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Spring 3-15-1994

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### Recommended Citation

Hannay, Margaret (1994) "The Mythology of *Out of The Silent Planet*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 20: No. 2, Article 4.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol20/iss2/4>

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### The Mythology of *Out of The Silent Planet*

#### Abstract

Discussion of *Out of the Silent Planet* focusing on the religious and theological aspects of Lewis' mythopoeic imagination and the creation of his "cosmic mythology." Describes how *OSP* establishes the "basis for [Lewis's] cosmic mythology, which is further developed in later books of the series."

#### Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S. *Out of the Silent Planet*—Mythology; Lewis, C.S. *Out of the Silent Planet*—Religion; Lewis, C.S. *Out of the Silent Planet*—Theology

# The Mythology of Out of The Silent Planet

MARGARET HANNAY

**T**he interplanetary novels of C.S. Lewis create a cosmic mythology which provides a framework for all other myth. The entire system seems so plausible, and the documentation of the correspondence with Dr. Ransom so authentic, that after it was first published in 1939 the public became concerned. Lewis received many letters asking if the story were true and why it had not been in the newspapers.

The entire mythic system is based on the premise of Earth as Thulcandra, the silent planet, removed from communication with Deep Heaven. In an article entitled "Will We Lose God in Outer Space?" Lewis wonders if "the vast astronomical distances may not have been God's quarantine precautions. They prevent the spiritual infection of a fallen world from spreading."<sup>1</sup> When the Oyarsa of Thulcandra became "bent" his image was stricken from the tablets of Meldilorn, and his planet sealed off from the others.



Before Lewis' trilogy was published the alien inhabitants of other worlds were always portrayed as monsters, the men who invaded their worlds as heroes. Lewis thought there was only a remote chance of discovering life on other planets, that "we shall hardly find it nearer than the stars."<sup>2</sup> But regardless of where we might find other rational species, such a discovery would raise certain problems:

I have no pleasure in looking forward to a meeting between humanity and any alien rational species... We shall enslave, deceive, exploit or exterminate; at the very least we shall corrupt it with our vices and infect it with our diseases. We are not yet fit to visit other worlds. (CR, p. 173)

If that alien species were stronger than Man, it would merely be the judgement of God upon us. But, with characteristic sarcasm, Lewis stated:

We shall think it just our bad luck if righteous creatures rightly destroy those who have come to reduce them to misery." (CR, p. 174)

It is a common belief that the discovery of another rational species would destroy the Christian faith. Lewis, however, felt that this feeble Christianity comes from giving the earth too central a place in cosmic history. There are four possible worlds we could find. If it were an innocent world it would not need or understand our idea of Incarnation or Redemption. If it were good and bad mixed, God might have a plan of Redemption for them so different than our own that we would not recognize it as such. Or we might meet a species that needed redemption and had not as yet received it. This would only raise the same problem as an unreached tribe of savages on earth, and our role could conceivably be that of missionaries. Or we might meet a completely diabolical race. This would be a familiar theological problem, for we have the same situation with demons. But it would demand an adjustment of our idea of absolute evil from incorporeal to corporeal. (CR, p. 174-75)



Ransom on Malacandra at first thought he was in a world that needed redemption. The hrossa spoke of the seroni in a way that seemed to indicate that they had a mythology and that the seroni were the god or demons. Any difficult or philosophical question was always answered with the words, "The seroni would know."<sup>3</sup> So Ransom made the mistake of asking if the seroni made the world; he received a schooling in Malacandran theology. This differed considerably from the theology of Telus, or Earth, because their world was innocent. They knew that Maleldil the Young crated the universe. But the hrossa, the seroni, and even the Oyarsa himself did not comprehend the Incarnation of Maleldil the Young on earth and begged to know of it. They had heard only that Maleldil "dared terrible things, wrestling with the Bent One on Thulcandra." (*OSP*, 120.) It was this desire for knowledge that prompted Maleldil to send the sorns to bring a man to Meldilorn — not desire for human sacrifice, as Weston and Devine believed.

One of the few allusions to classical myth occurs as Ransom, as prisoner in a space capsule, lies under the window of the side of the night like "a second Danae." As he gazes at the stars he feels a "sweet influence" pouring over and even stabbing into his surrendered body. (*OSP*, 31.) He, for the first time, found it difficult to disbelieve the old astrology. He decided that space was the wrong name, that the ancients had known better when they called it the heavens, the "womb of the worlds." He began to see the planets as "Gaps in the living heaven... formed not by addition, but by subtraction from, the surrounding brightness." (*OSP*, 40.)

When Ransom landed on Mars he noted the vertical theme of the world, the billowing columnar clouds which turned out to be ancient forests, the waves, boats, and creatures which were all too high for their width. He met an animal with speech and reason "as though Paradise had never been lost and earliest dreams were true." (*OSP*, 50.)



This language of the hross is of profound importance, for it turns out to be the Old Solar, the language given to the cosmos by Maleldil Himself, the great language by which was lost on earth as part of the Fall. This theme assumes great significance in the subsequent novels.

It was the hross who taught him that the world was made by Maleldil the Young who was not himself hnau. The concept of hnau, or created being, is one of the finest mythic elements of the novel. Lewis portrays three rational corporal species living in harmony, all subject to the commands of the eldils (roughly equivalent to angels) and the eldila's ruler, the Oyarsa. Each hnau had his own place in that world; none harmed or exploited another. There was not even a word for "evil" on that planet; only the parallel concept was "bent," or a twisted good. The eldila were a new concept for Ransom. He thought perhaps they were the explanation for the human tradition of "bright, elusive people — *alba, devas*, and the like." (*OSP*, 95) Thus in barely hinting at a relationship of the eldila with Thulcandra Lewis begins to set up his cosmic myth.

At the palace or temple of the Oyarsa, Meldilorn, Ransom found a stone that was engraved with a picture of the solar system. Each planet was shown in its orbit around the sun, each guided by its oyarsa. On that of Venus were udders or breasts, surprising Ransom that "their mythology, like ours, associates some ideas of the female with Venus." (*OSP*, 111) (Of course Ransom had not yet learned that their mythology was Truth in a more literal sense than he had ever suspected.) This picture was also significant in that the Oyarsa of earth had been roughly erased with a blunt instrument. It was at Meldilorn that Ransom learned from the Oyarsa of Malacandra as well. But, he said, "By my arm Maleldil... opened the handramits [canals] and let out the hot springs so that the hnau were not all killed. There was a great war, The Bent One was driven back to earth and bound in the air of his own world." (*OSP*, 120) So Lewis, in this one tale, united together the proverbial coldness of the moon, the canals of Mars,<sup>4</sup> and the Christian doctrine of the fall of Satan. Mars was smitten by

the Bent One so that the birds and others that lived who lived upon the surface of the planet, the handra, died of cold and lack of oxygen. But canals were dug, the handramit, which were warmed by hot springs; there mortal creatures could live in a climate comparable to a winter on earth. The seroni were the scientists who could live near the top of the world; the hrossa were hunters and poets who died if they ventured too far from the handramit; the pfiftriggi were great workers of metals and gems who lived in broad flat depressions that were remains of ancient oceans.

It was one of the pfiftriggi who carved Ransom's portrait on a stone (Meldilorn was made of giant rocks similar to Stonehenge), and taught Ransom something of artistic truth. For Ransom did not think the picture looked like him, or like any homo sapiens, but the pfiftriggi assured him "I do no mean it to be too like. Too like, and they will not believe it — those who are born after." (OSP, 114)

As Ransom left Mars in the space ship he reflected on the handramit, the great canals he could see on the surface of the planet beneath him. There were tremendous feats of suffering...

Or was that only mythology? He knew it would seem like mythology when he got back to earth, but the presence of Oyarsa was still too fresh a memory to allow him any real doubts. It even occurred to him that the distinction between history and mythology might be itself meaningless outside of Earth. (OSP, 144-45)

This theme of mythology and truth becomes central to the next published novel in the series, *Perelandra*.

Thus in *Out of the Silent Planet* Lewis had established the basis for his cosmic mythology. He had explained the fall of the Bent One, the subsequent quarantine that made Earth "the silent planet," the language of Old Solar, the existence of Oyarsa and eldila, the existence of other rational species, and space as the heavens. The references to Classical mythology in this first novel are negligible, and the relation of truth and mythology was just mentioned, not fully discussed. In *Perelandra*, Lewis expanded his use of classical allusion, gave fullness to his own cosmic myth, and introduced the Edenic, the Redeemer, and the Apocalyptic myths.

#### Notes

1. C.S. Lewis, *The World's Last Night and Other Essays*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1960, p. 91.
2. C.S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1964, p. 173. Hereafter this work will be cited as CR.
3. C.S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*. New York, Macmillan. 1965. p. 120. This work is hereafter cited as OSP.
4. C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966. pp. 68-69. Lewis knew recent discoveries had disproven the existence of the canals, but he incorporated them into the novel because "they were part of the Martian myth as it already existed in the common mind."



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