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Abstract

Postulates that while Ransom is the most obvious candidate for the Fisher King in *THS*, Jane Studdock is cast as a Grail quester in spite of her gender and the fact that she is married, and in effect achieves the Grail at the end.

Keywords

Grail (legend) in *That Hideous Strength*; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Jane Studdock; Lewis, C.S. *That Hideous Strength*—Sources

The GRAIL QUEST THEME IN THAT HIDEOUS STRENGTH by Karen Bailey

Quotations are from the 1965 Macmillan paperback edition of That Hideous Strength, except where noted.

Merlin's presence in That Hideous Strength clearly shows Lewis's debt to the Arthurian Legend, but his use of the Grail material is less obvious. Suggestive names and elements abound, but at first glance they do not seem to form a coherent whole or a fulfilled quest. On the other hand, their presence plainly shows that for the author the material had some meaningful part in the work.

First, let us examine some of these elements from the legend. The most striking is the equation: Ransom equals Fisher-King; he is not only given the name, but many of the character's attributes. As presented in Chretien de Troyes and his successors, the Fisher King is lord of a land which is desolate due to a curse on the king, expressed as a wound in his thighs. He cannot rise from his couch, but lives in an isolated room of his castle, subsisting on a sacred Host which is brought to him in the Grail by a woman. If the quester (Percival in this case) asks the proper question, the king and his land will be healed. But Percival is prevented from doing so by his sin, which is Pride (Wolfram von Eschenbach) or lack of proper feeling toward a family member (his mother) (Chretien). Later versions add that the Grail is in the keeping of a holy company which has passed the responsibility down since the time of Joseph of Aramathea.

Of course, there are numerous details of Chretien et al which are not echoed in Lewis's Fisher-King, but these above do appear. Ransom is lame and wounded, although in the foot rather than the thighs, following the plot of the earlier book in the trilogy Perelandra. Ransom lives in a blue room isolated from the rest of the house. He is associated with kingship (p. 143), and inherits the authority of Arthur along with the headship of the Company of Logres, which plays a role somewhat similar to that of the Grail company. Also, Ransom lives on bread and wine, the Eucharistic elements, which are brought to him by Mrs. Maggs. Certainly the land is represented as desolate: "The shadow of one dark wing is over all Tellus." (p. 293).

Since the Fisher King appears only in the Grail sections of the Arthurian legend - nowhere else - we may conclude that a quest is involved. We are then left with the problem of identifying the quester and the Grail itself within the story. There is no physical object corresponding to the Grail in That Hideous Strength, but this is a logical development of the legend as a whole. Beginning with the Cistercian influence in the thirteenth century, which identified the Grail with the consecrated chalice of the Mass (that is, the transubstantiated Element Itself), the Grail became less and less a physical object at all. By the time of Malory, for example, it appears as a shining vision of power hidden by a veil. Its achievement is the bestowal of God's grace, which is granted only to the chaste and holy. The unworthy, like Lancelot, are struck senseless if they presume to approach it.

In his introduction to Charles Williams' Arthurian Torso, Lewis claims that for Williams the Grail was entirely Christian in origin and identified with the Eucharist. Lewis evidently agrees with this concept. For him, in other words, the Grail is not a thing at all; it is symbolic of a mystical complete union of the Christian with God. Such a union is the purpose of the sacrament within the Mass, but it does not depend upon any formal situation or any human action.

If this is, in fact, what Lewis means by the Grail, then we must look for the quester in a mystic who achieves communion with God. The most convincing candidate in That Hideous Strength is Jane Studdock. To be sure, Jane does not start out as a very likely quester. She is not a

practicing Christian, although she attended church as a child and was married in one, so that we may assume she is baptised. Worse yet from the view of the Galahad tradition, she is a woman and not a virgin.

The first of these objections is removed by Jane's slow progress toward redemption developed by Lewis as part of the plot. The latter two objections are really illusory. In the early Grail romances such as Chretien's the Grail is handled by a woman, and certainly, if Lewis intends it to be a spiritual state rather than an object, there is no reason why a woman should not achieve it. Secondly, virginity is not actually a prerequisite. Chastity is required (at least in the later romances), but chastity is possible within Christian marriage. Indeed, Ransom says (p. 278): "She is doubtless like all of us a sinner; but the woman is chaste."

Jane shares many of the characteristics of the Grail questers in the various romances, and undergoes similar experiences. She is of noble birth (a Tudor) but does not want to assert it. Like Percival and Lancelot, she begins in a state of sin, in Jane's case due to her pride and the resulting improper relationship with her husband. This state of sin causes her, like Percival, to avoid the right questions and bring punishment upon herself: in her case, being tortured by Miss Hardcastle. Like Lancelot in Malory and the Queste del Saint Graal, she is undone and cast down by her first experience in the Grail castle (St. Anne's) during her first interview with Ransom. This is due to the coming of the eldil, not the presence of the Grail but the effect is similar.

This same interview begins the humbling of Jane's false pride and rebellion, which are the basis of her wrong relationship with God and Mark. This pride is similar to that which prevents Parzival's achievement of the Grail and causes his rebellion against God. But, of course, Pride is also the greatest sin as far as Christian thought in general is concerned, and is the most important hindrance to that spiritual state which for Lewis corresponds with the Grail.

Through a series of confusing, frightening, and humiliating encounters with the people of St. Anne's and her own second sight, Jane gradually changes: she comes to accept the need for humility and obedience. At first it is in terms of her marriage, but this is only a necessary preliminary. Jane's wifehood, like Christian marriage in general, does not stand alone. It is also an allegory "signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and His Church," as the Prayer Book says. In St. Paul's familiar passage (which is used as the epistle for a nuptial mass in Anglican churches):

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church: and he is the Savior of the body. Therefore as the Church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.

Ransom begins the process in his first conversation with Jane (pp. 144-150). This is followed by her torture under Miss Hardcastle and her first demonstration of moral courage. Further conversations take place with Mother Dimble and Mrs. Maggs. By the time of the search for Merlin, Jane is able to take the first step toward humility by placing herself in obedience to Ransom, thereby learning the fear of Hell (p. 278), although not yet the love of Heaven.

The last major impetus toward Jane's full redemption comes with her last pagan vision, in which she sees the blessing of what will be her marriage bed by the Goddess. It frightens her, and convinces her that she cannot stand alone against the powers she is exposed to by her gift. Ransom then explains her situation to her in no uncertain terms, and Jane at last comes to accept that she must, as she says, "become a Christian." (p. 316)

I submit that it has everything to do with literature. The works which appeal to us most strongly, those most likely to endure, probably those which most affect man's destiny, are those which make full and creative use of myth. Only they give us any hint of the world as a whole: because we think of that world, we even experience it, in mythic terms.

Writers like Tolkien and Eddison have drawn mostly on ancient myth. That's fine; it still speaks to us in a way that nothing else can. Various other writers employ religious myth, like C. S. Lewis, or historical, like Stephen Vincent Benét. Still others, mostly though not exclusively in science fiction, use scientific myth.

I think it's a very bad thing, a cause for great concern, that so few writers and poets nowadays do likewise--hardly any of the fashionable ones. Just how much universality is there in a novel about, say, the frustrations of a Manhattan intellectual? For that matter, just how much does it have to do with the specific society, its humble, its dead, and its unborn as well as its conspicuous living members? I don't deny that some of these authors have talent, but I do think you'll learn more about both the American scene and the human condition from somebody like John D. MacDonald.

Currently science is the most potent myth-starting force in existence. But how many major English-language poets have significantly drawn ideas and imagery from it? I can really only call to mind Kipling, Robinson Jeffers, and W. H. Auden. It's worth noting that these three men also made full use of legendary, religious, and historical myth. In so doing, they have not only enriched our conceptual universe, they have helped us get a better understanding of it and feeling for it. They have made us more sane. We need a lot of others who'll follow their lead.

By encouraging certain forms of myth, you in this society are doing something more valuable than you perhaps realize. I suggest to you that the other forms are equally worth developing. In fact, a literary work does not have to embody exclusively one kind of myth. It can use several, and thereby speak to us of the real world, today's and tomorrow's world.

Let me close with an example. But first a little introductory digression. You may be interested to know that I have just completed a redaction for the modern reader of the Hroif Kraki saga, an ancient Northern story which has close affinities to BEOWULF. In it I incorporate a translation of a poem from that general era, the Song of Grotte. For the benefit of those who don't know the Eddas, if there are any here, I'll explain that Grotte was a quern, a stone mill turned by an upright handle. But this quern would grind forth whatever the worker said. Two giantesses named Fenja and Menja were set to labor at it. At first they ground out the riches and peace that the owner wanted, then they grew angry and ground out enemies who slew him.

Well, you'll find that in my book. Today I'd like to show you how another twentieth-century writer creatively used not only this old, old theme, but certain myths of science as well. This was a Dane, Johannes V. Jensen. Some of you may have read his archeological novel THE LONG JOURNEY. He also did a historical novel called THE FALL OF THE KING, set in northern Europe during the chaos of the Reformation period. At the end, the hero, Mikkel, greatly aged, lies dying in a room of a castle. The previous chapter has told of the bitterly cold winter and the loud grinding of pack ice in a nearby strait. This is my translation, which I can only hope is not too unworthy of the original.

Each night came a ringing, sundering sound nearer to Mikkel's left ear.

It was like the sound of a millstone not far from his head. He often lay and thought that now he had died. There went centuries, where he was stretched out lame in the steel-sharp singing of the dark.

And yet he still woke now and then and could move a hand or glimpse somewhat of the room around him. But every time the monstrous sound began again in his ear, it had come nearer and shrilled through him more dreadfully than before.

It was the same sound he had marked in his youth, but then it was faint and remote, thousands of miles away. Later it had waxed each time it remembered him. And now the clamor was so immense that there was nothing else; Mikkel was lost

therein. It was the sound of a stone quern.

It was the near sound of Grotte, which Fenja and Menja swing in the north polar night.

Their mill-song shall take you, it shall come from inside your head as a noise of stone grinding asunder. Your head shall become the center for Grotte's whirlings of world-dust, for Fenja's and Menja's splintering quern-song.

We grind, sings Fenja, we swing the stone which is heavy as the earth, we grind you sunrise and cattle and fertile acres. We grind you shining clouds and rain for growth, clover, yellow and white blossoms.

And we grind you sickness and drought, sings Menja at the same time, burnt-off fields, waterlessness, we grind you hail like knuckles, we whirl you up a thundercloud from the west, darkness, lightning and smoldering homesteads.

We grind you springtime and blue billows, groans Fenja, we make the summer ready in time, we grind you greenwoods full of songbirds, we grind you love, forgetfulness and light nights.

And we grind you Fimbul's darkness, sounds Menja's rasping song, rain of ashes, withering, we grind you the winter into the heart of summer. We sing you a harvest storm, we swing rime and frost over everything growing, we grind the warmth out of the souls of men.

And yet we grind you new springtime and new growth, sings Fenja raging, we grind you solstice and dead calm on the sea, we grind you foals and shivering puppies and southerly winds, we grind you leafing and faith.

Yes, and we swing the quern so it creaks, cackles Menja, we grind at birth and we grind in the coffin, we grind snow and despair. I sing the last.

And now they arch their backs, the angry giant maids, and plant their legs deep in the mould and swing the smoking quernstone. They sing together, Fenja and Menja:

We grind you sun, moon and stars runaway around the world. Day and night shall change in a blink, white and black, and heaven shall go like a wheel. We grind you summer and winter like fever; heat shall fly upon you and flee again from cold.

But at last we grind you wintertime. We toil throughout thousands of years, but we grind you finally ice time.

Auroras over our heads! We grind you miles-wide ice and the year full of northerly storms and drifting snow. We grind the hope thin in you, we sing sums where the tale of the cold goes mounting. We grind you eternal nights, we swing the sun out upon distant roads. We grind coughing icebergs with crushed mountainsides down from the north and out over all rich plains, we crush the cities under the glacier, and we crumble all fruitfulness.

And we turn your head to stone, we whirl forth desolation, we sing with frost-cold heart till the quern shatters.

(Continued from page 7)

Jane is now prepared. Her thoughts as she walks in the garden directly afterward demonstrate that her pride has been humbled and her ignorance enlightened. She then has her first Christian vision, in which God bestows on her Grace and self-knowledge, and she responds. What she experiences is a death of her old self and a rebirth as a new creature; she is born again in a second baptism. Being a mystic, she also achieves a direct communion with God: "She had come...into a Person, or into the presence of a Person...with no veil or protection between" (p. 318). She has, in fact, achieved the Holy Grail. In the rest of the book, Lewis tidies up the loose ends by providing Jane with a reconstructed Mark with whom a Christian marriage is possible.

Despite his use of material from the Arthurian romances, Lewis's interpretation of the Grail quest is quite modern in tone. The quest is almost entirely internal, a psychological or spiritual journey rather than a physical one. Like Tolkien's Frodo, and Ransom himself, Jane is one of those modern questers who have greatness - and their quests - thrust upon them. She is no Galahad, not even a Percival. A certain nobility and grandeur of the first, a certain supernatural mystery of the second: both are missing in That Hideous Strength. But realism has been added to provide a well-designed counterpoint to the wild elements of myth and fantasy. And, as Lewis notes in his preface, this was his intent.