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A Comparison of Cosmological Geography in the works of J.R.R. Tolkienm C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams

Abstract
Compares the physical and cosmological geography of the works of Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams, with discussion of symbolism of compass directions.

Additional Keywords
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by Glen Goodnight

Some people are at first somewhat sceptical to hear of Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams grouped together, I was myself. Doubters have had good company, including Owen Barfield. You may read of his second thoughts in another article in this issue.

One of the ways that these men can be compared is in the cosmological structure of their respective worlds: Tolkien's Middle Earth found in The Hobbit and The Lord of The Rings; Lewis' Narnia found in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, Prince Caspian, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, The Silver Chair, The Horse and His Boy, The Magician's Nephew, and The Last Battle; Williams' Arthurian Logres as a theme or province of the Byzantine Empire in Taliessin through Logres and Region of the Summer Stars.

Tolkien's universe of Middle Earth has more to it than just Middle Earth. There was also Numenor and the Undying Lands. The map that goes with this article shows the lands of that universe during the First Age. *

Lewis' Narnia includes more lands than Narnia itself. There is also Calormen, the islands of the sea, Ramandu's Island, and Aslan's Country.

Williams Logres (Britian) is part of the Empire whose capital is Byzantium. West beyond Europe is Carbongeck, where King Pelles keeps the Hallows, and beyond that is Sarras, the Land of Trinity.

There is a pattern in each of these worlds, a pattern of (1) Mortal Lands, (2) Intermediate State, and (3) Spiritual or Undying Lands. All three worlds are implicit with metaphysical and even theological ideas.

The Mortal lands of Middle Earth, Narnia, and Logres are all the home ground for the main action of the respective universes. All three authors deal with a quest theme: Williams writes of the quest for the Holy Grail; Lewis writes of the search for the end of the world - Aslan's Country; Tolkien differs slightly here, the quest he writes of is to destroy an evil, not to achieve a good. But the Ring Bearer in the end does pass to the Undying Lands as a reward.

The metaphysical geography is related to the quest theme. In each world there is an intermediate state between the mortal and immortal lands; in such a state mortal beings can glimpse or experience thing of the immortal world. With Williams it is Carbongeck, an island where King Pelles and his daughter Helayne keep the Hallows. The Hallows are the Holy Grail and the spear that pierced Christ's side. Only through Carbongeck can one find the way to Sarras. Williams is using the traditional Arthurian mythos in his works, yet the way he handles the myth, elevating it to a very rich and sensitive level, emphasising its spiritual and mystical implications, makes Williams the most important contributor to the evolution of the Arturian myth in this century.

With Lewis the Intermediate State is Ramandu's Island in The Voyage of the Dawn Treader. This country is called "the beginning of the end of the world."

* Note: the geographical distances are not correct in any of the maps.
It is a place of supernatural wonder. Ramandu, although in human form, is not human but is a retired star from the heavens. The place is a parallel to Carbonek. Ramandu is like Pelles, his unnamed daughter is like Pelles daughter Helayne, Aslan's Table is like the Grail (both symbols of the Eucharist) and the stone knife is like the spear. The journey beyond Ramandu's Country becomes increasingly supernatural. The light increases greatly, the people never tire but are quiet with wonder. The sun increases in its size, the sea water becomes fresh and is drinkable, in fact it is like liquid light and intoxicatingly refreshing. Reepicheep, the most galant and heroic mouse of Narnia is like unto Galahad, his strongest desire is to find Aslan's Country which he does achieve in the end. (For you who want to do further study, compare the end of Dawn Treader with "The Last Voyage" from Taliesin Through Logres; for example the huge flock of doves.)

Analysis of Tolkien's Intermediate State is the hardest thing in this article. Numenor could be thought that state, yet it is not nearly as supernatural as Carbonek or Ramandu's Country. There is not a Pelles figure there or the Hallows, but more on that later. It is, as the others, the Westernmost (in the case of Ramandu's country, the Easternmost) of all Mortal Lands. From atop its highest mountain, the Meneltarma, there could be seen on a clear day the shores of the Undying Lands. Originally the Eldar came from the Undying Lands to enrich the people with knowledge and many gifts. The parallel ends there since Sauron beguiled Ar-Pharazon (as did Satan beguile Eve) and this high state of man's existence is removed. But at the time of the Third Age there seems to be some aspects of the Intermediate State resident in places such as the Grey Havens, Lothlorien, and Imladris (Rivendell). Elrond is a semi-Pelles figure in the sense of being more than an ordinary human with exceptional wisdom. As Pelles and Ramandu have no present wife but do have a beautiful daughter, so does Elrond. He keeps not the Hallows but the ancient heirlooms of the ring of Barahir, the shards of Narsil, the star of Elendil, and the sceptre of Annunimas.

Sarras, the land of Trinity, Aslan's Country, and the Undying Lands are all metaphors of heaven. Not a great deal of description is given by Williams, it is not needed. Lewis, who permits us to glimpse it briefly in Dawn Treader, finally takes us there in The Last Battle. Tolkien gives us a very sketchy description in The Lord of The Rings, and elaborates slightly while giving a linguistic analysis of "A Elbereth" and "Namarie," two elvish poems in The Road Goes Ever On (Houghton-Mifflin, 1967. pp. 58-67.) All three men have communicated, primarily in metaphor, the otherness, the holiness, the source of Joy to be found in the Immortal Lands.

In Williams and Lewis, the Immortal State is physically within their respective worlds, but Tolkien by combining the Intermediate State concept with the Edenic Fall myth, has man's pride the cause of the Undying Lands removed from the world of Middle Earth. It is interesting that what Ar-Pharazon could not take by force, Frodo, by doing his duty as he saw it, is graciously granted.

With Williams it is never stated as to his world being round or flat, but Lewis' and Tolkien's worlds are flat, which fits into the popularized Medieval Cosmology. (We know, of course, that since the ancient Greeks, educated men in the West have known our world is round.)
The textual proof of Middle Earth being a flat world is found in *The Return of The King* in the chapter "The Field of Cormallen": "There came Gwaihir the Windlord... mightiest of the descendants of Old Thorondor, who build his eyries in the inaccessible peaks of the Encircling Mountains when Middle Earth was young." The other reference is in relation to the fall of Numenor in appendix A, where we are told "the Undying Lands were removed for ever from the circles of the world." By implication we can see that the Encircling Mountains encircle a flat world. The only other conclusion would be encircling mountains around the poles or equator of a round world, which would not fit in to tone of the implied frame work.

We are told directly by Prince Caspian that Narnia is a flat world. Lucy in *The Last Battle*, from the viewpoint of the True Narnia, sees far off, what she had seen more closely in *Dawn Treader*: "the huge mountain which they had called Aslan's country. But now she saw that it was part of a great chain of mountains which ringed the whole world."

We note that the mountains Tolkien and Lewis speak of are huge and inaccessible, larger than any in our present world. It seems mountains had an important mythopoetic effect on these two men, considering their use again in Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle" and Lewis' *The Great Divorce*. The mountains in each case are a demarkation between the lowlands which are the fringes of heaven, and the deeper heaven "further in and further up." This is somewhat reminiscent of the numinous and inaccessible Mount Olympus, home of the Gods.

In both Williams and Tolkien the whole metaphysical orientation is towards the West. Sarras and the Undying Lands lie West. Both men are following the Arthurian, and the pre-Arthurian, the Celtic orientation. The Celtic tradition speaks of the Isle of the Blessed lying far to the West. This is reasonable since the East of Europe lay the vast land-mass of Asia inhabited by strange and unfriendly peoples. There was no heavenly metaphor there. The West lay Sea, whose essence has a strong mystical and mythopoetic effect on many minds.

The question arises why Lewis oriented Narnia towards the East. Firstly Narnia itself is a highly idealized Medieval culture, and while this is true, it seems Lewis did not want us to think of it as an allegory of Europe, but as truly another world: One of the ways he did this was by placing the sea to the East instead of the West.

West is the direction of the setting sun, and by metaphor the area of life's decision: death, consolation, eternity, the answer and culmination of all things. East is the place of the rising sun, of life's beginning, the mystery of birth and origins. While Williams and Tolkien use the Celtic orientation, Lewis seems more influenced by the Biblical tradition that paradise was East, not in the vast steppe lands of Central Asia, but in the Mesopotamian area, site of the Edenic Paradise, place of man's beginnings. In *Dawn Treader* he makes Aslan's Country paradisal with its endless forests, orchards, and waterfall; its piercingly beautiful smell and the indescribable music.

Yet again in *The Last Battle* Lewis has the characters reach Aslan's Country by traveling West, and Lucy seeing Aslan's Country ringing the whole world. Perhaps Lewis is implying the way to heaven is beyond a geographical orientation, only that it is beyond our present apprehension and existence.

It should be mentioned that each writer has a geographical area in his world where things are perverted or twisted; with Tolkien this is Mordor, land of Sauron, who seeks to bring all of Middle Earth into his darkness; with Williams it is P'o-L'u, a country in the Far East, beyond Burma. It is ruled by the Headless Emperor, who dress in scarlet robes, walks backwards, surrounded by his court of...
slithering Octopods. The tentacles of P'lo-L'u reach out to draw all into its unreason and inaccurateness. P'lo-L'u is an original contribution by Williams to the Arthurian mythos. With Lewis we have Calormen, located south of Narnia, across a vast desert. It is a land not supernaturally evil, but cruel and debased by its worship of Tash, a cruel vulture-headed beast with four arms, who demands human sacrifice. The Colormenes seem the combine all the worst features of Islamic and Pagan civilization. Yet out of Calormen such honorable and sincere men as Emeth appear, thus Calormen does not take on the totality of evil as does Mordor or P'lo-L'u.

In conclusion, we can say that there are strong similarities in the Cosmological structure of these three worlds, rather than a precise one-to-one relationship. These men were individuals, but exposed to similar sources of legend, and holding the same belief. In their writings we see slightly different qualities and values stressed, as it would be expected. We should remember that these men were together nearly twice a week for over five years, talking about many things and reading their manuscripts to each other as their works progressed. Williams was working on his Arthurian poetry while Tolkien on The Fellowship of The Ring. Even though the Narnia books were published one a year from 1950-1956, we know they were written earlier, and we can assume they were at least taking form in Lewis' mind during the period the three men were together, 1939-1945. With this knowledge it is not hard to see how strong similarities could have appeared in their writing.

The Cosmological structure of the three worlds, not including other similarities, seems to have an Arthurian-Celtic basis in the pattern of Mortal Lands, Intermediate State, and Undying Lands.

For some I hope this brief outline has been helpful in seeing one way in which Williams, Lewis, and Tolkien are related as a literary group. I hope I have calmed some scepticism and stimulated further study in you who read this. Cosmology may not interest the imagination of all, but we can see how important it was and is to these three men.