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# Human Destiny in That Hideous Strength

Wilfred Martens  
*Fresno Pacific University*

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# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume I**

A Collection of Essays Presented at

The First

FRANCES WHITE EWBANK COLLOQUIUM

ON

**C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS**

Taylor University 1997

Upland, Indiana

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**Human Destiny in *That Hideous Strength***

Wilfred Martens  
Fresno Pacific University

## Human Destiny in C.S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength* by Wilfred Martens

Readers generally consider the third novel of the trilogy different from the other two. Even Lewis had different perspectives on his second and third novels. George Sayer notes in *Jack: A Life of C S. Lewis* that *Perelandra* was "the space-travel novel he [Lewis] liked best and of all his books the one most essentially his own" (297). The same year as the publication of *Perelandra*, Lewis wrote in a letter to E. R. Eddison that he had begun another novel; he had written "300 sheets and come to the uncomfortable conclusion that it is all rubbish." The author's self-deprecatory comment belies the nature of *That Hideous Strength* as a complex and highly unified novel.

Yet in spite of its differences *That Hideous Strength* is an integral part of the trilogy. It is an apocalyptic novel which culminates the earlier confrontations between Ransom and Weston in the great battles between the forces of good and evil. In contrast to the two preceding novels, Lewis brings the readers down to earth, to England, to demonstrate that, like the distant worlds of Venus and Mars, the silent planet is a place of contending forces as well. Here too the natural and supernatural exist side by side. Lewis provides settings with which he was familiar: the academic world and the Christian community. Bracton College in the English university town

of Edgestow is host to the National Institute of Coordinated Experiments (NICE). Opposed to this group is a community of humans and animals who live in a large house in the hilltop village of St. Anne's. Their leader is Ransom. These are the forces and settings which provide Lewis with a structure that conveys the theme of human destiny, a theme which has been developed in the preceding novels. Human beings choose their destiny; the choice leads either to life or death, heaven or hell.

The theme of human destiny is conveyed in the third novel through the protagonists, Mark and Jane Studdock, young newlyweds who are suffering marital difficulties. The manner in which the theme is developed is via symbols which are integrally related to the values, beliefs, and dreams of these two characters. The idea of using symbols to develop a theological doctrine is not unusual to Lewis. In his essay "Is Theology Poetry?" he notes the similarity between the two: "Theology certainly shares with poetry the use of metaphorical or symbolical language" (85).

The archetype which reflects human destiny is the universal symbol of water. In the third novel this archetype is expressed in a variety of symbols and images including swamp, river, well, and a related symbol, bridge. Water is a common archetypal symbol, yet its ubiquitous presence in literature past

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and present does not diminish its significance in the trilogy. For example, Perelandra is a planet of water—oceans and islands. It is paradisaic and feminine in concept. Malacandra, on the other hand, has little water. It has been impacted by evil men from Earth. It has scorched dry deserts and only a few oasis-like valleys. It is masculine in concept. The third novel brings the two gender concepts together in the protagonists, a husband and wife, inhabitants of the silent planet which was once paradisaic before the fall. These protagonists are conveyers of the eschatological doctrine of human destiny, and it is via archetypal symbols that the pattern is developed.

Carl Jung notes in *Symbols of Transformation* that the archetype of water has dualistic associations of both life and death. In his essay "Symbols of the Mother and of Rebirth" he states:

The maternal significance of water is one of the clearest interpretations of symbols in the whole field of mythology, so that even the ancient Greeks could say that 'the sea is the symbol of generation.' From water comes life; hence, of the two deities who here interest us most, Christ and Mithras, the latter is represented as having been born beside a river, while Christ experienced his 'rebirth' in the Jordan . . . . All living things rise, like the sun, from water, and sink into it again at evening. Born of rivers, lakes, and seas, man at death comes to the waters of the Styx, and there embarks on the 'night sea journey.' Those black waters of death are the water of life, for death with its cold embrace is the maternal womb, just as the sea devours the sun but brings it forth again (218).

The river Wynd runs through Edgestow, bisecting the campus of Bracton College and Bragdon Wood, a remnant of ancient forest owned by the College. NICE has plans to purchase Bragdon Wood and adjoining properties in order to build a large headquarters and science experimentation center. The proximity of the river to the Wood makes the ground under the Wood unstable for building and creates swampy areas on the surface. In order to correct this problem NICE plans to divert the river in another direction. By realigning the topography NICE will cause the river to flow into and through a nearby valley, thus creating a new reservoir for the expanded needs of Edgestow. A major consequence of this redirection is the inundation of Cure Hardy, a small village in the valley; the Edenic setting will be forever lost in order to accommodate the science experiments of NICE. In an unpublished doctoral dissertation, Robert Martin notes the relationship of the river as symbol to Mark and Jane: "Wynd is meant to suggest 'wind,' a word associated with the medieval idea of 'spirit' through the ancient unities of the Hebrew *ruach* and the Greek *pneuma*. . . ." (332). If one combines Jung's association of archetypal river with life and death, and Martin's association with Spirit, the Wynd river takes on eschatological significance in relationship to the characters Jane and Mark Studdock.

Jane's association with the Wynd is developed largely through her association with Mr. and Mrs. Dimble. In an opening scene in the first chapter Jane meets her friends, Dr. Cecil and 'Mother' Margaret Dimble, while shopping in Edgestow. Dr. Dimble, a Fellow in Literature of Northumberland College in the University of Edgestow, is a Christian and a friend of Ransom. He had been Jane's tutor

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during her last years as an undergraduate. He has a deep knowledge of Arthurian legend. His wife is known as "Mother" Dimble, a faculty wife who served as an "unofficial aunt" to women students in her home. She is a childless woman who takes a special interest in Jane. After their shopping is completed they invite Jane home for lunch; the Dimbles live in college housing near the river and adjoining Bragdon Wood.

The Dimbles are directly affected by the Wynd. The underground seepage and the swampy areas create a setting which allows for residential homes but not larger structures for educational or commercial purposes. Only when the wetlands are dry can the land be reclaimed for new construction. Therefore, NICE plans to evict the Dimbles from their home in order to purchase the Wood and adjoining properties for its grand scheme. But because of her relationship with the Dimbles, Jane is also affected by the river and the plans of NICE. She is treated as a family member by the Dimbles, who draw her into the Company of St. Anne's. Margaret Dimble is a mother-figure and Cecil Dimble serves as a source of trust, wisdom, and advice for Jane. These persons oppose the plans of NICE, which they later learn include changes more far-reaching and evil than merely evicting families from their homes and wiping out a nearby village.

Bridge is another symbol associated with the archetypal river and thus with the theme of human destiny. Several bridges appear in the novel, but the most prominent bridge is one with which Mark is frequently associated as he walks from Bracton College to Bragdon Wood, a covered wooden bridge across the Wynd river. It is this bridge which provides access from the university to the Wood, property which NICE later acquires for its plans. Bridge as symbol can have positive or

negative meanings. For example, two of the Narnian tales also include bridges, but with two different meanings. A positive association is suggested in *The Voyage of Dawn Treader*. The children are returning from Narnia to their world, but they wish to go with Aslan to his world (heaven):

"Oh, Aslan," said Lucy. "Will you tell us how to get into your country from our world?"

"I shall be telling you all the time," said Aslan. "But I will not tell you how long or short the way will be; only that it lies across a river. But do not fear that, for I am the great Bridge Builder. And now come; I will open the door in the sky and send you to your own land" (VDT, 215).

Aslan is a positive bridge; he provides a connection between earth and heaven. He serves as a bridge which leads to the kingdom of Narnia, a place of joy, peace, and life. But in *Prince Caspian* The bridge takes on another meaning. It is described as something negative, a chain that limits the power of the river god. The children, accompanied by Aslan and a variety of creatures, come to a river:

They turned a little to the right, raced down a steep hill, and found the long bridge of Beruna in front of them. Before they had begun to cross it, however, up out of the water came a great wet, bearded head, larger than a man's, crowned with rushes. It looked at Aslan and out of its mouth a deep voice came.

"Hail, Lord," it said. "Loose my chains."

"Who on earth is that?" whispered Susan. "I think it's the river-god, but hush," said

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Lucy.

"Bacchus," said Aslan. "Deliver him from his chains."

"That means the bridge, I expect," thought Lucy. And so it did.

The bridge falls apart and disappears into the swirling waters. The river-god is freed and "With much splashing, screaming, and laughter the revelers waded or swam or danced across the ford . . . and up the bank on the far side and into the town" (PC, 193). In one tale, the bridge represents hope and life; in the other tale it restrains and imprisons; it must be destroyed. In the third novel of the trilogy, the symbol of the bridge also conveys dualistic meanings depending upon its relationship to characters and groups, in particular to Jane and St. Anne's, and Mark and NICE.

The Wynd river is a river of destiny and the bridge which crosses it offers a choice. In *That Hideous Strength* the two groups, St. Anne's and NICE, clearly represent the two options. To Jane, the Dimbles, and the others, the Wynd river is a natural river. To this group the river reflects the words of the ancient prophet Ezekiel in the Old Testament, "And wherever the river goes every living creature will live. . . . so everything will live where the river goes" (Ezekiel 47: 9). In opposing the diversion of the river in an unnatural and destructive direction they implicitly affirm its natural course. The bridge leads to life. Conversely, to Mark and the NICE group, the river is merely a natural barrier to their selfish plan. It matters little that its diversion will dry up Bragdon Wood and inundate the entire village of Cure Hardy. It reflects human choice which leads to destruction. The bridge leads to death.

To Lewis, choice is an essential part of human destiny. Mrs. Dimble reflects this

notion when she says to her husband, "What you were saying reminded me more of the bit in the Bible about the winnowing fan. Separating the wheat and the chaff. Or like Browning's line: 'Life's business being just the terrible choice.'" (THS, 284). The "terrible choice," a phrase from Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, consists of making a commitment to Ransom's plan, a plan to destroy NICE before it destroys the world.

The relationship of the symbols associated with water to the two communities in the novel reflects Lewis's position that the destiny of the natural world is closely related to the destiny of human beings. In *Miracles* he indicates that it is God's desire that all human beings choose and enjoy a new life, a new human nature. But it is not only human nature that will be remade; the natural world will also be redeemed. "It is the picture of a new human nature, and a new Nature in general, being brought into existence. . . . That is the picture—not of unmaking but of remaking. the old field of space, time, matter, and the senses is to be weeded, dug, and sown for a new crop. We may be tired of that old field: God is not" (149).

Lewis encourages an attitude of respect, even reverence of the natural world, as long as it does not result in worship of nature. Jane and Company manifest a respect for nature. They attempt to understand why NICE is so intent on acquiring Bragdon Wood and come to the conclusion that the area is desirable because of its "spiritual" history. For Jane and her friends the Merlin legend recalls good spirits, good magic. For the NICE group this history is perceived as a dark and evil spiritual history and therefore desirable for its purposes. The legend of Merlin recalls evil spirits, black magic. As Dimble observes, "Of course they hoped to have it both ways. They thought the

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old *magia* of Merlin, which worked in with the spiritual qualities of Nature, loving and reverencing them and knowing them from within, could be combined with the new *goeteia*—The brutal surgery from without" (THS, 285-286). But Bragdon Wood also has a legendary association with Logres, a time and country associated with Christian values and a premodern attitude toward nature. "Dimble and he [Ransom] and the Dennistons shared between them a knowledge of Arthurian Britain which orthodox scholarship will probably not reach for some centuries. They knew that Edgestow lay in what had been the very heart of ancient Logres . . . and that a historical Merlin had once worked in what was now Bragdon Wood" (THS, 200). To the St. Anne's Company, Bragdon Wood is a source of potential good; from it emerge the Christian values of Merlin.

In its efforts to change the course of the river of destiny, NICE makes a choice to take control of human destiny. For the people of Belbury the choice reflects their desire to be agents of evil who control the world according to their standards. As Dimble states, "After him [Merlin] came the modern man to whom Nature is something dead—a machine to be worked, and taken to bits if it won't work the way he pleases. Finally, come the Belbury people, who take over that view from the modern man unaltered and simply want to increase their power by tacking onto it the aid of spirits—extra-natural, anti-natural spirits" (THS, 285). After the river is diverted, the world of Belbury is characterized by the dry Bragdon Wood, a world without life. The bridge connects Bragdon College with a sterile desert. NICE has made its choice, and that choice results later in its apocalyptic destruction. The river of NICE is a river of death which ends in hell.

Mark, however, is not destroyed in the decimation of Belbury. Before he commits himself unequivocally to the plan of Belbury he makes an important decision. As he witnesses the chaotic tumult at the final Belbury banquet, he receives a note sent by Denniston advising him to escape Edgestow and go quickly to St. Anne's. With encouragement from Merlin he makes a choice: "Next moment he found himself running as he had never run since boyhood; not in fear, but because his legs would not stop. When he became master of them again he was half a mile from Belbury" (THS, 352). Shortly thereafter he joins his wife and his destiny is changed.

As a representative of St. Anne's Company, Jane lives with respect and in harmony with nature. She experiences a change in attitude and finally accepts a belief in God, a new perspective on the world. It is the world which Lewis describes in his essay "The Laws of Nature." The laws of nature, he explains, are behind events which occur but are not the cause. Behind the chain of events, and behind the laws is a source which nature does not identify:

The dazzling, obvious conclusion now arose in my mind: *in the whole history of the universe the laws of Nature have never produced a single event.* They are the pattern to which every event must conform, provided only that it can be induced to happen. . . . But the actual existence of the chain [of events] will remain wholly unaccountable. We learn more and more about the pattern. We learn nothing about that which 'feeds' real events into the pattern. If it is not God, we must at the very least call it

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Destiny—The immaterial, ultimate, one-way pressure which keeps the universe on the move" (78-79).

The laws of nature do not in themselves produce events; they are the pattern to which every event must conform. And it is God who feeds events into that pattern. It is such a God-centered view of the universe which Ransom and the Company of St. Anne's share. Thus their respect of, and their desire to live in harmony with, nature. Jane's conversion is described like a person crossing a bridge from a desert to a garden: "But they were changed. A boundary had been crossed. She had come into a world, or into a Person, or into the presence of a Person" (THS, 318). Earlier Mark had noticed changes in his wife as she continued her association with Ransom's group. "She seemed to him, as he now thought of her, to have in herself deep wells and knee-deep meadows of happiness, rivers of freshness, enchanted gardens of leisure, which he could not enter but could have spoiled. She was one of those other people . . . like the Dimbles—who could enjoy things for their own sake" (THS, 247). The choice of Jane to live in harmony with God and nature results in a world of water--rivers, wells, meadows, gardens. Her new perspective is largely the result of the influence of Ransom who appropriately declares, "I have become a bridge" (THS, 291).

Human destiny is the result of choice. As Lewis states in *Mere Christianity*: "If you want to get warm you must stand near the fire: if you want to be wet you must get into the water. If you want joy, power, peace, eternal life, you must get close to, or even into, the thing that has them. They are not the sort of prizes which God could, if He chose, just hand out to anyone. They are a great fountain of

energy and beauty spurting up at the very centre of reality. If you are close to it, The spray will wet you: if you are not, you will remain dry". (MC, 137).

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