

Study Guide

Out of the Silent Planet – C. S. Lewis

First Published 1936

Brief Biography of C. S. Lewis

Clive Staples Lewis, one of the most famous Christian authors of the 20th century, was born in Belfast, Ireland and grew up fascinated by animals and fairy tales. After years of English boarding school and the death of his mother from cancer, Lewis abandoned the Christian faith of his family and became interested in mythology. He became a poet and focused on classic epic poetry from the Greek and Norse traditions, then won a scholarship to University College, Oxford. At Oxford, Lewis began a friendship with the writer J.R.R. Tolkien (the author of *The Lord of the Rings*) who eventually led Lewis back to his Christian faith in 1931. Lewis then became a staunch defender of Christian theology, writing many essays, books, and radio broadcasts that outlined the rational and emotional reasons that mankind needs Christian belief. Many of these essays and broadcasts were anthologized in Lewis's most famous non-fiction work, *Mere Christianity*. Lewis also wrote several fictional novels that display the themes of mankind's sin and need for divine grace, including the Space Trilogy (of which *Out of the Silent Planet* is the first book) and his most famous works, the seven *Chronicles of Narnia* novels for children. The *Chronicles of Narnia*, written between 1949 and 1954, have become a classic of children's literature for their whimsical characters and fantastic adventures, but also for their accessible and interesting introduction to the basic tenants and theology of Christianity. Lewis remained a vocal and influential scholar and Christian apologist for the rest of his life, keeping a connection to Oxford and a post at Magdalene College, Cambridge. He was married to the American writer Joy Davidman for four years before her death in 1960. Lewis continued to help raise Joy's two sons, Douglas and David, before his own health failed and he died of renal failure in 1963. His books are still widely read today, and have been translated into many languages.



Out of the Silent Planet Summary

Chapter 1

The novel starts with Dr. Elwin Ransom walking through the English countryside during a year off from his work as a professor of language at Cambridge University. Ransom looks for a place to stay for the night, eventually coming to a large estate. The gate is locked, but Ransom hears a commotion and sneaks in through a hedge. He sees two men, Dr. Weston and Mr. Devine, struggling to capture a young boy. Ransom convinces Weston and Devine to let the boy go home and goes into Weston's house for a drink. The drink turns out to be drugged, and Ransom has a strange dream of meeting aliens while under its influence. When he wakes, Ransom finds himself in a spaceship. He overhears Weston and Devine say that they have kidnapped him to be a sacrifice to a mysterious people called the sorns on a planet called Malacandra.

Ransom tries to worry about his fate on Malacandra, but can't help but spend the journey in awe of the bright vitality of the heavens – he can't bring himself to call this expanse "space" now that he has seen how beautiful it is. After a month's flight, the ship begins its descent to the planet of Malacandra, and Ransom's fear returns despite the stunning landscape of Malacandra. They land at a settlement site on the shore of a gorgeous lake. As they unpack their supplies, Ransom sees three long, ghostly figures walk across the lake. He assumes these must be the sorns, and runs from Weston and Devine in terror. He flees through the alien forest behind the settlement.

Summary Analysis

A mysterious man whom the narrator calls the "Pedestrian" walks through the English countryside in a rainstorm, hoping to find a place to stay. After finding that no rooms are open in Nadderby, he walks on to a town noted on his map as Sterk. The Pedestrian has the air of an academic man, and indeed is a philologist (linguist) at Cambridge college. His name is Dr. Ransom. Ransom is disheartened at first to see that Sterk seems to be mostly farmland, until he finally sees a small cottage in the distance where he might ask for lodging.

When Ransom arrives at the small cottage, a woman there explains that there is likely no place to stay in Sterk except for an estate called The Rise. The Rise is where her son, Harry, works for a businessman named Mr. Devine and a professor whose name the woman does not know. The woman seems very upset that her son is not yet home, and Ransom offers to go to The Rise and send Harry home (while hoping to earn a place for himself to stay at The Rise in the process).

Ransom follows the woman's directions to the estate called The Rise, but finds the gate locked. Ransom decides to sneak through the tall hedge surrounding the estate. Once inside the grounds, Ransom notices how cold and unwelcoming the house itself looks, but presses on and rings the bell. There is no answer, but Ransom hears a scuffle and the sound of angry voices around the back of the house. A young child (later revealed as Harry) yells at someone to let him go home.

Ransom rushes to the back of the house and sees a child, whom he assumes to be Harry, struggling to escape from the grasp of two men. Ransom interrupts tentatively, muttering about sneaking in through the hedge, and then tells the men that Harry's mother wants him home. The larger man angrily asks who Ransom is, but the thinner man exclaims that he knows Ransom from Wedenshaw Secondary School. The thinner man reintroduces himself as Devine, and Ransom suddenly recognizes Devine as a schoolmate that he did not like. Devine then tells Ransom that the thicker man is "The Weston," the great physicist.

Themes

Christian Imagery and Thought

C.S. Lewis, a devout Christian for much of his adult life, includes his interpretation of the fundamentals of Christian belief in all his novels. In *Out of the Silent Planet*, Lewis uses the creative and exciting framework of a science fiction adventure to offer a new way for readers to think of Christianity through his protagonist Dr. Elwin Ransom's experiences on the new planet Malacandra (Lewis's name for Mars). Indeed, Lewis sees this... read analysis of Christian Imagery and Thought

C.S. Lewis, a devout Christian for much of his adult life, includes his interpretation of the fundamentals of Christian belief in all his novels. In *Out of the Silent Planet*, Lewis uses the creative and exciting framework of a science fiction adventure to offer a new way for readers to think of Christianity through his protagonist Dr. Elwin Ransom's experiences on the new planet Malacandra (Lewis's name for Mars). Indeed, Lewis sees this fantastic setting as absolutely critical to his goal of influencing his readers to think about and engage with Christian ideas and beliefs, disrupting the "stuffy" lectures and moralistic plays that Lewis assumes most people associate with Christian teaching. Away from the reverence of "stained-glass and Sunday school" that Lewis perceives as obstructing the true potency of Christian thought, Lewis hopes that *Out of the Silent Planet* can open the imaginations of his readers so that they are better able to accept the amazing truths he himself has found in Christian life.

Towards that goal, much of the religious discussion that Ransom, Lewis's main character, encounters on Malacandra loosely resembles the basics of the Christian faith. For example, Lewis describes the ruler of Malacandra as an angel-like figure called Oyarsa, and explains that this oyarsa serves more powerful figures who are rough analogues of the Christian figures God the Father and Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Lewis describes the Biblical account of the "fall" of Earth into sin by connecting it to a story in which Earth once had its own oyarsa, who then fought against the higher gods and plunged the humans of Earth into conflict and pain (paralleling the story of Satan's fall from Heaven and his subsequent temptation of Adam and Eve). While the Christian allusions are incredibly important to the story, Lewis purposefully leaves them vague rather than fully explaining how he sees the Christian universe relating to his imagined planet. These Christian elements are instead used to inform the fantastical elements of Lewis's science fiction universe, and in the process open the door for readers to look at Christian thought under a new guise that is not already affected by any negative associations they may have with Christianity.

Lewis then gives his readers a path to follow on their journey to accepting Christian thought through the spiritual awakening of Dr. Ransom, an average English professor who comes to believe and advocate for the Malacandrian religion. Over the course of the novel, Ransom finds that he is better able to avoid experiencing pain himself or causing it for others when he follows the orders of Oyarsa, suggesting that all humans can also improve their circumstances by looking for the will of God in their own lives. Significantly, Ransom is not a bad person who must be brought to salvation to save his life. He is a normal man who tries to do the right thing and hopes to overcome the fundamental brokenness of human nature. Through Ransom, readers are shown how a human might seek forgiveness and grace rather than punishment and restriction in their faith. As Ransom learns about the blessings that can come from living according to the Malacandrian worldview, the reader is also given a chance to consider the possible benefits of finding out more about a Christian life. Using Ransom's path as a representation for all men, Lewis shapes this awakening to suggest that all humans need God without forcing readers to recognize God immediately as the explicitly Christian God.

Human Nature and Morality

Lewis wrote *Out of the Silent Planet* as a response to what he saw as the "dehumanization" of science fiction, that is, the idea that science fiction had become too much about the strange and wonderful technology that authors could dream up and had moved away from exploring mankind's place in the universe (as had been the focus of science fiction novels such as the work of Jules Verne or H.G. Wells).

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Lewis finds ways to represent the opposing views on the purpose of science fiction and what those views say about the place of humans in the hierarchy of the universe. Lewis starts by using his characters Dr. Weston and Mr. Devine, an English physicist and businessman respectively, to show his distaste for the view of the pursuit of scientific knowledge as the endless march of progress and the inevitable triumph of human kind. Lewis sees that perspective reflected in modern science fiction novels that praise such characters for their use of strength and intellect to dominate others. Both Weston and Devine focus on what they can gain from exploiting Mars (Malacandra, in the vernacular of this planet’s inhabitants), either in terms of material wealth or in terms of a new colony for mankind to spread their version of civilization. In contrast, Lewis represents his own perspective on science fiction novels as a place to explore the fundamental nature of humankind through the human protagonist Dr. Ransom. Ransom comes to appreciate the Malacandrian species on their own terms and learns to accept his place in this society as a moral human who considers the well-being of others. He also comes to accept humankind’s place as a rational being (hnau) no better or worse than the other hnau of Malacandra. Ransom learns that living by the rule of those beings which are above hnau – the eldila, and specifically the head eldil, called the oyarsa – leads to a more fulfilling life.

Lewis then turns to what he considers proper morality, starting from the Christian idea that all humans fall short of their moral duties of caring for others and must be taught how to do what is right and reject what is wrong. Lewis defines right and wrong in terms of what is in line with the wishes of the ultimate ruler of the universe and what benefits the most people (and aliens). Oyarsa (the specific oyarsa of Malacandra, and the head of their moral system) proclaims Mr. Devine “broken” for forgetting the higher duty of hnau to consider things beyond the material world. In the same way, Dr. Weston is “bent” because he considers no one beyond humankind, staying too loyal to his idea of his own kind while ignoring moral injunctions to respect other types of beings (and indeed individual humans as well). Ransom learns that all humanity has a “bent” or sinful nature due to the failure of the oyarsa of Earth (The Bent One) to properly show humans their place in the universe and the need for obedience to the Old One, who rules the entire universe. Lewis thus sees humanity as fundamentally morally deficient, calling back to the Christian notion of original sin which proclaims all humans as sinful from birth. Yet Lewis sees a path back to the natural order of life, should humans accept that they are not the most superior beings in the universe and

subsume their own desires to the greater good as Ransom does at the end of *Out of the Silent Planet*.

Characters

Dr. Elwin Ransom

The protagonist of the novel, Ransom is a philologist don (linguistics professor) at Cambridge taking a gap year to walk through the English countryside. He is captured by Weston and Devine, then used as... [read analysis of Dr. Elwin Ransom](#)

Dr. Weston

A renowned physicist and man of science who organizes the mission to Mars (Malacandra) and seeks to eliminate the “savage” beings he finds there so that humanity can colonize Mars and have another planet to... [read analysis of Dr. Weston](#)

Dick Devine

A businessman who works with Dr. Weston and an old schoolmate of Ransom’s, Devine is motivated only by greed and hopes to settle Mars (Malacandra) so that humans can take advantage of the deposits... [read analysis of Dick Devine](#)

Hyoï

Ransom’s first friend among the hrossa, an intelligent seal-like species on Malacandra. Like all hrossa, Hyoï deeply appreciates poetry and beauty, introducing Ransom to the hrossan ideal of death as the welcome completion of... [read analysis of Hyoï](#)

Oyarsa

The specific oyarsa (guardian spirit) of Malacandra and the greatest of the spiritual beings known as eldila, roughly analogous to angels on Earth. Oyarsa appears to Ransom as a being of pure light. Oyarsa is... [read analysis of Oyarsa](#)

Kanakaberaka

One of the pfltriggi, a species on Malacandra that enjoys craftsmanship and stone work. Kanakaberaka carves Ransom’s portrait before Ransom meets Oyarsa, showing the idealization of this story that will be told after... [read analysis of Kanakaberaka](#)

The Old One

The supreme ruler and creator of the universe in Malacandran theology. The Old One does not have a corporeal body but lives everywhere in the heavens and watches over every living thing through his deputies... [read analysis of The Old One](#)

Maleldil the Young

The partner of the Old One, who helped create the world and lives with the Old One through the entire universe. Maleldil stands for all that is good, and his orders are in the... read analysis of Maleldil the Young

Minor Characters

Hnohra

An older hross who helps Ransom learn the language of the hrossa.

Augray

One of the sorns, the most scientifically-minded species on Malacandra, who helps Ransom continue his journey to answer the summons of Oyarsa.

Hrikki

A “cub” (young hross) who first explains the eldila to Ransom.

Whin

A hross who goes on the hnakra hunt with Hyoui and Ransom.

Hrinha

A hross who works for Oyarsa on the island of Meldilorn.

The Bent One

The name given to the oyarsa of Earth after this oyarsa rebels against the Old One and Maleldil and hopes to turn the humans of Earth towards evil. Roughly analogous to the Christian concept of Satan.

Lewis (The Narrator)

A version of the author C.S. Lewis himself, who is a student of Dr. Ransom’s in the story and helps Ransom publish his adventure once Ransom returns from Malacandra.

Harry

A young boy in England who does odd jobs for Devine, and is originally intended to be the sacrifice to the sorns before Ransom appears.

Historical Context of Out of the Silent Planet

Lewis wrote *Out of the Silent Planet* as a response to what he saw as a “dehumanization” of science fiction. Through a conversation with the author J.R.R. Tolkien, Lewis decided that he would write a romantic “space travel” novel while adding in the aspects of morality and universal humanity that he felt science fiction had lost. The novel is also steeped in the

traditions of English academia, referring to the dons of Oxford, and arguing against the rise of secularization among the scientific community in England. Lewis saw himself as uniquely suited to reach out to those who had abandoned religions and Christian faith in England, himself struggling with questions of atheism after his experience in World War I. Many who fought in WWI suffered a loss of optimism and became known as "The Lost Generation" for their new search for meaning in a world that suddenly seemed much less clear or good than previous generations believed. Church attendance in Great Britain declined somewhat during this time, as clergy were unable to provide adequate explanation for the senseless horrors of the war. Lewis then attempts to offer a new way to think about the Christian religion for those who were disillusioned by their experience with the church over the course of this time.

Questions and Answers

Which are three character-traits of Ransom in Out of the Silent Planet?

In Out of the Silent Planet, Ransom exhibits empathy, bravery, and trust. His empathetic nature is shown through his willingness to understand alien species and question his own. His bravery is... *(continue ...)*

What is the main conflict in "Out of the Silent Planet"?

The main conflict in "Out of the Silent Planet" is the internal struggle to transform Earth's society from one marked by struggle, cruelty, and individualism into a more harmonious and cooperative... *(continue ...)*

Who are the Hrossa in Out of the Silent Planet?

In Out of the Silent Planet, the Hrossa is one of the three species with reasoning abilities that live on the planet Malacandra. They teach Ransom their language and help him to settle on the planet.

In Out of the Silent Planet, how did Ransom form and overcome his preconceptions about Malacandra?

Ransom's preconceptions about Malacandra in C.S. Lewis's novel stem from his kidnapping by Devine and Weston, who plan to offer him as a human sacrifice. Initially terrified by the prospect of... *(continue ...)*

In Out of the Silent Planet by C. S. Lewis, what are Weston's fears?

Weston fears the seroni, or sorns, on Malacandra due to their advanced scientific and technical capabilities, leading him to consider offering a human sacrifice. Additionally, he fears the primitive... *(continue ...)*

What is strange about the rooms at The Rise in Out of the Silent Planet?

In "Out of the Silent Planet," the protagonist Ransom finds the rooms at The Rise peculiar due to their contrasting elements of luxury and squalor. The rooms contain expensive items like armchairs,... (*continue ...*)

How do the characters Ransom learns about on Malacandra represent the central figures in Christianity?

While on Malacandra, Ransom is taught about the order of the universe and its governing entities. "The Old One" appears to be the Malacandran name for God, as "Maleldil the Younger" is their name for Jesus. The *eldila* appear to be spirits that have the function of angels, watching over and protecting those dear to the Old One. The *Oyarsa*, both the one on Malacandra and those watching over the other planets, is a type of *eldil* that watches over entire planets and seems to be higher in power and authority than a typical *eldil*: they are essentially analogous to archangels. This corresponds with the situation of Earth (The Silent Planet); it is said that the Earth's *Oyarsa* fell from goodness and perverted his kingdom, polluting it with sin. This fits in with the Christian narrative of the angel Lucifer rebelling against God and turning to sin. The Malacandran view of religious hierarchy becomes clearer in the next two installments of the Space Trilogy as well.

How might Out of the Silent Planet be viewed as a social commentary?

The names and characters of Weston and Devine are highly intentional. Lewis intended for these two to represent vital elements of Western culture: progress-focused utilitarianism and materialistic greed, respectively. He seems to take a stand against these points of view, as evidenced by his unflattering and clearly negative portrayal of these men and their actions. In the final scene between Weston and *Oyarsa*, the latter demonstrates the imbecility of the former, kindly showing the flaws of his philosophy. This flawed philosophy is the predominant one in academic culture in today's Western society, so clearly Lewis is criticizing both its utilitarianism and its individualistic materialistic greed.

