

ABOLITION OF MAN AS SCI-FI: C.S. LEWIS'S SPACE TRILOGY

Seth Myers on the Integration of the
Abolition of Man into Lewis's Fiction

All good sci-fi series have at their heart some unique observation about man and his place in the cosmos. Whether it be the swashbuckling defense of humanity in Captain Kirk or the divide between reason and emotion of a Commander Spock or Data, space seems to (rather oddly) bring out the humanity in its explorers. C.S. Lewis's ill-named Space Trilogy¹ ("ill-named" for reasons that will soon be made apparent) is no exception in this sense. The trilogy is set in a series of planetary explorations: first to the masculine-themed Mars ("Malacandra")

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), *Perelandra* (1943) and *That Hideous Strength* (1945).

in *Out of the Silent Planet* (OSP) then to the feminine Venus ("Perelandra") in *Perelandra* (PER), with the finale back on Earth ("Thulcandra" or the Silent Planet) in *That Hideous Strength* (THS). In the series, the sinless, unfallen planets of Malacandra and Perelandra endure the arrival of the characters Weston and Ransom from Earth (the Silent Planet), and their fallen ways and proffered temptations (particularly from Weston). Lewis's Trilogy is thus more than merely entertaining Sci-Fi: "this is a tall story about devilry, though it has behind it a serious point which I have tried to make in *Abolition of Man*."² Lewis states in the preface to THS. Further, it is a story full of insights on gender, and we will see that these insights relate to the fundamental message of *Abolition of Man* (AoM). The themes of AoM – the rejection of natural, revealed morality in favor of a man-made one, the proposed domination of the many by the few, and the sacrifice of humanity for such "accomplishments" – are entertainingly on display throughout the entire *Space Trilogy*.

Abolition of Man - Rehash

Joy and desire – hallmarks of Lewis's unique approach to apologetics – lay the foundation for

² C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 8.

Lewis's argument in the *Abolition of Man*. "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us . . . we are far too easily pleased"³ argues Lewis for the validation of our longings. But these longings were in danger of being manipulated by propagandists, so said the authors of *The Green Book*, due to wartime propaganda while England and all of Europe were occupied with the Nazis (in 1943 when *AoM* was written); the specters of a Marxism claiming scientific validity as well as other evolutionary thought also loomed large at the time. Hence *The Green Book* (a fictional name given to what Lewis claimed was a very real book) was written, though its sloppiness in seeking to debunk manipulative appeals put at risk, claimed Lewis, our very ability to properly fight for the values we hold dear. Our problem is not "a weak excess of sentimentality" but "the slumber of cold vulgarity," Lewis argues, continuing "the task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles, but to irrigate deserts," providing a "defence against false sentiments" by "inculcat(ing) just sentiments."⁴ These sentiments are properly located as an intermediary between our

³ C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory" in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper, (New York: Collier, 1980), 4.

⁴ Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Collier Books, 1955) 24.

sense of reason and our pleasure-seeing appetites. Lewis uses Plato's anthropomorphic explanation of the state (or soul) – a body in which the head (reason or rulers) and stomach (appetites or working classes) are moderated by the chest (sentiment or the warrior class) – to argue for the essential roles of both reason and sentiment in morality. The chest, or traditional moral sentiments, help to enforce the dictates of reason on the often warring and pleasure-seeking appetites, serving as “indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man.”⁵ This proper alignment produces the virtuous behavior that Lewis argues Ancients and Moderns alike have promoted. Mess with this, remove the sentiments (creating what Lewis phrases “Men without Chests”), and dysfunction ensues:

In a sort of ghastly simplicity, we remove the organ and demand the function. We make Men without Chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.⁶

The corpus of such time-honored, virtuous behavior Lewis calls *the Tao*. Virtues such as self-

⁵ Ibid., 34.

⁶ Ibid., 35.

sacrifice, mercy, justice and duty to children and elders are traced across cultures such as the Greeks, Norse, Hindu, Australian Aborigine, Judeo-Christian, Chinese, Babylonian and Egyptian. Ideological Innovators, or even simple skeptics, of such sentimental, traditional morality pose a constant threat to mankind. In seeking to go beyond this *Tao* of universally accepted morality, they cannot find any new basis outside of the *Tao* on which to stake their claims, so they must instead look underneath the *Tao* for something more basic, often instinctual, to claim. Such instincts they find, such as the preservation of the species, prove problematic. First, if it were an ingrained instinct, then why do we need to be instructed to follow it? But beyond that, proposed instincts such as the “preservation of the species” (an argument offered by Weston in *OSP*) are much more akin to a stated programmatic goal than an emotional sentiment. For that, the sentiments promoted by the *Tao* suffice quite well (“thank you”) as for instance, the natural familial love of child has proved an effective deterrent to proposed schemes such as found in Plato's *Republic* to have young children raised by the state, Lewis observes:

Instead of suggesting truly novel bases for behavior and morality, moral and ideological innovators instead do one of two very perverse things: they distort

the *Tao* or they simply deny it. By stressing and promoting some particular virtue at the expense of others, such as equality by the Communists or cultural homogeneity by the Nazis, they necessarily trample some if not all of the rest of the virtues found within the *Tao*. But just as common, and insidious, is the hijacking of what would appear to be noble goals by the oldest perverse game in the book – the domination of man over man. The conquest of Man over Nature often amounts to the conquests of science at the disposal of a privileged minority of mankind, and then deployed over their imperial minions who constitute the remainder of mankind. Lewis cites such breakthroughs as the airplane, wireless communications and contraception as examples of such domination, the airplane as a machine of war, communications as a tool for propagandists, and contraception as a domination of the current generation over a future one.^{7 8}

⁷ Some argue that Lewis had an overly pessimistic view of technology, but that is beside the point – his point was about man left to his own (selfish) law-making. Such a critique is discussed at Matthew Schmitz, “Ayn Rand Really, Really Hated C.S. Lewis” in *First Things*, March 27, 2013. Online available www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2013/03/ayn-rand-really-really-hated-c-s-lewis.

But perhaps the most dangerous innovation is the conquest of the nature of humanity itself. Such programs (see Nazis and Communists above) simply reduce, once again, to the conditioning of a large portion of humanity for the benefit of a smaller. Just as Lewis argues that “Man's conquest of Nature turns out, in the moment of its consummation, to be Nature's conquest of Man,”⁹ the same ironic result holds those bent on domination of their fellow man. In seeking to remake man in their own ideological image, the crassness of their plans to simply subjugate their fellow man becomes apparent. The theme of domination is reminiscent of J.R.R. Tolkien's “One ring of power” from his *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* series. Just as Lewis, in his preface to *That Hideous Strength*, recommended waiting for Tolkien's manuscripts revealing the nature of Numenor and the True West, Lewis shows us in *THS* how domination arises and becomes justified by the oppressors.

⁸ A recent compilation of articles examining modern Sci-Fi in light of Lewis's *Abolition of Man* (*Science Fiction and the Abolition of Man: Finding CS Lewis in Sci-Fi Film and Television*, ed. Mark J. Boone and Kevin C. Neece, 2016) makes the point that science and technology are of less importance than the people behind it. It is an excellent book, but is beyond the scope of this review.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

Space Trilogy

The themes of *AoM* – the rejection of natural, revealed morality in favor of a man-made one, the proposed domination of the many by the few, and the sacrifice of humanity for such 'accomplishments' – are entertainingly on display in the entire *Space Trilogy*. In *Out of the Silent Planet (OSP)*, the scientist of imperialist bent, Weston, most directly represents all that *AoM* warned about. When Weston states “To you I may seem a vulgar robber, but I bear on my shoulders the destiny of the human race,” it gets translated tellingly as “there is a kind of *hnau* who will take other *hnau*'s food and – and things, when they are not looking. He says he is not an ordinary one of that kind. He says that what he does now will make very different things happen to those of our people who are not yet born.”¹⁰ His morality is thus shown for the lack of morality that it is – “stepping outside of the Tao, they have stepped into the void”¹¹ as Lewis states in *AoM*. And the virtue for which it is performed – simple domination – in this case, over those not yet born, and later in the speech, over the *hnau* of Malacandra themselves: “Our right to supersede you is the right of the higher over the lower life” becomes “because of all this . . . it would

¹⁰ Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 134.

¹¹ Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, 77.

not be the act of a bent people if our people killed all your people.”¹² Lewis thus perfectly illustrates his argument from *AoM* with the dialogue from *THS*, in a straightforward and even entertaining fashion.

Just why the moniker “The Space Trilogy” is so ill-suited to the theme of the series is useful to take up at this point. Just as Perelandra was shown to be brimming with life (and pleasure – Ransom describes his first drink while on Perelandra as “almost like meeting Pleasure for the very first time”¹³) – so does Lewis very early on state his objection to the term “space . . . the dismal fancy of the black, cold vacuity, the utter deadness . . . the very name 'Space' seemed a blasphemous libel for this empyrean ocean of radiance in which they swam.”¹⁴ Instead, Lewis cites “older thinkers (who) had been wiser when they named it simply the heavens – the heavens which declared the glory . . .”¹⁵ of God, as the Psalmist penned.¹⁶ “Space was the wrong name.”¹⁷ This conception of the lively heavens rather than the cold, lifeless space fits in with the natural harmony

¹² Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 134-5.

¹³ Lewis, *Perelandra*, (New York: Scribner, 2003) 32.

¹⁴ Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, (New York: Scribner, 2003) 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁶ Psalms 19:1.

¹⁷ Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 34.

between Creator and created that obedience to the *Tao* implies. By contrast, Innovators throughout (what has been suggested its proper name) *The Ransom Trilogy* constantly suggest some artificial life-force as a pale substitute. Whether an impersonal *elan vital* or life-force,¹⁸ or the lifeless, disembodied head of reason divorced from the fullness of humanity (which shows up in *THS*) – they all pale next to the lively source, and what we will soon see as the eternal masculine to our feminine – that Other which must be obeyed.

Perelandra also directly illustrates *AoM*'s arguments, particularly about obedience to the *Tao*. It is perhaps curious that the races on the unfallen Malacandra, in *OSP* the first book in the Space Trilogy, embody the aspects of the psyche or soul – reason, sentiment and appetites – described in the first of three chapters in *AoM*, “Men Without Chests.” Similarly the sequel *Perelandra* illustrates obedience to the *Tao*, described in the second chapter of *AoM*, “The Way.” But Lewis, perhaps a (non-perverse) innovator of his own, plumbs the familiar concept of law and presents a unique insight on it. Whereas the dysfunction of following false

¹⁸ In *Surprised by Joy*, Ch. XIII, Lewis claimed in his pre-Christian state to have been inspired and awoken by thinkers like Henri Bergson, 1859-1941, who posited such *elan vital* (“vital force”), which helped him to more deeply appreciate art, music and “the more exultant Psalms.”

laws, pseudo-*Tao* as it were, is shown in *AoM*, in *Perelandra* Lewis presents the fundamental law of Perelandra as beyond the category of something that is merely good for us. The fundamental law of Perelandra (akin to that singular law in the Garden of Eden) - that no one is to spend the night, or sleep, on the solid ground - Lewis suggests is given solely for the sake, and joy, of obedience, and not “for our own good” at all. “Where can you taste the joy of obeying unless He bids you do something for which His will is the *only* reason?”¹⁹ Tinidril tells Ransom. This obedience counters Lewis's old unrepentant self who desired “to call my soul my own:” instead, Tinidril explains how, “we cannot walk out of Maleldil's will: but He has given us a way to walk out of *our will*.”²⁰ Later, as Queen, she shows how the Fixed Land itself was but a symbol of self-will:

Why should I desire the Fixed except to make sure – to be able to one day command where I should be the next and what should happen to me? It was to reject the wave – to draw my hands out of Maleldil's. . . that would have been cold love and feeble trust. And of it how

¹⁹ Lewis, *Perelandra*, 101.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

could we ever have climbed back into
love and trust again? ²¹

But it is in *That Hideous Strength* (THS) that the themes of domination and of the erosion of humanity are most clearly presented (as if Weston's speech in *OSP* was not quite enough!) The disembodied head of Alcasan is perhaps the most direct symbol of the Belbury Innovators attempt to remake humanity itself. It goes beyond an *AoM* - esque "Men without Chests" - it is the epitome of lifelessness itself: "They have cleansed their world, broken free (almost) from the organic . . . they are almost free of Nature, attached to her only by the thinnest, finest cord"²² Filostrato explains.

The agenda of Belbury nearly reads directly from *AoM*: "Man has got to take charge of Man. That means, remember, that some men have got to take charge of the rest"²³ Feverstone explains to the new initiate, Mark Studdock. Then the real predation begins: "sterilization of the unfit, liquidation of the backward races (we don't want any dead weights), selective breeding"²⁴ Feverstone continues. Later, Filostrata apes *AoM* just as

²¹ Ibid., 179.

²² Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 173.

²³ Ibid., 40.

²⁴ Ibid.

explicitly: “You know as well as I do that Man's power over Nature means the power of some men over other men with Nature as the instrument. There is no such thing as Man – it is a word. There are only men.”²⁵

Thus does the dehumanization, the abolition of men, come to fruition. Instead of following the *Tao* – the law made for man (preserving his very humanity) – and not the other way around – the Belbury Innovators seek the destruction of men, and lots of them. In so doing, they reap the bonus, as it were, of losing their own humanity. And the only man left standing is not even human, as Filostrato continues: “No! It is not Man who will be omnipotent, it is some one man, some immortal man. Alcasan, our first Head, is the first sketch of it.”²⁶ The domination of the few over the many, and the abolition of man – these are illustrated perfectly in *THS*.

Finally, it is through gender that the fundamental principle of *AoM*, the yielding of oneself to the great Other, the Tao Giver, is strikingly illustrated. The entire trilogy is thick with it, as the masculine Mars (*OSP*), the feminine Venus (*PER*) and their marriage on Earth (*THS*) is a significant theme

²⁵ Ibid., 175.

²⁶ Ibid.

of the trilogy. In this finale to the series, we observe the struggling marriage of Mark and Jane Studdock. Mark is a researcher at the scientific, secular (and cut-throat) Belbury and its National Institute of Co-ordinated Experiments (N.I.C.E.), while Jane works under the Director (Ransom) at the Society of St. Anne's, which functions more like a loving family. Whereas the most memorable highlight of *OSP* was arguably Weston's speech as decoded by the unbent *hnau*, for *PER* that moment might likely be Ransom's contemplation on eternal gender, the eternal masculine and feminine. Beyond the mere sexes, male and female, these complements nevertheless underlie the sexes, and much of what we consider masculine and feminine in general. Complementary as rhythm and melody, yet as contrasting as an alert hand gripping a spear to a welcoming, open hand, and initiator and a recipient,²⁷ the genders reflect, even embody, ultimately the masculine and feminine aspect of the relation of the Creator to the created. Just as Mark learns that his love for Jane had only been for what he could obtain from her and not for her alone, so does Jane learn that her wish to "call her soul her own" likewise violated the humility of true love. That "equality is not the deepest thing,"²⁸

²⁷ Lewis, *Perelandra*, 171-172.

²⁸ Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 145.

as Ransom the Director instructs Jane, is the antidote to Tinidril's temptations in PER to become the tragic, self-possessed woman, disregarding her husband's roles, and with the world on her shoulders. The cost of such sole possession of soul is in fact the love which sustains it: "you do not fail in obedience through lack of love, but have lost love because you never attempted obedience"²⁹ Ransom advises Jane. In fact for the sake of her marriage, and that of the eternal feminine to the eternal masculine, Ransom further advises that "no one has ever told you that obedience – humility – is an erotic necessity."³⁰

While the Apostle Paul and Solomon would be challenged to combine their thoughts on such topics so powerfully, the story does not stop with man and wife: it is symbolic of a greater humility, that between created and Creator. We are feminine to the eternal masculine: "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. You had better agree with your adversary quickly"³¹ Ransom the Director advises Jane. Fittingly, Jane continues "Then I had better become a Christian?" to

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 146.

³¹ Ibid., 313.

which Ransom responds “It looks like it.”³² And Jane's temptation (similar to that offered by Weston to Tinidril in *PER*) to allay her “haunting female fear” and become “her true self (and) soar upwards and expand in some freer and purer world” in fact gave way to her molding by the (eternal masculine) “strong, skillful hands thrust down to make, and mend, perhaps even to destroy.”³³ The work of these hands would act according to a demand “not . . . like any other demand” but the demand which “was the origin of all right demands and contained them,” in which “in its light you could understand them, but apart from them you could know nothing of it.”³⁴ And finally, not just hands and demands, but it is a person who stands behind them, for whom we were “made to please Another and in Him to please all others.”³⁵

Further, the dynamics of the male-female relationship mirror truths of the masculine-feminine, and ultimately the created – Creator relationship. Just as Jane is advised that her “beauty was made for others,” and ultimately for the Director (who “could even decide not to keep it for himself

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 315.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 316.

but to order that it be given to another”),³⁶ so is Mark reminded that neither is his masculinity for his own self-serving love. At the gender level, thus is the eternal feminine a beauty to be shared and enjoyed by others, while the eternal masculine in its strength serves. Tinidril's Eve-like Garden of Eden temptation in *PER* is to become someone tragic (bearing her own self-importance; for Jane, the temptation extends to pirating a share of her husband's importance, as Jane is tempted to misunderstand and minimize his masculinity). Similarly, in *THS* Jane comes to realize she might be “a *thing* after all – (but) a thing designed and invented by Someone Else” and for qualities different than she had might have imagined. Jane admits that perhaps others had been right who “had infuriatingly found her sweet and fresh when she wanted them also to find her interesting and important.”³⁷ Thus Jane and Tinidril have not forfeited all of their humanity or even femininity, but revel in their share of the eternal feminine.

Jane's husband Mark does not undergo such a temptation, though the temptation to the male and the masculine is implicit in the masculine exploration of the trilogy, the first book, *Out of the Silent Planet*. Weston's speech about his vague, and

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 315.

ultimately empty and domineering, vision to further the fate of the human species, at whatever cost to others and hence to himself, suffices as the male analog to the temptation of Tinidril, the Green lady of Perelandra.

But the dynamics of the masculine – feminine relation is just as powerfully telling of the relation of man to God. Just as, in humility, Jane selflessly shares her essentially feminine beauty, Mark finds that he yields himself both to Jane and to God. Mark’s masculinity consists in sharing love-for-her-own-sake with his wife Jane, but he also yields his own masculinity – his vision and work in the world – as the essentially feminine to ultimately Masculine, an act of submission, humility and letting go of the “desire to call one’s soul one’s own”³⁸ to the Creator. Thus do both genders offer, uniquely, their submission.

The lesson of the *Abolition of Man* thus lies in not just the *Tao*, nor in how its violation destroys humanity, Man, and the society of men, but in this fundamental relation: that of our role as the eternal feminine to the *Tao* giver’s masculine, our reception to His initiation, and our obedience to find His love. The moral codes of ancient Egyptians, Babylonians,

³⁸ Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, (Glasgow: William Collins, 1986) 182.

Greeks and Romans thus come to life in the Empire of the Eternal King. As Mother Dimble puts it:

Of course there are universal rules to which all goodness must conform. But that's only the grammar of virtue. It's not there that the sap is. He doesn't make two blades of grass the same: how much less two saints, two nations, two angels. The whole work of healing Tellus [earth] depends on nursing that little spark, on incarnating that ghost, which is still alive in every real people, and different in each. When Logres really dominates Britain, when the goddess Reason, the divine clearness, is really enthroned in France, when the order of Heaven is really followed in China – why then it will be spring.³⁹

And it is this lesson, of our need to yield to the Tao and its Giver, thereby preserving our own humanity, that is the lesson of *The Abolition of Man*, as fully fleshed out in *The Space Trilogy* and in *That Hideous Strength* in particular.

³⁹ Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 369.

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