

Introduction to C. S. Lewis' *That Hideous Strength*: A Technocratic Thriller

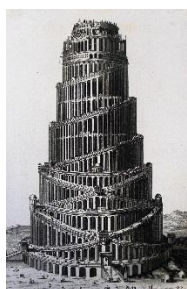
by Ted Lewis May 2021



"We don't want the world furred over by organic life. We must get rid of it.... Learn to make our brains live with less and less body: learn to build our bodies directly with chemicals."

Lewis himself called *That Hideous Strength* a "modern fairy-tale for grown-ups." One could place it somewhere between *The Magician's Nephew* (from *Chronicles of Narnia*) and Huxley's and Orwell's anti-utopian novels, *Brave New World* and *1984*. Remember how the world of Charn was destroyed by Empress Jadis, and due to the magic mechanisms of Uncle Andrew, she tried to make all London subservient? *That Hideous Strength* also involves a plot leading to total tyranny, but unlike the classic dystopian stories where the Controllers are already in full control, this story is about the very beginnings of technocratic rule, and thus the forces of good have a window of opportunity to stop the threat.

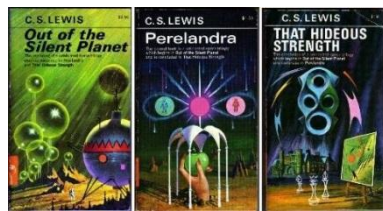
The title of the book gives a clue to the defeat of dark powers. Lewis drew the phrase from a 1555 poem about the Tower of Babel which had a lengthy "shadow of that hyddeous strength." In the end, great confusion falls upon the



university-sponsored National Institute for Coordinated Experiments (otherwise known as N.I.C.E.). Just as the Bible's Babel builders poked the heavens in their high-minded effort to make a name for themselves, modern technocrats of applied science, in the name of

Humanity, unwittingly broke the outer shield of “the Silent Planet.” What would have been a victory became an undoing. The antagonists of N.I.C.E. “pulled down Deep Heaven upon themselves,” allowing the celestial Powers to assist the protagonists of the story.

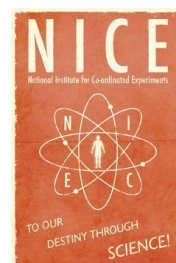
One might ask, “Is it necessary to read *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra* before *Hideous*?” It clearly helps to set the stage, but I would say it is not necessary. It is enough to know that Ransom, hero of the first two books, was vital in protecting Malacandra (Mars) from becoming colonized, and Perelandra (Venus) from becoming a fallen planet. Having fulfilled these heroic tasks, Ransom, back in Thulcandra (Earth), has become what David Downing calls a *unitive mystic*. He lives in a constant state of spiritual equilibrium in submission to higher beings known as *eldils*. One of his friends describes Ransom as one having “peaceful joy, enhanced powers, and intense certitude.”¹



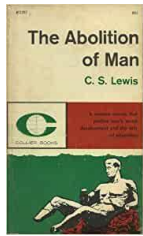
The real protagonists in *That Hideous Strength*, however, are Mark and Jane, a young married couple who barely see each other throughout the entire story until the last page! This is partly due to the fact that their marriage is not doing so well. Both of them have to face the truth of their own inner faults as they resist their respective journeys of conversion. Mark is willingly drawn into the inner ring of the N.I.C.E. network. As a budding sociologist, he can be useful in writing propagandistic material to better control public opinion. But the real reason for luring him in is to get to his wife, Jane, whose clairvoyant dreams foretell events yet to come. She, with great reluctance, is drawn into an opposite group, the fellowship of St. Anne’s, an eclectic community revolving around the headship of Ransom. In the end, her dreams are decisive in aiding this spiritually-tuned company.

The N.I.C.E. also has a head. Literally! A severed head that is kept alive with all manner of breathing and blood-circulating tubes.

¹ David Downing, *Into the Region of Awe*, IVP, 2005, p. 103. Description by Grace Underhill in *That Hideous Strength*.



And the Head gives spoken messages, too, thanks to the Macrobes, the fallen eldils of the Silent Planet. People can engage them through the technique-driven twins of magic and applied science. The Head is not only an oracle; it is also a prototype of Man Immortal: the end of evolution when Humanity overcomes Nature without need of a body. One of the Head's technicians explains how, "Man's power over Nature means the power of some men over other men with Nature as the instrument." (THS, 178)



This last line, as Alan Jacobs has pointed out, is verbatim from a spot in Lewis' *The Abolition of Man*.² In his preface to *Hideous*, Lewis confirms the link. "This is a 'tall story' about devilry, though it has behind it a serious 'point' which I have made in my *Abolition of Man*." The prospect of technocratic control by an elite group of people advised by scientists was no small matter for Lewis. In addition to writing Narnia tales and books on Christian apologetics, Lewis wrote over 30 books and articles which addressed trends in modern applied science.

Numerous critics, after *Hideous*' publication in 1945, claimed that Lewis was anti-science.³ We can hear the same call-out cry in our own era. But Lewis routinely denied this charge, explaining how he opposed "Scientism," the unchecked belief in Progress and Efficiency which allows for no "wholesome doubt."⁴ What he observed in his own day was a brewing subjective philosophy that disregarded the role of traditional moral values inherent to all human cultures. *Abolition* is basically a treatise on how modern society could 'progress' from traditional values to exchanged values (that seem good) to dehumanizing values, and thus to total technocratic control with no ethical constraints. In *Hideous Strength*, Lewis locates this drift within the "progressive element" of universities.

WARNING.... Reading *That Hideous Strength* is not an easy read! As hinted above, it is a malaise of mixed-up literary genres. It is full of obscure references. Some would say the plot lacks sufficient structure. And have I mentioned that Merlin from Arthurian times comes back to life in this story? Readers either give

² Alan Jacobs, *The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis*. Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 134. *Abolition*, p. 69.

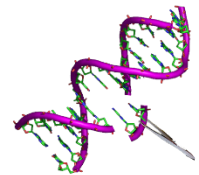
³ Miller, Ryder W. *From Narnia to a Space Odyssey: The War of Ideas Between Arthur C. Clarke and C.S. Lewis*. Simon & Schuster, 2003.

⁴ See C. S. Lewis, "Is Progress Possible? Willing Slaves of the Welfare State" in *God in the Dock* (Eerdmans, 1970); and "A Reply to Professor Haldane," in *Of Other Worlds* (Harcourt, 1966).

up at that point or they are fully captivated. And planetary beings that descend to earth? By Jove, is that even possible in good sci-fi literature?

But if any of the themes mentioned above grab your attention, perhaps because they resonate with current trends, this can be a very rewarding read. Sanford Schwartz points out that Lewis, who was fully aware of how Nazism and Communism threatened to transform humanity with subhuman agendas, positioned his dystopian vision in democratic, postwar England. He writes,

The capacity for the biotechnical transformation of humanity – driven by the extraordinary developments in genetic, robotic, information, and nanotechnologies – increases on an almost daily basis, and even if (for now) we in the West are somewhat less haunted by the specter of state-enforced eugenics, it seems as though the major concerns of the Space Trilogy are becoming ever more ominous as we move further into the twenty-first century.⁵



Here is one more reason to read *Hideous*. Lewis had a keen sense about how news media could be used to sway the masses, especially the intellectual top-layer. At one point the chief of N.I.C.E.'s secret police explains to Mark how good technocratic control requires that people are in a constant state of polarization. "Isn't it absolutely essential to keep a fierce Left and fierce Right, both on their toes and each terrified of the other? That's how we get things done." Lines like this are peppered throughout the book, revealing a side of Lewis that is lesser-known but certainly worth discovering.

Returning to *The Magician's Nephew*.... In the last chapter, Aslan gives both warning and command. Having explained how the world of Charn ended in disaster and ruin, Polly asks, "But we're not quite as bad as that world, are we, Aslan?"

"Not yet, Daughter of eve. Not yet. But you are growing more like it....Soon, very soon, great nations in your world will be ruled by tyrants who care no more for joy and justice and mercy than the Empress Jadis. Let your world beware. This is a warning. Now for the command. As soon as you can, take from this Uncle of yours his magic rings and bury them so that no one can use them again."

⁵ Sanford Schwartz, *C. S. Lewis and the Final Frontier*, Oxford Univ. Press, 2009, p. 7.

Yes, the relinquishing of rings rather than the employment of rings. An echo of the final fate of Sauron's rings, made by magic for the purpose of ruling over all the races. It seems that both Lewis and Tolkien had prescient understandings of how modern Western civilization would unfold if technocratic trends became commonplace.⁶

The perceptive reader of *That Hideous Strength* will hear echoes of Aslan's same warning and command for our own world. The difference, of course, is that Lewis is not writing his Space Trilogy for children; he is writing it adults.



Lewis, C. S. *The Abolition of Man*. Macmillan, 1943/1947.

Lewis, C. S. *That Hideous Strength*. Macmillan, 1945/1946.

Link here to a Readers Guide PDF on *That Hideous Strength*.

⁶ For literary sleuths of Inklings writings, you might investigate why Lewis would mention "Numinor and the True West" in his preface to *Hideous* without further detail, bidding his readers to await the forthcoming work from his friend J. R. R. Tolkien.