

Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016

Volume 5 *A Collection of Essays Presented at
the Fifth Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on
C.S. Lewis & Friends*

Article 27

6-2006

Rooms as Cultural Approaches

Katie Garber
Taylor University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Garber, Katie (2006) "Rooms as Cultural Approaches," *Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016*: Vol. 5 , Article 27.

Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol5/iss1/27

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for the Study of C.S. Lewis & Friends at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016* by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.

Rooms as Cultural Approaches

Cover Page Footnote

Undergraduate Student Essay

INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume V

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 2006

Upland, Indiana

Rooms as Cultural Approaches

Katie Garber

Rooms as Cultural Approaches

Katie Garber

That Hideous Strength might fit into a category I would label “pre-dystopian” literature—not being written before other dystopian works, but being a record of C.S. Lewis’s fictionalized, satirical account of a future world that stands on the brink of entering a dystopian future. It is “pre-dystopian” because it tells of the human struggle which occurs in deciding whether humanity will enter one of its worst imaginable ends.

The canon of dystopian fiction written in the decades around 1945 (the publishing date of *That Hideous Strength*) is exemplified by Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Orwell’s *1984*. Lewis’s ideas about the cause of a dark future differ not only in the fact that he acknowledges spiritual forces behind these human events, but also in the avenue through which he fears society will be spoiled. Lewis, the professor of English, looks mainly to art and culture as that culpable vein.

Huxley had assumed that the likely evils that would occur if society did not change certain trends would lie mostly along the lines of scientific advances in relation to embracing pleasure and total, mindless gratification. The government of *Brave New World* applies and enforces what seems to be scientific human “progress” and leaves its citizens mentally numb. Science has taken away pain and struggle, leaving any meaningful art and culture as simply dispensable non-issues. Orwell also presented an artless society, but his powerful government has taken control through the use of the military, retaining power through fear, organization, and propaganda.

Although Lewis’s novel does include frightful images of scientists attempting to force evolutionary progress onto humankind, the science is not the main issue. The ideas behind their goals are certainly dangerous, but the scientists are only fooled by those working for the demonic forces into believing that they have succeeded in their experiments with a prototype for the immortal, ubiquitous, inorganic human. Therefore real scientific advances were not necessary,

in Lewis’s mind, as they were for Huxley. A strong, threatening government also had little influence on the events in *That Hideous Strength*, beyond the intimidated government’s compliance with the N.I.C.E. plans. Transparent political goals were not necessary, for the work was underground, drawing members slowly together, initiating them into the pseudo-science run by demonic forces which hoped to eventually eradicate the rest of the population. Authoritarian governmental structures, based solely on the thirst for power, which Orwell feared as the cause of dystopia, did not bring Lewis the greatest fear. Lewis was warning instead against the infiltration of ideas into a generation with little remaining moral foundation, and with few assumed values that the skeptics (and artists) had left unquestioned. The hyperbolic goals of Lewis’s dystopian villains seem to be mostly impractical images which display to cultural progressives what their artistic and scientific “ideas” would look like if actually put into practice. In the novel’s preface, Lewis writes: “This is a ‘tall story’ about devilry, though it has behind it a serious ‘point’ which I have tried to make in my *Abolition of Man*,” a non-fiction work that he had published in 1943, dealing with issues of moral education.

If *That Hideous Strength* is a picture of good vs. evil within the contemporary culture that Lewis chastises in *The Abolition of Man*, I would argue that Lewis goes one further step into image-making by providing the two approaches to culture (the “good” approach and the “bad” approach) with their own uniquely conceived specialized room that holds their essential cultural ideal in one well-packaged design. The struggle between good and evil in this novel, then, may be understood in compact form by looking closely at the Blue Room vs. the Objectivity Room.

The Blue Room is located in The Manor at St. Anne’s and is the room in which Ransom, the Director, currently lives and where he communicates with the

eldils—or angels. It is the spiritual center of The Manor, being the most concentrated example of the good ideals they hold. The Objectivity Room is located in Belbury and serves a specific function other than residence: it is the final stage of training, or mind-alteration, for members of the N.I.C.E. who are chosen to enter the inner circle of devotion to the macrobes—or demons.

As the most general and obvious difference, the Blue Room is based on what C.S. Lewis considers “natural” and right, and the Objectivity Room is entirely “unnatural” and coercive. Defining which cultural system is the natural and which is the deviant stands at the base of Lewis’s approach to modern cultural issues. Have traditional approaches to reality been illusions which contemporary society has overcome? Or has contemporary society’s “progress” been an illusion which only takes it further from understanding reality? According to Lewis, in *The Abolition of Man*, explanations of the spiritual reality that lay behind nature came under scrutiny once scientific discoveries made traditional religious and spiritual ideas seem primitive. Lewis chooses the label the “Tao” for those basic values which must be assumed and cannot be “questioned” (for there can be no other basis on which to judge them). In general, the Tao, throughout history, has been accepted in its various forms by various cultures. The assumption that there is some sort of order and harmony in the universe, which is exemplified in those human societies following the Tao’s tenets, has more recently been supplanted by a culture driven towards what it perceives as independence from tradition and superstition. Cultures which had attempted to harmonize with the absolute truths behind nature and reality have more recently become cultures which deny any need to integrate with an absolute order, for they assume that no order exists.

The Blue Room in Lewis’s novel, however, is a contemporary picture of a community acknowledging that higher order. Jane Studdock first enters the room as an unbeliever; it is clear that fear and circumstance bring her to this household at St. Anne’s, not a desire to find Truth. In fact, she cannot at first comprehend the structure of life within this house, as she is not yet convinced of the moral assumptions which lead to the form that this community takes. The most obvious, if most controversial, example is their view of marriage. Mother Dimble, coming from a previous generation, cannot even understand why modern women would question their “duties” to their husbands, for these roles should come naturally. Although she basically attributes this to instinct, her beliefs are more likely the results of what Lewis would argue is a proper upbringing and education based on the Tao. On the other hand, the Director has explanations and rational arguments for these same traditional gender roles in marriage; however, his arguments are based on the humble acceptance of the foundational principles given by his

spiritual authorities. Of course, many who accept the idea of the Tao itself may not see traditional gender roles as part of this foundational value system, but Lewis uses this issue as a vivid picture of how his idea of what is natural and right would be lived out in a likeminded group of people.

Jane is initiated into this common understanding when she speaks with the Director in the Blue Room. The approach to enlightenment within this room is neither coercive nor manipulative; it is honest and understanding. The Director tells her bluntly, for example, that obedience is necessary and that “equality is not the deepest thing” (148), both very jarring ideas to a modern woman. He also recognizes that her mindset is not exactly her fault. “They never warned you. No one has ever told you . . .” (148), he says. He follows up this discussion about her role in marriage with a demonstration based in nature. After dropping some crumbs on the floor, they watch as mice run in to appropriately eat the crumbs. The Director displays through an everyday experience the fact that harmony exists in the world and that it is a human duty to make “adjustments” (149) if need be in order to enter into the “dance” of nature, as he calls it. Husband and wife must play their part in the higher order, just as man and mouse must play certain roles if they wish to avoid turmoil. In the Blue Room, then, human beings are first honestly educated about the Tao, which is the system upon which the natural world was created, and are second invited to join in on the dance of all nature which can only occur when humans freely choose to join in their place.

In contrast, the Objectivity Room attempts to disrupt this order through coercive means. After Mark has spent some time discovering deeper layers within the N.I.C.E. organization, coming closer to finding its real hidden purposes, he faces the final initiation into its Inner Circle; this last step is meant to occur within the Objectivity Room. To become a member of the “family,” as Withers calls the group at the core of N.I.C.E.’s goals, the individual must enter into a family of an entirely different sort than that imagined by those at St. Anne’s. This is also a family which is more “like a single personality” (120). Ransom’s explication of the ideal family is also unified like a single personality, and yet it is based on the opposite of equality, focusing instead on the give and take of the various unique elements. Conversely, the “single personality” desired as an ideal community at the N.I.C.E. is one in which all subjectivity and uniqueness is erased; in other words, the humans in this family must cease to be human. Frost explains that “a circle bound together by subjective feelings of mutual confidence and liking would be useless” (255) for their purposes.

To achieve this state in its members, the N.I.C.E. must manipulate their minds through blatantly unnatural means. Within the Objectivity Room, human beings lose that which makes them human. For example, a

Rooms as Cultural Approaches • Katie Garber

series of dots cover the ceiling. The subject looking at the ceiling believes that they are randomly placed, then begins to see a possible pattern, but realizes that there is no pattern, even though it continually seems that one must exist. Eventually the subject would become numb to this disturbing effect. These sorts of elements in the room draw out into the light those tendencies for unification and harmony which the community at St. Anne's celebrates; but they only bring them out in order to make them so obviously absurd compared to the alternate reality they have created as the basis of this room. On a cultural level, this technique would actually resemble a postmodern deconstruction of metanarratives. Through very unnatural methods which break away from the traditions of art as a means of expressing harmony and trying to understand reality, art has taken on the role of emphasizing that society's previous attempts to construct a unifying metanarrative of any sort is entirely contrived and therefore useless. The false impression of harmony, it says, has hindered the progression of mankind towards objective truth—which is admittedly difficult to handle for any who have not erased their human subjectivity and sensitivities. Therefore, they must become numb to those things which will not conform to previous assumptions about harmony in the natural order, and must also become numb to those things which offend their sense of decency—which, to the progressive mind, is clearly based on contrived human constructs. This desensitization is the function of the visual art within the Objectivity Room.

This artwork is of the sort produced by the Dada and Surrealist movements. It is a purposefully disturbing art, and it glorifies the human subconscious as its source—looking within the human mind for understanding, rather than looking outside towards nature and a higher spiritual realm. Within the Objectivity Room it functions as an agent for numbing the moral sensibilities, and therefore we can assume that Lewis viewed such art as similarly detrimental to society. By displacing this art from intellectual circles revered by culture into a room used for mental manipulation by a distinctly abhorrent organization, these contemporary forms of art and those who praise them become by implication the villains of our culture.

While Jane is choosing to learn and to humbly accept the principles which run the very human and meaningful culture of the company at St. Anne's, Mark is being coerced into conforming to inhuman objectivity. Jane experiences the rebirth of her assumptions about morality most significantly within the Blue Room, interacting with those people who can lead her to knowledge of truth and knowledge of the spiritual powers behind this truth. Hers is a very personal transformation, based on free choice, honesty, and humility. On the other hand, those who are trying to conform Mark's mind are allowing the Objectivity Room to effect him in isolation, apart from any true

human connections. He is essentially forced into this setting where they mean to kill any assumptions about morality which had remained from his upbringing.

In providing his readers the images of these two rooms, Lewis gives us two small packages that can be carried around, which represent the opposing cultures human beings then (and now) face. Although displaced into a science fiction novel, they are the options between which his contemporaries may choose: as described in *The Abolition of Man*, these are the way of the Tao vs. the way of its modern dissenters. As described in *That Hideous Strength*, these are the Blue Room and the Objectivity Room.

Bibliography

- Lewis, C.S. *That Hideous Strength*. New York: Collier Books, 1962.
- . *The Abolition of Man*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.