

Discussion Guide

Out of the Silent Planet, chs 1–10



OPEN

“His mind, like so many minds of his generation, was richly furnished with bogies. He had read his H. G. Wells and others. His universe was peopled with horrors such as ancient and medieval mythology could hardly rival. No insect-like, vermiculate or crustacean Abominable, no twitching feelers, rasping wings, slimy coils, curling tentacles, no monstrous union of superhuman intelligence and insatiable cruelty seemed to him anything but likely on an alien world. The *sorns* would be ... would be ... he dared not think what the *sorns* would be. And he was to be given to them. Somehow this seemed more horrible than being caught by them. Given, handed over, offered. He saw in imagination various incompatible monstrosities — bulbous eyes, grinning jaws, horns, stings, mandibles. Loathing of insects, loathing of snakes, loathing of things that squashed and squelched, all played their horrible symphonies over his nerves. But the reality would be worse: it would be an extra-terrestrial Otherness — something one had never thought of, never could have thought of.”

– ch. 5, p. 37



Entry

1. Ransom’s imagination had been shaped by the science fiction he read. What’s an example of a time that a story or film seemed to stick in your head in such a way that it influenced your thinking or living?



Recall

1. What do we learn about Ransom? What traits do you find admirable? Regrettable? Relatable? *chs. 1–3*
2. What do we learn about Weston? What type of real person or fictional character does he remind you of?
3. What do we learn about Devine? What type of real person or fictional character does he remind you of?



Analysis

1. What is the “mental furnishing” that science fiction — such as the work of H.G. Wells — has given Ransom’s generation? What assumptions about “extra-terrestrial Otherness” does this engender? *ch. 5*
2. One of the major themes in this week’s reading is the contrast between “space” and “the heavens.” What is the difference, and why does this matter so much to Ransom? *ch. 5*
3. How does Ransom’s initial experience of Malacandra surprise his expectations? What are the distinctives of this planet? *chs. 7–8*
4. How do you see C.S. Lewis trying to subvert and challenge the tropes of science fiction literature? Do you find his efforts successful? Lacking?
5. Ransom encounters two kinds of creatures on Malacandra: *sorns* and *hrossa*. What do we know so far about each? What is noteworthy about his experience and attitude in these encounters? *chs. 8–10*



DIVING DEEPER

“But Ransom, as time wore on, became aware of another and more spiritual cause for his progressive lightening and exultation of heart. A nightmare, long engendered in the modern mind by the mythology that follows in the wake of science, was falling off him. He had read of ‘Space’: at the back of his thinking for years had lurked the dismal fancy of the black, cold vacuity, the utter deadness, which was supposed to separate the worlds. He had not known how much it affected him till now — now that the very name ‘Space’ seemed a blasphemous libel for this empyrean ocean of radiance in which they swam. He could not call it ‘dead’; he felt life pouring into him from it every moment. How indeed should it be otherwise, since out of this ocean the worlds and all their life had come? He had thought it barren; he saw now that it was the womb of worlds, whose blazing and innumerable offspring looked down nightly even upon the Earth with so many eyes — and here, with how many more! No: Space was the wrong name. Older thinkers had been wiser when they named it simply the heavens — the heavens which declared the glory...”

– *ch. 5, p. 34*



Reflection

1. Why might the assumptions about extra-terrestrial otherness that science fiction engenders be a problematic assumption for a “pious man” like Ransom — or for us? *ch.5*
2. Weston does seem to have a sense of morality, but not one that Ransom finds especially persuasive. Where have you encountered Weston-like philosophy in your life? *ch.4*

“There is really no use in continuing this cross-examination... It would be easier if your philosophy of life were not so insufferably narrow and individualistic. I had thought no one could fail to be inspired by the role you are being asked to play: that even a worm, if it could understand, would rise to the sacrifice.”

– *Weston, ch. 4, p. 29*

3. Across this series, Ransom will undergo a powerful transformation: “from pedestrian to pendaragon.” What do you make of him at this stage? How do you find aspects of his character admirable or embarrassing? Do you relate to him? *chs. 1–10*