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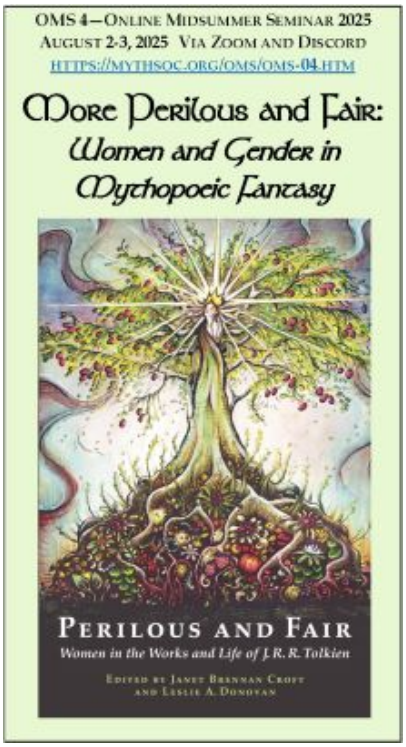

Friar Jack, The Science-Fiction Apologist: Exploring “The Friar of Oxford” by William Lindsay Gresham

Abstract

Few Inklings scholars have explored William Lindsay Gresham’s life outside of the fact that he was married to Joy Davidman. His poem “The Friar of Oxford,” published here for the first time, shows a surprising level of engagement with C.S. Lewis’s ideas, combining war imagery with references to the Ransom Cycle and a “mushroom cloud” reference that may show he explored one of Lewis’s literary influences. The poem’s contents add to existing Gresham-Inklings scholarship, and show Gresham accomplishing the same goals that the Inklings and their associates like Dorothy L. Sayers accomplished in their “escapist” or mythopoeic works.

Additional Keywords

william lindsay gresham; fletcher pratt; robert a. heinlein; joy davidman; spanish civil war; nightmare alley; matthew arnold; world war i poetry; spanish civil war poetry; war poems of the united nations; ransom cycle; that hideous strength; scientism; atomic bomb; olaf stapledon; the spires of oxford; winifred m. letts; clark sheldon; don w. king; frederik pohl the way the future was

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FRIAR JACK, THE SCIENCE-FICTION APOLOGIST: EXPLORING "THE FRIAR OF OXFORD" BY WILLIAM LINDSAY GRESHAM

SØRINA HIGGINS AND G. CONNOR SALTER

What if Joy Davidman wasn't the only person in her first marriage to write about C.S. Lewis? What if her ex-husband wrote about Lewis in perceptive, insightful ways that can enrich our readings of the Ransom cycle?[6] Indeed, a newly discovered manuscript contributes to our growing awareness that William "Bill" Lindsay Gresham (1909–1961), Davidman's first husband, has more to offer as a writer, reader, and thinker than has previously been recognized. The few analyses of Gresham tend to examine only a narrow section of his life and works. Crime-fiction scholars talk about his noir novel *Nightmare Alley*, frequently suggesting parallels between his characters' inner struggles and his alcoholism or suicide.[7] Inklings scholars often speak about him more or less as he's portrayed in the play and movie(s) *Shadowlands*: mentioning

[6] In light of the recent discoveries that *The Dark Tower* is genuine, and Brenton Dickieson's work showing *The Screwtape Letters* was originally connected to *Out of the Silent Planet* ("A Cosmic Shift"), we are using Ransom cycle over Ransom trilogy.

[7] For example, Craig MacDonald describes him as having a "noir life" (14).

his divorce from Davidman, alluding to reports of his substance abuse and other issues,[8] then shifting to discussions about Davidman's relationship with Lewis.

While several scholars, including Davidman biographer Abigail Santamaria, have revealed greater nuances, much remains to be explored. For example, hardly anyone has asked what Gresham thought of the Inklings. In this short article, we show the value of reconsidering Gresham's place in Inklings discussions, especially concerning theologically-infused fantastic fiction. Our examination of one poem reveals that, like the Inklings, Gresham transformed genres that critics viewed as "lowbrow" and used them for serious purposes.

Little has been written about whether Gresham knew the Inklings' writings.[9] Past scholarship has alluded to the fact he and Davidman both read Lewis's nonfiction—as shown in a joint letter they wrote to Lewis in 1949 (Santamaria 193–194). Gresham himself reports that, during his Christian period (c. 1946-1950), he and Davidman "used [Lewis's] books as constant reference points" ("From Communist to Christian" 77). However, biographers usually focus on Davidman's reading of Lewis, as detailed in their correspondence. Besides Douglas A. Anderson, who showed in 2008 that Lewis knew of Gresham's short story "The Dream Dust Factory" (Anderson 313–14),[10] few have discussed whether Gresham and Lewis read each other's work. Other than Anderson, the only major discussion on this point came in 2020 when Wheaton College's Marion E. Wade Center released a blog post by David C. Downing discussing an intriguing archival artifact. In August 1960, Gresham stayed with Lewis at the Kilns to see his sons and recorded Lewis on reel-to-reel tapes reading from *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *The Canterbury Tales*.[11] Even

[8] Some of these issues, such as reported abusive behavior, are complex. Santamaria notes that Douglas Gresham no longer affirms all the allegations, while David Gresham called them "a propaganda campaign" (250). With anyone else who could verify the accusations now deceased, "the full truth about what happened between Joy and Bill behind closed doors remains a mystery" (ibid).

[9] A notable exception is discussions of Gresham's preface to the first American edition of *The Greater Trumps* by Charles Williams, published by Pellegrini & Cudahy in 1950. See Hefling; Higgins "Mysticism, Magic, and Marriage"; Patterson, "The Triumph of Love"; Salter, "The *Nightmare Alley* of *That Hideous Strength*"; and Salter, "*Monster Midway*."

[10] As Anderson explains, Lewis's 1962 conversation about science fiction with Brian Aldis and Kingsley Amis includes him mentioning "Food to All Flesh," a story by Zenna Henderson that had only appeared in the same *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* issue featuring Gresham's story "The Dream Dust Factory" (314; "Unreal Estates" 146). Anderson does not mention that Gresham published "The Star Gypsies" in the same magazine, five months earlier.

[11] A digital version of the recording can be purchased through the Rabbit Room (see "The 'Lost' C.S. Lewis Tapes").

this discovery led Downing to focus on Lewis, not on the significance of Gresham's recording.

One further example illustrates the dearth of work on Gresham in relation to Lewis. In 2022, Harry Lee Poe released the third and final volume of his meticulous Lewis biography. It includes more particulars about Gresham than typically appear in Lewis biographies; for example, Poe mentions Gresham disliked unrealistic detective stories (233). Yet even here, in a highly detailed book including such obscure points as Lewis's penchant for cheap black tea (238–43), Poe omits Gresham's 1960 visit to the Kilns and the fact that Lewis apparently read Gresham's work—both important for understanding either author. We hope this article shows there is more to the Gresham-and-Inklings discussion and that their interactions carry significance for genre history.

A surprising document in the William Lindsay Gresham papers at the Wade Center is at the core of this Gresham-Inklings story. It is a one-page poem entitled "The Friar of Oxford," contained in a file labeled "Poems, 1941–1944" (Folder 280 in Box 4). Joe R. Christopher mentions "The Friar of Oxford" in his 2015 *Mythlore* review of *A Naked Tree*, Don W. King's edited collection of Davidman's poetry (186), but he does not quote it. In fact, with the exception of the final line, it has never been published until now.[12] The poem is printed below in its entirety.[13]

THE FRIAR OF OXFORD
(to C.S.L., with apologies to Winifred M. Letts)

I saw the Friar of Oxford
  As I was passing by,
The doughty Friar of Oxford
  Beneath a smouldering sky;
And My heart was won by Christom men
  Who teach men how to die.

The years go fast on Tellus
  Beneath its mushroom cloud;
The blistered rock receives again
  The knee-bones of the proud,
But when Maleldil murmurs, "Come!"
  We cast off earth and shroud.

[12] To the best of our knowledge, only one poem in the folder, "Last Kilometer," was published during Gresham's lifetime. Another poem, "Rahnhild," was published in 2024; see Salter, "William Lindsay Gresham and Norse Poetry."

[13] To preserve textual integrity, a strikethrough has been maintained.

We leave the brittle comfort
    Of microscope and slide;
Our heaven-mocking mirrors crack,
    The star bowl shatters wide,
And each man grovels in the blaze,
    Knowing that he has died.

God rest you, Friar of Battle,
    Who smote us, thigh and crown.
Old matin-ringer! When at last
    You lay ~~your~~ the broadstaff down,
God bring you to a fairer place
    Than even Oxford town.
        —William Lindsay Gresham[14]

NOTES ON THE TEXT

Before we examine the poem's context and content, here are a few notes about the text itself. The poem is typed, with handwritten revisions apparently made by Gresham.[15] In line five, the word "And" was penciled in afterward, hence why "My" is capitalized. In line 22, "your" was crossed out and replaced with "the." "Blistered" in line nine was not changed, but it was circled, and alternatives ("cankered" and "poisoned") were written in the margin. While none of these changes are sizable, they reveal that Gresham worked on this poem at least twice, making it more than a poetic flourish. It seems he cared about its quality enough to return to it, attempting improvements.

Calling Lewis "the Friar of Oxford" brings us to the poem's "apology to Winifred M. Letts." Gresham's piece is a parody of "The Spires of Oxford" by Irish poet Winifred Mary Letts (1882–1972); it appeared in her 1916 collection *Hallow-e'en and Other Poems of the Year* (7–8). As we will discuss later, "friar" not only serves a stylistic purpose—sharing the same assonance and final consonance as "spires," preserving the poem's rhyme scheme—it also connects

[14] "The Friar of Oxford" by William Lindsay Gresham. Copyright © by William Lindsay Gresham. Reprinted by permission of The Estate of William Lindsay Gresham and Brandt & Hochman Literary Agents, Inc. All rights reserved.

[15] We consulted Gresham scholars Don W. King and Clark Sheldon. King stated the handwriting samples gave him little to work with, but it is likely Gresham's handwriting (1). Sheldon gave a qualified affirmative: "The 'the' on the bottom is a close match to something I've got written in the early 1950s. There are some letters that seem like him, and some letters that don't. The P is problematic, unless there is an upstroke from the bottom of the letter to the top of the loop where his pencil skipped. But if forced to choose I would say they are in his hand, for what that's worth" (Sheldon 1).

to the affectionate image of Lewis as an apologist, defender of the faith. Since Letts's poem is in the public domain, we reprint it here:

THE SPIRES OF OXFORD
I saw the spires of Oxford
  As I was passing by,
The gray spires of Oxford
  Against the pearl-gray sky.
My heart was with the Oxford men
  Who went abroad to die.

The years go fast in Oxford,
  The golden years and gay,
The hoary Colleges look down
  On careless boys at play.
But when the bugles sounded war
  They put their games away.

They left the peaceful river,
  The cricket-field, the quad,
The shaven lawns of Oxford,
  To seek a bloody sod—
They gave their merry youth away
  For country and for God.

God rest you, happy gentlemen,
  Who laid your good lives down,
Who took the khaki and the gun
  Instead of cap and gown.
God bring you to a fairer place
  Than even Oxford town.

SPIRES VS. FRIAR
Letts's poem is a love song to Oxford and to the young men who studied there before dying in World War I. Gresham's poem is, in a way, a love song to Lewis, who studied at Oxford and returned there after surviving the war's front lines (*Selected Poems* 85).[16] Letts focuses at first on Oxford architecture, alluding in her title and first line to Matthew Arnold's poem "Thyrsis," in which he famously

[16] Indeed, by the time Gresham wrote his poem, Lewis had survived both world wars, although without serving in active duty in the second.

calls Oxford the city of "dreaming spires."[17] Gresham does not describe the city or the university but uses Letts's setting as background for his theological observations.

It's worth noting that "The Spires of Oxford" belongs to a tradition of World War I poems that includes works by Lewis, Tolkien, and other veterans.[18] Gresham was also a war poet: much of the Wade folder contains poems referencing his experience fighting in the Spanish Civil War in 1937–1938. Davidman included one of Gresham's poems about Spain, "Last Kilometer," in her 1943 anthology *War Poems of the United Nations* (319). Therefore, in "Friar," we have a war poet turning another war poem into a speculative reflection on faith, war, and science, and then dedicating the results to an older war poet.

GENRE(S) IN "THE FRIAR OF OXFORD"

Gresham's "Friar" is obviously a parody, making use of a serious war poem for a personal purpose: praising an author he admired. At the same time, it is also a serious poem about using popular literature (parody, speculative fiction, or detective stories, to name a few) to convey important ideas. Gresham used "lowbrow" fiction to communicate serious content in other works.[19] Famously, Lewis, Tolkien, and Williams used other "lowbrow" genres—fantasy, science fiction, and the supernatural thriller novel—as vehicles for their theological beliefs.[20] Inklings associate Dorothy L. Sayers used crime fiction to explore war trauma (via Lord Peter Wimsey's PTSD) and other weighty topics.[21] If there is a

[17] Lewis uses this phrase when describing his first time arriving in Oxford. He exited the train and began walking in the wrong direction, "all agog for 'dreaming spires' and 'last enchantments' (*Surprised by Joy* 225). He kept walking until, "when it became obvious that there was very little town left ahead of me," he turned around: "There, behind me, far away, never more beautiful since, was the fabled cluster of spires and towers" (226). "Last enchantments" is another phrase by Matthew Arnold, from a piece in *Essays in Criticism* on Oxford, which he imagines "whispering from her towers the last enchantments of the Middle Age" ("Preface" 7-8)

[18] Lewis's first published work was the poetry collection *Spirits in Bondage*, containing several poems written during his service in the trenches of France. Tolkien wrote at least seventeen poems during his war service, including the seminal "The Voyage of Eärendel the Evening Star"; several appear in *The Book of Lost Tales.*

[19] Alan Prendergast highlights how *Nightmare Alley* shows the "shadowy divide between popular entertainment and literature" where a pulp novel becomes more substantial than audiences expect (14)

[20] For example, see Malcolm Guite's five-lecture series on how the Inklings were "Fantasists or Prophets?" where he argues that they were both.

[21] For Sayers's use of World War I trauma, see Patterson, "All Nerves and Nose." For a recent discussion of Sayers's detective stories as mythopoeia, see Joanne Drayton, "How the Queens of Crime Fiction Developed a Modern Myth."

popular fiction spectrum with naturalistic murder mysteries at one end and science fiction at the other, *Nightmare Alley* may place Gresham closer to Sayers than to the Inklings.[22] However, with "The Friar of Oxford," Gresham moves closer to the Inklings' genre territory: he uses parody and science fiction to talk about how humans can face death courageously despite dehumanizing technological warfare, and he casts Lewis as the protagonist.

DATING "THE FRIAR OF OXFORD"

It is difficult to say when Gresham wrote this piece—which would determine when he began reading Lewis's science fiction. We know that Lewis and Gresham both contributed short stories to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*; we know Lewis had access to an issue containing one Gresham story (Anderson 313–314). We know that Lewis also contributed two stories to the magazine: "The Shoddy Lands" in 1956 and "Ministering Angels" in 1958. Therefore, it is plausible that Gresham read those tales. However, the references in this poem to "Tellus" and other details mean that Gresham is referencing a pre-1950s Lewis work: the Ransom cycle, published in 1938–1945.

Given that Davidman discovered the Ransom cycle in 1945–1946 (Santamaria 153), Gresham likely became acquainted with Lewis's fiction through her. The fact that Gresham praises Lewis as an apologist suggests he wrote the poem when he was sympathetic to Christianity. Davidman converted to theism in 1946 and became interested in Christianity the same year (Santamaria 176–177). Gresham reports a parallel spiritual path, stating that in 1946 he had at least come to believe in Christianity along with his other commitments ("From Communist to Christian" 76).[23] By spring 1948, their family was attending Pleasant Plains Presbyterian Church in Staatsburg, New York (Santamaria 186). Gresham later said he ceased to be a Christian in 1950, when he became interested in Zen Buddhism (212). Hence, he probably wrote "The Friar of Oxford" between 1946 and 1950.

In fact, we know from the final two lines that he wrote this poem at least before 1950. While Gresham apparently never published the complete poem, he ends his preface to Charles Williams's *The Greater Trumps* with the following: "Williams is one of those rare authors one longs to know and query in person about important things. But this we cannot do—he has slipped out of our three-dimensional segment. We have his books; perhaps he said in them all

[22] For a comparison of Gresham, Williams, and Sayers as crime-fiction storytellers, see Salter, "William Lindsay Gresham and the Inklings."

[23] Gresham is quoting from *The Screwtape Letters* (135), indicating that initially, his interest in Christianity mingled with his past leftwing ideals. The Marion E. Wade Center archives include Gresham's copy of the sequel article, "Screwtape Proposes A Toast," published in 1959 in *The Saturday Evening Post* (see Works Cited).

he had to say—or at least that we could understand. God bring him to a fairer place than even Oxford town" ("Preface" ix-x). Since the preface is dated Christmas 1949 (x), we assume Gresham wrote the entire poem before that date and decided to use the last lines for another project.

Whatever the precise composition date, the Ransom references show Gresham enjoyed and studied Lewis's novels well enough to include allusions within his own poetry. Lewis was not merely an author Gresham knew about, who inspired his wife's work, and later married his wife: Lewis was, at least for a period, a writer who inspired Gresham enough to influence him, too. The truth proves bigger than *Shadowlands* and connects this short, parodic poem to the development of Lewis's and others' "lowbrow" fiction.

INSUFFICIENCY OF SCIENTISM

"Friar" can be read as a lament to lives wasted when technology overthrows human dignity: one of the Ransom trilogy's big concerns. In the poem, Gresham contrasts Lewis as faith's defender with amoral science or "scientism" as a destructive force. Lewis uses this term in *The Discarded Image* when discussing the middle ages, claiming that "The mass media which have in our time created a popular scientism, a caricature of the true sciences, did not then exist" (17). As Sanford Schwartz explains, Lewis saw scientism as part of a worldview "which transferred the focal point of creation from a transcendent God to the progressive development of Man" (6). The results include a "conceptual apparatus that consigns other human beings to subhuman status, or summons up an 'evolutionary imperative' to legitimate the suspension of time-honored norms" (ibid). Lewis discusses his concerns about scientism in various contexts—including correspondence with a writer who became his and Davidman's mutual friend: Arthur C. Clarke.[24]

The Ransom cycle allows Lewis to present his concerns through vivid storytelling. Across the three books, Ransom battles two villains, Weston and Devine, who "use the presumption of their own evolutionary superiority to justify the conquest, displacement, or even the extermination of other rational beings," human and extraterrestrial, who do not fit their agendas (Schwarz 10). Gresham appears to allude to the destruction these villains wreak not just on others but on themselves. The lines about leaving behind laboratory research could refer to Weston, who was apparently a brilliant physicist but ignored the spiritual realities that illuminated the physical realm he studied. The cracking of mirrors (presumably in telescopes) and the shattering of the star bowl (which may be an astronomer's celestial globe or armillary) evoke the scenes in *Perelandra* when Ransom sees the "burning dome of gold" outside his spaceship

[24] For their 1943 correspondence about scientism, see Ryder W. Miller.

(34).[25] When he exits his spaceship and surveys the land, he sees the sky is "pure, flat gold like the background of a medieval picture" (35); a sky, which, as the medievalists believed, proves to be peopled with spirits and breathing celestial influences. The dark, empty images depicted in scientific charts and described by H.G. Wells and others have been cracked and shattered, letting in divine light.

Mushroom Cloud

The reference to a "mushroom cloud" may lead readers to assume Gresham wrote the poem after the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in August of 1945; while this is likely, the term predates the Manhattan Project, meaning we must tread carefully when using it to date or interpret Gresham's piece. As a meteorological term, it is attested at the end of the eighteenth century; the earliest instance we have located comparing a cloud to a mushroom is in Thomas Dick's 1799 *Atmospheric Phenomena* (138). The exact phrase is used as early as 1824, in Amos Eaton and John Webster's *Philosophical Instructor* to describe what is now called a stratocumulus cloud (145).[26]

However, given the rest of the poem, Gresham's "mushroom cloud" is unlikely to be a natural phenomenon. Google Ngram Viewer shows usage of the phrase sharply increases in the twentieth century, especially as war imagery. Could Gresham's use refer to World War I? Historians often cite the conflict's ruthless application of unprecedented military technology—mustard gas, machine guns, and tanks—its wanton disregard for human life, and its brutal battlefield carnage. One soldier present at the Battle of Messines recalled what it was like when nineteen land mines simultaneously detonated on Messines Ridge: "The whole ground went up and came back down again […]. It was like a giant mushroom" (van Bergen 88). Few wars showed scientism's danger more vividly.

[25] Another possible interpretation is that "the star bowl" may refer to the Heaven of the Fixed Stars from Dante's cosmology: the eighth sphere or firmament in which the stars were set, a concept that appears throughout *The Discarded Image* when Lewis discusses a medieval view of the night sky (Ward 23). More broadly, "the star bowl" could be a poetic reference to the dome or bowl of heaven as it appears from earth. This interpretation would fit with reading the third stanza as a dramatization of death: the soul breaks through the material heavens and into the Heaven of God. Interestingly, *The Bowl of Heaven* is the title of astrologer Evangeline Adams's 1926 autobiography. Gresham's familiarity with New York writers, his research on paranormal claims, and his wide-ranging library of books on occultism and Eastern religions make it plausible he knew her work ("William Lindsay Gresham Library Listing").

[26] We are grateful to Joe Hoffman for directing our attention to references earlier than those cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Before Hiroshima, the most famous usage of "mushroom cloud" in technological, military terms came in a science fiction novel by one of Lewis's influences: Olaf Stapledon's 1930 novel *Last and First Men*. The novel describes a group of scientists in Plymouth, England, watching a physicist demonstrate "the utilization of subatomic energy by the annihilation of matter" on Lundey Island (II.37). When the weapon detonates, "suddenly the whole island, three miles of solid granite, leapt asunder; so that a covey of great rocks soared heavenwards, and beneath them swelled more slowly a gigantic mushroom of steam and debris" (II.39).

Lewis had a complex attitude toward Stapledon's work. In the preface to *That Hideous Strength*, he praises Stapledon's rich powers of invention but says he does not admire Stapledon's philosophy (7–8). Mervyn Nicholson notes that Lewis disagreed with Stapledon's atheistic approach to science fiction (16), and Michael R. Collings documents Lewis's specific critique: in Stapledon's works, "science represents the highest good and Christian values play no essential role" (33). This is precisely Lewis's concern about scientism: not with science *per se*, but with a worldview that idolizes it above all else. Hence, Lewis's amoral scientists in *That Hideous Strength* may be described as negative inspiration from Stapledon: scientism's acolytes prove to be ruthless tyrants prepared to dominate and even eliminate human life. The ruthlessness even becomes hypocritical in the novel, when the scientists at NICE murder William Hingest, "one of the two scientists at Bracton [College] who had a reputation outside England" (*That Hideous Strength* 55), for not following their agenda. In the name of scientific progress, they kill one of their best scientists.

While scholars currently do not have a complete picture of Gresham's reading habits, evidence suggests he could have been familiar with Stapledon. After starting his publishing career in 1935 (Dorsett 52) and contributing to the true crime and detective story markets (Wood 13), he became familiar with various well-known science fiction writers in the postwar period.[27] He could easily have been aware of Stapledon's work even before reading *That Hideous Strength*.

Stapledon's use of the phrase "mushroom cloud" to describe an atomic weapon took on new relevance after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings: biographer Robert Crossley reports that immediately after the bombings, several scientists and journalists cited Stapledon's prophecies of atomic warfare

[27] Frederic Pohl recalls Gresham visiting "The Ipsy-Wipsy Institute," Fletcher Pratt's New Jersey home that hosted various writers during the 1940s–1950s ("Fletcher Pratt, Part 5"). Gresham's correspondents included science-fiction writers such as Pratt, Henry Kuttner, and L. Ron Hubbard (Salter, "Exploring William Lindsay Gresham" 1). Gresham and Robert A. Heinlein apparently knew each other (Heinlein 422). We would like to thank John D. Rateliff for locating the Heinlein and Pohl references ("Three Glimpses").

(324). Google Ngram Viewer confirms that usage of the phrase increased significantly after August 1945. Therefore, while the phrase may predate the Manhattan Project by centuries, the term became far more widely used when Stapledon's vision of atomic warfare became fact and was thereafter associated with atomic weapons. Wherever Gresham got the phrase from, it's extremely likely he refers to the atomic bomb in the poem.

Yet whether Gresham took the mushroom cloud from World War I, from Stapledon's work, or from the atomic bombs dropped on Japan, his usage accomplishes the same purpose: the image ties together the Ransom cycle's critique of scientism and the poem's emphasis on Lewis as a Christian defender of the faith. The "mushroom cloud" of Messines Ridge, the "gigantic mushroom of steam" from Stapledon's imagination, and the "mushroom clouds" over Hiroshima and Nagasaki all demonstrate the dangers that Lewis thought scientism posed if scientific progress conquered human dignity. Gresham uses the image to chillingly depict scientism's consequences. The poem reminds readers that Lewis's science fiction, like his apologetics, combats an antireligious understanding of progress.

Secondary World

Another fascinating feature of Gresham's poem is its subtle interweaving of Lewis's secondary world, The Field of Arbol, with a war-torn earth landscape. The "smouldering sky" of the first stanza could refer to a post-apocalyptic scene of fire and smoke after the dropping of an atomic bomb, where the very rocks are "blistered" by the devastating heat. Or it could allude to the Perelandrian sky: a "burning dome of gold" shot through with "violent" lightning, closing each day with a "many-coloured furnace" of sudden sunset (*Perelandra* 57). The second stanza mentioning life on "Tellus" suggests that the first interpretation may be correct. However, it is not strictly speaking our own earth, but the "silent planet" of the Ransom cycle, as evidenced by the reference to "Maleldil."

Maleldil is the God of the secondary world whose planets include Malacandra, Perelandra, and Thulcandra: a sub-creation that is nearly identical to the primary world but allows Lewis to embody theological themes in the landscape and narrative details. Calling God "Maleldil" serves as a fulcrum on which the two worlds pivot: for the first ten lines, the poem could be set entirely in the real world, the world darkened by guns and bombs. But then, for the thirteen lines after that reference, the two worlds intersect or even merge, as Lewis (the "Friar") exists in both simultaneously—and so do we. Furthermore, not only do "we," the readers, exist in the primary and secondary worlds at once: we also live on Tellus and "leave" it for heaven in the third stanza, knowing that we have died.

The knowledge of death may be intellectual: the knowledge that the "comfort of / microscope and slide" provided by scientism has led to a dead end. Alternatively, leaving Tellus for heaven may be the physical journey from mortal life to heaven. If the latter, it is noteworthy that Gresham treats death positively: "Last Kilometer" and his other Spanish Civil War poems included in the "Poems, 1941–1944" folder highlight battle carnage and death with no resolution. Here, as we discuss further in the section below on Death in Battle and Psychomachia, men "grovel in the blaze," but "Christom men" can "teach men how to die." Death, which Gresham and Lewis saw firsthand in war, becomes part of a larger vision in which Maleldil calls men to heaven. What seemed a mere parody poem with a few science fiction images turns out to propound a very serious theme indeed.

If we read the poem as Gresham exploring his war trauma via Lewis's Ransom cycle imagery and the (historical or speculative) atomic bomb, then it demonstrates how he and Lewis seek similar goals as veterans writing speculative fiction. They both used science-fiction imagery to comment on and reframe traumatic war events.[28] As Lewis puts it, one of art's functions is "to present what the narrow and desperately practical perspectives of real life excludes" ("On Stories" 10). Lewis uses science-fiction examples like H.G. Wells's *First Men in the Moon* to support this point in "On Stories," demonstrating how speculative fiction particularly can be a vessel for reframing experience to provide truth. Gresham used a more naturalistic but no less spectacular concept to explore truth and meaning in *Nightmare Alley*: the carnival as "a representation of a possible answer to the horrors of American society" (Shapiro 224). Sometimes, escapist literature says best what needs to be said.

Lewis as Apologetic Warrior

Gresham not only describes Lewis as an intellectual opponent of reductive scientism; he also depicts him as a Friar of Battle, doughty, wielding a broadstaff: a Christian soldier.

The first stanza calls Lewis "doughty," an archaic word for "brave, bold, resolute" ("doughty"). In medieval texts, it is almost universally used of a warrior or athlete, referring to physical prowess.[29] But Gresham does not call Lewis "The doughty Warrior of Oxford." Instead, he calls him a "Friar," a priest whose notable trait is giving up power, particularly economic power: Roman

[28] For a recent discussion of how Lewis alludes to World War II in the Ransom cycle, see Gumerova and Sergeeva.

[29] For example, Helen J. Nicholson observes that *vassaux*, the French word for squires, is "synonymous with 'doughty warrior'" in the *Chanson de Roland* (56).

Catholic friars take vows of poverty ("Friar"). Yet in the last stanza, Gresham refers to Lewis's weapon of choice: not the Bible, but a "broadstaff." The combination of a Friar and a broadstaff inescapably evokes the image of Friar Tuck of Robin Hood's Merry Men: a priest and warrior who fought for the right. Tuck used a quarterstaff, not a broadstaff, but he and Lewis were both known for their portly girth, love of good food and drink, rollicking sense of humor, stubbornness in (intellectual or physical) fights, and loyalty to Christian charity. As in the other instance where he used this poem's words to talk about an Inkling (the *Greater Trumps* preface), Gresham uses monastic imagery to depict his subject as a complex spiritual warrior. [30]

Perhaps saying he "smote us, thigh and crown" means that Lewis's words convicted his readers emotionally and rationally. Perhaps they are allusions to the Fisher King and to Christ crowned with thorns: both are powerful images from Christian literature, history, and iconography and literature. The Fisher King with the wound in his thigh or loins is an Arthurian legendary character, the keeper of the Grail—a reference that Gresham may have known either from reading Arthurian works such as Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* in his Brooklyn high school years, or with a researcher's help.[31] The Fisher King reference also ties into the Ransom trilogy. In *That Hideous Strength*, Ransom takes on the name Mr. Fisher-King.[32] At the end of the novel, he is taken away to "the cup-shaped land of Abhalljin" on the planet Perelandra, (notably reminiscent of the Grail-goblet, where he will be with King Arthur [*That Hideous Strength* 271]). Gresham's remark about a wound in the "crown" or head calls to mind both Christ's head wounded by the Crown of Thorns and Ransom's incurable wound in his heel, a reference to Genesis 3:15, a Christological text. Therefore, depicting the Friar as smiting us "thigh and crown" characterizes Lewis as a Christ-like, Arthurian warrior like his own Elwin Ransom: elf-friend, space-voyager, savior of unfallen Perelandra. High praise indeed!

"The knee-bones of the proud" implies humility and dovetails the poem's conversion imagery with its science fiction imagery. It may be read as the new convert bending in prayer, as Lewis did when he became a theist in 1929: "I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps,

[30] In the preface, Gresham calls Williams "a Christian mystic, gifted with uncanny insight" and describes the book as featuring "the simple piety of Brother Lawrence […] It is a guide to Christian charity, intercessory prayer and the practice of the presence of God" (ix). So, Lewis is like Friar Tuck, Williams is like Brother Lawrence.

[31] For example, Gresham dedicated *Monster Midway* to Sylvester L. Vigilante, who worked at the New York Public Library. We would like to thank Clark Sheldon for providing information about Vigilante's friendship with Gresham.

[32] For more on Ransom as an Arthurian figure, see Shogren.

that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England" (*Surprised by Joy* 279). If Lewis is the Friar whose work affects "the proud," then "the proud" may be readers like Davidman, who came to Christianity after reading Lewis's apologetics. It can equally be read as people falling to their knees in horror at another world war—the war that became the stage for Lewis's most prolific period as an apologist—and more specifically the new threat of atomic destruction: the fictional destruction that Stapledon describes in *First and Last Men* and the literal destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The description of Lewis as a matin-ringer is a creative liberty, not a biographical reference. Lewis not only did not ring matins; he disliked liturgical church worship. He said that hymns "were (and are) extremely disagreeable to me" (*Surprised by Joy* 286). His Oxford pupil Alan Bede Griffins reported this distaste "remained with him to the end of his life" ("The Adventure of Faith" 88). In that case, "matin-ringer" may be read as Lewis waking up readers spiritually. Like any good priest, the doughty friar is there at the beginning and end of the congregant's life: he wakes his audience up to spiritual concerns and teaches them how to die.

Death in Battle or Psychomachia

Whether the third stanza celebrates how God's truth shatters scientism or laments men dying in battle, the last stanza looks ahead to Lewis's own future death. In the context of a war poem about a spiritual soldier, this ending calls to mind another literary genre: psychomachia, or conflict of vices and virtues.[33] Gresham thus cleverly combines spiritual combat with physical combat in the person of Lewis as a Christian warrior.

Two lines after calling Lewis "doughty," Gresham categorizes him with "Christom men / Who teach men how to die." "Christom," a variation on the medieval word "chrisom," refers to christened or Christian people ("chrisom"). Since medieval audiences often used it in the context of a "Christom/Chrisom child," a christened infant who died after birth (Coster 285), it is appropriate that Gresham uses it to describe Lewis as a Christian teaching people how to to face death in a Christian fashion with courage and faith. Again, this is very like Ransom in *Perelandra*, showing Gresham's familiarity with that book. When Ransom and Weston (or the Un-man) are fighting their final, extended battle and find they are about to drown or be smashed to bits against rocks, Weston cries in despair. Ransom, on the other hand, rallies and shouts lines from *The Battle of Maldon*, then tries to instill courage in Weston by reminding him: "There are hundreds of mere boys facing death on Earth this

[33] The *Psychomachia* is an early medieval allegory written by Prudentius, depicting the conflict between Christian and pagan values.

moment. We'll do very well" (171). Here again, Lewis connects his science fiction to real events on earth, and Gresham connects the primary and secondary worlds in his poem.

Resurrection in "The Friar of Oxford"

But the story does not end there—neither the story of this poem nor the story of Lewis's life. In the second stanza of "The Friar," the fulcrum-word "Maleldil" occurs when the Friar murmurs to the readers, "Come!" and "We cast off earth and shroud." It seems that here, Gresham holds out hope of resurrection: both earth (the soil over a grave; the planet earth; this terrestrial existence) and shroud (grave clothes) are left behind as God calls believers to pass beyond "the star bowl" into whatever beauties are beyond.

However, the "earth and shroud" may also have a meaning specific to Lewis's fiction. In *Perelandra*, Ransom travels to Venus in a vessel that, as the narrator observes, looks uncannily like a casket or coffin (22). He casts off from the earth, lifted into the heavens by the Eldila (angelic beings or planetary intelligences). Before he gets into this vehicle, however, he's told to undress. He removes his "shroud" of earthly garments and leaves behind the earth. Whether Gresham had this scene in mind is impossible to know; yet the connection is fitting and plausible.

Finally, the poem ends with a prayer that when Lewis dies, "God [will] bring you to a fairer place / Than even Oxford town." Obviously, this refers to heaven. However, given the many allusions to the Ransom cycle, that fair place must also be the valley of Abhalljin "beyond the seas of Lur in Perelandra" (*That Hideous Strength* 271). There, Lewis/Ransom will join King Arthur and "Enoch and Elias and Moses and Melchisedec" (ibid), all great apologists for God in their own ways. At death, Lewis will effectively achieve the Holy Grail.

Gresham has packed all of this—praise of Lewis as (spiritual and physical) warrior, lament for war's devastation, warnings about technological dehumanization, and a literary-Christian hope for heaven—into a short parodic poem about "lowbrow" fiction. An impressive feat indeed, but one that many of his contemporaries (the Inklings included) were also accomplishing, each in their own way. The history of "lowbrow" escapist fiction is rich and complex, carrying ideological weight worthy of serious study.

Conclusion

"The Friar of Oxford" shows there is more to the Gresham and Lewis story than research has previously shown. Scholars have been aware he read Lewis's apologetics when Davidman was interested in Lewis (Glyer 11); Anderson's work established that Gresham and Lewis contributed short fiction to the same magazine in the 1950s; and the 1960 tapes established that Gresham was also

familiar with the Ransom stories. "The Friar of Oxford," an ode to Lewis's science fiction that considers Lewis's themes and even ties them into their mutual experiences as veterans, shows he was likely immersed in Lewis's work by the 1940s, enough that it was informing his own writing. Given his aforementioned preface to Williams's *The Greater Trumps*,[34] it is unsurprising that he also heartily engaged with the Ransom cycle. We may extend these points to argue that Gresham was not a casual reader of the Inklings: he was an early student of their work.

Furthermore, the fact that Gresham takes an affectionate view of Lewis's faith provides a glimpse into the least-explored part of his life: his 1946–1950 Christian period. "The Friar of Oxford" shows Gresham not as he's often portrayed: the war-torn alcoholic in the 1930s, the problematic ex-husband and father in the 1950s, or the suicidal cancer patient of the 1960s. Instead, it comes from his brief, stable period, a time that few Inklings scholars have explored and one worth celebrating.

If "The Friar of Oxford" shows Gresham following Lewis's example, using speculative fiction as a vessel for truth, the poem further enacts what connects him to the Inklings and their circle. Their works—Lewis's science fiction, Tolkien's fantasy epics, Williams's supernatural shockers, Sayers's detective stories—belong to genres considered uncultured by critics of the time. Yet they all used popular fiction as vessels for serious themes—like theology, war, and the dangers of scientism. Gresham not only used crime fiction (i.e., *Nightmare Alley*) to explore serious ideas: "The Friar of Oxford" shows Gresham using a genre that Lewis knew and loved, to explore truth. The two men who married Joy Davidman had more in common than domestic drama, and we ought to dig deeply into their imaginative explorations of truth.

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[34] It's worth noting that Gresham's preface, dated "Christmas 1949" (x), includes Gresham discussing George MacDonald. By the late 1940s, Gresham was well-versed enough in the Inklings to seek their influences.

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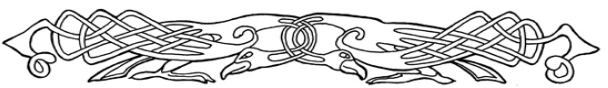

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