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Abby Palmisano
Taylor University

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Triology

Cover Page Footnote

Undergraduate Student Essay

**Being Hnau:
The Imago Dei in *Gulliver's Travels*
and the C.S. Lewis Space Trilogy**

by Abby Palmisano

Abby Palmisano is a senior English Literature Major at Taylor University. In the summer of 2016, she received a Faculty Mentored Undergraduate Summer Scholarship grant to do research in the Brown Collection of Taylor University's C.S. Lewis and Friends Center. She also co-authored "A Bibliography of the George MacDonald Victorian Periodical Collection in the Center for the Study of C. S. Lewis and Friends" for *North Wind Journal*.

As a child, one of C.S. Lewis's favorite books was "an unexpurgated and lavishly illustrated edition" (Schakel 191) of *Gulliver's Travels*. As an adult, Lewis wrote that Jonathan Swift's novel fulfills "an imaginative impulse as old as the human race...to visit strange regions in search of such beauty, awe, or terror as the actual world does not supply" (191). The same could be said of Lewis's *Space Trilogy*. In fact, *Out of the Silent Planet* and *That Hideous Strength* bear striking similarities to *Gulliver's Travels*, the third and fourth books in particular. Both authors specifically question what it means to be human, and both conclude that being "human" means two things. On one hand, to be human means to be fallen. On the other, it means to be a reflection of the Divine. Interestingly enough, both Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Lewis's *Space Trilogy* probe the issue of what it means to be human through creatures who are distinctly non-human. In both novels, this exploration of "the human" is conducted through the satiric escapades of the human protagonists, Gulliver and Ransom. According to Peter J. Schakel, "As we view and hear Ransom express surprise and confusion over its differences from our world, we grasp an implicit critique of our own world—as one does in *Gulliver's Travels*" ("The Satiric Imagination" 135). Gulliver and Ransom, in conversation with the inhabitants of the worlds to which they travel, begin to recognize and respond to the fallen nature of humanity. What Schakel does not mention, however, are the contrasting ways in which the two men react to this realization. Whereas Gulliver grows in his disgust for humans, and regresses himself into his fallen nature, Ransom turns to the mercy and love of Maleldil, enhancing the reflection of the Divine within himself.

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Similarities between the two protagonists can be seen in the introductions of the characters. The initial circumstances which set the stories into motion mirror each other. Both men are travelers waylaid by captors. Transported to a distant land, they encounter a differing species possessing unusual rationality, thus causing each to question his own view of humanity, both in terms of virtue and reason. Both Ransom and Gulliver are well equipped to learn new languages rapidly, allowing them to adapt to the new worlds in which they find themselves with relative ease. However, it is this ability to communicate and relate to the inhabitants of the alien land that becomes the cause of their eventual discomfort. In conversation with these other creatures, Ransom and Gulliver begin to view humankind through new eyes, seeing especially its shortcomings. This transformation of perspective produces a change in the lives of both men.

In Book IV, Gulliver arrives at this disenchantment with humanity after several years spent with the Houyhnhnms, a species of philosophical horses who are the ruling creatures of the island on which they live. This disenchantment arrives slowly, partially through discourse in which he learns that war, lying, and other destructive moral blunders are not a part of the Houyhnhnms' lives. The other source of Gulliver's disenchantment is the constant comparison made between Gulliver's description of humans and the local Yahoos—the irrational and brutal animal in Houyhnhnms Land that not only resemble humans physically but appear to have a similar propensity towards vice. As Gulliver begins to see humans as no more than the animalistic Yahoos, he no longer recognizes the Divine Image in humankind. Ultimately, Gulliver accepts the Houyhnhnm's belief that they are the "perfection of nature," confusing traits of character with physical image, sending him into a misguided attempt to become more like a Houyhnhnm in physicality, rather than virtue. After his return to England, Gulliver's friends tell him that he is obviously trying to think and act like a horse.

Ransom comes to an apparently similar realization through his discourse with the various creatures of Malacandra. In light of this epiphany, and despite his disappointment, Ransom ultimately looks to the mercy of Maleldil, and learns that the word "human" refers to something more than bodily form or even to the rational mind" (*Perelandra* 49). Thus, he grows into the full potential of the reflection of the Divine within himself. As a result of these experiences both Ransom and Gulliver view humankind through the lens of another species and they both witness, for the first time, what fallen man

really is. Once they are able to achieve this new view, Ransom and Gulliver arrive at a turning point at which the Divine Image within themselves will either be enhanced, and grow to its full potential, or else take a fatal blow. It is at this crossroads that the protagonists differ. While Ransom views the transgressions of man in context of the ultimate mercy imparted by Maleldil, Gulliver's lack of spiritual understanding renders him incapable of finding any redemption in humanity.

One way in which Gulliver's spiritual understanding falls short is his failure to acknowledge the *Imago Dei*. Gulliver and Ransom initially fail to recognize the equality existing between certain created beings. Equality seems an elusive concept for the fallen order of mankind, as can be witnessed through the human tendency to create royal lineages, as well as the imperialistic pursuit of other lands. Gulliver has a "great...veneration for crowned heads" (236) that contents him with subservient roles that place him near the ruling power of whatever society he currently resides. However, Gulliver eventually is confronted with his own romanticized view of royalty. At the Magician's island, Gulliver meets several resurrected monarchs, all of which possess debased morality and common lineage.

Like Gulliver, Ransom initially accepts that social hierarchy is a part of nature. Ransom attempts to place this human construct onto the creatures of Malacandra. Initially, this is an impediment towards Ransom's recognition of the Divine Image in the Malacandrians. Ransom, along with Weston and Devine, attempts to mentally fabricate a Malacandrian power construct that mirrors human imperialistic structures, placing Sorns (to whom they misattribute superhuman qualities) at the top and the Hrossa towards the bottom. In time, Ransom is confronted with his own contrived view of reality. This occurs primarily in conversation with Augray the Sorn. Augray teaches Ransom that the rational creatures of Malacandra—the seroni, the hrossa, and the pfilltriggi—are all equal because they are all "hnau," meaning they are all equally endowed with the *Imago Dei*. Weston, however, in failing to recognize the equality of all rational creatures, attempts to imperialize Malacandra. These misconstrued hierarchies are typically established based on the perceived degree of reason possessed by an individual or species. Eventually, this confusion flows into the human perception of the higher orders of creation, with the individual envisioning himself "to be a little blind Oyarsa in [their] brain" (*Out of the Silent Planet* 137). It is because of this phenomenon that Weston feels justified in his actions.

The pride displayed in Weston is the same type of pride seen in the Houyhnhnms in Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels*. The Houyhnhnms, although certainly rational, do not seem to possess the moral or spiritual capacities of the *Imago Dei*; instead they are “wholly governed by reason” (*Gulliver's Travels* 318). In fact, all of the virtues of the Houyhnhnms are founded on the single premise of reason. The Houyhnhnms only speak the truth because “the use of speech was to make us understand one another, and to receive information of facts” (285). Therefore, if “one said the thing which was not, these ends would be defeated.” However, reason acting of its own accord, without morality or spirituality to guide it, is fallible. In acting on reason alone, the Houyhnhnms are able to rationalize immoral behaviors, such as such as creating a social hierarchy based on physical attributes. The Houyhnhnms are also prideful of their physical form, viewing themselves as the “perfection of nature” (250).

Surprisingly, Lewis's Weston has much in common with Swift's Houyhnhnms. Like the Houyhnhnms, Weston is “wholly governed by reason” (*Gulliver's Travels* 318), and makes use of no other capacities outside of reason. Weston undervalues his moral and spiritual capacities. He sees systems of morality as arbitrary and does not recognize Maleldil. In failing to recognize the value of morality and spirituality, Weston's behavior is rather is rather Houyhnhnm-like. Therefore, he is able to justify his desire to imperialize Malacandra for the preservation of the human race through a rationality that mirrors the Houyhnhnms view of themselves as the “perfection of nature.” Like the Houyhnhnms, Weston views the existence of his own species as the most valuable. This Houyhnhnm-like worldview is further explored through MacPhee in *That Hideous Strength*, who likewise attempts to conduct himself exclusively by reason, undervaluing passions, such as romance, but out of reason has contrived some system of morality.

Just as Weston resembles the Houyhnhnms, Devine, who has no care for the Divine Image within himself or others, shares several traits with the brute species of the Yahoo, who seem to be a characterization of fallen humanity *without* the *Imago Dei*. In *Gulliver's Travels*, “the Yahoos are violently fond” of “shining stones of several colors” (*Gulliver's Travels* 309). They hoard these stones in their kennels, howling if their treasure is stolen away from their keeping. Furthermore, the Yahoos are altogether so irrational that they are looked on by the Houyhnhnms as mere animals, and therefore blamed no more for their barbarous nature than a “*gmmayh* (a bird of prey)

for its cruelty” (*Gulliver’s Travels* 294). It is for these reasons that the Houyhnhnms see it best to exterminate the Yahoos.

Devine is characterized by the same “natural bent either to profusion or avarice” (*Gulliver’s Travels* 298) as the Yahoos. In *Out of the Silent Planet*, this description of fallen nature is shortened to the word “bent” in the language of Deep Heaven. The “shining stones” that attract the Yahoos, referencing precious stones of monetary value such as silver or gold, are likewise prized and sought after by Devine. In fact, Devine’s sole enterprise on Malacandra is to gather “Sun’s Blood,” or gold. Devine’s selfish motives that accompany his manipulative and cunning nature are the exact dispositions ascribed to the Yahoos by the Houyhnhnm master. Devine, too, has gone so far into the fallen nature of humanity, and ignored his image-bearing capacities, that the Oyarsa of Malacandra deems him “only a talking animal...and could do no more evil than an animal” who would be unmade on his planet, just as the Houyhnhnms see it profitable to exterminate the Yahoos.

In each of the novels, rationality is recognized by a created being’s ability to aptly communicate through language, as well as their tendency towards order. Both authors also employ the concept of communication, and the lack of it, as a signal for a misused capacity for reason. In the third part of *Gulliver’s Travels*, the highly “scientific” people of Laputa, who possess a distorted form of reason, can barely hold a normal conversation. Later on, the projectors at the Grand Academy experiment with creating nonsensical academic books and try to do away with language altogether. Their lack of communicative abilities is a reflection of their stunted personhood. For the Houyhnhnms, saying “the thing which is not” (*Gulliver’s Travels* 285) hinders the reception of information, and therefore is an impediment to knowledge and reason. Communication, then, proves the presence of reason. It is through the recognition of language that Gulliver first discovers that the people of Lilliput and the Houyhnhnms are rational beings.

In *Out of the Silent Planet* and Book IV of *Gulliver’s Travels*, the initial meeting of another intelligent species disorients the main characters, as well as their counterparts. What indicates that they have met another rational being is the observance of particular patterns and cadences of the vocables being made, which are too specific to not be language. Language, in all its complexities, is similarly identified as a sure sign of reason by Ransom, a philologist. The more reasonable the character, the greater their abilities for communication become and vice versa. Lewis displays the deterioration of communication at

the banquet held by the N.I.C.E. As language dissipates into utter nonsense, the room of human beings deteriorates into Yahoos, rioting, fighting, and acting in brutish and irrational manners.

Although some elements from each of the four parts of *Gulliver's Travels* are reflected in *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis primarily echoes the progression of events and ideas explored in the third part of Swifts novels. From the moment Mark Studdock enters the N.I.C.E., the plot lines between the two novels match with great congruity. Both the N.I.C.E. and the people of Laputa place a near veneration on their capacity for reason. However, the types of reasoning used by both groups are distorted; in their devoted striving for logic, their capacities for reason have been damaged. This veneration manifests itself in the Laputans' habit of employing geometrical terms in the description of aesthetic beauty. The Laputans, in their admiration for geometry, misappropriate logic by utilizing complex mathematical formulas and figures in practical matters (such as making clothing or houses) which reason would traditionally determine to require relatively simple equations. These mishaps are "frequent, and little regarded" (*Gulliver's Travels* 190). In the end, Gulliver resolves that the Laputans "are very bad reasoners" (*Gulliver's Travels* 192). Their communication is stunted and a simple answer is a rarity. Gulliver finds the super-intelligent Laputans to be "disagreeable companions" (*Gulliver's Travels* 205). Therefore, he primarily converses with lower-class citizens who are thought to be more disengaged from their thoughts- because they are "the only people from whom [he] could receive a reasonable answer." This misuse of reason is juxtaposed with an example of true rationality. In *Gulliver's Travels*, this juxtaposition is found in the Laputan lord who is considered "the most ignorant person" in the society (*Gulliver's Travels* 205). Despite the lord's poor reputation, he "listened to [Gulliver] with great attention and made very wise observations."

The Institute's near veneration of skewed reason is similar to the Laputans. At the N.I.C.E., reason is likewise twisted into something entirely apart from itself. At the N.I.C.E., Mark, in conversation with Wither, recognizes the meaningless nature of their discourse, wondering "what are we both talking about?" (*That Hideous Strength* 53). Wither himself displays the exact behavioral characteristics of the Laputans. Just as the Laputans would "forget what they were about" (*Gulliver's Travels* 187) due to their seemingly "intense speculations" (186), Wither will often not immediately recognize who is speaking to him, stares off "dreamily" (*That Hideous Strength* 101), and is "so far from listening that Mark felt an insane doubt whether he was there

at all” (185). This is one of the many occasions where Lewis takes an interpretation of Swift’s text and ushers it to the next level of exploration. In this instance, Lewis questions the integrity of the speculations of the Laputans through Wither, examining the possibility of these supposed speculations in reality being the “detachment of the spirit” (248). The character of Hingest, in *That Hideous Strength*, fulfills the role of the Laputan lord; although considered “an embarrassment” (*That Hideous Strength* 55) by the Progressive Element at Bracton, he is seen to be a legitimate scientist who sees through the N.I.C.E.’s scientific facade and recognizes the Institute as a political conspiracy. Not surprisingly, both Gulliver and Mark, upon witnessing all of these things, desire to leave their respective locations.

Once Gulliver leaves Laputa for the mainland of Balnibarbi, he learns of the projectors and visits the Grand Academy, both of which provide further inspiration for the N.I.C.E. The students at the Grand Academy apply backwards reasoning to each experiment conducted, rendering all of their academic endeavors irrational and liable to failure. The landscape of Balnibarbi has been left in ruins by the projectors, who have adopted the twisted logic of Laputa. In the same way, the N.I.C.E. is involved in a backwards scientific experiment of reanimating the dead. Lewis then echoes the irrational destruction of Balnibarbi’s landscape in the N.I.C.E.’s destruction of the scenic village of Cure Hardy.

Once Ransom returns from Perelandra, he is a changed man. The *Imago Dei* has been enhanced, thereby ending his similarities with Gulliver. In *That Hideous Strength*, it is Mark, rather than Ransom, who is following in Gulliver’s footsteps. Both are out of touch with their spiritual capacities, have misused moral capacities, and in terms of reason, are rendered defenseless due to the same weakness, an overwhelming desire for power and sense of belonging to “the inner circle” of whatever group they are currently involved with. Mark forfeits his true potential in order to become a part of whatever exclusive group holds power within an institution, and Gulliver admits to having “been oft to amuse [himself] with visions of what [he] would do if [he] were a king, a general, or a great lord” (*Gulliver’s Travels* 248).

The first capacity of the *Imago Dei* affected for Mark and Gulliver alike is the spiritual. In *Gulliver’s Travels*, the possibility for spiritual destruction is seen in the actions of the human race. When asked by the Houyhnhnm master to describe the reasons for which humans go to war, one reason given is religion, specifically in the more arbitrary

matters fought over between Catholics and Protestants. Gulliver is a Christian at face value, likely due to the era in which he lives, but spirituality plays little to no role in his life. Despite all this, Gulliver's spiritual capacities remain untouched rather than destroyed. He is unable to trample on a crucifix when asked to in Japan, even though refusal warrants the possibility of death.

For Mark, who is not a Christian, the ability to participate with in a spiritual relationship with the Creator has been left untouched his entire life. In *That Hideous Strength*, Mark is confronted with the possibility of spiritual destruction through Straik, whose personal brand of theology has been distorted to fit the needs of the Institute. He has managed to twist the core doctrines of Christianity into an entirely different religion that places man as the main power of the universe. Furthermore, several aspects of the Christian faith are mimicked by the Institute in its exploitation of spirituality. Filistrato informs Mark that the head would "have every part of" Mark (*That Hideous Strength* 172), as God desires every part of His created beings. The N.I.C.E. even offers a form of eternal life, one that would be absent of the Imago Dei altogether. Fortunately for Mark, his general discomfort for religion turns him away from Straik's heresies. The final test of his religious standing, as a part of his initiation into the N.I.C.E., takes place when he is asked by Frost to trample on crucifix (as happens to Gulliver). Although he is not a Christian, Mark is unable to bring himself to do this, despite the fact that refusal could mean death.

For Mark and Gulliver alike, the potential for immortality proves fascinating and highly desirable. Death, however, is recognized as a natural and ordained part of human life by both authors; the Hrossa and Houyhnhms have set lifespans, and accept death without fear. When Gulliver first learns of the immortal race of the Struldbrugs, he is delighted, and immediately envisions power and eternal youth. The fact that the Struldbrugs are miserable and live eternally powerless comes as a shock to Gulliver. Gulliver's wishful view of immortality is also seen in Ransom. However, Ransom, although highly respected, is powerless, and has no intention of gaining power due to to his obedient relationship with Maleldil. Even so, it is clear that he is not meant to live eternally on the Earth. However, since the members of the N.I.C.E. do not recognize or value the Divine Image, they attempt to create a race of immortals absent of the Image. As MacPhee expresses, the N.I.C.E. looks to this immortal race as "the next step in evolution" (*That Hideous Strength* 194). Members of the Institute,

such as Filistrato, look forward to a ruling class of immortals (as did Gulliver) and take it upon themselves to act in anticipation “the next step,” the eventual rid of organic life.

The idea of “the next step” in itself is further expanded on in *Mere Christianity*, and delves into the concept of superhuman nature, another prevalent theme of the *Space Trilogy* and *Gulliver's Travels*. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis states that “imaginative writers try to picture this next step—the ‘Superman’ as they call him; but they usually only succeed in picturing someone a deal nastier than man as we know him” (*Mere Christianity* 218-219). Gulliver makes this very assumption in Brobdingnag, upon his initial meeting with the giant race of men, as does Ransom when he views the Sorns for the first time. As Ransom learns, there are created beings that are above man, but their physical makeup is antithetical to the popular relation of size and soul. In being more, they seem, to human eyes, to be less, and the Divine Image seen in humankind is magnified in them. Unfortunately for the members of the N.I.C.E., contact with superhuman beings who are “a good deal nastier than man as we know him” has been made. In conversing with the “Macrobes,” as Frost calls them, and in rejecting the Divine Image, the members of the N.I.C.E. make themselves vulnerable to the cruel manipulation of the fallen eldils. In the end, it is the cause of their demise.

Although all of the novels possess many satirical moments, a very serious message lies at the heart of the stories. While both authors recognize the fallen nature of humanity, they likewise draw attention to the valuable qualities in human beings that are a reflection of God. The books offer, in conjunction with humorous and exciting adventures, an in-depth exploration of the *Imago Dei*—the capacity for reason in particular, and reveals the danger of undervaluing the Divine Image. In the end, the reader walks away with the realization that the universe, as well as the reflection of the Divine within themselves, is far greater than they ever expected it to be.

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