In the mid-1930s, C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, on a walk, agreed that there was a dearth of quality writing in “speculative fiction.” The genre term “science fiction” didn’t really become popular until the 1950s, but that is the sort of literature they were thinking about. “There is too little of what we really like in stories,” Lewis said. “I am afraid we shall have to try and write some ourselves.”

As the anecdote goes, they flipped a coin to decide who would write about time-travel and who would take up space-travel. Tolkien ended up with time-travel and wrote two unfinished works related to the Silmarillion (The Lost Road, The Notion Club Papers). Lewis landed with space-travel and soon began his famed Ransom Trilogy.
The first two novels clearly venture out into “Deep Heaven.” The protagonist Ransom has his adventures, respectively, on Mars and Venus, or rather, Malacandra and Perelandra. In both stories, Ransom confronts the ambitious agenda of a scientist, Weston, who is bent on colonizing these pre-fallen planets in the name of evolutionary and transhumanistic progress.

It is certainly best to read these two books first as a foundation for reading the third book which takes place back on Earth, or Thulcandra, “The Silent Planet.” Why is it silent? Because the spiritual beings that steward the rest of the solar system (Arbol’s Field) are not able to communicate through Earth’s outer barrier (which splits through the moon) due to its fallen nature.

Having encountered innocent creatures and spiritual beings in these new worlds, Ransom returns to the Silent Planet as a transformed person with heightened capacities to discern the malevolent powers that threaten all human society. These Macrobes (fallen eldila) seek to dominant the world through a social and scientific planning agency called the National Institute of Coordinated Experiments, mostly known as N.I.C.E. Two new protagonists, husband and wife Mark and Jane, must not only find their way in the midst of this epic struggle; they must also find themselves, and ultimately each other in the context of their failing marriage.

If you do not read the other two novels first, it is possible to read That Hideous Strength by itself. This is a major reason I have compiled this Readers Guide. There are several online summaries and videos of Out of the Silent Planet and Perelandra that can give a backdrop.

This final story in the trilogy has often been critiqued as a very cumbersome and challenging book to read, full of obscure references and literary genre-gear shifts. But it does hold together quite well with respect to two main themes: Lewis’s critique of Scientism (mind you, not Science), and the slow conversion experiences within Mark and Jane as they navigate the new circles in which they find themselves.

Perhaps you were wondering earlier... What book is The Tortured Planet? This is actually an abridged version of That Hideous Strength which was requested and printed by an American publisher in 1958 with Lewis’ approval. He essentially trimmed out a third of the writing from his original work without any loss to overall plot and detail. Try buying one on Ebay!
THE SETTING

*That Hideous Strength* (published in 1945) is set in post-war England, around 1948, in and around the fictional English town of Edgestow (north of Oxford; west of Cambridge; east of Wales), home of Bracton College at University of Edgestow. The nearby town of Belbury to the south is the location of the new N.I.C.E. headquarters; further eastward from Edgestow is St. Anne's Manor where Ransom lives in community with others who share his common cause. Central to Edgestow is an old-growth area called Bragdon Wood, known for the legendary spot of Merlin’s Well and possibly Merlin’s burial site.

Check out this [second map](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2021/05/06/an-old-pictorial-map-of-central-oxford-are-there-links-to-c-s-lewis-fiction/) by Tim Kirk from 1981:

Printed in *Mythlore* (Issue 29, page 6)

See below for a link to Annotated References for Quotes and Allusions.
LIST OF CHARACTERS
(adapted by Ted Lewis from Wikipedia)

Jane Tudor Studdock – Protagonist; supposedly writing a PhD thesis on John Donne, but since her marriage has been disoriented as a housewife. She reluctantly discovers herself to be clairvoyant. Married to Mark.

Mark Gainsby Studdock – Protagonist; sociologist, and ambitious to the point of obsession with reaching the "inner circle" of his university-based social environment. Married to Jane.

N.I.C.E. Associated Characters

François Alcasan – "The Head", a French scientist executed for murder. His head, recovered by N.I.C.E., is kept alive by technology while serving as a communication vehicle for the Macrobes.

John Wither – Long-winded bureaucrat, Deputy Director of the N.I.C.E. He is the true leader of the N.I.C.E. and a servant of the Macrobes. His speech and thinking are characterized by vagueness and jargon.

Professor Augustus Frost – A psychologist and assistant to Wither (also aware of the Macrobes). He views emotions and values as mere chemical phenomena; his speech and thinking are coldhearted and precise.

Miss/Major Hardcastle (a.k.a. "The Fairy") – The sadistic, cigar-chewing head of the N.I.C.E. Institutional Police and its female auxiliary, the WAIPS.

Dr. Filostrato – An obese Italian physiologist who has seemingly preserved Alcasan's head (unaware of the Macrobes). He wishes to free humanity from the constraints of organic life.

Lord Feverstone (Dick Devine) – The politician/businessman/nominal academic who lures Mark into the N.I.C.E. He, with Weston, had kidnapped Ransom in Out of the Silent Planet.

Reverend Straik – the "Mad Parson." He believes that any sort of power is a manifestation of God's will, and is ready to obliterate the "organization of ordered Sin called Society".

Horace Jules – A Cockney novelist, tabloid reporter, and pseudo-scientific journalist who has been appointed Director of the N.I.C.E., but only as a figurehead.

William (Bill) Hingest – A distinguished chemist recruited by N.I.C.E. but soon resigns, having expected N.I.C.E. to be about science. Consequently, he is murdered by N.I.C.E. agents.
St. Anne's Fellowship (or Company)

Dr. Elwin Ransom (also known as "the Pendragon" and "the Fisher King") – A former Cambridge don who heads the community at St. Anne's. He alone communicates with benevolent elfina.

Grace Ironwood – The seemingly stern but kind psychologist and doctor who helps Jane interpret her dreams. (An interesting counter-part to Fairy Hardcastle.)

Dr. Cecil Dimble – An academic, old friend of Ransom, and close adviser on matters of Arthurian scholarship and pre-Norman Britain. Once taught Jane; dislikes Mark.

Margaret "Mother" Dimble – Wife of Cecil Dimble. Having had no children, the Dimbles have compensated by their kindness to students.

Ivy Maggs – Formerly a part-time maid for Jane; now driven out of the town by N.I.C.E. and living at St. Anne's. Ivy's husband, Tom, is in prison for petty theft. He ends up at N.I.C.E.

Andrew MacPhee – A rationalistic Scottish scientist and close friend of Ransom (from WW1). He joins St. Anne's to fulfill the role of a resident skeptic.

Arthur Denniston – An academic at Edgestow and student-friend of Mark, until the latter won the fellowship at Bracton College (due to Feverstone). Married to Camilla.

Camilla Denniston - Tall and beautiful, she is the first person Jane meets at St. Anne's. Wife of Arthur Denniston. Both forced to leave their home near Bragdon Wood.

Merlinus Ambrosius – The wizard Merlin, awakened from sleep and returned to serve the Pendragon and save England. Receives the powers of the planetary Oyéresu beings.

Mr. Bultitude – Last of the seven bears of Logres that escaped from a zoo and was tamed by Ransom who has authority over animals. Later captured by the N.I.C.E., but escapes again.

TITLE REFERENCE

“The shadow of that hyddeous strength, Sax myle and more it is of length.”

from Ana Dialog, Sir David Lindsay, 1555 (with reference to the Tower of Babel)
WHAT IS LOGRES?

Of course, Lewis was a top scholar in Medieval and Renaissance Literature, and thus it was easy for him to weave Arthurian themes into the book, as well as ancient understandings of planetary powers. These two subjects show the influence of two Inklings on Lewis’ literary engagements: Charles Williams, who wrote several works on Arthurian subjects, and Owen Barfield, who influenced Lewis to some degree regarding hierarchies of spiritual beings.

Logres is the ancient pre-Norman realm of Britain during the era of Roman decline, constituted by the core of King Arthur’s kingdom prior to the Anglo-Saxon takeover. While idealized and romanticized, the term represents long-lost, yet enduring elements of a ‘golden-era’ England, in contrast to subsequent British culture that supplanted the Logres-impulse. Influenced by Williams’ own reworking of the Arthurian myth, Lewis adapts this content for his own purposes by bringing Merlin back to life.

Stephen Winter explains how Logres never fully disappears. “Britain is usually in the ascendency but Logres is always present and recognized as a kind of truest and best self of the people, always under pressure, but always re-emerging in some new and vibrant way.” (A Pilgrim in Narnia, 2018 blog posting.)

Mrs. Dimble, in Hideous, describes this resurgence of Logres in the modern era as a ‘haunting’:

“There was a moment in the Sixth Century when something that is always trying to break through into this country nearly succeeded. Logres was our name for it – it will do as well as another. And then... gradually we began to see all English history in a new way. We discovered the haunting.”

Ransom, however, warns against any sort of British exceptionalism. “Every people has its own haunter. There is no special privilege for England – no nonsense about a chosen nation. We speak about Logres because it is our haunting, the one we know about.”

Altogether, Logres was an important element for Lewis to help illuminate the contrasting worldview of the British stakeholders at N.I.C.E. Adjacent to this ancient history is the group of planetary beings in the solar system that likewise stood apart from the mechanistic and transhumanist aims of the technocrats. These two threads merge at the climax of the book when Merlin becomes the instrument through which the celestial Oyéresu can channel their powers.
Lewis accents how he was influenced by Owen Barfield, directly placing Barfield in a quote about his knowledge of “ancient unities” (261). Barfield, an Anthroposophist, was Lewis’ lifelong friend and intellectual sparring partner. Lewis once said that Barfield’s influence on himself was greater than his own influence on Barfield.

Learn more about planetary influences: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Planets_in_astrology

Lewis was quite familiar with these aspects through Medieval texts, and one author has suggested that the seven Chronicles of Narnia intentionally included characteristics of each planet respectively (Planet Narnia by Michael Ward).

Dystopian Novel About Technocray

What makes reading this book both fun and interesting is the playful, yet satirical style of Lewis’ descriptions of the N.I.C.E. enterprise. Written after Huxley’s Brave New World, but before Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty Four, Hideous Strength presents a dystopian totalitarian project at its very inception. In contrast to those other classics, Lewis offers an ending that defeats the sinister powers. This climax mirrors the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, where mass confusion prevents the technocratic project from continuing.

Sociologist Jacques Ellul wrote about the grip of technological totalitarianism that defies all limits, yet is blind to the consequences of its own over-reach. In The Technological Society he wrote how “the technical society must perfect the ‘man-machine’ complex or risk total collapse. There is no other place to go but up.”

The architects of N.I.C.E. likewise end up over-extending their reach. Ransom explains to Merlin what has happened. “Their own strength has betrayed them. They have gone to the gods who would not have come to them, and pulled down Deep Heaven on their heads.” This is an image of the Babel builders piercing a hole through the ceiling of the heavens, unknowingly bringing doom down upon their own project. (Perhaps the Tower of Babel passage can be read as an ancient sci-fi text, since the top theme in all sci-fi literature is social control!)

All of the N.I.C.E. characters represent different aspects of the nexus between applied science and social control. One area includes the propagandistic efforts to control the general population through the press (hence, Mark’s usefulness as a sociologist/statistician).
Meanwhile, behind closed doors, experimentation on both animals and humans (felons) serves to advance the cause of Humanity which ultimately holds no regard for individual people or creatures. Underlying all of the sub-developments is a mechanistic view of life that not only devalues humanity, but ends up destroying all aspects of nature.

THE ABOLITION OF HUMANITY

While C. S. Lewis is mostly known for his Christian apologetic writings and his books for children, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, few people know that he wrote over 30 articles and books that analyzed trends in modern applied science. One of the key texts here is *The Abolition of Man* which is based on three lectures he gave at the University of Leeds. In his preface to *Hideous*, Lewis plainly mentions how his novel fictionalizes the themes he developed in *Abolition*.

In fact, Filostrato delivers a line that is stated verbatim in the third section of *Abolition*: “What we call Man’s power over Nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as its instrument.” In a later conversation, Mark learns how the dead weight of the human population serves “as a kind of cocoon for Technocratic and Objective Man.” In this transformation toward transhumanism, “The human race is to become all Technocracy” (258).

In the wake of the publication of *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis was often accused of being ‘anti-science.’ For him, however, the problem was with “scientism,” a philosophical orientation to science which rejects the guidance of traditional moral absolutes (summed up by Lewis as the *Tao* in *The Abolition of Man*), and places full faith in technological progress which gives no place for honest questioning or “wholesome doubt.”

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If you want to do a deeper follow-up to how Lewis wrestled with these issues, there are several essays worth reading in the collected volume of short writings, *God in the Dock*. One of these is “Is Progress Possible? Willing Slaves of the Welfare State,” where Lewis writes about a “new oligarchy” that is reliant on the advice of scientists who direct social and political policies. (First published in the *Observer* magazine, 1958.)

Another article, “Reply to Professor Haldane,” can be found in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (1966). Here Lewis openly presents his non-partisan political views in conjunction with the prospect of a techno-scientific elite that influences public policy. He warns of two fateful beliefs: “the belief that the process which the Party embodies is inevitable, and the belief that the forwarding of this process is the supreme duty and abrogates all ordinary moral laws” (84).

For a comprehensive study on this topic, read...

**Scientism**

“C. S. Lewis: Science and Scientism” by F. Schaefer III

https://www.lewissociety.org/scientism/
ANNOTATED REFERENCE GUIDE

WARNING: That Hideous Strength, for many, is not an easy book to read. It has lots of allusions to other literary and historical figures, Latin quotes, and even references to people whom Lewis admired or did not admire. Using an annotated reference guide can be very helpful!

The most comprehensive online annotated guide for quotes and allusion for That Hideous Strength is produced by Arend Smilde from Utrecht, Netherlands. 

http://lewisiana.nl/thsquotes/

Here are three examples from a list of hundreds of entries:

- Chapter 1 mentions Henry de Bracton
  The annotation explains how he was an English Medieval lawyer (1268) who wrote a work on common law that emphasized how no king was above the law.

- Chapter 6 has a Latin line from the Roman poet Ovid, “Ad metam properate simul”
  The annotation gives the meaning: “hurry on to the finish together!” (suggesting orgasm). And the source: Ars Amatoria (The Art of Love) II, 727.

- Chapter 14 has the title “Real Life is Meeting”
  The annotation explains that this is a quote from the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber who wrote I and Thou.
CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

The two main characters of the book, Mark and Jane, are frankly not very sympathetic characters for the reader to identify with. And as a married couple, they are never together throughout the entire story until the very last page! A primary way that the book is structured is that the storyline moves back and forth between what Mark is experiencing in his world and what Jane is experiencing in hers.

Throughout this interweaving plot, both characters are faced with circumstances and people that confront some of their most basic assumptions about life and themselves. Lewis, very cleverly I think, describes how an inner conversion experience takes a lot of time and is typically met with great resistance. (He of all people should know!) I do not simply mean conversion in the religious sense. But it does include the classic threat to one’s protective ego, and the winning over of one’s surrender to a set of views and values that ultimately seem more appealing than appalling.

What’s fun in comparing the two figures (and by the way, Lewis throws in a lot of gender-based commentary throughout the story – that itself is a full topic of discussion) is that Mark very much wants to be accepted in the “inner ring” of this new social project, whereas Jane very much does not want to join the eclectic company she encounters. Therefore, Mark’s journey of growth gradually unfolds in relation to his own disenchantment with the group in which he finds himself; Jane’s journey unfolds in relation to her re-enchantment with the group that she is in.

Rather than saying more about how and why Mark and Jane change within from start to finish, I will offer some **Study Questions** to help you think about these threads of resistance and release toward personal transformation.

1. What, for Mark and for Jane, are the ways they think about life or themselves that are barriers to their inner growth?
2. What do they encounter (i.e. the people they meet) that makes them more resistant to blending in with their groups?
3. What experiences help them the most to initially break down those barriers and to consider the merits of a new change?
4. What for each of them was the final element that allowed them to take the plunge toward their truer selves?
5. What are the implications of their individual transformations for their marriage relationship?

For further reading about Lewis and gender issues, read Christiana Hale’s works on C. S. Lewis.

C 2021 by Ted Lewis
SECONDARY RESOURCES

Recommended for Deeper-Dive Study of the Space Trilogy


FINAL THOUGHTS

In Lewis’ book, *The Magicians Nephew* of the Chronicles of Narnia, Queen Jadis wanted to take over London with the help of Digory’s Uncle Andrew. Can you imagine what would have happened if she had stuck around and gained deep influence over the bureaucrats, technocrats, and other elitists who all, in the name of Scientific Progress, were willing to lead English society toward a Brave New Utopia?

Reading *That Hideous Strength* can be read as an extension of that very scenario. Recall when Aslan references the ruinous end of the world of Charn. Polly then asks, “But we’re not quite as bad as that world, are we, Aslan?”

“Not yet,...but you are growing more like it....Soon, very soon, great nations in your world will be ruled by tyrants who care no more for joy and justice and mercy than the Empress Jadis. Let your world beware. This is a warning. Now for the command. As soon as you can, take from this Uncle of yours his magic rings and bury them so that no one can use them again.” Hmmm. Disempowering magic rings. That sounds familiar.