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Abstract
Examines the changes Elwin Ransom undergoes in the course of Out of the Silent Planet: his development emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually.

Additional Keywords
Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Ransom—Development; Lewis, C.S. Out of the Silent Planet; Lynn Maudlin

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Elwin Ransom: The Pilgrimage Begins
George Musacchio

In a letter of 1944, C.S. Lewis tells his friend Sister Penelope that he has recently completed the last book of "the Ransom trilogy" (qtd. in Green and Hooper, 177). It is an appropriate term, for Elwin Ransom is indeed the central, unifying character of the trilogy: Out of the Silent Planet (1938); Perelandra (1943); and That Hideous Strength (1945). It is Ransom's trilogy, and it is Ransom's pilgrimage.

By his pilgrimage I mean the protagonist's Christian growth in the course of the trilogy. He develops throughout the first two books and, though his character is static in the third, his pilgrimage does not end until he returns to the planet Venus (Perelandra), the event he is awaiting at the end of That Hideous Strength. In this article I examine the changes he undergoes in Out of the Silent Planet.

To notice any changes, we must first get to know the initial character. As we read the opening pages of the novel, Ransom may remind us of Lewis himself. Like the Lewis of 1937, Ransom is tall, unmarried, almost forty years old, and a devotee of walking tours. And like Lewis he is a philologist. Dr. Elwin Ransom, however, it is not C.S. Lewis in literary disguise, for as we learn later Lewis himself enters the trilogy as a character under his own name. Ransom has reminded some readers of Lewis' good friend J.R.R. Tolkien, also a philologist; and someone has nominated Charles Williams as the model for Ransom. But I doubt the significance of the similarities. Even if Ransom is a composite of people Lewis knew, he is a unique character in a work of fiction; we need to know him, not his possible real-life counterparts.

More important than his similarity to any person living or dead is the basic moral outlook of the initial character. He is a benevolent, compassionate man. We see this when his feelings for a distraught woman prompt him to promise her he will inquire after her simple son, who is working at The Rise nearby (9). It is true that he also hopes, by inquiring for the boy at The Rise, to get shelter there for the night, but this selfish motive is secondary to his motivation for helping the woman — as his subsequent actions prove. That is, when he finds the gate of The Rise locked, he has an inclination to strike out for the next town, but he rejects this inclination for moral reasons: "... he had committed himself to a troublesome duty on behalf of the old woman" (10). He frets about the obligation, but he takes it as a duty. A part of his initial character, this habitual sense of oughtness is further revealed in this response to sounds of scuffling behind the house. "The noise was unmistakable by now. People in boots were fighting or wrestling or playing some game... he heard the monosyllabic barking ejaculations of men who are angry and out of breath. The last thing Ransom wanted was an adventure, but a conviction that he ought to investigate the matter was already growing upon him" (11). The Ransom of Chapter 1 is a man of moral principle.

Beyond his acceptance of a moral law, an "oughtness" in the universe, Ransom is "a pious man" (35). On the spaceship he wrestles with the wrongness of suicide (35-36). On Malacandra (Mars), alone, he prays. And when he does, it seems to come naturally, not as a desperate or unusual action.

Yet, there is another point to be made about the initial character of the protagonist: like most of us men and hobbits, he is no dashing hero. When he feels duty-bound to rush to the scuffle behind the house at The Rise, he does; but coming upon the two men struggling with the simple-minded boy, he finds it difficult to shout out authoritatively. Sputtering "in rather an unimpressive voice, "he says, "Here! I say!..." (12). He sounds almost as bad as Sir Plume, a dandified and ineffectual character in Alexander Pope's Rape of the Lock. Sir Plume's lady-friend insists he demand Belinda's ravished lock of hair from the dastardly Baron:

(Sir Plume of amber snuffbox justly vain,
And the nice conduct cane)
With earnest eyes, and round unthinking face,
He first the snuffbox opened, then the case,
And thus broke out — "My Lord, why, what the devil!
Z__de! damn the lock! 'fore Gad, you must be civil!
Plague on't! 'tis past a jest — nay prithee, box!
Give her the hair " — he spoke, and rapped his box.

Yet, there is another point to be made about the initial character of the protagonist: like most of us men and hobbits, he is no dashing hero.
could" (20). Neither Sir Lancelot nor James Bond would ever do that.

I do not mean he is cowardly; indeed he underestimates his own courage at times:

The bellicose mood was a very rare one with Ransom. Like many men of his own age, he rather underestimated his own courage; the gap between boyhood’s dreams and his actual experience of the War had been startling, and his subsequent view of his own unheroic qualities had perhaps swung too far in the opposite direction. (37)

I mean rather that he is quite ordinary in this regard, like Bilbo at the beginning of The Hobbit and Frodo at the beginning of The Lord of the Rings. And like those two hobbits, he has heroic potential. When we have read Perelandra, with its long, pivotal battle, and then reread Out of the Silent Planet, we see what this brief wrestling match with Weston foreshadows; then we grasp something of Ransom’s tremendous potential for courage and heroism. As Lewis says in another context, “there are no ordinary people” (Weight of Glory 15).

This seemingly ordinary, basically moral Cambridge don, then, is the initial character as we come to know him in the opening chapters of the Trilogy. When we come to know the developed character, the later Ransom, we understand the initial one better by comparison. Then we conclude that in the very beginning he is a decent chap, probably in Lewis’ view an admirable don, then a kidnapping victim hurtling toward an alien world, and he feels too good to worry about his future. “The adventure was too high, its circumstance too solemn, for any emotion save a severe delight.” After such a mind-expanding experience of space, “he now felt that Weston had justly called him little-minded in the moment of his first panic” (31). Ransom’s Danaean conception is growing good fruit already.

Nor is his change just emotional. He becomes aware of a “spiritual cause for his progressive lightening and exultation of heart” (32). The modern myth-ology of outer space as dead and vacuous sloughs off his mind, and he now sees it as “the womb of worlds.” Henceforth to him it is not “Space” but “the heavens.” He thinks of the opening verse of Psalm 19, “The heavens declare the glory of God”; and he lovingly quotes Milton’s description of the

‘happy climes that ly
Where day never shuts his eye
Up in the broad fields of the sky.’

(Comus, qtd. in CSP 32)

This experience renders a tremendously important change in Ransom’s whole outlook. As they descend toward Malacandra, the narrator tells us, “Nothing in all his adventures bit so deeply into Ransom’s mind as this. He wondered how he could ever have thought of planets, even of the Earth, as islands of life and reality floating in a deadly void. Now, with a certainty which never after deserted him, he saw the planets... as mere holes or gaps in the living heaven...” (40). On his return voyage he feels this splendid plenitude of life “tenfold” (146). His new concept of the heavens is the first major step in Ransom’s spiritual education. In his pilgrimage he is beginning to learn the system — Maleldil’s system. This twentieth-century pilgrim must come to understand Maleldil as the source of all life and as an immanent Presence throughout a creation teeming with life. In the education of the enfant Ransom, the curriculum of the First Form is cosmic.

The pilgrim arrives at his second milestone in his sojourn among the hrossa. His slow education among these unfallen, poetic, rational animals is important in his developing character. Through them he gains a new perspective on his own, fallen race. From them he learns about unfallen sexuality, about facing death unafraid — in short, about dimensions of Maleldil’s system that he had never dreamed possible. It is of those creatures that he continues to think, long after his return to Earth. In a letter to “Lewis” Ransom says, “Those quiet weeks, the mere living among the
hrosa, 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 primitivistic 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 sorns, 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 today.... Perhaps... there was something in the air he now breathed, or in the society of the hrosa, 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 hrosa: 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 Ransom refers 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 hrosa. As Ransom leaves them behind to make his way to the Oyarsa, he determines to obey the eldils 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 favorable 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.

In the heavens, among the hrosa, and with the eroni, 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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