

C.S. Lewis' "That Hideous Strength"

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Though it would not see publication until August 1945, C.S. Lewis finished his greatest novel, *That Hideous Strength*, on Christmas Eve, 1943. In terms of depth, style, and audacity, *That Hideous Strength* is superior to its closest dystopian rivals, *Brave New World* and *1984*. Its characters are far more realistic, and the setting—far from being medicated pristine world of Huxley's or the grim soiled world of Orwell's—of post-war Britain is genius, in its execution as well as in Lewis's presumption.



It is well worth remembering that Lewis wrote this extraordinary novel during one of the darkest periods of the Second World War. German troops had lost ground in Russia as well as in Italy during 1943, but the Axis still held the vast majority of European countries in an iron grip. There was, by no means, certainty of an allied victory, even though the British had performed well in North Africa and were now bombing Berlin. The Tehran Conference, held

in November 1943, discussed allied invasion of central and northern Europe, but, again, victory was far from sure. While it did not seem to Lewis or to his fellow British that the Nazis would physically invade England by late 1943, England might very well become unwittingly a fascist power in its struggle against fascism. Lewis desperately wanted to prevent such an outcome.

That Hideous Strength is the third of Lewis's celebrated *Space Trilogy*. In *Out of the Silent Planet*, the hero Elwin Ransom had traveled to Malacandra (Mars), and in *Perelandra*, he had traveled to Venus. *That Hideous Strength* takes place at home, in a small fictional college town. Ransom, having saved the Malacandrans from Terran imperialism, and having prevented a second Fall in Eden in *Perelandra*, has inherited money and an estate, St. Anne's-on-the-Hill, and has formed a company to combat the grasping and progressive power of a new private-public institute known as the NICE: The National Institute for Coordinated Experiments. Far from large or mighty, Ransom notes that his company consists of very few. "We are four men, some women, and a bear," he notes.[1] Tellingly, though, Ransom is known as the Pendragon, and he is, legitimately, the modern heir of the early medieval monarch, King Arthur. His circle, though far from physically powerful, represents what remains of integrity, honesty, and faith in the modern world.

Ransom, however, does not even appear in the novel directly until the second third of the novel. Instead, the novel revolves around a newly married couple, Jane and Mark Studdock, and the choices—generally poor—that they each make. Throughout most of the novel, the two are separated spiritually and physically from one another. Critically, the two were to have been the parents of the next King Arthur, but, using birth control, they destroyed this blessing. "For a hundred generations in two lines the begetting of this child was prepared," one character laments, "and unless God should rip up the work of time, such seed, and such an hour, in such a land, shall never be again." [2] A grudging seeress, Jane moves reluctantly and quietly toward alliance with Ransom, while Mark inches his way, however haltingly and awkwardly, toward the NICE.

Both Ransom's forces and those of the NICE seek to find the ultimate weapon in this war between good and evil, the wizard Merlin, asleep now for some fifteen centuries. Where he is buried and what side he will choose are unknown. Was he a pagan, a Christian, or some third thing? Awakened, will he serve good or ill?

In the story, Lewis brilliantly describes all of the evils of *That Hideous Strength*—that is, the grip of the devil, earth's guardian angel gone rogue—with each new evil progressively revealed to be worse than the previous one. Bureaucratic tyranny, subjectivism, social gospelism, scientism, puritanism, Gnosticism, fascism, and communism each appear in varied form during the story. "That Hideous Strength holds all this Earth in its fist to squeeze as it wishes," Ransom explains.[3] Yet, no matter how much the devil might be involved, humans have freely chosen the paths by which evil has made itself known.

What should they find incredible, since they believed no longer in a rational universe? What should they regard as too obscene, since they held that all morality was a mere subjective by-product of the physical and economic situations of men? The time was ripe. From the point of view which is accepted in Hell, the whole history of our Earth had led up to this moment. There was now at last a real chance for fallen Man to shake off that limitation of his powers which mercy had imposed upon him as a protection from the full results of his fall. If this succeeded, Hell would be at last incarnate. Bad men, while still in the body, still crawling on this little globe, would enter that state which, heretofore, they had entered only after death, would have the diuturnity and power of evil spirits. Nature, all over the globe of Tellus, would become their slave; and of that dominion no end, before the end of time itself, could be certainly foreseen.[4]

The devil might be the most powerful of angels, but he can only manipulate, not make; only distort, not create. Thus, through a perversion of the gift of free will, men have become fallen, worshipping themselves and their works, thus remaking the world not in God's image, but in Satan's.

Not surprisingly, especially given the author's own conservative and traditionalist views, Lewis's novel offers pithy criticisms of much of the modern world. Academics, for example, can only think of human beings as groups, not as individuals. Teachers want to make mockeries of their students. Police want nothing more than to beat the population into submission. Engineers want to denude the earth of its vegetation. The press exists to fool the public with propaganda. And, the powerful, naturally, crave nothing but more power.

The West, again, Lewis reminds us, brought this upon itself, no matter how much the devil might be cheering us on.

The poison was brewed in these West lands but it has spat itself everywhere by now. However far you went you would find the machines, the crowded cities, the empty thrones, the false writings, the barren beds: men maddened with false promises and soured with true miseries, worshipping the iron works of their own hands, cut off from Earth their mother and from the Father in Heaven. You might go East so far that East became West and you returned to Britain across the great Ocean, but even so you would not have come out anywhere into the light. The shadow of one dark wing is over all Tellus.[5]

As bleak as all of this is, Lewis does always ingeniously demonstrate the power of sacrificial love, noting that it not only created the world but redeems it. At one key point in the novel, Venus—the embodiment of love—actually descends upon St. Anne's-on-the-Hill, fundamentally inspiring a better future through the act of procreation, thus, finally, consummating a marriage, the ultimate association.

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Notes:

[1] Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 292.

[2] Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 278-279.

[3] Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 293.

[4] Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 203-204.

[5] Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 293.

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