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Annalee Brantner

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Hnau Too: Diversity in Out of the Silent Planet

Annalee Brantner

Though some readers may criticize C. S. Lewis for a lack of diversity in his fiction, his work shows his belief that all people are God's children and his desire for all races to treat each other with respect and love. Lewis introduces diversity in Narnia where creatures and humans alike are seen as persons and as having great value. In *The Chronicles of Narnia* he illustrates the equality in value between all sentient creatures as inherently built into the world rather than addressing it in detail throughout the stories. In *Out of the Silent Planet*, however, Lewis creates a space for a more direct discussion of racism and diversity by integrating it into the storyline. Lewis explores issues of diversity through Ransom's misconceptions and assumptions regarding the native creatures and their social structure, the actuality of life on Malacandra and the benefits of its structure of equality and difference, and Weston's twisted views on humanity. Lewis uses imagination to express truths on racism, letting the imaginative world make way for a faithful outlook and bypassing the bias that interferes with real-world debates.

Before Ransom arrives on Malacandra, he has already imagined the aliens who inhabit the planet. Wellsian ideas of “loathsome sexless monsters” and “horrors such as ancient and medieval mythology could hardly rival” consume his mind as he anticipates his arrival on the unknown planet.¹ When he sees a *sorn* for the first time, he is so overcome that he flees in terror, thinking its unfamiliar features equate the dangerous monster he imagined. When he first sees a *hross*, he again lets terror guide him, basing his perceptions solely on the unfamiliarity of the creature, until intellectual inquiry overpowers them. After his interest in language introduces him to the *hross* Hyoui, Ransom continues to view the *hrossa* as an inferior species and treats them like an experiment (no matter how many of his theories are rendered false) until defeating the *hnakra*. Only then is “that difficulty which they, accustomed to more than one rational species, had perhaps never felt” overcome as Ransom realizes “they were all *hnau*.”² A desire for superi-

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▫ Lewis, C. S. *Out of the Silent Planet*, 37.

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ority and control or an incorrect sense of fear often fuel racism. Because Lewis portrays the story through Ransom's perspective, the reader internalizes Ransom's perceptions. When Ransom assumes the *sorns* are dangerous, the readers follow his perspective and let it become their own. Lewis brings the readers into these misconceptions and includes them in Ransom's journey towards correcting them, showing the difficulty of counteracting his prejudices. Lewis makes the reading personal by requiring the audience to examine itself, its prejudices, and the root of its misconceptions instead of becoming passive observers in Ransom's journey.

Moreover, when Ransom begins to learn about Malacandra through the *hrossa*, initially he cannot grasp its societal structure. He comes to see that each of the three species coexists peacefully. No hierarchy lies between them, but they all have different skills, which they contribute to the whole. The *hrossa* are poets and artists, they recognize beauty and reflection and share with their fellow *hnau*. The *seroni* learn about the natural world and universe and study all they can, sharing any knowledge asked of them. The *pfifltriggi* build and create for all of the planet. All *hnau* work together and value each species' unique contributions. They respect each other's gifts and passions; the *seroni* are even considerate of the ways the *pfifltriggi* enjoy working when asking them to build. By contrast, Ransom comes from a broken world—a silent planet—and cannot fathom the harmony between them and the celebration of differences. Even Ransom's inquiries on power and imbalance are so bent by his world, that the *hrossa* cannot understand them. Ransom knows selfishness and fear and prejudice, and he comes from a world marked by them all, yet the planet and *hnau* he feared are now able to show him—and readers as well—the brokenness in his world. In seeing the holistic existence between the various species on Malacandra, Ransom sees Earth's need for diversity and peace.

When Ransom arrives on Malacandra, his thoughts are controlled by fear to the point that he cannot even imagine the planet as marvelous; nevertheless, “before anything else he learned

that Malacandra was beautiful.”³ Nothing in the story gives the impression that Malacandra would be anything else except Ransom's fear, which he lets dictate his perceptions of the inhabitants, imagining a world that matches his assumptions. From the moment he arrives, however, his misconceptions are broken down into truth and beauty, and he “even reflected how odd it was that this possibility had never entered into his speculations.”⁴ Ransom's recognition of the planet's beauty shows his ability to overcome his initial perceptions and sets the stage for his future encounters with the natives. Before he can get over his fear of the creatures and see their value, the physical beauty of the planet is starting to break down his misconceptions.

Lewis explores Ransom's various prejudices, their causes, and their dissolution. Ransom is scared to land on the planet, but his fears are quickly met with the actuality of beauty and dissolved through the visual realization. He sees Hyoi as a danger before his philological interest spurs him to action. The cause of the action, however, affects the formation of the relationship. Ransom views the *hrossa* as an intellectual study, and this perspective makes it more difficult for him to view them as equals. As he observes their life, he draws attention to practices he sees as inferior and diminishes the value of actions that prove otherwise. He notes their “beehive-shaped huts,” that “they slept on the ground,” and their lack of arts “except a kind of poetry and music” in contrast to Earth's development and civilizations.⁵ Only after learning the language well enough to answer the *hrossa*'s questions and gain a clearer understanding of their knowledge and culture, does a “real revolution in his understanding” occur.⁶ His time with the *hrossa* works slowly to correct his assumptions. He spends weeks learning their culture through immersion, yet he does not truly see them as an equal until they defeat the *hnakra* together. Through Ransom's time with

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▣ Lewis, 43.

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▣ Lewis, 43-44.

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▣ Lewis, 67.

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▣ Lewis, 68.

the *hrossa*, Lewis shows that placing oneself in a position of superiority, even with good intentions, is a barrier to the world God intended where all *hnau* coexist respectfully. Diversity is not an experiment or box to check off a list, but God's natural order for humanity.

Furthermore, the immensity of Ransom's fear towards the *seroni* hinders his ability to overcome his prejudices. Ransom first hears of a *sorn* while being kidnapped to another planet. At this point he is justifiably frightened, but he uses his fear to build up unfounded prejudices. He knows nothing about the *seroni*, yet decides they are a fate worse than death, feeling "he could face death but not the *sorns*."⁷ Even when the *hrossa* speak of the *seroni* with respect, Ransom refuses to release his initial inhibitions. Because Ransom places so much weight in his fears, he is not able to overcome his perceptions of a *sorn* until he comes into direct and willing contact with one. When Ransom starts his journey to Oyarsa, the *hrossa* direct him to a *sorn* Augray for help. Ransom is hesitant to trust Augray at first; however, when he finally surrenders, he can open himself to *sorns* in ways he never did with the *hrossa*, deciding "from the outset that he would be quite frank, for he now felt that it would be not *hnau* . . . to do otherwise."⁸ Lewis shows the strength of fear and the grip it takes upon a person's reason even when unfounded. Lewis also shows that the breaking down of barriers leads to freedom. Though Ransom still has much to learn, he finally understands the nature of *hnau* and accepts those around him, enabling him to be honest and release some of the fear holding him. He learns to appreciate the variety of *hnau* around him and the differences between them, accepting all of them as equals and experiencing a truly diverse world.

Finally, Weston's conversation with the Oyarsa, reveals the root of racism: an excessive love of one's own kind. Throughout the book, the other becomes a villain to those who do not understand it, yet in this moment unknown creatures do not spur Weston's beliefs but rather an

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⁷ Lewis, 37.

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⁸ Lewis, 102.

inordinate love for his kindred. Other laws for *hnau* such as pity, straight dealings, and shame are diminished by the love of kindred. Love of humanity becomes an idol for Weston, and he is unwilling to invite other types of *hnau* into his world. Like Weston's views, racism stems from the exclusivity of one group from another and their refusal to recognize and respect groups outside of themselves. Like these bent beliefs, the acceptance of only one type of *hnau* leaves a person's world narrow and empty. After finding out that Earth only has one type of *hnau*, the *sorns* are struck and think "this must have far-reaching effects in the narrowing of sympathies and even thought."⁹ The refusal to reach outside of one group creates a small world, and the lack of diversity diminishes the new perspectives and thoughts that come from a diverse group setting as well as the ability to relate to people outside of a person's personal experience. Lewis's discussion on race and diversity culminates with Weston's argument with Oyarsa. As the audience travels with Ransom through false prejudices and sees the value and rewards of accepting all *hnau* as equal, it sees the ridiculousness of Weston's claims and can see beyond his claims to the sad world a lack of diversity leaves. Weston's beliefs address the root of racism and emphasize the need for diversity.

Similarly to Lewis's other books, *Out of the Silent Planet* creates a world filled with a celebration of diversity and equality of value, however, unlike his other works Lewis's introduction of a foreign character into the world creates a conversation on race and diversity. Through Ransom's time in Malacandra, Lewis highlights our own world's need for diversity and the dangers of racism and excessive love of kindred. He forces the readers to reflect on their views and actions when it comes to other races and challenges them to treat every person as a child of God. Lewis celebrates the differences between different types of *hnau* and shows how these differences, matched with equal respect and value, serve to create a strong and healthy society. The racism of Earth juxtaposed to the equality and peace of Malacandra creates a tension, which

helps the reader to understand the real world, marking prejudices and misconceptions to advocate a fuller and diverse view of humanity.

Bibliography

Lewis, C. S. *Out of the Silent Planet*.