C.S. Lewis’s Space Trilogy: Myth, Fantasy, Science

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Abstract:
From revolutions in communication technology and transportation to encounters with space travelers and aliens, from leaps in human evolution to new dimensions of existence, from creating stories of the past to speculations about the future, science fiction, fantasy, and myth have variously captured the far reaches of the human imagination, making the familiar strange and the strange inevitable. From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, it is fascinating to watch the rapid innovations in science and technology overtake their fictional anticipation and to return to our most speculative and fantastical literature to see how perceptively it anticipated the social and geopolitical transformations—and challenges—these innovations would inspire. We can, moreover, look through these fictions and recognize in them a prolonged engagement not just with the transient social anxieties of their individual moments, but also with the timeless drama of human contact with the divine, the transcendent, the otherworldly, and the sublime. This paper brings together these genres with their divergent but intersecting histories and asks why they might be particularly relevant to study in the contemporary moment. While science fiction has garnered increasing attention in recent years in the academy (and increasing recognition in mainstream publications), the status of fantasy is even more controversial—and the line between them itself a subject of debate. Myth, by contrast, has long been a source of scholarly fascination, although the term typically emerges in the study of American literatures in its pejorative sense. Yet, myth plays a seminal role in the genres of science fiction and fantasy, so much so that science fiction and fantasy can arguably exceed the category of genre to contribute to what William Burroughs calls “a new mythology for the space age.” This paper will explore the insights that emerge when we consider the various imaginative engagements that characterize Space Trilogy as science fiction, fantasy, and myth as central concerns of C.S. Lewis in literary history and cultural production.

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Clive Staples Lewis loved making up stories and reading as a child. As an adolescent he discovered Germanic and Norse Mythology, or Northern mythology, and became infatuated with it. He even took Christianity as a myth. In 1931 he fully accepted Christianity because of Tolkein and through his reading. He is known for both his fictional work, especially The Screwtape Letters, The Chronicles of Narnia and The Space Trilogy and his nonfiction, such as Mere Christianity, Miracles and The Problem of Pain. Out of the Silent Planet was his first novel of the three published in 1938, of his Space Trilogy,—also known as his 'Cosmic Trilogy' or 'Ransom Trilogy'. The other books in the trilogy are Perelandra (1943) and That Hideous Strength(1945). All of his works reflect his love for God's creation and express his belief in “something more” as Bosky says. It is apparent in his works, including Out of the Silent Planet, that he doesn't see Christ as static or in the past, but his study of medieval literature and "painfully-acquired faith" give him personal feeling for Christ and a deep intellectual understanding of His "immediacy" as described by Gibbons.

The Space Trilogy is a fine demonstration of the genius of C.S. Lewis. Out of the Silent Planet, Perelandra, and That Hideous Strength are tightly bound to each other-yet in a unique fashion. Out of the Silent Planet is the first book of the series, and serves as an intriguing and delightful opening to the interplanetary societies of The Space Trilogy. The beauty of this book-and the entire trilogy-is that although it is far from wordy, it creates such imagery that the reader actually feels like he is part of the story.

Out of the Silent Planet, introduces the hero of the trilogy, Dr. Ransom. Ransom, the protagonist of the story, is a Christian philologist who gets mixed up with two men in contact with extraterrestrials, and is himself taken against his will to another planet. He is abducted by evildoers Weston and Devine, and taken to another planet "Malacandra," or Mars. Once there, Ransom escapes his captors, meets the various good inhabitants of the planet, and is eventually brought before the Oyarsa (head "eldil," or angel) who has been set in charge over the planet by Maleldil the Young (God, the Son), who dwells with the Old One (God, the Father). Ransom finds out that there is healthy communication between angels of different planets, except for his own planet, Thulcandra (the Silent Planet, or Earth). Long ago the chief angel of Earth went bad, and all communication was cut off, until Maleldil became a man and went down there (things which angels long to look into). Ransom's captors do some bad stuff, and they all get booted off the planet by the Oyarsa to protect his people.
The second book *Peralandra* involves another planet different from the one dealt with in the first book. Here, Ransom is taken by the Oyarsa of Malacandra to *Perelandra* (Venus), where he is an active participant in the establishment of a sinless race of humanity. Shortly after he meets the Woman, who had been separated from the Man, he sees Weston (the antagonist from the first story) come to the planet in his spaceship. They meet, up Weston begins long conversations with the lady, trying to get her to do something that Maleldil had forbidden. Ransom soon realizes that Weston has been fully possessed by the evil angel of Earth. His job is to stop the temptation of the Woman, and conquer the devil-Weston. When words fail, there is a big brawl, and when he has finally won, Ransom finds he has sustained an incurable wound on his heel from where the devil-Weston bit him. Ransom then recovers, meets the angels of Mars and Venus, and the First Couple.

*That Hideous Strength* deals with the evils of totalitarian political systems, and the motives behind such government. It deals with sorcery in modern times, and contact with the servants of the Enemy. It is terrifying in its implications, intimidating in its stature, intriguing in its mystery, and captivating in its entirety. This book shifts the main focus from the perpetually-wounded Ransom (who is still a major character), to a young married couple in England who gets caught up in a conspiracy and counter-conspiracy that will decide the fate of England. Mark, a man-fearing professor, falls in with the wrong crowd in his efforts to please. The N.I.C.E. (National Institute of Co-ordinated Experiments) is a secretive group of inner circles within circles, and Mark feels tempted to climb his way further up and further in. But he grows increasingly uncomfortable as he discovers more of their plans, which include setting up their own local government, doing away with "the little guy," and eventually sterilizing the planet of all useless organic life. Mark's wife, Jane, falls in with the right crowd, Ransom and friends, as they try to figure out what's going on and what to do about it. Long story short, the good angels from other planets come and help the small band of good people, and in the process Mark and Jane both become Christians. And Ransom gets back to Earth and be healed.

Each of the books can stand on its own as a work of literature, especially *Peralandra*. The improbable aside, he weaves together majestically the more mysterious parts of the Gospel and mythologies to come up with an interplanetary version of Christ's redemption. This is a science-fiction series unparalleled in the world today. It is an enduring classic, hard as diamond, cold as ice, hot as the subterranean fire, sharp as the surgeon's scalpel. While time lasts, it always will be so. The interaction, throughout the trilogy, are masterfully wrought by Lewis, inspires to honesty and humility and dependence on God in ways that no heavy theology text has been able to do. Lewis gives us a grander, more sweeping vision of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

The word Myth is derived from the Greek “mythos” which referred to anything delivered by mouth: a speech, conversation, advice, command or a promise. Homer uses “mythos” as a resolve, purpose or plan and, in addition, as a tale, story or narrative. In the Poetics Aristotle, who used “mythos” as plot, claimed that it was “the first essential, the life and soul.” ¹ Myths may
be defined as anonymous stories, rooted in the primitive folk-beliefs of cultures. They might present supernatural persons and events as explanations for natural phenomena, cosmic views and special human perceptions. The mythologies of various cultures throughout the world share common themes: creation of the world and the presence of gods, the meaning of life and death and adventures of cultural heroes. Joseph Campbell summarized the various interpretations of myth in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*:

> Mythology is...a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world of nature...a production of poetical fantasy from prehistoric times, misunderstood by succeeding ages ...a repository of allegorical instruction, to shape the individual to his group...a group dream, symptomatic of archetypal urges within the depths of the human psyche...the traditional vehicle of man’s profoundest metaphysical insights...God’s revelation to his children. Mythology is all of these.²

Although Lewis does not use every element of every stage, in his trilogy as a whole the basic structure of the quest-myth is evident, as it also is in the individual structures of Out of the silent Planet, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*. In each novel of the trilogy a different phase of the quest myth is emphasized. In *Out of the Silent Planet*, departure- separation and preparation of the hero is primary. Lewis himself saw *Out of The Silent Planet* as Ransom’s “enfance”. In *Perelandra* the hero faces his great initiation and trials. The hero of *That Hideous Strength* returns to Earth to spread the message of his adventures. He is more remote and passive, a mentor, guide and director rather than the main actor.

Fantasy is a genre of fiction that commonly uses magic and other supernatural phenomena as a primary element of plot, theme, or setting. Many works within the genre take place in imaginary world where magic is common. Fantasy is generally distinguished from science fiction and horror by the expectation that it steers clear of (pseudo-)scientific and macabre themes, respectively, though there is a great deal of overlap between the three, all of which are subgenres of speculative fiction.

As in science fiction, characters may represent different species, but they are more mythical in nature, such as dwarves, elves, wizards, dragons, and monsters. Fantasy often takes place in unspecified locations or times, as in Tolkien's Middle Earth, and customs are heavily accented to reinforce tribal or cultural identity, such as those of hobbits. An entire mythological back-story is usually provided to create believability while providing context for epic struggles between good and evil. Charms, spells, and talismans are staples of fantasy fiction.

One can already see that there are many similarities between sci-fi and fantasy. *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien are clearly fantasies in their use of mythical creatures and magic. Lewis's Space Trilogy, however, is a different matter. It is marketed as straightforward science fiction, and yet technology is secondary to Lewis's emphasis on Christianity. Lewis himself said of the trilogy that,
The books are not especially concerned with scientific accuracy or technological speculation, and in many ways they read like fantasy adventures...the interplanetary ideas in the series clearly represented mythology.\(^3\)

Lewis considered fantasy to be essential for the true myth. He analysed it from its psychological and literary aspects in an essay entitled “The Meanings of Fantasy” in *An Experiment in Criticism*. He found fantasy to have three meanings, two of which have literary parallels:

1. Delusion is purely psychological and has no literary interest. It is a mistaken perception of reality.
2. Morbid Castle Building is “a pleasing imaginative construction entertained incessantly, and to his injury, by the imaginer, but without the delusion that it is reality.” It is a fantasy that leads to inaction. It is an escape.
3. Normal Castle Building is the type of fantasy that has two literary presentations. It is the dreaming “indulged in moderately and briefly as a temporary holiday or recreation.” Normal Castle Building can be either Egoistic or Disinterested. Each results in a different type of fantasy.\(^4\)

His friend and colleague Tolkien had a theory of the uses of fantasy which Lewis subscribed to as well. The purposes of fantasy were three-fold:

1) Recovery: the beginning of a clear view of life; it is a seeing of things as we are meant to see them. Fantasy restores our sense of wonder and mystery which familiarity has dulled.
2) Escape: the turning of our minds away from an unpleasant, cruel, ugly and unjust world or immediate environment to a better place- a different world. It is flight from human limitations, especially mortality.
3) Consolation: the happy ending, the “eucatastrophe”, the “sudden joyous turn”, the fulfillment of ancient desires.

Tolkien’s formula for Recovery- Escape-Consolation appears to correspond to the mythical pattern of the hero: Departure (Escape) – Initiation (Recovery) – Return (Consolation). All three elements appear in each of the novels of the trilogy. In addition, one may see the relationship between the idea of Escape and the events of *Out of the Silent Planet*, Recovery and Ransom’s experiences in *Perelandra*, and Consolation and the dramatic salvation of Earth in That *Hideous Strength*.

According to Wikipedia, Science fiction is a genre of fiction dealing with imaginary but more or less plausible (or at least non-supernatural) content such as future settings, futuristic science and technology, space travel, aliens, and paranormal abilities. Exploring the consequences of scientific innovations is one purpose of science fiction, making it a "literature of ideas".

Science fiction is largely based on writing rationally about alternative possible worlds or futures. It is similar to, but differs from fantasy in that, within the context of the story, its imaginary elements are largely possible within scientifically established or scientifically postulated laws of nature (though some elements in a story might still be pure imaginative speculation).
Science fiction shares certain important commonalities and strengths with myth. Just as with ancient myths, a key strength of science fiction is its narrative form. It has become so popular because it appeals to the dramatic dimension within people. Life seems more like a story than a set of abstractions, and just as history is a multi-faceted story, the future will be a complex saga of stories. Science fiction, like myth, contains personified characters, thus creating a personal connection with the reader. The reader often identifies with the characters – sometimes positively, sometimes negatively - and vicariously experiences the drama and events of the story through the characters. As with myth, the stories of science fiction express fundamental themes and archetypes of human existence. In both, science fiction and mythology fantastic beings and settings are presented as a way to symbolically highlight important features of humanity or reality. Although science fiction may inform it also produces an emotional experience in the reader. The future is felt, as well as imagined and considered. This emotional dimension often translates into inspiration.

Although the experience of science fiction is personalized, science fiction stories are often set within a cosmic context and have the same breadth and scope that mythic tales do; they also address the same expansive themes of the nature of reality and the meaning of human existence. In fact, as in myth science fiction connects the person with the cosmic. Many science fiction writers are very conscious of the connection between their genre and mythology. But science fiction goes beyond traditional myths. From a modernist perspective the myths of old are based on archaic thinking. They are oblivious to modern science and the issues of modern life. If myths do have a unique power to motivate and inform people, then perhaps what are needed are new myths based on contemporary thinking that address contemporary issues, as well as issues of the future.

In his Space Trilogy, C.S. Lewis created myth based on Biblical archetypes and Christian doctrine. Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and redemption of mankind are represented in the myth of the heroic quest which may be identified as the central myth of western literature. Lewis’s concept of mythic heroism is based on his Christian ethics, and displayed in the trilogy as a choice for obedience. Such a decision often entails inaction, whereas disobedience involves action.

Throughout his literary career, C.S. Lewis analyzed, explained, and argued for Christianity and its values. Like ancient mythmakers who invented stories of gods demi-gods and heroes to explain events in the world and man’s relationship to nature and God, Lewis created myths using what he recognized to be the basis of western culture and myth itself, Christian doctrine. His purpose was to explain the world and men’s souls in their past, present and future conditions. His science fiction trilogy embodies, through his use of the myth of the hero, the Christian stories of the Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection of Christ, and the redemption of mankind.

The story of Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection represents one version of a myth that is present in the most ancient and primitive cultures. That is the myth of the heroic quest which chronicles the birth, death, and rebirth of the hero. The quest -myth in one sense is the only myth—that is, all other myths are part of the quest-myth. “Northrop Frye identifies the central myth of literature as
the quest-myth.\(^5\) Joseph Campbell has analysed the quest-myth in detail and has given it the name “monomyth”, which represents its characteristic as the first and central myth. Campbell’s monomyth has a tripartite structure:

1. departure of the hero from the society;
2. initiation and death (symbolic or actual) of the hero;
3. return or rebirth of the transcendent, transfigured hero into society\(^6\)

C.S. Lewis has employed the myth of the heroic quest and Campbell’s special and unique pattern. *Out of the Silent Planet* is concerned with the departure and separation of the hero, from his earthly society. *Perelandra* describes the initiation of Ransom and his struggles on the planet Venus to perform the heroic act and fulfill the quest. *The Hideous Strength* is the story of Ransom’s transcendent return and re-education of his society. And the three novels have different quest heroes.

He uses the quest-myth in his trilogy to reveal the meaning and purpose of life, the dangers to all mankind of temptation, fall and exile, and the possibility of rebirth, redemption, and transcendence for all. Lewis imparts to his audience an awareness of the “eternal” and its presence in the temporal world. In his Space Trilogy, Lewis attempts this goal of embodying some reflection of eternal truth through his application of the quest-myth to the structure, motifs and characters of the novels.

Lewis describes outer-space in a way that one doesn't envision when one thinks of space. Instead of being a dark void, it is full of radiant light. This description of space is an echo of Milton's "unblinking day" and "empyrean oceans of radiance," Lewis is trying to show that the Christian universe is not cold or empty, but full of light and God's infinite presence. In the spaceship on the way to Malacandra, Ransom bastes in the light, which fills him with a vitality he never knew on Earth. This experience far contradicts his former notions of space, which he recounts here:

He had read of 'Space': at the back of his thinking for years had lurked the dismal fancy of the black, cold vacuity, the utter deadness, which was supposed to separate the worlds. He hadn't known how much it affected him till now—now that the very name 'Space' seemed a blasphemous libel for this empyrean ocean of radiance in which they swam. He could not call it 'dead'; he felt life pouring into him from it every moment. How indeed should it be otherwise, since out of this ocean the worlds and all their life had come? He had thought it barren: he saw now that it was the womb of worlds, whose blazing and innumerable offspring looked down nightly even upon the earth with so many eyes—and here, with how many more! No: Space was the wrong name. Older thinkers had been wiser when they named it simply the heavens...\(^7\)

In outer-space, Ransom is closer to God than he ever has been before because he is no longer on the "silent planet" of Fallen Men, but instead in the heavens where the glory of God is
everywhere. Even though this is a Science Fiction novel, Lewis doesn't dwell on scientific descriptions of machines, but describes them more poetically. However, some say that it is blatantly inaccurate and insults science, such as Professor J.B.S Haldane. Haldane said in an essay called "Auld Hornie, F.R.S." that Lewis didn't know enough science to write science fiction and that Lewis' contempt for science and scientists made it so that he would have no influence on them by writing this book. He also argued that Lewis reduced complex moral, social, and political issues into one over-simplified struggle between good and evil. Lewis responds to this in an essay he writes called "A Reply to Professor Haldane", in which he says that it is not an attack on scientists but on 'scientism', which is "a certain outlook on the world which is casually connected with the popularization of the sciences." He also says that he needed to use popular, albeit inaccurate astronomy to create willing suspension of disbelief in the common reader; he knows the science is not correct, but that's not the point of the novel.

Campbell’s pattern of the mythic quest, it is applied to the trilogy, offers another dimension to Lewis’s work and connects it more firmly with an ancient tradition of mythic, heroic literature. By his use of the Old Testament and New Testaments in the trilogy, Lewis refers to the greatest sources of literary patterns in western culture. By comparing the archetypal elements of Lewis’s trilogy with Campbell’s heroic pattern, one is better able to understand the bond between Lewis’s Christianity and mythology. The pattern of the mythic quest also offers for comparison the progression of experiences which literary heroes have undergone, although not every hero follows every step described by Campbell.

The typical hero of myth has intellect and the conscience as his tools and weapons rather than sword or muscle. The concept of heroic obedience runs throughout the trilogy. In Out of the Silent Planet Ransom learns that delayed obedience is unacceptable. Both he and Tinidril in Perelandra show heroism through obedience; Tinidril’s is passive, Ransom’s active. Weston’s fat is that of the willfully disobedient. It is in the final book of the trilogy that the importance of obedience is emphasized most clearly. Lewis implies that Jane’s and Mark’s childlessness is deliberate disobedience to nature and divine destiny. Jane’s feminism is disobedience within the social and spiritual hierarchy. Jane and Mark both learn in the course of the novel that obedience and humility are spiritual and erotic necessities. Ransom and Merlin in this part of the trilogy epitomize Christ-like obedience, while Jane and Mark represent Everyman.

What every person chooses rather must choose between good and evil every day is a major theme of the trilogy. As Ransom discovered in the darkness on Perelandra, every person is a Christ; every person has a calling despite feelings of unworth or unsuitability. No choice is trivial or irrelevant.

Another aspect of Christian heroism that is developed in the trilogy is that each character is a part of the hero. This is best seen in That Hideous Strength by the company. No single character is suitable alone, not even Ransom. Every member contributes an element of heroism that is vital
for the success of the heroes in the trilogy combine to conform more completely to the elements of Campbell’s pattern of mythic heroism.

In short, we love fantasy and science because it’s a welcome relief from the routine of everyday life and it presents us with a universe of possibilities. We need also, as Einstein said, a sense of wonder and mystery. We need imagination as well as reason, we need the insight that comes from myth and poetry as well as those that come from science. Myth and fantasy are the things of different world which is full of charms and supernatural things. C.S. Lewis has tried to bring those things on papers which satisfy the psyche of not only children but also pacify the quest of elderly people who want to escape from this world of reality to the world of ease, joy and full of pleasure, to a certain extent. Somewhere they want to quench the thirst of delving deep into divinity somewhere they relate their life with supernatural things.

References