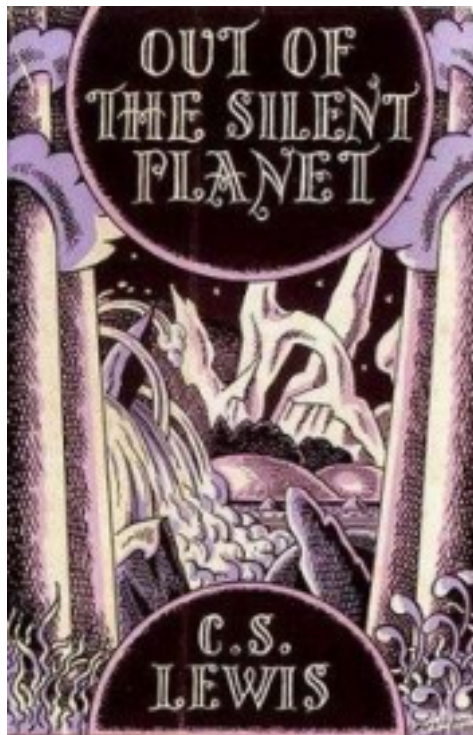


Out of the Silent Planet: Tensions Between Medieval and Modern Worldviews

by Ted Lewis, August 2022

Anselm House will be hosting three evening sessions in November and December led by Ted Lewis for this book by C. S. Lewis. For more information about this readers discussion group, click here. (ADD LINK OR DETAILS)



“Our right to supersede you is the right of the higher over the lower.” – Weston to Oyarsa

C. S. Lewis’ first book in his Space Trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*,¹ is really the only book in the set that is true science fiction. The other two, of course, fall into the same genre, but they are best viewed as hybrid projects. *Perelandra* is essentially a re-telling of a biblical myth with a lot of Dante and Milton thrown in.

And *That Hideous Strength*, the odd-ball of the bunch, is a dystopian fantasy that takes place in post-war England. Altogether, it is an intense mixture of diverse genres and disparate literary references which could drive the likes of Tolkien nuts.

The Trilogy hangs together through the main hero Ransom, a philologist from Cambridge. Through his encounters with spiritual beings in all three books, he moves from one state of enlightenment to another, allowing him to successfully fight against evil forces. Of course the other thread that holds the novels together is Lewis' critique of modern *scientism*, namely the ideological orientation toward applied science and technology as trusted means to help humanity reach new heights without the guidance of traditional ethics.

Lewis was a reader of science fiction long before the term was coined in the mid century. At eleven, his father gave him *First Men in the Moon* by H. G. Wells.² Multiple motifs can match up *First Men* with *Out of the Silent Planet*, including the pairing of a scientist with a business technocrat. Lewis references Wells in a prefatory note to *Silent Planet* in order to indicate his debt for borrowing standard sci-fi imagery.

What is most clear, however, is that Lewis did *not* borrow Wells' worldview. With Chesterton, Lewis sought to critique a host of 'isms' that clung to a modern attitude toward science and progress: materialism, evolutionism, reductionism, determinism, and later, behaviorism. Lewis' primary motivation to write his Space Trilogy was to "combat the dangerous ideas that were popular in the genre he loved."³

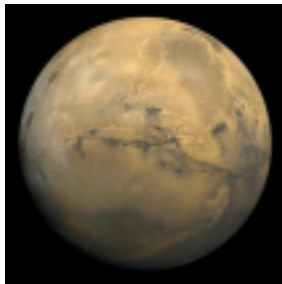
Whereas Well's famous story *The War of the Worlds*⁴ involved a Martian invasion of the Earth, Lewis inverted this framework by having imperialistic earthlings penetrating into a benign Martian world characterized by social harmony. A very real concern of his was that the fallen Silent Planet, Earth, would colonize all of the other planets which for him existed in celestial, pre-fallen states.

Central to Lewis' framework is the medieval cosmography of the heavens. When



Ransom is first drugged and dragged off to Mars in a space craft, he experiences first-hand how outer space is anything but a cold, dark, vacuous 'space'. Instead, he encounters a radiant display of colorful light; this beauty-scape literally affects his own disposition for the better. As Lewis explains in *The Discarded Image*, one is not properly "looking out" from Earth into empty space, but rather, according to the Medieval Model, "looking in" toward a majestic order.⁵

'Deep Heaven' (as Space is renamed) is thus one of many aspects of the paradigm that informs Lewis' literary system. On Mars (Malacandra) there is also a harmonious hierarchy of spirit beings and sentient beings. Three species of *hnau*, or rational creature, populate the planet. From their perspective they consider each other as equals, though they have very different vocations. Ransom, an expert in languages, is able to learn Old Solar, the *lingua franca* of the planets, and thus he communicates successfully with these beings.



The tension throughout OSP is primarily created by the imperialistic aims of Weston and Devine (who brought Ransom as a sacrificial victim). Lewis employs many of the stereotypical motifs of callous colonizers: the search for gold, the threat of guns, and the condescending dumbed-down speech. Behind it all is the bravado of a socio-evolutionary worldview that assumes higher civilizations merit the right to control lower ones.

One of the more crass expressions of Weston's view on life is that rational beings are expendable for the sake of "the greater good." No price – even "the rights or life of an individual or of a million individuals" – is too high to pay in pursuit of humanity's advancement and domination in the universe.⁶ Lewis explored this theme in his book *The Abolition of Man*. At some point in the future of the modern West, he argued, the rejection of objective moral values will lead to the loss of our very humanity.⁷

Just prior to the quote above about the "rights or life" of people is a telling line. "We have learned how to jump off the speck of matter on which our species began," explained Weston. "Infinity, and therefore perhaps eternity, is being put into the hands of the human race." *Out of the Silent Planet* is basically a story where two worldviews clash head on: one that glorifies the power of humanity

over everything else (which ultimately leads to its destruction), and one that glorifies the power of a Creator and the beauty of an ordered cosmos worthy of our respect.

The reader's discussion group at Anselm House for *Out of the Silent Planet*, starting in November 2022, will go through the book not so much chronological as it will thematically. Our three evening sessions will be arranged as such:

- 1. Lewis' positive framework for a well-ordered world**
- 2. Lewis' critique of modern scientism and progress**
- 3. Lewis' insights for how we can engage our current times**

A **Readers Guide to *Out of the Silent Planet*** by Ted Lewis can help new readers navigate their way through the book, including helpful knowledge about Malacandrian geography and Old Solar language.

A sequel discussion group for *Perelandra* is planned for November of 2023. *That Hideous Strength* was covered last November 2021, as it presented themes of great relevance to our current times of social control. But perhaps by 2024 we will need to revisit that capstone book to the trilogy.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, John Lane, The Bodley Head: 1938; Macmillan, 1965.

² H. G. Wells, *First Men in the Moon*, serialized in *The Strand Magazine*, 1900-1901.

³ Jacob E. Meyer, p. 39 in *A Compass for Deep Heaven: Navigating the C. S. Lewis Ransom Trilogy*, Diana Pavlac Glyer and Julianne Johnson, eds., Square Halo Books, Baltimore, 2021.

⁴ H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds*, William Heinemann, London, 1898.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, Cambridge University Press, 1971, p. 119.

⁶ Lewis, *Silent Planet*, p. 29; as referenced by Jacob Meyer in *Compass for Deep Heaven*, p. 42. ⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, Macmillan, 1947; originally three lectures given by Lewis at the University of Leeds in 1943.