

# OUT OF THE SILENT PLANET

by C.S. Lewis



## THE AUTHOR

Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963) was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland; his father was a lawyer and his mother a mathematician. She died when Lewis was nine, and the trauma eventually drove him to atheism in his teens. He read voraciously from his youth and began writing at an early age. He served briefly in World War I and graduated from Oxford in 1923. He returned to Oxford to teach English at Magdalen College (1925-1954), then moved to Cambridge as Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature (1954-1963). He died on the same day that John F. Kennedy was assassinated - November 22, 1963.

Not surprisingly, reading and conversations with fellow scholars led to Lewis' conversion. Christian writers such as George MacDonald and G.K. Chesterton led him to question the arrogance of his atheism, and ultimately the exercise of his imagination along with his reason brought him to Christ. He went on to become one of the greatest spokesmen for the Christian faith in the twentieth century.

Lewis preferred the company of men to women, living for most of his life with his older brother Warren and spending long and delightful afternoons in discussions with fellow writers at the *Eagle and Child* pub in Oxford. The writers who gathered there styled themselves the Inklings, and included J.R.R. Tolkien, Owen Barfield and Charles Williams. He did, however, care for the mother of his college roommate, Paddy Moore. The two had vowed to care for the other's families should either one be killed in the war, and Lewis kept his promise, allowing Mrs. Moore to live with him and his brother until her death in 1951. Finally, and most unexpectedly, Lewis married - having carried on a lengthy correspondence with Joy Davidman, an American Jewish divorcee, the two fell in love when she visited him in England and married in 1953. Their marriage was a happy one, but was cut short when Joy died of cancer in 1960.

Lewis' writings display an enormous range and virtuosity in varying styles and genres. They include the children's stories for which he is perhaps most famous (*The Chronicles of Narnia*, 1950-1956), autobiographical writings (*The Pilgrim's Regress*, 1933; *Surprised by Joy*, 1955; *A Grief Observed*, 1961), his Space Trilogy (*Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, *That*

*Hideous Strength*, 1938-1945), and theological and apologetic writings (*The Problem of Pain*, 1940; *The Screwtape Letters*, 1942; *Mere Christianity*, 1943; *The Abolition of Man*, 1943; *The Great Divorce*, 1945; *Miracles*, 1947; and *God in the Dock*, published in 1970), along with literary criticism and essays on a variety of other topics.

*Out of the Silent Planet* (1938) was the first novel in Lewis' Space Trilogy. It involves Ransom, the protagonist, traveling to Mars (also known as Malacandra) after being kidnaped by an evil scientist, Weston, and his friend Devine, who are attempting to exploit the resources and lay the groundwork for colonizing the planet. Like the rest of the Space Trilogy, the story is based on the conceit that Greek and Roman mythology represented distant memories in the minds of a fallen race of an existing angelic hierarchy.

## **MAJOR CHARACTERS**

- Elwin Ransom - The protagonist is a philologist who has been taken against his will to the planet Mars (Malacandra).
- Edward Weston - An evil physicist who travels space seeking to conquer other worlds.
- Dick Devine - Weston's partner, he seeks to exploit the resources of Malacandra for financial gain.
- Hyoi - The hross who first encounters Ransom; he is killed by Weston and Devine after the successful hunt for the hnakra.
- Hnohra - An elderly hross who teaches Ransom their language.
- Augray - A wise old sorn who helps Ransom on his way to Meldilorn.
- Kanakaberaka - A pfifltrigg who carves Ransom's likeness on a monolith on the island of Meldilorn.
- Malacandra - The Oyarsa (angelic ruler) of the planet that bears his name.

## **PLOT SUMMARY**

The story begins with philologist Elwin Ransom out on a walking tour in the countryside during a break from his classes at Cambridge. While looking for a place to stay for the night, he is accosted by a woman who is worried because her son has not returned from his job at a nearby cottage. Ransom offers to look for the boy. When he arrives at the cottage, he finds the boy in a struggle with two men in front of a huge spherical contraption. One is Devine, a former schoolmate of Ransom's, though not one he liked very much. The other is Weston, a famous physicist. When Ransom interrupts them, they let the boy go and invite Ransom inside for tea. Devine, after ascertaining that no one knows where Ransom is or when he is to return, drugs his tea, and when he wakes he hears Devine and Weston arguing about whether to take him along on

their trip. When he realizes he is about to be kidnaped, Ransom tries to run, but is subdued by his attackers and finally knocked out.

When he wakes up again, he is in the spaceship far from earth. His captors give him little information, but he gradually learns that they are going to a planet called Malacandra, that the planet is inhabited, and that they plan to turn him over to creatures called sorns, presumably as a human sacrifice. Weston and Devine had visited the planet before, and each had his own designs on it; Weston saw it as a potential earth colony, to be conquered and inhabited after destroying the creatures that lived there in order to perpetuate the human race, while Devine wanted to exploit its natural resources and make a fortune for himself.

When they land on Malacandra, Ransom finds a beautiful planet with tall, colorful vegetation and blue waters. Soon the sorns approach - tall, pale white creatures with long bodies and faces. Ransom's captors pull their guns in order to turn him over to the sorns, but suddenly a large creature with snapping jaws comes through the water like a bullet. When the men turn to fire at it, Ransom escapes. He runs through the unfamiliar landscape, not certain which he more fears, Weston and Devine or the sorns. He soon leaves both far behind, but quickly realizes he has nothing to eat or drink. He finally tries the water and finds it warm but palatable, but when he tries to cut off portions of the large plants and eat them, he finds them indigestible. He encounters giraffe-like creatures and sees one sorn, but manages to evade detection.

As he rests by a large lake, a creature emerges from the water; it looks something like a seal, all black and furry, but is thinner, walks upright, and is about seven feet high. He soon realizes that the thing is trying to talk to him. Halting introductions tell him that the creature is a hross. The hross gives him food and adds something to the water to make it taste better, and leads him to his boat, invites him to enter, then the two paddle away. Ransom, as a philologist, picks up the tongue of the creature fairly quickly, and from him begins to learn something of the planet on which he has landed. It consists of a high plateau, the harandra, that makes up the surface of the planet and is covered with a pinkish cloud cover, and a deep canyon cut into the surface, the handramit, which is wet and fertile. The former is the abode of the sorns, the latter of the hrossa. The hross takes Ransom to a community of his fellows, and the visitor is immediately surrounded by curious hrossa young and old.

Ransom gradually becomes accustomed to life in the hross village, eating their food, learning their language, and becoming able to tell the individual hrossa one from the other. As they tell him about themselves and their planet, he attempts to tell them about his, and is embarrassed at how little he actually knows; he cannot even identify it in the night sky. He soon learns that Malacandra is inhabited by three kinds of hnau - sentient creatures - the hrossa, the sorns, and the pfiltriggi. The first inhabit the handramit and excel in poetry and song, the second live hear the harandra and are known for their great wisdom, and the last live underground and are experts at making beautiful objects from the gold found there. Ransom asks which of the species rules the planet, but is told that Oyarsa rules under Maleldil the Young, who created the worlds. He begins to understand that Malacandra contains three very diverse species that live in perfect harmony. The idea of evil - what the hrossa wind up calling "bent hnau" - is difficult for them to conceive. The closest they can come to approximating the idea of evil is the danger posed by the hnakra, a monster that inhabits the waters and periodically threatens the hross villages. He also learns of the eldils, creatures visible to the hrossa but invisible to Ransom himself.

In conversations with Hyoui, Ransom learns that the hrossa are monogamous, reproduce only once in life, and treat death as a natural transition into the presence of Maleldil. The periodic

attacks of the hnakra are seen as challenges that add spice to life, and the fact that Ransom saw one of the creatures before he encountered the hrossa cause them to prepare for the hunt. Ransom is given the honor of accompanying Hyoui in his boat during the hunt. As they search for the hnakra, Hyoui hears a voice - Oyarsa speaks to him and tells him to take Ransom to Meldilorn, where Oyarsa dwells; no reason is given. Just then the hnakra appears. After a vicious attack on the boat by the monster, Ransom and Hyoui manage to kill the brute. Just as they begin to revel in their victory, however, a shot rings out and Hyoui falls - he has been shot by Weston and Devine. At this point, Ransom, despite mourning the death of his friend, realizes that he needs to obey Oyarsa and proceed to Meldilorn forthwith.

He is given general directions and told that he will receive further assistance from Augray. He has no idea who or what Augray is, but he follows the directions he is given, which take him out of the handramit higher and higher toward the harandra above. As the temperature drops precipitously and the air grows thinner, he realizes that life on Malacandra can only exist in the handramits, since they alone have an atmosphere. He finally stumbles, exhausted, into a cave from which comes the light of a fire. It is Augray's Tower, and, much to his dismay, Augray is a sorn. Augray welcomes Ransom and gives him food and much-needed oxygen. After a period of conversation about eldils and Oyarsa, Augray takes him to a sort of observatory from which Ransom can see his own planet, and is dismayed to find that Earth is the planet known as Thulcandra - the "Silent Planet" - because its Oyarsa and eldila rebelled against Maleldil the Young and have been cut off from the rest of the worlds.

Augray then offers to carry Ransom to Meldilorn to see Oyarsa. As they journey, Ransom gets a better look at the harandra, consisting mostly of red rock-like formations that at one time were plants. Augray tells him that the surface of the planet used to be full of living creatures, but that they died out and the three species that remain dug the handramits as safe places in which to live. He also discovers that the sorns have domesticated the large giraffe-like creatures he had seen earlier. During the trip, Ransom meets other sorns, some of whom are scientists who ask him many questions about Thulcandra and its history. The next day, Augray and Ransom descend into another handramit. It is lovely; at its center is a blue lake with a perfectly-formed island at its center - Meldilorn. A hross is summoned to take Ransom to the island, and he is permitted to explore until he is summoned by Oyarsa. As he walks around the island he sees sorns and a few hrossa, and has his first encounter with a pffltrigg - a frog-like creature that specializes in digging, making works of art, and constructing mechanical things. The pffltrigg, named Kanakaberaka, is carving Ransom's likeness on a monolith. Other stones along the main walkway picture the history of Malacandra, and one shows the solar system; this allows Ransom to identify Malacandra for the first time - it is the planet he knows as Mars. Pictures of the Oyarsas who rule the planets Ransom knows as Mercury, Venus, and Mars show a striking resemblance to the gods identified with those planets by the ancient Greeks and Romans.

The next day, Ransom is summoned to meet Oyarsa. At the summit of the hill, he finds all the inhabitants of Meldilorn awaiting his arrival. Not only does he see sorns, hrossa, and pffltriggi, but senses eldila, both on the ground and in the air. Soon Oyarsa arrives - the great eldil who rules the planet under Maleldil the Young. He is Malacandra - the eldil from whom the planet derives its name. Ransom explains how he came to Malacandra, and the Oyarsa in turn tells what he knows of the history of Thulcandra - how the Oyarsa of that planet became bent, causing the realm beneath earth's moon to be quarantined from the rest of the bright heavens. He has heard rumors of extraordinary deeds done by Maleldil in Thulcandra, but knows only

shadows; Ransom will later speak of these wonders. Ransom also tells Oyarsa of the evil intentions of Weston and Devine.

Soon a procession of hrossa arrive, bearing three dead hrossa, including Hyoui, and guarding Weston and Devine, whom they have taken prisoner. Weston speaks to the Malacandrians as if they were primitive savages or children, and refuses to believe in the existence of Oyarsa, thinking the voice in the air to be some kind of ventriloquist's trick. Weston first threatens Oyarsa, then offers gifts of beads and trinkets in return for their freedom and a large supply of "sun's blood" (gold). He argues for the right of the superior species - man - to rule and conquer the inferior (anything else) by a sort of Social Darwinism. The Malacandrians only laugh at the stupidity of these men, and Oyarsa orders several of the hrossa to dunk Weston's head in a bucket of water repeatedly in order to calm him down. Oyarsa, who could easily kill the two, declines to do so because they are not his hnau. Instead, he will send them back to Thulcandra, fixing their spaceship so it will self-destruct shortly after landing. Ransom is given the choice of remaining on Malacandra or returning to earth with Weston and Devine. He somewhat reluctantly chooses the latter, despite the dangers of a voyage to a planet that was now on the wrong side of the sun from Malacandra.

Weston's careful calculations get them safely home, despite horrible heat inside the spacecraft and the unforeseen problem of the moon getting in their way as they neared the earth. When they land safely, Weston and Devine flee immediately, leaving Ransom asleep in the ship. He wakes and begins walking through the English countryside, and soon sees a brilliant flash of light that means that the spaceship is no more.

In the Postscript, Ransom writes to Lewis, criticizing certain aspects of the fictionalized account of his journey, especially the fact that Lewis has left out much of the linguistic material Ransom had provided about the richness of the Malacandrian languages. After further discussion concerning eldila and allusions to them in medieval literature, Ransom closes his letter to Lewis by bemoaning the fact that no more space travel will be permitted, since the Oyarsa is now on guard against further malicious attempts to leave the Silent Planet.

## **NOTABLE QUOTATIONS**

"The boy was ideal. Incapable of serving humanity and only too likely to propagate idiocy. He was the sort of boy who in a civilized community would be automatically handed over to a state laboratory for experimental purposes." (Weston, ch.2, p.19)

"We have learned how to jump off the speck of matter on which our species began; infinity, and therefore perhaps eternity, is being put into the hands of the human race. You cannot be so small-minded as to think that the rights or the life of an individual or of a million individuals are of the slightest importance in comparison with this." (Weston, ch.4, p.27)

"I suppose all that stuff about infinity and eternity means that you think you are justified in doing anything - absolutely anything - here and now, on the off chance that some creatures or other descended from man as we know him may crawl about a few centuries longer in some part of the universe." (Ransom, ch.4, p.27)

“And yet, he thought, beyond the solar system the brightness ends. Is that the real void, the real death? Unless . . . he groped for the idea . . . unless visible light is also a hole or gap, a mere diminution of something else. Something that is to bright unchanging heaven as heaven is to the dark, heavy earths . . . .” (Ransom, ch.6, p.40)

“But starting from the other end you had an animal with everything an animal ought to have - glossy coat, liquid eye, sweet breath and whitest teeth - and added to all these, as though Paradise had never been lost and earliest dreams were true, the charm of speech and reason.” (Ransom, ch.9, p.58)

“But it takes his whole life. When he is young he has to look for his mate; and then he has to court her; then he begets young; then he rears them; then he remembers all this, and boils it inside him and makes it into poems and wisdom.” (Hyoï, ch.12, p.73)

“That the hrossa should have such instincts was mildly surprising; but how came it that the instincts of the hrossa so closely resembled the unattained ideals of that far-divided species Man whose instincts were so deplorably different?” (Ransom, ch.12, p.74)

“I do not think the forest would be so bright, nor the water so warm, nor love so sweet, if there were no danger in the lakes.” (Hyoï, ch.12, p.75)

“They cannot help it. There must be rule, yet how can creatures rule themselves? Beasts must be ruled by hnau and hnau by eldila and eldila by Maleldil. These creatures have no eldila. They are like one trying to lift himself by his own hair - or one trying to see over a whole country when he is on a level with it - like a female trying to beget young on herself.” (Augray, ch.16, p.102)

“The sky, no less than the earth, was full of them; the visible Malacandrians were but the smallest part of the silent consistory which surrounded him.” (ch.18, p.118)

“It was not always so. Once we knew the Oyarsa of your world - he was brighter and greater than I - and then we did not call it Thulcandra. It was the longest of all stories and the bitterest. He became bent.” (Malacandra, ch.18, p.120-121)

“We think that Maleldil would not give it up utterly to the Bent One, and there are stories among us that He has taken strange counsel and dared terrible things, wrestling with the Bent One in Thulcandra. But of this we know less than you; it is a thing we desire to look into.” (Malacandra, ch.18, p.121)

“I see that you have chosen the most momentous crisis in the history of the human race to betray it.” (Weston, ch.20, p.134)

“Our right to supersede you is the right of the higher over the lower.” (Weston, ch.20, p.135)

“The year we are in now - but heavenly years are not as yours - has long been prophesied as a year of stirrings and high changes and the siege of Thulcandra may be near its end. Great things are on foot.” (Malacandra, ch.21, p.143)

“He felt almost the opposite - that life was waiting outside the little iron egg-shell in which they rode, ready at any moment to break in, and that, if it killed them, it would kill them by excess of its vitality.” (ch.21, p.146)

“Death is not preceded by dread nor followed by corruption.” (Ransom, Postscript, p.159)

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet* was written in 1938, on the eve of World War II. In what ways is the novel a product of its historical context? Give special consideration to the actions and words of the villains of the story, Weston and Devine. Be specific.
2. The era of European imperialism came to an abrupt end after World War II, but before that conflict, some still treasured the ideals of the age of imperialism, including Social Darwinism. C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet* was written in 1938, on the eve of World War II. In what ways does the novel criticize the thinking of British imperialists? Use specific characters, quotations and incidents from the story to support your answer.
3. Discuss the three sentient species on Malacandra in C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*. Many have seen in these three species a picture of different divisions of humanity. In applying this conceit, what would the three represent - races, social classes, occupations, differing gifts? Support your answer with specifics from the novel.
4. C.S. Lewis asserted that *Out of the Silent Planet* is an attack on scientism. Discuss the difference between science and scientism and explain why the book is aimed at the one and not the other. Support your answer with incidents and quotations from the story.
5. Consider the character of Weston in C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*. What is the chief sin of which Weston is guilty? How does Lewis point out this sin? Is his critique coherent with what Scripture has to say on the subject? Why or why not?
6. Near the end of C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*, Weston and Devine are brought before Oyarsa for judgment. The angelic ruler of Malacandra concludes that Weston may yet be saved, but Devine is beyond all hope of salvation. Why do you think this is true? What qualities of the two men led Lewis, through the words of Oyarsa, to come to this conclusion?

7. Discuss the role of death on Malacandra in C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*. In the postscript, Ransom writes, "Death is not preceded by dread nor followed by corruption." Is the author's view of death on an unfallen world biblical? Why or why not? Support your answer with quotations from the novel and from Scripture.
8. Discuss the view of angels (the eldila and Oyarsa) in C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*. Lewis is clearly writing a fantasy novel, yet the correlation is a clear one. Is his treatment of these beings biblical, given the fact that he obviously used the license available to any writer of fiction? Why or why not?
9. Robert Burns, in his poem *To a Louse*, said, "O wad some Power the giftie gie us / To see oursels as ithers see us!" How does C.S. Lewis use the viewpoints and comments of the three sentient species on Malacandra in *Out of the Silent Planet* concerning Thulcandra to illuminate the human condition and make comments on the true nature of mankind and the world we inhabit?
10. Discuss the relationship between the first two books of C.S. Lewis' Space Trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra*. In what important ways does the first set the stage for the second? Be sure to go beyond the mere introduction of characters; consider setting and plot as well.
11. Discuss the view of the dignity of man presented in C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*. Be sure to include in your discussion both the ideas Lewis advocates and those he critiques. Support your arguments with quotations from the text.
12. In C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*, Weston is pictured as a man who desires to accelerate the evolutionary process by scientific means. Early in the book, he speaks of a mentally handicapped boy in the following words: "The boy was ideal. Incapable of serving humanity and only too likely to propagate idiocy. He was the sort of boy who in a civilized community would be automatically handed over to a state laboratory for experimental purposes." How do Weston and the Nazis he is intended to represent demonstrate the logical consequences of Darwinism?
13. In C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*, Ransom comments on the family life of the hrossa by saying, "That the hrossa should have such instincts was mildly surprising; but how came it that the instincts of the hrossa so closely resembled the unattained ideals of that far-divided species Man whose instincts were so deplorably different?" Discuss the extent to which the sentient species on Malacandra are intended to give idealized representations of mankind. What is the theological significance of these similarities that Lewis incorporates into such clearly non-human creatures?

14. In C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*, the hross named Hyoui, when speaking to Ransom about the hnakra, says, "I do not think the forest would be so bright, nor the water so warm, nor love so sweet, if there were no danger in the lakes." To what extent is it true that one is unable to appreciate the good apart from the presence of evil? Is a fallen world in this way better than an unfallen one? Is the New Jerusalem truly better than the Garden of Eden? Support your answer, both from the novel and from Scripture.
15. Compare and contrast the views of the inhabitants of Mars found in C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet* and H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*. What do the conflicting views of the authors tell you about their respective worldviews? Use specific traits and responses to show how the portrayal of aliens illuminates the underlying philosophies of the two writers.
16. Compare and contrast the characters of Professor Weston in C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet* and Uncle Andrew in the same author's *The Magician's Nephew*. While one is a villain and the other a comic figure, both serve as targets for Lewis' criticisms of science and its potential for abuse. In your comparison, be sure to note the responses of the two men when they are brought to bay by those they hoped to dominate.
17. In C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*, discuss how the protagonist Ransom changes as a result of his journey to Malacandra. Cite specific instances of character development and altered attitudes. To what extent do these changes correspond to biblical teachings concerning sanctification?
18. In C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*, the wise old sorn Augray says, "There must be rule, yet how can creatures rule themselves? Beasts must be ruled by hnau and hnau by eldila and eldila by Maleldil." Compare the picture of the interrelationships that exist in the universe pictured by Lewis with the medieval concept of the Great Chain of Being. To what extent is this view of an ordered universe biblical?
19. In C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*, the wise old sorn Augray observes that Thulcandra is a bent world because, among its inhabitants, "every one of them wants to be a little Oyarsa himself." From a biblical standpoint, is this an accurate assessment? Support your conclusion from Scripture and from other quotations and incidents in the novel.
20. To what extent is the peaceful coexistence and mutual respect among the three sentient species on Malacandra in C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet* a commentary by the author on racism among human beings? What, according to Lewis, are the causes and cure of racism? Are his assessments of this topic biblical? Why or why not?
21. Use the invented term *hnau* in C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet* to discuss the author's view of the image of God and that of which it consists. Though the Malacandrian word is never defined, much may be gleaned from context. What are the salient characteristics of hnau? To what extent do these correspond to the biblical idea of the image of God? What lessons does Lewis draw from the use of the concept? Support your answer with specifics from the novel.

22. Analyze the conversation between Weston and Oyarsa in C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*, giving special attention to the portion of the dialogue for which Ransom is called upon to translate. How does Lewis use this dialogue as a key portion of the philosophical and social critique contained in the novel? Be sure to consider stylistic elements as well as the content of the conversation.