

THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE FICTION LITERATURE CHALLENGE –
“OUT OF THE SILENT PLANET” BY C.S. LEWIS

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Abstract: C.S Lewis is best known for being the author of the Narnia series of novels (written between 1949 and 1954) and also for being a Christian apologist. What is not so well known outside of the science fiction fraternity, if such a one exists, is that he wrote a highly influential trilogy of science fiction novels, starting with *Out of the Silent Planet* in 1938.

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C.S Lewis is best known for being the author of the Narnia series of novels (written between 1949 and 1954) and also for being a Christian apologist. What is not so well known outside of the science fiction fraternity, if such a one exists, is that he wrote a highly influential trilogy of science fiction novels, starting with *Out of the Silent Planet* in 1938. It is alleged that Lewis decided to write the story after reading David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus*, but must surely also owe a debt to *A Martian Odyssey* by Stanley G. Weinbaum and *A Princess of Mars* by Edgar Rice Burroughs. However, in the edition I read, the 2001 Voyager Classics edition (which is combined with the follow up – *Perelandra* – which I haven't read as yet) the introductory note from Lewis indicates that the debt of creativity belongs with HG Wells. Which unfortunately gives the game away regarding the plot, to some extent.

The story of *Out of the Silent Planet* begins with a gentleman walking in the countryside. Before long he has found himself, significantly via his own acts of kindness, in the house of a scientist, and intervening on behalf of a poorly educated boy. The gentleman is Professor Ransom, a middle-aged man on a walking sabbatical. The scientist is Weston. With him is an old adversary of Ransom's, an adventurer called Devine. Before he realises, Ransom is drugged and aboard some kind of spaceship, somehow in space. He finds himself on a planet known as Malacandra. Apparently he is an appeasement or sacrifice for the natives, known as sorns. On arrival, however, Ransom escapes his human captors. He then has a series of short and almost perfunctory adventures where he meets two other intelligent races of the planet; the hrossa and the pfifltriggi. Each of the species has particular characteristics. The sorns are very tall and very slender humanoids, and which are surely the origin of the pseudo-scientific aliens in modern culture known as the Greys. They are the scientists and thinkers of the planet. The hrossa which resemble stretched otters, with their love of water and boating. They are poets and musicians; the creators. The final race, the

pfiflriggi, are the builders. They resemble insectile frogs. Ransom is introduced to another race, while being pursued by his erstwhile captors, the Eldils – who are beings apparently made of light. They have a prime, or leader, called Oyarsa who summons Ransom to explain himself and his presence on what we by now know is Mars.

So not much of a plot, it would seem. However, the making of this story is the writing, the characters and the allegory. It certainly has a place in the pantheon of respected and influential science fiction stories for a number of reasons. Despite only brief appearances, Weston is a reasonably interesting character and symbol of the scientific and potentially godless world that Lewis perhaps foresaw. Devine is less so, more of an in-between character. While Ransom is the decent everyman, explaining to the reader the morals and dilemmas of the story. Oyarsa, towards the conclusion of the novel, describes Weston as having “the mind of an animal,” and his mind is filled with “fear and death and desire”. And this is perhaps key. Weston, fearing for his life, argues that the advancement of human civilization justifies any action that would conventionally be termed “immoral”. Even his death would be fine providing it would eventually lead to the conquest of Mars and the eventual population of space by humankind.

Lewis is possibly showing that the blind following of scientific progress is immoral and salvation is found in a god, or spirituality at least. For it is a thinly veiled symbol that Oyarsa is an angel, and a high one too. Oyarsa describes space as heaven and that all the planets have a guardian angel such as he. Only Earth does not, as there was once a battle between the ‘bent one’ (Satan) and the ‘old one’ (God), and that since Maleldil the Young (Christ) no-longer rules. So now Earth is the Silent Planet, with no god, but amoral man who will take another’s life as easy as he would take some food. The allegory is an obvious one, especially from the viewpoint of history. The good follow a spiritual, inclusive path, while the immoral pursue science at any cost. Lewis wasn’t shy about promoting Christianity and morals. Out of the Silent Planet is possibly the first true science fiction story to address the issue head on. Certainly, the giants that Lewis’ stood upon almost always avoided it, with the exception of those describing religious systems within potential utopias. And it definitely is science fiction. Unlike the tales of Edgar Rice Burroughs on Barsoom, there is no fantasy or mystery here. The human travellers arrive on a space-ship, which while it is not specifically explained, is the product of science and not magic. Even the angels are just another species in the heavens and not supernatural beings. What is interesting, however, that even now, even in an established genre in the late 1930s, and almost without exception (Lindsay, Voltaire and Stapleton notwithstanding) the science fiction writer’s imagination had not escaped the terminal velocity of Mars.

Lewis is an eloquent writer, as his subsequent success perhaps proves. The characters, both human and non- are interesting. There is a complete lack of female

characters of significance, which is always sadly to be expected from the male authors of this time. Perhaps Lewis and others simply didn't know or understand enough about women to write about them properly, or perhaps I'm being too much of an apologist for outright sexism. The descriptions of the Martians and the planet itself are noteworthy. The three main species find themselves in other stories by other authors in time. Meanwhile, Ransom's descriptions of being on a strange planet and how he felt about the aliens are unusual and evocative. On reflection, the world building and universe mythology that Lewis creates, while thinly disguised, is complex and engaging. The language and writing draw you in. It is only the simple and to be honest, not very interesting, series of mini-adventures that Ransom undertakes (albeit rarely of his own choosing) that really lets the story down. Lightweight narrative clashing with heavy moral preaching leads to an unbalanced and unsatisfactory literary science fiction meal. "Out of the Silent Planet" is the first book in C. S. Lewis's Space Trilogy, published in 1938. The novel is a thought-provoking and imaginative work that blends science fiction, fantasy, and philosophical themes. Set in a distant future, the story follows the protagonist, Dr. Elwin Ransom, on an interplanetary adventure to Mars (known as Malacandra by its inhabitants) and his encounters with alien beings. Through this journey, Lewis explores human nature, morality, and the complexities of cosmic existence. The novel opens with the introduction of Dr. Elwin Ransom, a philology professor, who is kidnapped by two men, Devine and Weston, and taken to a remote location. Ransom quickly realizes that he is on a spaceship headed to Mars. During the space voyage, Ransom learns that Devine and Weston plan to offer him as a sacrifice to the alien beings on Mars. He discovers that Weston's motivation is driven by his desire for power and dominance over other planets.

Upon arriving on Mars, Ransom manages to escape from his captors and explores the alien landscape. He encounters strange creatures and flora, discovering a fascinating and harmonious world. Ransom meets the Hrossa, a peaceful and wise species of humanoid creatures who live near the water. The Hrossa embrace a simple and natural way of life and possess a deep appreciation for poetry and storytelling. Ransom embarks on a journey with one of the Hrossa, Hyoi, on a boat called the Oyarsa. During their voyage, Ransom learns more about Malacandra's history and its unique social structure. Ransom's journey continues as he encounters another intelligent species called the Seroni. The Seroni are highly intellectual beings who live in magnificent and mysterious caves. They possess advanced knowledge and are known for their pursuit of truth and wisdom. Ransom is summoned to meet Oyarsa, the ruler and guardian spirit of Malacandra. Oyarsa represents a higher order of being, responsible for the well-being of the planet and its inhabitants. Ransom learns about the cosmology and cosmic harmony that govern Malacandra. Unbeknownst to Ransom, Weston is plotting a dangerous plan to exploit Malacandra's resources and

colonize the planet. He seeks to gain power and control over this alien world, even if it means destroying its unique civilization. Ransom, Hyoui, and another Hross named Whin are captured by Weston's followers, who believe that human sacrifice is necessary to appease the alien beings. Ransom stands trial before the Bent Oyarsa, the corrupted ruler of a distant region, who is under Weston's influence. The Hrossa, Seroni, and other creatures of Malacandra unite to rescue Ransom and his companions from Weston's followers. The alien beings demonstrate their unity and strength in the face of exploitation. Ransom, now safe and free, boards the spaceship and prepares to return to Earth. He is deeply moved by his experiences on Malacandra and contemplates the impact of human nature on different worlds. The novel concludes with Ransom's return to Earth. He reflects on the significance of his journey to Malacandra and the profound lessons he has learned. Ransom is forever changed by his encounter with the alien world and the wisdom of its inhabitants.

Exploration of Human Nature: "Out of the Silent Planet" delves into the nature of humanity, both its potential for good and its capacity for evil. The contrasting characters of Ransom and Weston serve as archetypes representing the battle between morality and self-serving ambition. Critique of Colonialism: Through Weston's colonization plans and exploitation of Malacandra, Lewis critiques the imperialistic tendencies of humans and their propensity to conquer and dominate others. Harmony and Cosmic Order: The novel explores the concept of cosmic order and harmony in the universe. Malacandra represents a world where creatures coexist in balance with nature, fostering a deeper connection to the cosmos.

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