

ARTICLES

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Conversion in C. S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*

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Abstract

C. S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength* is often regarded as one of his most bizarre and unwieldy books. There are very few studies of it, and those that do exist tend to focus on its central social critique, leaving its ancillary theological and philosophical themes largely unexplored. This article examines the motif of conversion in *That Hideous Strength*. It traces out the contrasting conversion narratives of Mark and Jane Studdock, situates them in relation to the larger social message of the novel, and then draws two applications for what we can learn about evangelism today from this book.

Christians who want to share their faith skillfully and winsomely in a post-Christian setting may benefit much from C. S. Lewis's portrayal of conversion. Conversion is a theme throughout Lewis's writings—one thinks of Eustace Scrubb in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, for instance, or Queen Orual in *Till We Have Faces*, or Lewis's own conversion story in *Surprised by Joy*. But one of the most insightful portrayals of conversion in the Lewisian corpus—and simultaneously perhaps the least known—comes in *That Hideous Strength*, the third of his *Space Trilogy* adult novels.¹

That Hideous Strength is fundamentally a work of social criticism—its preface states that it has the same point as *The Abolition of Man*, and the bulk of the plot concerns the threat of the technocratic National Institute of Coordinated Experiments (N.I.C.E.) and their aims to free humanity from nature. But the book also provides a unique window into Lewis's thought on a range of topics as diverse as gender, criminal justice, the Arthurian legend, and the nature of animal consciousness. The book's most visible motif, arguably, is conversion, and it is the conversion stories of Mark and Jane Studdock that organize the two central plotlines of the book, the one at the N.I.C.E. and the other at the manor at St. Anne's.² In fact, those features of *That Hideous Strength* that have garnered the heaviest criticism—the strongly dystopian mood,³ the relatively slow, inactive plot,⁴ and the overt supernaturalism that seems to break in disruptively against both mood and plot⁵—seem to serve precisely to accentuate the internal, spiritual development of these two characters. In other words, the blending together of the mundane and the miraculous that characterizes Lewis's story, however much it may have perplexed and displeased some readers, starts to make more sense in light of the book's message, particularly its depiction of conversion.⁶

Conversion in *That Hideous Strength*, like the structure and tone of the book as a whole, is marked by a sense of juxtaposition. Lewis's story highlights both the struggle and freedom involved in conversion, both the agony and beauty, both the otherworldly glory and this-world ordinariness, both its death-to-life decisiveness as well as its moment-by-moment complexity. A consideration of each character's conversion, followed by a comparison between the two in light of the larger social criticism in which they are encased, will result in several worthwhile insights that may enrich our understanding of conversion today.

1. Jane's Conversion

The defining characteristic of Jane's pre-conversion life is a fierce independence, an aversion to any sort of submission or deference or yielding. Early on she has a nightmare and runs to Mark for comfort, only to resent herself the next morning "for the collapse that had betrayed her last night, into being what she most detested—the fluttering, tearful, 'little woman' of sentimental fiction running for comfort to male arms."⁷ A bit later Lewis writes:

To avoid entanglements and interferences had long been one of her first principles. Even when she had discovered that she was going to marry Mark if he asked her, the thought, "But I must still keep up my own life," had arisen at once and had never for more than a few minutes at a stretch been absent from her mind. Some resentment against love itself, and therefore against Mark, for thus invading her life, remained.⁸

As Jane increasingly experiences clairvoyant dreams throughout the novel, she resents them as invasions into her established privacy. Initially she resists sharing them with those at St. Anne's because she doesn't want to join a group, to choose sides. Lewis narrates, with possible allusion to his own pre-conversion state, "she didn't want to get drawn in. It wasn't fair. It wasn't as if she had asked much of life. *All she wanted was to be left alone.*"⁹

Jane's desire to be left alone manifests itself in a caution and guardedness when she first gets involved with the company at St. Anne's. Early on she finds that, for instance, although she likes the Dennistons, "her habitual inner prompter was whispering, '[T]ake care. Don't get drawn in. Don't commit yourself to anything. You've got your own life to live.'"¹⁰ Later, when Jane is about to meet the Director, she once again warns herself, "[B]e careful. Don't get let in for anything. All these long passages and low voices will make a fool of you, if you don't look out. You'll become another of this man's female adorers."¹¹ This is Jane's great fear: getting "taking in."

As the plot develops and Jane interacts with the characters at St. Anne's, it becomes apparent that Jane's individualism is particularly cast along the lines of gender. She is not simply opposed to needing others, but especially opposed to needing *men*. In the earlier conversation with Dennistons, for instance, what provokes her is not Arthur Denniston's comparison of joining their Company to leaping in the dark, or getting married, or joining the Navy, or becoming a monk, or trying a new food. While these images awake "complicated resentments and resistances" in Jane,¹² it is only when he suggests that she needs her husband's approval to join the Company that Jane becomes really *angry*.¹³

Jane's posture of isolationism, her settled defiance of need and mutuality and commitment, is the primary impediment to her conversion to Christianity. Interestingly, Lewis drew attention to this same characteristic as the primary impediment to his own conversion. As he put it, "I had always wanted, above all things, not to be 'interfered with.' I had wanted (mad wish) 'to call my soul my own.'"¹⁴ In *Surprised by Joy* Lewis describes his own conversion story as the slow, step-by-step unraveling of this independence, comparing it to the long, piece-by-piece loss of a chess match.

Jane's conversion is structured very similarly, with several key experiences functioning as triggers in a long, slow defeat. The first significant experience (perhaps comparable to Lewis's reading of George MacDonald) is her meeting with "the Director" (i.e., Ransom), the head of the Manor at St. Anne's. Upon first sight, Lewis narrates, "she looked, and instantly her world was unmade."¹⁵ What strikes her so much about him (very much related to her conception of gender) is his kingliness. Unable to determine whether he is young or old, Jane is reminded of Arthur and Solomon, and finds that "for the first time in all those years she tasted the word King itself with all linked associations of battle, marriage, priesthood, mercy, and power."¹⁶ In encountering the Director, Jane forgets her grudge against Mark and her independence is loosened up enough that she does not bristle when he confronts her egalitarian view of marriage or emphasis on obedience as necessary for love.¹⁷

Towards the end of this conversation, Lewis writes that Jane was

thinking simply of hugeness. Or rather, she was not thinking of it. She was, in some strange fashion, experiencing it. Something intolerably big, something from Brobdingnag, was pressing on her, was approaching, was almost in the room. She felt herself shrinking, suffocated, emptied of all power and virtue.¹⁸

On her way home, Lewis depicts “four Janes” all squabbling with each other, trying to respond to this encounter. One part of her is simply receptive of the Director’s words; another part of her is disgusted by this receptiveness as degrading and vulgar; a third part of her introduces moral categories to the experience which produce guilt for not loving her husband; and a fourth part of her, the greatest, is overwhelmed with sheer joy. This fourth state of joy rises above the rest, and yet, significantly, this experience does not result in Jane’s conversion. It is a sort of “pre-conversion”—an initial experience, knocking her isolationism and pride off balance a bit, and opening up her trust to the people with whom her conversion is associated. Using Lewis’s chess metaphor, you could compare this experience to the loss of one’s first bishop or knight.

The second crucial development for Jane comes when she is confronted with the possibility of death while hunting for Merlin with some of the other characters from *St. Anne’s*. Whereas before she had never taken the idea of God seriously, now the possibility of death (combined with her earlier encounter with “kingliness” and “hugeness”) makes it impossible to think of anything else. Her perception of life has already been so upturned through her experiences at *St. Anne’s* that she feels that “almost anything might be true” and for the first time seriously considers the possibility of heaven and hell.¹⁹ But at this point in her development, the possibility of a supernatural world does not repeat her experience of joy, but still fills her with only dread.

“Check mate” comes during Jane’s second significant conversation with the Director towards the end of the book, during which her egalitarian view of spiritual reality is finally and irreparably dismantled. As the Director speaks to her about becoming a Christian, Jane realizes that her prior conception of a world beyond nature was of a “neutral, or democratic vacuum” in which equality was the greatest thing. As she listens to the Director, for the first time she considers that “there might be differences and contrasts all the way up, richer, sharper, even fiercer, at every rung of the ascent.”²⁰

From this insight Jane realizes that the “invasion” into her independence by marriage is only one small instantiation at the biological level of a deeper reality at the spiritual level. What has clogged up her relationship with Mark is of one piece (though on a much smaller scale) with what now clogs up her relationship with God. Jane’s fundamental opposition to submission and deference needs to be dismantled, and it is the knowledge of this need that leads to her conversion. As the Director puts it to her,

your trouble has been what old poets called *Daungier*. We call it pride. You are offended by the masculine itself: the loud, irruptive, possessive thing—the gold lion, the bearded bull.... The male you could have escaped, for it exists only on the biological level. But the masculine none of us can escape. What is above and beyond all things is so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to it.²¹

Lewis's depiction of Jane's conversion has earned him strong criticism from egalitarian and feminist scholars, and even among his admirers one can discern some embarrassment in defending him from charges of sexism.²² Nonetheless, if Lewis were half so condescending toward Jane as some read him, it is curious to find him describing his own conversion experience in such similar terms in *Surprised By Joy*. Lewis's point is that the path to life only comes through submission and surrender to God, and since Jane's pride is directed toward both her husband and God simultaneously, her submission to God can only transform her orientation toward her husband as well. As Woodruff Tait rightly observes, even while disagreeing with Lewis at points and making plain her own egalitarian convictions, "what Lewis pictures in Jane's submission is, in the end, a model, not just for *female* Christians, but for all Christians."²³ In other words, Jane's ultimate problem is not an egalitarian view of gender, but an egalitarian view of the universe: her great problem is not a lack of submission to Mark, but a lack of submission to anything.

Thus what Jane discovers is ultimately what all Christians discover: that relating to ultimate spiritual reality turns out to be less about being affirmed in one's self-chosen identity, and more about submission, surrender, obedience, and change. Heaven proves in the end less like a democracy and more like a monarchy: and conversion turns out to be less like a triumph and more like a defeat.

Jane walks into a Garden after this conversation with the Director to think. She worries, "supposing one were a thing after all—a thing designed and invented by Someone Else and valued for qualities quite different from what one had decided to regard as one's true self?"²⁴ For a while she is still offended by the thought that even God would never understand her, never take her seriously—that she would be eternally misunderstood. Finally, at a particular point in her walk in the garden, she becomes aware of being in the presence of some new world or Person, and in that presence she realizes that

this demand which now pressed upon her was not, even by analogy, like any other demand. It was the origin of all right demands and contained them. In its light you could understand them: but from them you could know nothing of it.... In this height and depth and breadth the little idea of herself which she had hitherto called *me* dropped down and vanished, unfluttering, into bottomless distance, like a bird in space without air.²⁵

This second experience changes Jane as much as her first encounter with the Director, but in a different way: in the first conversation Jane experiences hugeness, in the second one she sees herself in *relation* to hugeness. In the awareness of God's presence and glory, her lifelong independence is finally undone. She realizes that heaven may be a monarchy, but it is unlike any human monarchy; God may be King and Sovereign, but never has anyone been more unlike a common human tyrant; and conversion may be total defeat and loss, but it is a blessed defeat into joy and life.

2. Mark's Conversion

Mark's conversion is in some respects the exact opposite movement from Jane's. Whereas Jane's deepest fear is being taken in; Mark's is being shut out. She fears intrusion; he fears exclusion. She is always fortifying defensive walls; he is perpetually climbing and then discarding ladders. Mark personifies the phenomenon of Lewis's thought called the "Inner Ring."²⁶ One gets a glance at his driving psychology at one point when, trying to justify his role in media propaganda he comforts himself with the thought of "nobody ever again having the right to consider him a nonentity or cipher."²⁷ That is the great fear animating his life. When Mark's career is threatened at the N.I.C.E., for instance, his conscience is overcome by his "other and stronger self, the self that was anxious at all costs not be placed among the outsiders."²⁸

Lewis's own conversion is materially more similar to Jane's than Mark's. But one might also see in Mark's inner-circlism something of Lewis's experience as a teen at Malvern and again as an adult at Oxford. In an early letter to his brother, Lewis spoke of "the real Oxford" as "a close corporation of jolly, untidy, lazy, good-for-nothing, humorous old men, who have been electing their own successors ever since the world began and who intend to go on with it."²⁹ And one cannot help but wonder what experiences in Lewis's own life informed the book's many scenes depicting the inner life and politics of Bracton college (the opening story of the Bracton College meeting, for instance, breathes with such ease and familiarity that it almost feels autobiographical).³⁰

Like Jane, and like Lewis himself, Mark goes through a series of pre-conversion experiences. First, the possibility of death during his imprisonment by the N.I.C.E. disillusioned him from his ambitions and compels him for the first time to honestly consider his life. Looking back at each stage of his life, he recognizes a recurrent pattern in which his need to belong has always squeezed out all real joy and driven away his closest friends. As Lewis describes it, "he looked back on his life not with shame, but with a kind of disgust at its dreariness.... He was aware, without even having to think of it, that it was he himself—nothing else in the whole universe—that had chosen the dust and broken bottles, the heap of old tin cans, the dry and choking places."³¹

During a period of solitary confinement that follows this experience, Mark sustains some kind of spiritual attack and cries out for help. During this experience, he realizes that the philosophy of his captors is the logical consequence of principles he has believed all his life, and he loses confidence in the freedom of his own thinking and willing.³²

He is then exposed to bizarre forms of psychological torture, such as being placed in rooms of odd disproportions and grotesque pictures, and being made to do seemingly random, meaningless tasks. These experiences are designed to produce in Mark what one of his captors (a man named Frost) calls "objectivity" (the notion that all thoughts are mere chemical reactions and the self is an illusion). But it has the opposite effect:

As the desert first teaches men to love water, or as absence reveals affection, there rose up against this background of the sour and the crooked some kind of vision of the sweet and the straight. Something else—something he vaguely called the "Normal"—apparently existed. He had never thought about it before. But there it was—solid, massive, with a shape of its own, almost like something you could touch, or eat, or fall in love with.³³

Mark gradually takes sides with the "Normal" and the "Straight" over and against the naturalistic philosophy of his captors, and when Frost finally orders him to trample on a crucifix, he refuses, reasoning that even if Christianity is a fable and the universe is a cheat, "why not go down with the ship?"³⁴ In the end, Mark is released, and as he returns to Jane in the final pages of the book, he reviews his life and his marriage from a completely new, humbled standpoint. But even at this point it is not yet clear whether and when Mark has fully converted: all these developments seem to be preparatory, pre-conversion experiences.

3. Conversion in Light of the Social Message of *That Hideous Strength*

Many interpreters of Lewis have noticed the structural symmetries of Mark and Jane's conversions, with similar sequencing but often diametrically opposite results.³⁵ Both become swept up in a supernatural community (one angelic, one demonic). Both meet the respective "Head" of their order, and the meeting produces a profound result (joy for Jane, horror and revulsion for Mark). Both face the prospect of death, and have a resulting religious and existential crisis (openness to the excitement of life for Jane, awareness of the boredom and insipidity of his life for Mark). Both have climactic experiences that produce multiple selves, all squabbling with each other (Jane's with the Director in chapter 7, Mark's in chapter 8 with Dimble).

The contrast between these two conversion movements, however, comes into even clearer focus when they are interpreted, not merely in relation to each other, but against the broader social message of *That Hideous Strength*. The book is typically interpreted as a critique of modernity, and one can indeed detect a steady medievalism/modernism contrast throughout the book, culminated in the translation of Merlin from the latter to the former. Mark and Jane are, for their own part, quintessentially *modern* characters—their very names, unlike other names in the book, are prosaic and dull, and their conversions are frequently depicted in terms of movements away from modernist ideas and assumptions. What makes Mark's discovery of “the Normal” a necessary pre-conversion step, for instance, is his “modern” education, which has made him what Lewis calls a “man of straw.”³⁶

Seen in this light, the book's contrapuntal oscillation between its two narratives, those of Jane and Mark, is simply one piece of a larger dialectic running throughout the book serving to contrast good vs. evil, Belbury vs. St. Anne's, beauty vs. utility, Britain vs. Logres, and above all, a medieval vs. a modern view of the universe and our place within it. Within this contrast, the manor at St. Anne's represents the older, romantic world where love and obedience are seen as the ultimate aim of humanity, while the N.I.C.E. represents the newer, mechanistic world where ruthless progress and evolution are seen as the ultimate. Just as the N.I.C.E. seeks to divorce the mental and the material, best represented in Whither's flights from reality (cutting mind from body) and Frost's “objectivity” (cutting will from mind), so the Company at St. Anne's represents the “affirmation of our organic, embodied, and finite condition” (hence ending the book with sex).³⁷

It is not insignificant that Lewis wrote *That Hideous Strength* at the same time as he was researching for his *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*.³⁸ Lewis's popular and academic works often exhibit cross-pollination: *Perelandra*, for instance, written at the same time as Lewis's *Preface to Paradise Lost*, portrays many of the themes of Milton's great work.³⁹ In his *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, Lewis opens the work by arguing against the commonplace view that modernity brought about emancipation from medieval magic and superstition. Rather, for Lewis, the Renaissance brought about an age in which science simply replaced the role that magic had played in previous cultures, namely, twisting nature to serve humanity's ends rather than bending humanity to fit within nature. Of course, this is exactly the threat represented by the N.I.C.E., Lewis's modern analogue to the wickedness of the Tower of Babel.

The presence of the Arthurian legend in the book, a source of perplexity for some critics, becomes less strange when viewed in relation to this larger historical contrast. But it also may help explain one of the other strange features in *That Hideous Strength*, such as why it is not, like the first two novels, interplanetary. Lewis originally began *The Space Trilogy* in an agreement with his friend J. R. R. Tolkien to write the kinds of books that they wanted to write, but no one else was writing. Lewis was assigned to write a space-travel story (which became *Out of the Silent Planet*), and Tolkien was assigned to write a time-travel story (which only resulted in the aborted *The Lost Road*). If Lewis crafted *That Hideous Strength* to make up for his friend's failure to complete his end of the bargain, replacing space-travel with time-travel, then the sort of time-travel Lewis used (involving Merlin and medievalism) would certainly have been materially relevant to the criticism of modernity he sought to make. In other words, if Lewis's goal in the first two books in *The Space Trilogy* was to invert a modern cosmology with a medieval one in which “space” is not cold and empty but full of life, then his goal in the final installment of the trilogy was to invert a modern view of history with a medieval one in which modernity is not mere progress beyond pre-modernity but rather a kind of fall or declension from it—ultimately a second Babel.⁴⁰

As sharp as Lewis's contrast between medievalism and modernity is, it is not without a subtle irony, for (as Schwartz demonstrates) halfway through the novel it is revealed that the leaders of the N.I.C.E. are searching for the grave of Merlin the Magician, under the influence of demonic forces.⁴¹ Thus the difference for Lewis between medievalism and modernity is not that one invokes the supernatural, while the other invokes progress—as though Lewis were affirming a kind of cultural stasis or mere return to the past. Rather, for Lewis modernity has its own kind of magic and mysticism, while Christianity, for its part, is not opposed to a kind of development and “evolution.”⁴² That is just why the conversions of Mark and Jane (as long, slow, developments out of barrenness and into joy) play such an important role within the overall thrust of the book.

In fact, keeping Lewis's larger social message in view may go some distance in answering the criticism that Lewis has sloppily thrown together the mundane and the miraculous in *That Hideous Strength*. If part of Lewis's purpose is to undermine the common misconception of modernity as the age of reason and moderation replacing the superstition and mysticism of the medieval world, one can more readily appreciate the role of Mark and Jane within the novel. Their day-to-day struggles (marriage boredom for Jane, academic ambition for Mark) contrast so wildly with the fantastical realities of the book (global catastrophe, demonic invasion, the return of Merlin) that without both it is hard to make heads or tails of Lewis's subtitle: “A Modern Fairy Tale for Grown-ups.” Apparently juxtaposing the “modern”/“Grow-up” with the “Fairy Tale” was part of Lewis's intentional design, part of his strategy for undercutting the myth of modernity as emancipation from magic. What better way to make this social critique than by contrasting the diabolical and magical (the N.I.C.E.) with the organic and the natural (St. Anne's), and slowing narrating the transposition of a typically “modern” married couple from the former to the latter?

4. Lessons for Today

Two aspects of Lewis's portrait of conversion may be particularly worth reflecting on with a view to our understanding of conversion today, particularly in our efforts at evangelism in post-Christian settings. First, both Mark and Jane's conversions occur in a complicated, sequential process. For each character, there is a dramatic turning point, and yet most the real drama occurs in the process that leads up to that moment. The conversions are total and all-encompassing, but not simple or punctual. They fall out, like Lewis's conversion, kind of like a slow chess match. Second, the “pre-conversion” experiences of each character differ according to the particular shape their lives have taken without God. Jane's isolationism is dismantled by the experience of glory (“Hugeness”); Mark's inner-circlism is dismantled by the experience of morality (“the Normal”).

These “pre-conversion” experiences are as unique to each person as they are necessary for the change to occur. In fact, they are not only different from each other, but nearly opposite each other. Mark's pre-conversion experiences are largely moral/ethical, and occur through relationships with evil people; Jane's pre-conversion experiences are largely transcendent/aesthetic, and occur through relationships with good people. Mark enters a company headed by devils and looks inward; Jane enters a company headed by angels and looks outward. Mark must suffer to torture and defeat to stand up with a conscience; Jane must taste enrapturing joy before bowing down in submission.

The slowness and specificity of each character's conversion does not take away from their supernatural character. Both Mark and Jane come to see that their lives are not merely incomplete without God, but plunging headstrong into ruin and misery. One feels in both accounts the intensity of the struggle, the power and beauty of the total reversal that is finally accomplished in each character. In Lewis's imagination, one can well see why Christ would call conversion a *rebirth* in his conversation with Nicodemus ([John 3:3](#)). But looking at Lewis's depiction of conversion, one can *also* see why Christ rarely makes the same kind of appeal to two different people: right after he speaks to Nicodemus about rebirth, for instance ([John 3](#)), he will speak to a more “worldly” sinner about living water ([John 4](#)).

Lewis's insights into the nature of conversion remind us of the need for sensitive exegesis of the hearts and lives of our non-Christian friends and neighbors. It would likely do little good to hand Mark Studdock a gospel tract before his encounter with "the Normal." Similarly, any call to repentance in Jane Studdock's life would probably only generate offense prior to her encounter with joy. And yet, how many Mark or Jane Studdocks live and work around us each day? For most of our non-Christian friends and neighbors, converting to Christianity must simultaneously or previously involve converting *out of* the anti-objective, anti-idealistic, anti-Platonic, anti-transcendent worldview that is increasingly common in post-Christian Western culture.

In other words, conversion involves both disconnection and reattachment, both death and resurrection: and sometimes the *death/disconnection* part can be a long, messy process. This is certainly Lewis's own experience, and that of countless others throughout church history as well.⁴³ And because this process is different for different people, gospel *proclamation* generally requires gospel *application*. Francis Schaeffer used to say that if he had only an hour to spend sharing Christ with someone, he would spend the first 55 minutes listening, and the last 5 minutes presenting Christ. Listening is a necessary part of evangelism because conversion is a step out of sin, and sin entangles different people in different kinds of idols.

To be sure, the ultimate need of the human soul does not change. Every human being most basically needs God, and therefore every fallen human being needs the removal of that which separates us from God, sin/guilt/death. And yet, different people will often *experience* gospel need and gospel fulfillment in different ways in different settings. Not everyone has a Lutheran crisis of conscience and guilt; some have an Augustinian crisis of soul and desire, or a Kierkegaardian crisis of selfhood and angst; and of course many have no felt crisis at all.

Perhaps, therefore, the greatest need for the evangelization of postmoderns is simply a *sense* of God. In a post-Christian culture, you cannot assume *God* as a metaphysical or ethical framework. Saying "Christ died for your sins" will mean very little to Mark Studdock until he has taken sides with "the Normal" in his N.I.C.E. jail cell; it will mean very little to Jane Studdock until she experiences the "hugeness" and joy that upsets her individualism; and it will likely mean very little to postmodern people who are unsure whether there are such things as objective goodness, truth, beauty, meaning, or souls.

5. Conclusion

In closing, it is worth reflecting on the value of Lewis making these points in a novel, instead of a more abstract kind of writing. In a post-Christian setting, the arts may play a particularly useful role for communicating spiritual truths, particularly those that may function to induce "pre-conversion" experiences. One thinks, for instance, of how many postmodern people have gained a sense of transcendence from reading Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and how often this has played a significant role in conversions to Christianity, even though the book contains no Christian allegory.⁴⁴

The arts are powerful because they can provide a sense of glory (think "hugeness") and goodness (think "the Normal")—those very qualities for which postmodern, transcendence-starved people so desperately ache. The person who lives next to you or works across from your cubicle may scoff at the notion of miracles or heaven, and they may bristle at the idea of sin or judgment. But they may also sense a beauty and charm in middle-Earth or in Narnia or at St. Anne's that cannot be accounted for within the limits of their worldview.⁴⁵

[1] By “least known” I am referring both to the general preference among popular readers of books like *Mere Christianity* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* over *The Space Trilogy*, as well as the relative dearth of secondary literature on *The Space Trilogy* (also called *The Ransom Trilogy*). T. A. Shippey, “The Ransom Trilogy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*, eds. Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), notes that only three book-level studies of *The Space Trilogy* have been conducted: David C. Downing, *Planets in Peril: A Critical Study of C. S. Lewis' Ransom Trilogy* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992); Jarod Lobdell, *The Scientific Novels of C. S. Lewis: Space and Time in the Ransom Stories* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004); and Sanford Schwartz, *C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier: Science and the Supernatural in the Space Trilogy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[2] Interpreters of *That Hideous Strength*, in focusing on the larger drama at Belbury and St. Anne's, often neglect the internal developments within Mark and Jane. A helpful exception is provided by Wesley A. Kort, *Reading C. S. Lewis: A Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 133–149, who detects two threads to the novel, the “large story” of Belbury's struggle to control society and the “personal story” of Mark and Jane struggling to adjust to marriage. For Kort, these two threads in the story are closely related to one another, and between the two the more prosaic struggles of Mark and Jane are more important, since they frame the narrative (134).

[3] Schwartz, *C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier*, 93–94, draws attention to the striking similarities between *That Hideous Strength* and 18th century Gothic romances, particularly their blending of “the Probable and the Marvellous.” Schwartz attributes this similarity to the influence of Lewis's friend (and fellow inkling) Charles Williams, who drew from this genre for his “spiritual shockers,” which Lewis imitated so exactly in *That Hideous Strength* that the book is frequently called “a Charles Williams novel by C. S. Lewis” (see Schwartz, *C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier*, 92). The Charles Williams/Gothic influence goes a long way in explaining the darker tone of *That Hideous Strength*.

[4] Lewis's writing is typically compact and compressed. By comparison, *That Hideous Strength* is somewhat sprawling (more than twice the length of the first two books in the trilogy put together). This, combined with its abundance of characters, has not gone unnoticed by critics. See, for instance, Shippey, “The Ransom Trilogy,” 244.

[5] George Orwell's early review, for instance, expressed what would become a common criticism: “One could recommend this book unreservedly if Mr. Lewis had succeeded in keeping it all on a single level. Unfortunately, the supernatural keeps breaking in, and it does so in rather confusing, undisciplined ways.” He then goes on to draw particular attention to the Merlin narrative, Ransom's perpetual youth, Jane's dreams, and the presence of “various superhuman visitors from outer space, some of them with rather tiresome names.” He particularly faults the story's abrupt conclusion, claiming that “the book ends in a way that is so preposterous that it does not even succeed in being horrible in spite of much bloodshed.” George Orwell, “The Scientists Take Over: Review of *That Hideous Strength*,” *Manchester Evening News*, 16 August, 1945, <http://www.lewisiana.nl/orwell>. More recently, Rowan Williams has described the destruction of the evil characters at the end of the story with the following words: “‘over the top’, I think, is the only expression one can use for this. I think it's when the elephant breaks loose and comes into the dining room and begins trampling people to death that I feel something has snapped in the authorial psyche” (“*That Hideous Strength: A Reassessment*,” in *C. S. Lewis and His Circle: Essays and Memoirs from the Oxford C. S. Lewis Society*, ed. Roger White, Judith Wolfe, and Brendan N. Wolfe [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015], 99).

[6] That the novel's apparently haphazard mixture of the mundane and the supernatural was an intentional decision on Lewis's part, if not already apparent from the book's subtitle, is evident from a 1945 letter to Dorothy Sayers, where, on the heels of several negative reviews, he wrote, “apparently reviewers *will not* tolerate a mixture of the realistic and the supernatural. Which is a pity, because (a) it's just the mixture I like, and (b) we have to put up with it in real life.” Quoted in *C. S. Lewis: A Companion & Guide*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 231, italics his. Though many reviewers were critical of the seeming polarities brought together in *That Hideous Strength*, others praised this aspect of the book. H. P. Edens, for instance, wrote in *The Punch* (August 1945): “it is Mr Lewis's triumph to have shown, with shattering credibility, how the pitiful little souls of Jane and Mark Studdock become the apocalyptic battlefield of Heaven and Hell.” Quoted in *C. S. Lewis: A Companion & Guide*, 240.

[7] Lewis, *That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups* (1945; reprint, New York: Scribner, 2003), 44.

[8] *Ibid.*, 70–71.

[9] *Ibid.*, 81–82, italics added.

[10] *Ibid.*, 112.

[11] *Ibid.*, 139.

[12] *Ibid.*, 113.

[13] *Ibid.*, 114–15.

[14] C. S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, in *The Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Inspirational Press, 1987), 125. See the helpful discussion in Downing, *Planets in Peril*, 28–29.

[15] Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 139.

[16] *Ibid.*, 140.

[17] Some have suggested that this conversation is patterned after that between Percival and the fisher-king in grail legend. See the discussion in Downing, *Planets in Peril*, 77–78.

[18] Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 147. Already on her way to the Manor, we note that Jane is struck by “the size of the world” that is opening up to her, anticipating what she experiences during her time there (p. 44).

[19] *Ibid.*, 231.

[20] *Ibid.*, 312.

[21] *Ibid.*, 312–13.

[22] Among the most overblown and misleading critical accounts of Lewis on gender is A. N. Wilson's *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 2002), perhaps only surpassed by Philip Pullman's tirade against Lewis for the Narnia books (which he describes as “grotesque,” “disgusting,” “ugly,” “poisonous,” and “nauseating” (Michael Ward, “C. S. Lewis and Philip Pullman,” *The Mars Hill Review* 21 [2003], http://www.planetnarnia.com/assets/documents/74/Lewis_and_Pullman.pdf). Alan Jacobs, a leading interpreter of Lewis who is more balanced and appreciative of his thought, also seems a bit uncomfortable in discussing what Jane Studdock reveals about Lewis's thought on gender (see his *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005], 258–59). Interestingly, Monika B. Hilder (*Surprised by the Feminine: A Rereading of C. S. Lewis and Gender*, *Studies in Twentieth-Century British Literature* 12 [New York: Peter Lang, 2013]) argues that Lewis's highly nuanced view of gender, grounded in a theological framework that ultimately validates and affirms femininity, is misunderstood today precisely because it subverts Western chauvinistic assumptions.

[23] Jennifer L. Woodruff Tait, “‘You Will Have No More Dreams; Have Children Instead:’ Or, What's a Nice Egalitarian Girl Like You Doing in a Book Like This?” *Inklings Forever* 6 (2008), 10, italics original, www.taylor.edu/cslewis. Woodruff Tait also points out, interestingly, that for all the Director's strictures regarding equality as “not the deepest thing,” in actual practice the manor at St. Anne's is far more democratic than the N.I.C.E., as well as most communal arrangements—there are no servants, but all (men and women alike) take turns with the house and garden work.

[24] Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 315.

[25] Ibid.

[26] See the helpful discussion in Jacobs, *The Narnian*, 180–83. Cf. C. S. Lewis, “The Inner Ring,” <http://www.lewissociety.org/innerring.php>.

[27] Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 132.

[28] Ibid., 98.

[29] Quoted in Downing, *Planets in Peril*, 119.

[30] These elements are what lead Downing to call *That Hideous Strength* a “satire on modern academia” (*Planets in Peril*, 6).

[31] Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 243–44.

[32] Ibid., 264–67.

[33] Ibid., 296–97.

[34] Ibid., 333–34.

[35] Richard J. Purtill argues that “the intricate pattern made by the movement of the two Studdocks” is “too orderly to be accidental,” then providing an impressive summary of the opposite sequence of their movements (“*That Hideous Strength: A Double Story*,” in *Longing for a Form: Essays on the Fiction of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Peter J. Schackel [Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1977], 97). For instance, Jane’s encounter with Hardcastle, a member of Mark’s community, is contrasted with Mark’s conversation with Denniston, a member of Jane’s community. Schwartz also has a helpful discussion in *C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier*, 111. Purtill also draws attention to the opposition of Ransom and Whither, the respective “directors” of their community, for whom language serves opposite ends: clarity for the former (a philologist), and obfuscation for the latter (“*That Hideous Strength: A Double Story*,” 100). Downing, *Planets in Peril*, 58, provides some further perceptive parallels: “Jane begins with a malaise and lack of commitment, either to her marriage or to her scholarship; Mark begins with a reckless commitment, a headlong plunge to fulfill his ambitions by the shortest route possible. Jane dreams realities and thinks they are illusions; Mark is deluded about the actual workings of Bracton and N.I.C.E., just when he thinks he knows what is really going on. Jane takes a slow train to join St. Anne’s, while Mark rushes to Belbury in a big, flashy car driven by the reckless Feverstone. Jane is invited to join St. Anne’s, while Mark is coerced into joining N.I.C.E. The fresh garden at St. Anne’s fills Jane with images of paradise, while the garden at N.I.C.E. is artificial and sterile, like “a municipal cemetery” (p. 101). Jane is filled with ineffable joy when she first meets the head of St. Anne’s—the regal and mystical Ransom, returned from Perelandra. Mark is filled with unspeakable horror and revulsion when he meets the “head” of N.I.C.E.—a decapitated head supposedly kept alive by the scientific apparatus but actually animated by dark eldils.”

[36] Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 182, “in Mark’s mind hardly one rag of noble thought, either Christian or Pagan, had a secure lodging. His education had been neither scientific nor classical—merely ‘Modern.’”

[37] Schwartz, *C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier*, 139.

[38] C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*, Oxford History of English Literature 3 (1954; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

[39] Shippey even calls *Perelandra* a “reprise of books 4 and 9–10 of *Paradise Lost*” (“The Ransom Trilogy,” 242).

[40] The title *That Hideous Strength* comes from a reference to the tower of Babel story in a 16th century David Lyndsay poem. The couplet in question reads: “the shadow of that hyddeous strength, sax myle and more it is of length.”

[41] Schwartz, *C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier*, 95.

[42] *Ibid.*, 3–18. See especially his discussion of Lewis’s portrayal of good as dynamic and developmental, and an “evolving Eden,” on pp. 14–15.

[43] St. Augustine makes for a good case study in this regard. Augustine experienced a dramatic conversion in 386, but only after a long, complex, process involving a back-and-forth interplay between Christianity and various other non-Christian or sub-Christian religions and philosophies. He was a Manichee for almost ten years before his conversion to catholic Christianity, and it was not orthodox, catholic Christianity *per se* that led him out of Manichaeism, but a sort of loose conversion to neo-Platonism, which exposed to his mind the errors of the Manichaeic view of good and evil. Some historians have merged Platonism and Christianity together as one movement in Augustine’s development, but Peter Brown demonstrates that Platonism was an autonomous (brief) phase just before his conversion (*Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, revised ed. (Los Angeles: U.C.L.A. Press, 2000), 140). Augustine’s absorption of Plotinus in the 380s was as a kind of preparatory stage, an intellectual incubating period, making him ripe for that crucial moment in the garden in 386. Nor, interestingly, did Augustine decisively discard neo-Platonism when he embraced Christianity, but rather it continued to develop in his thought alongside Christianity, interwoven with it. Only gradually over the next decade does neo-Platonism recede into the background as Augustine drifts away from an intellectualized Christianity, from the Platonic ideal of the “Philosopher” pursuing wisdom, and becomes, by the time of *The Confessions* in 397, more distinctively and more simply, a Christian. Moreover, more clearly than with Manichaeism, neo-Platonism leaves a lingering influence on his thought and expression, palpable for example in his admiring attitude towards pagan philosophy in *The City of God* (written between 413–426). One could perhaps say that his neo-Platonism gets absorbed into and transformed by his Christianity, rather than simply replaced by it. But even this is a process, and (again) takes a decade.

[44] Responding to suggestions that the One Ring represented the atomic bomb, Tolkien protested, “I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so.... I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers.” J. R. R. Tolkien, foreword to *The Lord of the Rings* (1966; reprint, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), xxiv.

[45] I am grateful to Brian Tabb for his editorial suggestions and for directing me to several recent works on *That Hideous Strength*.

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