

Who Were The Inklings?

Dr. Bruce L. Edwards
Bowling Green State University
©2006 All Rights Reserved

The Inklings were an informal Oxford-based band of “male bastion” friends and writers led by two of the twentieth century’s most illustrious and influential fantasy and science-fiction writers, *Chronicles of Narnia* author C. S. Lewis and *Lord of the Rings* author J. R. R. Tolkien.

The Inklings writers group met together weekly between 1933 and 1949, and produced some of the twentieth century’s most popular and enduring works of fantasy, science fiction, and “supernatural thrillers.” Led by Oxford University literary scholars C. S. Lewis, creator of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, and J. R. R. Tolkien, creator of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, this now-legendary troupe read aloud from their works-in-progress over pints of stout and equal parts uproarious laughter and earnest criticism, producing an astonishing number of works over a period of sixteen years, and creating a legacy that continues to influence the world of genre fiction.

Tolkien produced the group’s nickname, referring to the label as “a pleasantly ingenious pun in its way, suggesting people with vague or half-formed intimations and ideas plus those who dabble in ink.” The “group” began in fact as a duo, a mutual admiration society between Lewis and Tolkien, who met at Oxford in the 1920s and discovered their common interest in all things ancient and medieval, and discovered a shared romantic temperament that leaned toward the “mythopoeic,” that is, toward the creation of fictional secondary worlds, entire landscapes populated by creatures and driven by story lines reflective of great myth, dark legend, and innocent fairy tale. Both were World War I veterans, both were refugees from the modern world and from the rising trend of modernism in literature and criticism, and both wished to rally to themselves others so likeminded and equally disaffected. These two formidable talents invested a great deal of time forging their metaphysical credo before sharing it among others.

The Inklings in Action

Before the Inklings’ roll call grew beyond Lewis and Tolkien’s ardent private conversations and animated excursions into the never-never lands of fantasy and science fiction, Tolkien published *The Hobbit* (1937) and Lewis published *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938). Once they had begun to meet in earnest and with the regularity that characterized them during most of the 1940s, Lewis and Tolkien became even more prolific—though Tolkien’s masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings*, remained out of the public eye and unpublished until the early 1950s. The Inklings eventually included professional friends (Lewis’s family physician, Humphrey Havard, attended), admired writers and stimulating thinkers (Charles Williams, who gained some fame as a writer of supernatural fiction, earned Lewis’s special acclaim for his Arthurian poetry cycle; Owen Barfield, a longtime friendly philosophical combatant of Lewis, who first met Lewis in 1919, commuted to Oxford from London where he practiced law), family members (both Lewis’s brother Warren and Tolkien’s son Christopher participated), and enterprising students (most prominent among them the poet John Wain), judged by Lewis and/or Tolkien to possess the right stuff to engage in the rough and tumble of a typical Inklings meeting.

Lewis's Magdalen College rooms were a usual Tuesday morning setting, while the Thursday evening gatherings at the famous Oxford pub, The Eagle and Child, formed the more usual jovial meeting site. And what were such meetings like? They began, one way or other, with Lewis as host inviting someone to share a chapter from a manuscript, read aloud, and then submit themselves to the assembled august crew for commentary. A veritable writer's studio, no holds barred, but all commentary focused on improving not denigrating the works of their authors, it was an exhilarating experience for all. C. S. Lewis's brother Warnie, himself a surprisingly productive, nonprofessional historian, expressed it this way: "We were no mutual admiration society: praise for good work was unstinted, but censure for bad work—or even not-so-good work—was often brutally frank. To read to the Inklings was a formidable ordeal."

Within their rich and layered, often boisterous and bawdy discussions, Lewis read from some or all of his most important works of the era, including *The Problem of Pain* (with a chapter supplied by Dr. Havard), *The Screwtape Letters*, *Perelandra*, *The Great Divorce*, and at least some portion of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*; while Tolkien read frequently from his burgeoning "new Hobbit," *The Lord of the Rings*. (Tolkien acknowledged long after Lewis's death that his *Lord of the Rings* would never have seen the light of day without Lewis's helpful criticism and constant exhortation to complete it and send it to his publisher.) Barfield shared his prose explorations and expositions of metaphor, and what, as an advocate of Rudolph Steiner's occultic anthroposophism, he termed "the evolution of consciousness," while Charles Williams submitted for Inklings review his most famous Stephen King-like thriller, *All Hallows' Eve*, which was well loved by T. S. Eliot..

In retrospect, perhaps the most remarkable aspect of their association and productivity was that they were successful amateurs at the very things they loved—each of them becoming accomplished as writers outside of the fields and professions that brought them their livelihoods. They wrote and they met for the sheer joy of it, as well as for the reinforcement of their unabashed countercultural convictions about the world at large and the world to come. In one form or another, each embraced Christianity (Barfield's "faith" being the least articulated or pronounced) and this worldview was decidedly present in nearly every aspect of their published work, either on the surface (in the case of Lewis and Williams) or more latent (as in the case of Tolkien).

Though in many ways the genius behind the Inklings was Tolkien's—and the Inklings was a surrogate for an earlier "writer's club" that Tolkien had helped found but which was decimated by World War I—Lewis was its center of gravity, its draw, and its ongoing source of energy. His ebullient personality was in great contrast to Tolkien's more shy and retiring demeanor. Lewis's group criticism could be pointed and personal, but always rendered for the sake of making a work more "seaworthy"; Tolkien's was more muted, and focused on encouragement. What brought them together week after week, besides the pleasure of their company (which was enormous), was a shared conviction that the twentieth century had started abysmally and that one of the best ways to maintain or restore the glories of the "true West" was to create and promote grand works of mythopoeia—myth, fantasy, and speculative fiction that would "steal past the watchful dragons" of conventional wisdom and decadent culture and instill what Lewis called "a taste of the other"—a vision of a transcendent realm.

Lewis and Tolkien: The Heart of the Inklings

If one were to codify Lewis and Tolkien's shared aesthetic, it would be something like this:

The world as we know it is not the world as it once was. The world as we see it and experience it is not the world as it was designed and ordained at its origin. The world as it now is, a world of spoiled goodness, a world of decay, is withstood and understood only by those with an unfathomably wild sense of the anticipation of soon sure redemption. The world of shadows, of almos, and neither/nors, close calls, what ifs will give way to the bright sunshine of a world to come free of evil, free of pain, free of death.

These are the secret facts that inform our every attempt to explain, or explain away, the universe and of our place in its Shadowlands. These are the stubborn rumors of a Lost Eden, an Elusive Nirvana, a Passage to Eternity that no civilization has been able entirely to dismiss or disavow in all that millennia that we have traversed the earth and are, in the end, the truest estimation of our predicament, and of our destiny.

These in particular are the theological and aesthetic premises of the works both Lewis and Tolkien produced during their sojourn together within the Inklings meetings, and are evident in Lewis's space trilogy, *Screwtape*, *The Great Divorce*, and, indeed, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and in every aspect of Tolkien's *Hobbit/Lord of the Rings/Silmarillion* epics of myth. Myth for them was not defined as a legendary tale told with dubious authority; but instead it is the grand overarching narrative that created the reason to be, and to become, for members of the village, polis, nation touched by its encompassing themes, images, characters, and plot lines.

Neither antihistorical, nor ahistorical, the Inklings' view of myth is that it evokes awe, wonder, passion, and, what is more, pursuit—a culture's myth is the story that has the power to explain the origin and destiny of a people, the text that orients them in history, guides them in the present, and points them to a future in which they and their offspring will live and move and have their being. Hence the *Lord of the Rings* and the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Myth places them in the presence of their creator and benefactor, judge and advocate, and answers the questions when, how, who, and why. A "true myth" has the power to explain where we came from, shape our identity and purpose, instill hope, promote justice, sustain order. That is why Lewis can describe the Christian gospel in these terms: "as myth transcends thought, Incarnation transcends myth. The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. . . . Christians also need to be reminded . . . that what became Fact was a Myth, that it carries with it into the world of Fact all the properties of a myth."

The Inklings' modus operandi was to create fantasies and new myths that could serve as an "alternate history," a winsome, redemptive, inclusive worldview that would restore personal dignity and a promised destiny to those with ears to hear, and eyes to see. A history alternate to what? Simply put, it is alternate to what they regarded as the distorted false history written in the rise of a dehumanizing and disenchanting naturalism and one that reduces men, women, children, and even whole civilizations to instincts, impulses, genetics, environment: a cosmic accident. Neither Lewis nor Tolkien were tame writers, and both believed that we long to know there is a homeland where we truly belong, an enchanted world, a everland that calls to us in the midst of confusion and doubt, a world that we can see "if the eyes of our hearts are enlightened."

From Middle-earth to Narnia, from Perelandra to Cair Paravel, and on to Mordor and Malacandra, Lewis and Tolkien and the rest of the Inklings called upon readers to reenchant the cosmos, keeping alive the promise and animating the search for the world beyond the world. This is what Lewis is getting at in publishing this early review of Tolkien's *The Hobbit*: "To define the world of *The Hobbit* is, of course, impossible because it is new. You

cannot anticipate it before you go there, as you cannot forget it once you have gone.” In a later review of the completed *Lord of the Rings*, Lewis capsuled its achievement: “it rediscovers reality” by making of this world a myth; “the value of myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which had been hidden by the veil of familiarity.”

“The veil of familiarity” is a telling phrase; in the realm of the fantastic, within mythic landscapes, vistas, perspectives—anything might happen, anything might be discovered. One is not restricted by what he or she knows of the real world, its colors, shapes, creatures, languages, predicaments. The author of fantasy can use these but also invent still more—thus intermixing them with the familiar and the real to create a “secondary” world that envelops and surpasses both. These alternate histories rescue readers from the “veil of familiarity,” ushering them into a transcendent realm unreachable by mere reason or coldhearted induction. This is certainly the ongoing legacy of the Inklings, whose work has inspired the rehabilitation and expansion of the genres of fantasy and science fiction well beyond their own century.

Selected Works

Owen Barfield

Poetic Diction (1928)
Saving the Appearances (1957)
Speakers Meaning (1967)
Worlds Apart (1963)

C. S. Lewis

The Chronicles of Narnia (1950–1956)
The Great Divorce (1945)
Out of the Silent Planet (1938)
Perelandra (1943)
The Screwtape Letters (1942)
That Hideous Strength (1945)
Till We Have Faces (1956)

J. R. R. Tolkien

The Hobbit (1937)
The Fellowship of the Ring (1954)
The Two Towers (1954)
The Return of the King (1955)
The Lord of the Rings (omnibus) (1968)
The Silmarillion (1977)

Charles Williams

War in Heaven (1930)
Many Dimensions (1930)
The Place of the Lion (1931)
The Greater Trumps (1932)
Shadows of Ecstasy (1933)
Descent into Hell (1937)
All Hallows' Eve (1945)

Further Reading

Duriez, Colin, and David Porter. *The Inklings Handbook*. St. Louis, MO, 2001.
 A one-volume comprehensive encyclopedia that covers all key questions regarding the Inklings.

Glyer, Diana. *The Company They Keep: C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien as Writers in Community*. Kent, OH, 2005.
 The most up-to-date and accurate treatment of the relationships among Lewis, Tolkien, and the Inklings.

Humphrey Carpenter. *The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Their Friends*. Boston, 1978.
 The original biographical treatment of the Inklings, somewhat dated but still useful for overall perspective.