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THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF C. S. LEWIS'S NOVEL *THAT HIDEOUS STRENGTH*

Anna GUMEROVA, Valentina SERGEEVA

A. M. Gorky Institute of World Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences

Abstract

That Hideous Strength, the third novel of C. S. Lewis's *The Space Trilogy*, called by its author "a modern fairy-tale for grown-ups", was written at the end of the Second World War; it is set in some indefinable time "after the war". Nevertheless, the culture and history of England plays a significant role in the novel, not only as the source of images and storylines, but also as a topic of scientific research inside the author's world. The characters' attitude towards this topic is meaningful. The cultural and historical context of the novel is complex: we can see there is the legendary history of England (Arthurian tales, Merlin as the legendary person and literary character) and its real history (certain features of English colleges dating back to the Middle Ages, real characters such as Henry Bracton, the famous lawyer of the 13th century, Cromwell, etc.). Both real and legendary histories intertwine in the world of the novel, sometimes within a single paragraph or scene, for example when the narrator speaks of his visit to Bragdon Wood (chapter 1, part 3), where a real historical figure (Bracton), an imaginary locus (the wood) and "the medieval song" of the 14th century made up by Lewis himself are put together, or when Mr. Dimble (chapter 1, part 5) talks about the historical origins of Arthurian legends. It makes the world of the novel multidimensional and atemporal.

Keywords: *Lewis; Arthurian; historical; legendary; imagination; creative method.*

C. S. Lewis's novel *That Hideous Strength* is the third and the last of *The Space Trilogy* (the others being *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra*). It is generally agreed that the entire trilogy is a transition from science fiction (that is, the first novel) to fantasy as we know it (the third novel). From the very beginning (the

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preface) we know how the novel will be made. The author writes: "I have called this a fairy-tale in the hope that no one who dislikes fantasy may be misled by the first two chapters into reading further" (Lewis *That Hideous* . . . vii). Let us remark on the partial synonymy of "fairy-tale" and "fantasy" in this sentence. More importantly, the reader may suppose some fantastic elements will appear in Chapter 3, where in fact there is an opposition seen from the eyes of Mark and Jane Studdock, two main characters, who take different sides. Mark goes to the N.I.C.E. (the National Institute for Co-ordinated Experiments), while Jane happens to find out that she is a seer (a person with second sight). Fantastic elements in the novel (or the things one may call so) appear in the very first chapter–though the reader does not find there any "magicians, devils, pantomime animals, and planetary angels" (Lewis *That Hideous* . . . vii). Also the Preface states that the action takes place in the nearest (to Lewis) future—"after the war", while the novel itself is written during the Second World War, and some authorial devices are shown as early as the first chapter. In other words, this also can be called an element of the fantastic.

In his very preface, Lewis points at some other genres with which he compares his novel; beside fairy-tale, he speaks of "pantomime animals" and a "tall story" (Lewis *That Hideous* . . .vii), and furthermore he specifies a direct connection to contemporary philosophy. He says, "I believe that one of the central ideas of this tale came into my head from conversations I had with a scientific colleague, some time before I met a rather similar suggestion in the works of Mr. Olaf Stapledon" (viii). Olaf Stapledon was an English writer and philosopher, author of fantastic novels and contemporary of Lewis; Lewis seems to have liked his way of combining philosophy and the fantastic, but strongly disliked his views.

> Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (1930), with its doctrine of humanity's sacred obligation to scatter its seed among other worlds, provided the impetus for Lewis to start writing the Ransom trilogy in the first place. In *That Hideous Strength* Lewis goes beyond *Out of the Silent Planet* in trying to expose the fallacies and dangers in the philosophy of what he called "Westonism." By the time Lewis composed the third book of the trilogy, he had read Stapledon's other well-known novel, *Star Maker* (1937), which surveys the entire history of the cosmos and suggests that some sort of god, or creative principle, is evolving amid the galaxies. Writing to Arthur C. Clarke in 1943, Lewis described the ending of Stapledon's novel as "sheer devil worship" (Downing 54).

And, finally, there is also a mention of Tolkien demonstrating the Inklings' collaborative work; Lewis mentions "Numinor" and says that his readers will have to wait till Tolkien's manuscripts are published (Lewis *That Hideous* . . .viii). It is evident that Lewis knew about these manuscripts and, judging by his

mistake (Num*i*nor, not Num*e*nor), he must have just heard this name, not seen it written.

Thus, since the very beginning Lewis introduces his own description of his creative method, that is, the combination of fantastic and reality, allusions to literature, folklore and contemporary philosophy; it is supposed to inspire the appropriate reception. The first two chapters describe, among other things, the everyday family life of the Studdocks; the husband and the wife, Mark and Jane, are recent college graduates; Mark recently became a Bracton fellow and, both here and in the following chapters, the reader can see the wide context of the English college system, academic environment, the problems of women's education and so on.

The first pages of the novel are a starting point for one of the plot lines, namely, the story of Jane and Mark's marriage, their sexual relation and associated problems. This storyline is introduced in various ways, including the literary context. Jane is writing her doctoral thesis on John Donne, trying to "lie great stress on Donne's 'triumphant vindication of the body'"; she remembers "the ambiguous passage at the end of *Love's Alchymie*" (Lewis *That Hideous* . . .5):

> Hope not for minde in women; at their best
> Sweetnesse and wit, they are but Mummy possest.

We can see there only the two final lines of the poem. It was somewhat smoothed within the Russian translation of the novel, literally translated as "do not wait any intellect from women, theirs are care and modesty" (Льюис 10). However, the real meaning of the poem runs as such: a poor lover swears in earnest that minds, not bodies, get really married, and finds his sweetheart's mind "angelic" (Donne 39); but the best of women do not have "mind"; being very sweet and witty, they are but "possessed mummies", soulless bodies made to move.

In general, it is really strange that, being a woman herself, Jane chooses such a poem for the "triumphant vindication of the body". Martha Summons discusses this in her book *A Far-Off Country: A Guide to C. S. Lewis's Fantasy Fiction*: "Ironically, Jane Studdock, who refuses to have children, is attempting to write her dissertation on Donne's glorification of the body" (Summons 326). However, Lewis' irony here is deeper than that: Jane recalls a poem where women are called "soulless bodies". Maybe Lewis, being a Christian apologete, meant that the "vindication of the body" can logically result in the loss of the soul. This very line appears later in the same chapter; before talking to her former tutor, Dr. Dimble, Jane and Mrs. Dimble went to see Jane's new hat, and Mrs. Dimble asks for permission to kiss the young woman in quite a peculiar form: "Do you hate

being kissed?" (Lewis *That Hideous* . . . 22) It is clear that tactful Mother Dimble just wants to know if she could kiss Jane without making her feel uncomfortable, but this question suddenly triggers very strong feelings because Jane takes these words literally, as if she is asked if she literally dislikes kissing. "'Do I hate being kissed?' thought Jane to herself. 'That indeed is the question. Do I hate being kissed? Hope not for mind in women–' She had intended to reply, 'Of course not,' but inexplicably, and to her great annoyance, found herself crying instead" (Lewis *That Hideous* . . . 22-23).

One could say Lewis actively hints at the fact that Mark and Jane's discord has something to do with their sexual relations. One can speculate whether that has something to do with their decision not to have children, but, anyway, the problem is rooted here, and it can be seen in the context of the novel. One of the negative characters triumphantly claims that they are going, in particular, to get rid of sex for reproduction, and is told that "would not be much fun". He says: "You have already separated the Fun . . . Look at your English women. Six out of ten are frigid, are they not?" (Lewis *That Hideous* . . . 198) And later Mr. Dimble tells his wife that minds (*mind* again!) "get more and more spiritual, matter more and more material" (so Lewis again refers to the division of spiritual and material), and Mother Dimble says, "Yes, spirit and matter, certainly. That explains why people like the Studdocks find it so difficult to be happily married" (Lewis *That Hideous* . . . 334). So it is the problem of matter inconsistency. And, as Mr. Summons remarked in the aforementioned work, "the book begins with the word 'matrimony' and ends with the reunion of Mark and Jane" (Summons 165). One can see how just the two lines from John Donne's *Love's Alchymie* lead to one of the main themes of the novel.

The very first chapter, however, presents to the reader, through the eyes of Lewis—who enters the story as a character[1]—the panoramic view of English history, where historical facts, legends and literature are mixed. "He put Arthurian material to a different kind of use in his science fantasy novel *That Hideous Strength*, in which he puts forward the idea that the world could be redeemed through Merlin and the Fisher King if only medieval Christian values could be recovered" (Cooper 47). Let us also notice this very accurate definition of the genre applied to Lewis' book—"science fantasy novel".

The Russian philosopher and historian Nikolai Antziferov (1889–1958) who, incidentally, did much to improve the sightseeing tour activities[2] in Russia

[1] By the way, this is typical for all *The Space Trilogy*–a character named Lewis speaking in the first-person appears at the end of *Out of the Silent Planet* and in the beginning of *Perelandra.*

[2] Antziferov wrote about museum excursions and historical city tours; he dedicated a great part of his work to the history of St. Petersburg, claiming that the knowledge,

and, together with his teacher and remarkable historian I. V. Grevs (Greaves), shaped the theory of excursion, wrote in his book *The Soul of Petersburg*:

> A tour should be the gradual submission of the city to the visitors' experience. It is to disclose the soul of the city, the soul changing in the course of historical process, to free it from the material shell of the city in the depth of which it is hidden, to conduct therefore the process of the spiritualization of the city. Then you will have an opportunity to provoke a conversation with the soul of the city and maybe to feel a kind of friendship with it, to make a cordial contact (Анциферов 30)...[3]

And further on:

> Vernon Lee, being a keen admirer of Italy . . . recounts the gifts of friendship with "those other friends who are not human beings":[4] "the good of charming us, of raising our spirit, of subduing our feelings into serenity and happiness; of singing in our memory like melodies" . . . "And as for visible embodiment, why that is the place itself, or the country; and the features and speech are the lie of the land, pitch of the streets, sound of bells or of weirs; above all, perhaps, that strangely impressive combination, noted by Virgil, of 'rivers washing round old city walls'"—and we also added: the smells of the city. But there are nooks and corners in the city where we can acutely sense the presence of the "deity".
>
> Here are the arched bridge over the quite canal compressed with heave granite, the squat yellow tower propping the arch of the palace from under which the wide river can be seen covered with quietly rustling pieces of ice looking like a flock of swans slowly mowing their way, and there, beyond the river, the walls of the gloomy fortress, and the sparkling needle of a spire topped by the Archangel rises above it, and all this unity of sounds, colors, shapes, the play of light and shadow and, lastly, the sense of the space makes the cella of the temple where *genius loci* lives (Анциферов 30-31).

C. S. Lewis very likely did not get acquainted with Antziferov's works, even if, thanks to Andrew Walker, his friendship with the Russian philosopher Nikolai Zernov is known, and it can be assumed that Lewis was interested in Russian philosophy, as many English writers were, partly due to the long-standing presence of the Russian thinkers in England since the 19th century.[5] Antziferov

understanding and sensing of the historical and cultural context can create the city aura for us.

[3] We are citing Antziferov here in our own translation, after the Russian book.

[4] Vernon 4-5. Antziferov used a contemporary Russian edition of her book.

[5] See more in Andrew Walker. "Under the Russian Cross: a Research Note on C. S. Lewis and the Eastern Orthodox Church". *A Christian for All Christians: Essays in Honor of C.*

speaks about *real-life* Saint Petersburg just as Vernon Lee writes about *real-life* Italy, while Lewis describes the *fictional* town of Edgestow as if it were real-life. This Edgestow is set in real-life England, it looks like a real English town—Lewis compares it with Oxford and Cambridge: "Though I am Oxford bred and very fond of Cambridge, I think that Edgestow is more beautiful than either" (Lewis 5)—and its history is full of real English history, just as, in Antziferov's words, the real history of Russia fills and animates Saint Petersburg. Antziferov says that the best way of getting acquainted with the city and disclosing the soul of the city is an excursion; Lewis gives his readers a tour of the college and the forest to bring them at last to that very thing which, according to Antziferov, could be called *genius loci*—namely, to Merlin's well and tomb. And, after having crossed the bridge and on entering the forest, the narrator gets the same feeling Vernon Lee writes about: "the good of charming us, of raising our spirit, of subduing our feelings into serenity and happiness; of singing in our memory like melodies". Of course, this can be compared with Lewis's description of the narrator's impression of Bragdon Wood: "I was quite alone; and it felt more like the loneliness of a very large room in a deserted house than like any ordinary solitude out of doors. I remember thinking, 'This is the sort of place which, as a child, one would have been rather afraid of or else would have liked very much indeed.' A moment later I thought, 'But when alone—really alone—everyone is a child: or no one?' Youth and age touch only the surface of our lives . . . The air was so still and the billows of foliage so heavy above me, that I fell asleep" (Lewis *That Hideous* . . . 11, 13).

So, on approaching this fragment from *That Hideous Strength*, a reader can imagine being on a tour. Lewis mentions first that one can enter Bragdon Wood only through the gate designed by Inigo Jones (a 17th century English architect); and he does not reach it immediately. Then there is Newton's quadrangle and some Gregorian buildings (i.e. 17th and 19th centuries), the reader feels "the smell of fresh bread" (10), sees the medieval college and "the much smaller quadrangle called Republic" (10). Republic is a community of the equals, which is normal for a monastic fraternity, or it may have been thus renamed in Cromwell's time. That is to say, thanks to that one word one gets the double historical and cultural context, both medieval and that of Cromwell's time. Then, as if the readers are really on a sightseeing tour, they are asked to remark on the fact that "the grass here looks very green" (10). There they can find the Chapel, too; and they hear the "hoarse, heavy noise of the works of a great and old clock" (10). Then "the quadrangle called Lady Alice" is probably reminiscent of the period after Cromwell and the revolt against King Jacob II, also of the 17th century. "You were in a sweet, Protestant world. You found yourself, perhaps, thinking of

S. Lewis. Ed. by Andrew Walker and James Patrick. Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1992. Pp. 63-67.

Bunyan or of Walton's *Lives*" (10)—and, as discussed in the Arend Smilde's commentaries to *That Hideous Strength* that Walton's *Lives* is "a collection of short biographies, including one about John Donne" (Smilde). (The readers will notice that they have been dealing mostly with the Modern age up to this point.)

By the quadrangle called Lady Alice, and then by the bridge and Inigo Jones' gates, the reader enters the wood and see a well in the heart of it—and they are plunging in the depth of time. "The masonry was very late British-Roman work, done on the very eve of the Anglo-Saxon invasion" (*That Hideous* . . .11); all the Arthurian legendary inside the novel dates back to that period. Bragdon relates to aforementioned Bracton because the Bracton family had believed "that they had something to do with it" (11).

"I suppose no one now would attach much importance to Strabo's *Balachthon* though it had led a sixteenth-century Warden of the College to say that 'We know not by ancientest report of any Britain without Bragdon' (11-12). There, for the first time, a literary device is used that later will be repeated more than once in the novel: Strabo can be the real historian of the 1st century or the monk of the 9th century Walafrid nicknamed Strabo, but neither of them wrote anything called *Balachthon*. Interestingly, Andriy Masliukh, the Ukrainian translator of Lewis's novel, pointed at the fact that Strabo the historian had mentioned Britain and the druids in his *Geography* (Маслюх).

If the readers continue their trip through Bragdon, "the medieval song takes us back to the fourteenth century". The song probably was made up by Lewis and there is "good enough evidence that the well with the British-Roman pavement was already 'Merlin's Well'" (Lewis *That Hideous* . . . 12). So, using documents and pseudo-documents of various types, Lewis imitates scientific research; he mixes together the real history and facts invented by himself, and the reader gets the feeling, the atmosphere of something real. Then, again, the Elizabethan era is mentioned. The fictional

> Warden Shovel surrounded the Wood with a wall for the taking away of all . . . wakes, May games, dancings, mummings, and baking of Morgan's bread heretofore used about the fountain called in vanity Merlin's Well, and utterly to be renounced and abominated as a gallimaufrey of papistry, gentilism, lewdness and dunsicall folly. Not that the College had by this action renounced its own interest in the place (12).

Morgan's bread may have been also invented by Lewis but it does not seem out of place amid the May games, dances, etc. This is again an image of good old England, with its traditional pastimes and folklore.

Then Cromwell comes to destroy "the groves and the high places", and again the reader can see a fictional character, Richard Crowe who "had been killed

. . . on the very steps of the Well". "His last words had been 'Marry, sirs, if Merlin who was the Devil's son was a true King's man as ever ate bread, is it not a shame that you, being but the sons of bitches, must be rebels and regicides?'" (Lewis *That Hideous* . . .12)

There is here an amazing mix of real and fictional characters and events. Sir Kenelm Digby, of the 17th century, had seen "a certain strange appearance" at the well (Lewis *That Hideous* . . .13), and the readers know nothing more about this "appearance" and can imagine it as they like; and they find out "where Collins the poet had lain, and where George the Third had cried" (13) at the turn of the 18th and 19 century; and then they enter the 20th century and learn that "the brilliant and much-loved Nathaniel Fox had composed the famous poem three weeks before he was killed in France" (13). Sir Kenelm Digby, "Collins the poet", and George III were absolutely real (though of course they could not have visited the imaginary wood), and Nathaniel Fox, who is mentioned next, is a fictional poet, but, on the other hand, it is a fact that many of Lewis's and Tolkien's friends, their classmates and peers, were killed in France, on the Somme, sharing the same fate as unfortunate imaginary Fox.

That is to say, there is here not just the history of a fictional college and wood but also a panoramic view of England and English history, probably from the early mention of Strabo the historian or, anyway, from the British-Roman period, and to the World War I. Reality and fiction, including made-up "documentary evidences", intertwine in the novel from the very beginning.

This is not just a document or a list: Lewis reconstructs a place that seems to be very real, a *locus* full of specific details—Gregorian buildings, a dark passage, a bright green quadrangle, a chapel and a clock, sound and smells, a bridge across the river, a gate designed by Inigo Jones—and only this is complete are the readers allowed to see Merlin's well. Moreover, this place is described from the very beginning as eternal and enduring; it, however, *ceases* to exist at the end of the novel, because the college and its surroundings were completely destroyed by the earthquake.

In the same chapter literature allusions are at used extensively. Professor Dimble speaks of the Arthurian legend while describing Britain in the British-Roman era.

> "It's really wonderful," he said, "how the whole thing hangs together, even in a late version like Malory's. You've noticed how there are two sets of characters? There's Guinevere and Launcelot and all those people in the centre: all very courtly and nothing particularly British about them. But then in the background—on the other side of Arthur, so to speak—there are all those *dark* people like

> Morgan and Morgawse,[6] who are very British indeed and usually more or less hostile though they are his own relatives. Mixed up with magic. You remember that wonderful phrase, how Queen Morgan 'set all the country in fire with ladies that were enchantresses.' Merlin too, of course, is British, though not hostile. Doesn't it look very like a picture of Britain as it must have been on the eve of the invasion?" (Lewis, *That Hideous* . . .23)

Dr. Dimble speaks of Arthur as of "a man of the old British line, but also a Christian and a fully-trained general with Roman technique, trying to pull this whole society together" (Lewis *That Hideous* . . . 24), and he mentions Merlin, too, who is going to be the key character of the novel. "Has it ever struck you what an odd creation Merlin is? He's not evil: yet he's a magician. He is obviously a druid: yet he knows all about the Grail. . . . Buried but not dead, according to the story" (24-25).

In her article "Arthurian and Cosmic Myth in *That Hideous Strength*", Margaret Hannay describes the role and the origins of the Arthurian myth in the novel referring, among other things, to Lewis's statements himself: "In a letter to a young American friend Lewis suggests sources he might consult to pursue his interest in Merlin: the prose Merlin, Geoffrey, the Arthurian Chronicles from Ware to Layamon, and the three-volume set of the Works of Sir Thomas Malory" (Hannay 7).[7] In her paper dedicated to the Arthurian myth in the novel, she provides a map of Edgestow where Brackton College and Bragdon wood are marked (8). In other words, it is evident enough for the researcher that what we have there is a "local" text—a text closely related with some *locus*.

This episode ends the first chapter which, judging by his Preface, should in Lewis's opinion, have misled the readers disliking fantasy—but one can identify a number of fictional elements in the college history. That is how the whole book, in general, is made, that is how it is structured: modern context, mainly around the college—contemporary history, including the World War II that had not finished yet by the time the novel was written. Incidentally, Curry, one of the college experts, that is to say a "bad guy", is "a military historian", while the others are constantly trying to call him an economist (Lewis *That Hideous* . . . 44). Then there is the context of contemporary trends in philosophy and psychology, and the

[6] And here one can see Morgan again, as in the story of wakes and games in the Wood, where she was mentioned by Shovel, who thought her to be one of common people's superstitions (and maybe not Morgan herself, but only her mysterious bread). For Dimble, she may have not been historically real but nevertheless real enough, just like Arthur, Merlin and the other figures of the legendary past.

[7] We are most grateful to Brenton Dickieson, who has mentioned this article on his web-site *A Pilgrim in Narnia*: https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2021/02/23/edgestow/

context of the anti-utopian future, and the rich context of the past, that can be historical, legendary or literary.

The last such context mainly relates to a group of characters opposing Belbury—people living in St Anne's. They recall King Arthur and the Arthurian stories; they read Macdonald's *Curdie* and Austen's *Mansfield Park*. As a result, this particular situation helps "the past" penetrate the dystopian future and destroy it. The N.I.C.E find Merlin (at least, they think they do), but they have no philologists among them, no experts in ancient languages, so they cannot communicate with him. On looking carefully at the opposing forces in the book, one sees that it is, so to speak, the only professional difference: there are sociologists, psychologists, scientists both in Bracton and Belbury… but there are no philologists among the negative characters, and the only Belbury historian is a military historian. And in that very passage where the reader learns about Curry's profession, the other man, Busby, makes a mistake twice, maybe considering Curry to be too poor a historian or thinking this discipline to be "unscientific", and has to be corrected. Curiously, Curry is the one who stays alive in the end, and maybe he will restore the college after its spectacular downfall. A not-so-perfect historian is evidently still better than none at all.

> Curry always in later years regarded this as one of the turning-points of his life. He had not up till then been a religious man. But the word that now instantly came into his mind was "Providential." . . . The whole College wiped out! It would have to be rebuilt. There'd be a complete (or almost complete) new set of Fellows, a new Warden. It was Providential again that some responsible person should have been spared to deal with such a tremendous crisis. . . . The more he thought of it, the more fully Curry realised that the whole shaping of the future college rested with the sole survivor. It was almost like being a second founder. . . . He saw already in imagination the portrait of that second founder in the new-built hall, his statue in the new-built quadrangle, the long, long chapter consecrated to him in the College History (Lewis, *That Hideous* . . .448).

Notably, the main character of the entire *The Space Trilogy* (not only of *That Hideous Strength*) is a philologist, which is expressively emphasized when he is introduced to Weston, the main antagonist of the first two novels, by Devine, the future Lord Feverstone and the antagonist of *That Hideous Strength*. "'*The* Weston,' . . . The great physicist. Has Einstein on toast and drinks a pint of Schrödinger's blood for breakfast. . . . Dr. Elwin Ransom. *The* Ransom, you know. The great philologist. Has Jespersen on toast and drinks a pint—' 'I know nothing about it,' said Weston, . . . I don't care twopence . . . on what unscientific foolery he is at present wasting money that ought to go to research'" (Lewis *That Hideous* . . . 15). Virtually, the opposition of "physicists" and "philologists" is partly traced here, in the very beginning of the trilogy. The notion that philologists play the

crucial role in *That Hideous Strength* is particularly important since Lewis himself was a philologist, as well as his friend, Charles Williams, who, according to researchers, was one of the prototypes of Ransom. It cannot be omitted that Lewis, under his own name, appears in all the three novels of *The Space Trilogy*; in the first book he gets to know Ransom after finding the name Oyarsa in a fictional author's manuscript and then actually becomes an author, too, writing *Out of the Silent Planet* after Ransom's memoirs. In the second book he has to help Ransom go on a journey and then meets him as he returns, and in the third novel Lewis is the one who has a "tour" around the college to Merlin's well. Therefore, English history seen from his eyes is passing before us. So, philology (and history) seems to be able to save the world because it deals with the true deep essence of things: the world in front of us comes alive, and it appears to be more powerful than the experiments of the N.I.C.E.

Thus, using historical and cultural realities in *That Hideous Strength* C. S. Lewis creates a peculiar intertwining of the fantastic and the genuine, fictional and real life, and many features of his method become evident from the very first chapter of the novel. Besides, the fact that the college and Bragdon Wood are described by Lewis as a tour of the English history and legendarium allow the readers to become deeply involved in the story of the fictional events occurring in Edgestow.

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BIONOTE

Anna Leonidovna GUMEROVA – Candidate of Philological Sciences, Senior Research Assistant at the Department of Literary Theory, A.M. Gorky Institute of World Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences. She teaches at the Institute of Foreign Languages (Moscow State Pedagogical University). In 2001 she graduated from the State Academy of Slavonic Culture (Moscow). In 2007 she successfully defended her dissertation entitled "The Compositional Role of Internal Texts in F. M. Dostoevsky's Works: Biblical Quotes in the Novel The Brothers Karamazov". Her area of interests are composition, quotes, F.M. Dostoevsky's works, J. R. R. Tolkien's and C. S. Lewis' works, fantasy literature, contemporary literature process. A. L. Gumerova wrote several articles concerning quotes and the problems of composition, J. R. R. Tolkien's and C. S. Lewis' works, fantasy literature.
Email: gratia4@yandex.ru

Valentina Sergeevna SERGEEVA is a Candidate of Philological Sciences, Senior Research Assistant at the Department of Literary Theory, A.M. Gorky Institute of World Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences, translator. In 2005 she graduated from the Moscow State Pedagogical University; in 2007 she graduated from the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute (Moscow). In 2008 she got a Candidate degree after presenting her dissertation on medieval English ballads. She also prepared and published a few works in the series "Literature Heritage" ("Literaturnye pamyatniki"), such as "York Mystery Cycle" and "Robin Hood Ballads". She authored a book of history tales for children. Her area of interests are documentary, historical commentary, medieval literature, English literature, fantasy literature, J. R. R. Tolkien's and C. S. Lewis' works.
Email: yogik84@mail.ru