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It's About the Journey: Lewis on Heroes and Personality in Out of the Silent Planet

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It's About the Journey

Lewis on Heroes and Personality in *Out of the Silent Planet*

In C. S. Lewis's writings, specifically his fiction, there is an emphasis placed on the ordinary man who by no effort of his own stumbles into an adventure. It is Ransom, a middle-aged philologist on a walking tour. It is the Pevensie children, four siblings sent to find asylum from the Blitz. Lewis consistently chooses the ordinary for his protagonists over the heroic, showing that, in fact, "there are no 'ordinary' people."¹ In his novels, Lewis's heroes come from humble beginnings and are shaped by circumstances until Lewis is satisfied with them; that is, until they reach their full potential. This draws on his belief that humans only attain true personality by surrendering their personalities to God, who then shapes them into true sons: "The more we get what we now call 'ourselves' out of the way and let Him take us over, the more truly ourselves we become."² C. S. Lewis believes that even the most ordinary person is capable of becoming great; this philosophy is demonstrated by his choice of Ransom as the hero of his space trilogy, and Ransom's growth throughout his adventures from the shabby philologist to the kingly Pendragon.

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1949).

2. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. In *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2007), 175.

Lewis's insights on human personality are particularly helpful in understanding his choice of hero. In his essay on Lewis's view of personality, Bruce Young proposes that Lewis "see[s] the human person, not as a finished entity, but as an activity, as in process of being created."³ Lewis would agree with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "unfinalizable" self, that a human self cannot be labelled or fully defined. Lewis rejects the idea that one's personality is a stable, constant thing. He writes that God is not content to leave us as we are:

If we let Him—for we can prevent Him, if we choose—He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, A bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful, but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what He said.⁴

Lewis calls this a full surrender on the part of the human, and he says that it is necessary to surrender to Christ in order to actually acquire personality. In *Mere Christianity* he confesses, "I am not, in my natural state, nearly so much of a person as I like to believe: most of what I call 'me' can be very easily explained. It is when I turn to Christ, when I give myself up to His Personality, that I first begin to have a real personality of my own."⁵ Lewis even compares God to an author, writing that God "invented—as an author invents characters in a novel—all the different men that you and I were intended to be."⁶ Thus in his writing, instead of drawing on the ancient view of the hero, as one possessing heroic qualities from the beginning and using those qualities in his adventures, Lewis conceives the hero as acquiring heroic traits during his

3. Bruce W Young, "Beyond personality: C. S. Lewis' semi-postmodern view of the human person." *Appraisal* 9, no. 1 (2012): 40+. *Academic OneFile* (accessed November 3, 2016), 40.

4. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 163

5. *Ibid.*, 176.

6. *Ibid.*

adventures. Ransom goes on a physical journey that produces a spiritual journey, as he transforms into the hero he needed to become—just as humans who submit to God are transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Ransom starts off the novel as quite average. O’Hare calls him “a plain, no-nonsense” man. In the novel, “this rather ordinary hero finds himself party to some extraordinary goings-on.”⁷ While Ransom believes himself well-educated, it is soon clear to him that he has room for growth in many matters, such as the contents of the galaxy:

He had read of “Space”: at the back of his thinking for years had lurked the dismal fancy of the black, cold vacuity, the utter deadness, which was supposed to separate the worlds. He had not known how much it affected him till now—now that the very name ‘Space’ seemed a blasphemous libel for this empyrean ocean of radiance in which they swam. He could not call it ‘dead’; he felt life pouring into him from it every moment. . . . He had thought it barren: he saw now that it was the womb of worlds.⁸

Adding to Ransom’s ordinariness, there are certain aspects of his character that reflect certain of Lewis’s friends. While many attempt to identify Ransom with real-world persons, such as Charles Williams and J. R. R. Tolkien, O’Hare cautions against doing so. Concerning his own work on *Out of the Silent Planet*, he says that “attempting to engage in ‘sheer deduction’ for identification purposes . . . is the fruit not of criticism but of biographical second-guessing.”⁹ Instead, he examines various aspects of Ransom and how they align with various friends of Lewis. Instead of treating Ransom as an almost allegorized Tolkien, O’Hare notes certain “non-Tolkienian elements in the character of Ransom: the real man married while the fictional one did not, and the man in the novel took a doctorate while Tolkien never did, and so on.”¹⁰ He clarifies

7. Colman O’Hare, “The Hero in C. S. Lewis’s Space Novels.” *Renascence* 31, no. 3 (Spring 1979), 142.

8. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 32.

9. O’Hare, “The Hero,” 144.

10. *Ibid.*

his meaning further, saying, “But I do not think that Lewis tried to write a biographical paean for Tolkien any more than he tried to write one for Williams (who, unlike Mr. Fisher-King, was married).”¹¹ Instead, O’Hare argues that neither was “immortalized”; rather, they were utilized to “flesh out the author’s creations, color his ‘portraits’ and make them more ‘real.’”¹² Instead of making Ransom a portrait of a character, Lewis drew on the characters of his friends for small details to make him more realistic. O’Hare distinguishes between an *enactment* of a person and an “*allegorical* portrait” of a person.¹³ To assist with this, he references Lewis’s own response in 1958 via letter to a Mrs. Hook, in which Lewis writes,

Ransom (to some extent) plays the role of Christ not because he allegorically represents Him (as Cupid represents falling in love) but because in reality every Christian is really called upon in some measure to *enact* Christ. Of course Ransom does this rather more spectacularly than most. But that does not mean that he does it allegorically.¹⁴

To *enact* means to act out a role—literally, to “in-act.” Thus, Ransom in some sense *enacts* Tolkien and Williams—he plays the role of them in a manner, not representing them allegorically but taking on various characteristics of them. This use of real persons makes a character more realistic, and in Ransom’s case, more ordinary.

The fact that Ransom is so ordinary is significant in relation to Lewis’s view of the personality. Just as Lewis believes that personality must be shaped and changed throughout one’s life, Ransom must be shaped and changed in order to become the Pendragon in *That Hideous Strength*. Literary critic Janice Prewitt draws a contrast between Ransom and other heroes.

11. O’Hare, “The Hero,” 146-147.

12. *Ibid.*, 147.

13. *Ibid.*, 151.

14. C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume 3*. (HarperCollins). Kindle, 1005.

Before the rise of the individual and the development of the novel, a hero was generally of noble birth.¹⁵ However, with various movements such as the Reformation and the Renaissance, an emphasis was placed on the individual person. Instead of writing about the highborn, there was a surge of writing about common people. Lewis follows this tradition with his decidedly unromantic Ransom, who, as compared to Spenser's Red Crosse Knight, is a commoner-hero with no knightly skills except his intellect and moral values.¹⁶ Furthering the contrast, Prewitt writes, "Unlike the typical epic hero, Ransom, not of royal or noble birth, comes from the middle class. He wears a backpack instead of armor, walks instead of riding a horse, and talks rather than engaging in sword play."¹⁷ Interestingly, though, he is not a typical twentieth-century hero either: "he is not a soldier, a politician, an entertainer, or a sports figure. He is not particularly handsome or young."¹⁸ Instead, Ransom "is a middle-aged university professor, a philologist, not a dean or a college president. In his utter ordinariness, Ransom appears unheroic."¹⁹ However, this sets the stage for Ransom's transformation.

Drawing on Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Prewitt defines the hero in Lewis's space trilogy as one who learns to be heroic. She writes on fantasy, "Often part of the creation of the imaginary space includes a journey and subsequent adventures which reveal the qualities of character that define the hero."²⁰ This is what happens in both *Out of the Silent*

15. This is shown by such characters as Homer's Odysseus (a king) Shakespeare's Hamlet (a prince), etc.

16. Janice C Prewitt, "Heroic matriculation: the academies of Spenser, Lewis, and Rowling." *West Virginia University Philological Papers* 53 (2006): 25-39. *Academic OneFile* (accessed November 3, 2016), 27.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 25.

Planet and *Perelandra*. Since this paper does not have the scope to cover both, only the former will be examined. Prewitt writes that in novels with the hero type exemplified by Ransom, “the author creates an imaginary world as a sort of school, an ideal training ground for a character with heroic potential but without fully possessing the necessary virtues for heroic status.”²¹ Outer space and Malacandra serve as Ransom’s “school.” Here he is taught the cardinal virtues of Fortitude and Prudence. When Ransom first awakens in the spaceship, he is “thoroughly frightened—[he feels as if] he might at any moment pass into delirious terror or into an ecstasy of joy.”²² However, as he experiences the heat of the heavens, he begins to feel “vigilant, courageous and magnanimous as he had seldom felt on Earth.”²³ Even as Ransom begins his journey, he is already overcoming fear with a fortitude temporarily granted to him through the experience of the heavens. This leads to Lewis’s tweaked definition of fortitude: “fortitude is not the absence of fear in danger but, rather, the ability to set aside fear to accomplish some necessary task.”²⁴ As Ransom prepares to land on the surface of Malacandra, he does not experience paralyzing fear. Instead, he is able to rationally plot and plan, ensuring that he will not be helpless upon arrival.

Prewitt writes that heroes of Ransom’s type are taken from their circumstances so that they might grow, and then returned, the better for what they have learned: “Drawn from the current culture, these characters enter life in the imaginary world, acquire these necessary

21. Prewitt, “Heroic Matriculation,” 25.

22. C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1965), 23.

23. *Ibid.*, 29.

24. Prewitt, “Heroic Matriculation,” 27.

virtues, and return once more to the real world having gained heroic status.”²⁵ This is the experience of Ransom, who through his journey to Malacandra acquires the virtue of Fortitude. One of the key changes in his character is exemplified when he is hunting the *hnakra* with the *hross*. Before the hunt, Ransom reflects, “A short time ago, in England, nothing would have seemed more impossible to [him] than to accept the post of honour and danger in an attack upon an unknown but certainly deadly aquatic monster.”²⁶ He muses that there may be “something in the air he now breathed, or in the society of the *hrossa*, which had begun to work a change in him.”²⁷ Compare this to the experience of the Edmund in *Prince Caspian* while he is fighting the dwarf Trumpkin: “But the air of Narnia had been working upon him ever since they arrived on the island, and all his old battles came back to him, and his arms and fingers remembered their old skill.”²⁸ Lewis constantly refers to “air” throughout his novels. The Narnian air itself causes children to grow strong and old men to feel young again.²⁹ The very environments of Narnia and Malacandra serve as incubators, or as Prewitt terms them, “schools,” for developing virtues.

Lewis, a Platonist, felt that his modern culture was lacking in the area of the four cardinal virtues of Temperance, Prudence, Fortitude, and Justice. Thus, he creates Ransom, an ordinary man who goes “on a quest, an educational journey, during which [he] develops qualities preparing him for future rule or leadership.”³⁰ Prewitt notes that Lewis uses Ransom’s

25. Prewitt, “Heroic Matriculation,” 25.

26. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 77.

27. *Ibid.*, 77.

28. C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001), 364.

29. C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* and *The Magician’s Nephew*.

30. Prewitt, “Heroic Matriculation,” 25-26.

experiences “in the imaginary space [to define] the nature of the heroic and [comment] on the values of the current culture.” Ransom is a “non-heroic [figure] who will soon be revealed as heroic.”³¹

There are many instances in *Out of the Silent Planet* in which the reader sees Ransom learning Fortitude on Malacandra. When they first land, he gets his first view of *sorns* and reacts in fear: “now with a shock that chased the blood from his cheeks he saw that they were alive, that they were moving, that they were coming at him. He had a momentary, scared glimpse of their faces, thin and unnaturally long. . .”³² He runs from them, escaping Weston and Devine, his captors, and high-tails it into the wilderness, where he finds “nothing to fear—except the fact of wandering unprovisioned and alone in a forest of unknown vegetation thousands or millions of miles beyond the reach and knowledge of man.”³³ He is driven on not by Fortitude, but sheer survival instinct. He has several instances of fear; he has a “bad fright” when he meets a herd of giraffe-like creatures³⁴; he sees a *sorn* and “his heart stood still.”³⁵ Finally, he meets a *hross* named Hyoui. Thinking Hyoui to be an animal, Ransom is fearful. The narrator comments, “There comes a point at which the actions of fear and precaution are purely conventional, no longer felt as terror or hope by the fugitive.”³⁶ Ransom at this point is filled to the brim with fear from his experiences on Malacandra, and it remains for him to overcome this fear and step into Fortitude.

31. Prewitt, “Heroic Matriculation,” 25-26.

32. *Ibid.*, 45.

33. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 47.

34. *Ibid.*, 52.

35. *Ibid.*, 53.

36. *Ibid.*, 54.

As Ransom travels through Malacandra, first living with the *Hrossa* and then meeting the *sorns* and the *pfifltriggi* and finally the Oyarsa, he slowly overcomes this fear. The Oyarsa of Malacandra gives a reason for this: when his people moved from the surface of the world into the lower levels of the planet, he says, “one thing we left behind us on the *harandra*: fear. And with fear, murder and rebellion. The weakest of my people does not fear death. It is the Bent One, the lord of your world, who wastes your lives and befouls them with flying from what you know would overtake you in the end.”³⁷ Fear was not in Maleldil’s (God’s) original plan. It was introduced by the Bent One (Satan); thus the unfallen peoples of Malacandra do not experience it. Fear is what the Oyarsa accuses Ransom of: “You are guilty of no evil, Ransom of Thulcandra, except a little fearfulness. For that, the journey [back to Earth] you go on is your pain, and perhaps your cure: for you must be either mad or brave before it is ended.”³⁸ This is proved true; on the trip through space back to Earth, Ransom’s fear slowly fades away: “Some moments of cold fear he had; but each time they were shorter and more quickly swallowed up in a sense of awe which made his personal fate seem wholly insignificant. . . his heart because steadier than it had ever been.”³⁹ When they get to the end of their trip and are seemingly not going to make it back to Earth, Weston collapses in despair, but Ransom is quiet and calm, accepting of death. In the end, they land in England. Ransom wakes up to find that Weston and Devine have left the spaceship “in *fear* of its threatened ‘unbodying.’”⁴⁰ Now, it is others who are characterized by fear, not Ransom. Ransom has learned Fortitude.

37. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 140.

38. *Ibid.*, 142.

39. *Ibid.*, 146, 147.

40. *Ibid.*, 150. Emphasis added.

With C. S. Lewis's idea of the human personality in mind, it is clear to see that Ransom as a hero is a representative of the Christian. As Ransom submits to the greater knowledge of the *Hrossa* and the *sorns* and the Oyarsa, he gains Fortitude. Similarly, the Christian gains greater personality, greater personhood, when he submits himself to Christ, for "In him we live and move and have our being."⁴¹ As Lewis moves Ransom through his adventures, guiding him that he may gain Fortitude, God guides us through trials that teach us virtue: as Paul writes to the Romans, "Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame."⁴² It is not that God puts us through these bad things, but rather that he takes the trials and tribulations of our lives in a fallen world and he forces them to be for our good. Through our challenges, we become better image-bearers of Christ, which is God's goal for our lives.

C. S. Lewis views personality as an action. Human beings act out their personality; it is not a set, stable thing. However, human beings also have a Creator who has made them with the potential to enter into a personal relationship with Him. It is only through this relationship with God that we can fully enter into and grasp the personality that we were designed for, the personality that was designed for us. When a Christian physically dies, he will be united with God, but he will be a distinct being. Lewis writes in *The Problem of Pain* that "union exists only between distincts; and, perhaps, from this point of view, we catch a momentary glimpse of the

41. Acts 17:28 *ESV*.

42. Rom. 5:3-5.

meaning of all things.”⁴³ It is in our distinctness from God that we can be together with him—for a single entity cannot be together with itself. The fact that we will only realize our true personality in heaven means that in our current lives our personality is still evolving and growing and changing, and this principle is reflected through Lewis’s choice of character.

Ransom begins the novel as a shabby philologist and university professor on a walking tour: by all accounts, an ordinary man. This depiction is fleshed out with playful allusions to Lewis’s friends. Through his adventures on Malacandra, he learns the cardinal virtue of Fortitude. He makes the transformation from a fear-filled individual to a courageous hero. While this paper does not have the scope to follow the transformation through *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*, Ransom could not become the Pendragon in the final book apart from his transformation in *Out of the Silent Planet*. This also represents the Christian idea that our trials lead us to build character and grow more Christ-like in preparation for heaven, where God has prepared a place in heaven for each of us. Lewis writes, “Your place in heaven will seem to be made for you and you alone, because you were made for it—made for it stitch by stitch as a glove is made for a hand.”⁴⁴ Thus it is incumbent on us to use our time on Earth—almost a school or training ground for heaven—to become more Christ-like before we return home.

43. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 642.

44. *Ibid.*, 640.

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