind Aragorn and Merry feel in the fiction and the kind the reader feels outside the story, are based upon the faith in the old myths that is based upon faith alone. In *The Lord of the Rings*, hope springs from the un-hoped for return of Gandalf which is clearly analogous to the hope which Christians base on God's mightiest act, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Gandalf consequently parallels the *Christus Victor* of classical Christology, a conception rooted in the apocalyptic image of the Son of man, coming in power and glory and winning the victory over the devil and his powers. The death of this Christ would not primarily be the Son's offering a sacrifice to the Father but his entering the darkness where man is imprisoned and freeing him by defeating the primal enemies, sin and death.

Considered allegorically, *The Lord of the Rings* speaks not only of the nature of the struggle against evil, the inescapability of involvement, the necessity for freedom, the stuff of heroism, and the possibility for significant loss within the struggle. It also vehemently declares that hope is a viable alternative in the face of evil. The several mini-triumphs culminate in the happiest of endings. Frodo and Sam achieve their quest and wake in the sweet air of Ithilien. They see Gandalf again as well as their other friends. They are glorified in word and song, a minstrel of Gondor having composed and performed the lay of Frodo and the Nine Fingers and the Ring of Doom. It is left for Sam, the commoner in the aforementioned quadripartite hero, to put the event into words that can be understood and appreciated. We are told that Sam "laughed aloud for sheer delight, and he stood up and cried: 'O great glory and splendor! And all my wishes have come true!' And then he wept." (RK, 232)

Tolkien has termed this kind of happy ending the eucatastrophe. It is a sudden and joyous turn of events that gives only a fleeting glimpse of a joy that which goes beyond the sense of awe and wonder aroused by the successful fantasy story. It is rather analogous to the joy in the birth of Christ, which is the eucatastrophe of the story of the incarnation.

The metaphor for Charles Williams was power. The end was a result of the conflict between the two powerful opposite poles. Good and evil, for Williams, constantly struggled to manipulate occult forces, to transcend the limitations of time and space, to control matter, through mind, and to discover the secrets of life and death.

All of Williams' novels are attempts at bypassing allegory and creating myth, especially the myths in the first three chapters of *Genesis in Antietam: The Place of the Lion*, for example is a parable of ontology, and this is one aspect which differentiates Williams from his friend Tolkien. Rather than exploring Biblical eschatology, Williams writes parables of both creative and miscreative knowing. His fiction, then, is his interpretation or reinterpretation of the Genesis myth. The ontology which is presupposed in William's novels is partly derived from and inherent in the dogmatic formulations to which he subscribes and how he reads them. His theology as emphasized in his fictions is not discovery but rather the communication of received truth. He is thus closer to the Greek church fathers than to the Latins who stressed a moral duality of sin and healing grace. In direct contrast to Lewis, Wil-
hrossa, are to me the main thing that happened" (135); and in the book's last pages he describes the ways of life and death in this primitivist utopia. Rather than go into specific details of his gradual education here, I move to the climax of this act, the hnakra-hunt.

The hunt brings about a change for the better in Ransom, but the moral nature of the event is complex. Even as they prepare for the hunt, Ransom feels how much he has already changed:

A short time ago, in England, nothing would have seemed more impossible to Ransom than to accept the post of honor and danger in an attack upon an unknown but certainly deadly aquatic monster. Even more recently, when he had first fled from the seroni, or when he had lain pitying himself in the forest by night, it would hardly have been in his power to do what he was intending to do to-day.... Perhaps... there was something in the air he now breathed, or in the society of the hrossa, which had begun to work a change in him.

(77)

Exhibiting sufficient bravery in the fight with the hnakra, Ransom achieves a new sense of manhood. At the same time, he feels a new oneness with the hrossa; they are all hnuu, all rational animals, Ransom as well as Hyoi. At this point the narrator says of Ransom, "He had grown up" (81). It is a major accomplishment in the enfance of Elwin Ransom.

But this is where the moral complexity comes in. In saying "He had grown up," is the narrator only indicating Ransom's view of the experience at that moment? If so, a rifle shot shatters our unqualified acceptance of his view. Hyoi's death, says Whin, comes from their not having obeyed the eldil's command to send Ransom to the Oyarsa immediately (83). The command came before the hnakra attacked; Ransom and the others all chose to fight it instead of retreating to put Ransom ashore. Now Ransom feels terribly guilty about Hyoi's death. Was the killing of the hnakra, then, a bad act instead of a good one? Did Ransom thereby grow up, or did he indeed fall down? It is a difficult question. It is these events to which the Oyarsa will refer later, in Meldilorn: "I sent my eldil to fetch you," he will say to Ransom, "but still you would not come... and hnuu's blood has been shed" (120).

Good does come from these climactic events among the hrossa. As Ransom leaves them behind to make his way to the Oyarsa, he determines to obey the eldila from now on rather than to trust his own judgement (85). This resolution stands him in good stead during his arduous climb up the mountains and on to Meldilorn. This change in attitude strikes me as more important than his Conradian courage in the hnakra-kill. Not that the courage is unimportant. As he climbs he contemplates the changes within himself, contrasting that initial terror, self-pity, and lack of direction when he first escaped Weston and Devine, with his current well-being and sense of duty; he feels confidence and even pleasure (86-87).

Ransom reaches his third milestone through the help of the sorns. Augray especially teaches Ransom many things about Maleldil's system; whereas he had feared these giant creatures from the beginning, Ransom has now turned a corner in his attitude toward sorns (97, 101). They will occasionally and understandingly startle him with their looks, but he continues to learn from their unfallen reason. He gains from them a new perspective on truth as he learns more about Mars/Malacandra and how it contrasts with Earth in the number of rational species, etc. He is being re-educated -- shaken out of his Earth-bound, twentieth-century views. If we don't push the divisions too far, we can say that among the hrossa Ransom's heart matures and among the sorns his head matures.

In the heavens, among the hrossa, and with the earoni, Ransom has learned and changed. The fourth milestone for this pilgrim is Meldilorn, the holy island of the Oyarsa, the chief eldil of the planet. This milestone does not mark another change in Ransom, but it shows how much he has changed.

Much of the difference is indicated in brief in his reply to the Oyarsa's accusation that he has fearfully avoided this meeting: "That is true, Oyarsa. Bent creatures are full of fears. But I am here now and ready to know your will with me" (122). In the climactic events that ensue, Ransom contrasts most favorably with Weston, in everything from linguistic ability to basic goodness on Malacandra combine in those marvelous translations he makes of Weston's speech to the Oyarsa (e.g., 135-36). Hemingway once said that what a good writer needs most is a reliable, built-in crap detector. Ransom has developed one on Malacandra and accordingly cuts Weston's speech to its real meaning.

Phase one of Ransom's pilgrimage soon ends. The heavenly powers help the trio return safely to Earth. They have been gone nine months, and the strain puts Ransom in the hospital for the next three months (That Hideous Strength 231, 232). But otherwise the trip has done him great good, and the difference will be apparent in Perelandra, the second volume in the pilgrimage of Elwin Ransom.

Works Cited

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