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The Centre of the Inklings: Lewis? Williams? Barfield? Tolkien?

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Abstract

Considers which of the Inklings might be considered the “centre” of the group through a discussion of the dynamics of the writing workshop. On the basis of studies of successful writing groups, concludes the Inklings are a model of the type of group which includes several different types of leaders, but no authoritative overall leader.

Additional Keywords

Barfield, Owen—Friends and associates; Inklings; Lewis, C.S.—Friends and associates; Lewis, Warren—Friends and associates; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Friends and associates; Williams, Charles—Friends and associates; Writing groups

THE CENTRE OF THE INKLINGS: LEWIS? WILLIAMS? BARFIELD? TOLKIEN?

DIANA DAVLAC GLYER

Introduction

ONE ISSUE FREQUENTLY DEBATED among Inklings scholars is the question of which member served as the center of that group. Most often, people claim that C.S. Lewis is the center, that he is in some sense responsible for the group's existence, and that he is the one who provided the glue that held them all together. Humphrey Carpenter, for example, tells us that "The Inklings owed their existence as a group almost entirely to [Lewis]" (*Inklings* xiii). Later in the same book, Carpenter defines the Inklings as a group of Lewis's friends: "The group gathered round him, and in the end *one does not have to look any further than Lewis* to see why it came into being" (171, emphasis added).

Many others champion Lewis as the group's central figure. Joan McClusky defines the Inklings as "a group of C.S. Lewis' admirers and friends" (35). Colin Duriez says, "The Inklings' embodied C.S. Lewis' ideals of life and pleasure. In fact, he was the life and soul of the party" (*Lewis Handbook* 88), and again, the Inklings were "a literary group of friends held together by the zest and enthusiasm of C.S. Lewis" (*Tolkien Handbook* 134). Katharyn F. Crabbe writes, "Lewis was the center around which the 'Inklings' [...] formed" (19). Jared Lobdell says that the Inklings were "essentially Lewis's creation" (6). Daniel Grotta calls Lewis the "fountainhead" of the group (92). Sebastian Knowles says "Lewis was the lynch-pin of the group" (132). Mitzi Brunsdale calls them "Lewis's group" (170). Gareth Knight says, "Lewis may be regarded as the mainspring of the Inklings" (6), and again, "Its membership varied over the years but its effective center of gravity was C. S. Lewis" (1).

If you look at some of the statements made by the Inklings themselves, it becomes clear where this conviction is coming from. Dr. R.E. Havard, for example, has asserted, "In my view we were simply a group of C.S.L.'s wide circle of friends who lived near enough to him to meet together fairly regularly" (qtd. in Carpenter *Inklings* 161). Elsewhere, Havard says, "[Lewis] was the link that bound us all together. When he was no longer able to meet us, the link was

snapped" (Havard 353).¹ According to Charles Moorman, "both Tolkiens remember Lewis as the firm center of the group" (29n12). Tolkien himself describes the Inklings as "the undetermined and unelected circle of friends who gathered about C.S.L." (*Letters* 388) and again as "the circle of C.S. Lewis" (*Treason* 85).

In considering these claims, it is useful to point out that there are others who contest this Lewis-centric approach and argue that although Lewis certainly played an essential role, other members serve as this group's true core. In an early article, Glen GoodKnight emphasizes the importance of Charles Williams to the group, and GoodKnight is among the first to describe Williams's role as the "catalyst" for what happened in the meetings (8). And although Gareth Knight tends to favor Lewis as central to the group, he also emphasizes the transforming presence of Charles Williams:

It would seem that Lewis and Williams had a strong catalytic effect upon one another, for it is after their meeting that we find a spark entering C. S. Lewis's writing that transformed him from a little-known academic to a popular literary figure. (8)

Again, Knight writes that this friendship with Williams "influenced Lewis to a considerable degree in the period immediately prior to his bursting into prominence as a Christian apologist and writer of metaphysical science fiction" (153). The suggestion, of course, is that the timing is not coincidental, and that Williams is to a very large extent responsible for Lewis's transformation.

According to Knight, Williams had a similar impact on the Inklings as a group. Before Williams, the group lacked focus and literary effectiveness; after Williams, "a critical mass was reached in the alchemical crucible of the Inklings" (244).

Another member of the Inklings, John Wain, also emphasizes the importance of Williams, not only to the Inklings, but the whole Oxford scene.² Among the various significant and "dramatic" personalities that Wain admired at Oxford, Wain asserts that Williams was "over-arching them all" (154, 147). Williams exerted so powerful a presence over the community that when he died, the city

¹ Havard is referring to the Tuesday morning meetings, which ended in 1963 when Lewis died. Thursday evening meetings ended earlier, in October of 1949.

² Many others who were not Inklings remember Williams in similar terms. For example, W.H. Auden writes a moving tribute to him in his introduction to Williams's *The Descent of the Dove*. He remembers,

When I first met Charles Williams I had read none of his books; our meetings were few and on business, yet I count them among my most unforgettable and precious experiences. [...] [M]ore than anyone else I have ever known, he gave himself completely to the company that he was in. (v)

of Oxford and the university, too, were changed. Wain writes simply, "Oxford was a different place." He continues,

There was still much to enjoy, much to love and hate, much to get used to; but the war-time Oxford of my undergraduate days had disappeared. Its pulse had stopped with the pulse of Charles Williams. (152)

In fact, it is C.S. Lewis who first affirmed the central role that Williams played in the meetings of the Inklings. In particular, Lewis emphasizes Williams's energy and his unique ability to draw out and blend together the diverse threads of the group:

[T]he importance of [Williams's] presence was, indeed, chiefly made clear by the gap which was left on the rare occasions when he did not turn up. It then became clear that some principle of liveliness and cohesion had been withdrawn from the whole party: lacking him, we did not completely possess one another. He was (in the Coleridgian language) an 'esemplastic' force. (*Essays Presented* xi)³

Charles Moorman strongly agrees with this perspective, insisting "[E]very circle must have a center, and Charles Williams is the center of the Oxford Christians" (27). The reason Williams deserves this distinction, according to Moorman, is the extent to which the other Inklings "borrowed" his ideas, including the idea of Exchange, the conflict of Arthurian and non-Arthurian Britain, and the Beatrician doctrine of love and marriage. Moorman is convinced that "most of the ideas which bind the group together [...] are 'pure Charles'" (27). Lois Lang-Sims takes it one step further, asserting the utterly unique genius of Williams's work, and concluding, "Williams will be remembered when [Lewis and Tolkien] are forgotten" (qtd. in Williams 16).

Williams is undoubtedly a central figure, but there is also reasonable support for considering Owen Barfield as the true center of the Inklings, at least as its intellectual center. While Williams was a late addition to the group, participating for six brief years, Barfield was there long before the group took shape, and he lived until 1997, long after the group disbanded. Verlyn Flieger points out that, among the Inklings, "[H]e was at once the most profound mind and the most unobtrusive presence." She affirms that Barfield's ideas are so

³ The term "esemplastic" was coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and it means that something has the ability to shape many diverse ideas or things into unity. Coleridge uses the term in Volume I, Chapter 13 of his *Biographia Literaria* or *Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*. Coleridge influenced many of the Inklings; Owen Barfield wrote a book about his ideas entitled *What Coleridge Thought*.

important and foundational that he can truly be said to have “changed the way we saw the world” (“Appreciation” 17).

Barfield’s early friendship with Lewis was certainly seminal to Lewis’s thinking. Barfield’s books, especially *Poetic Diction*, also had a profound impact upon the scope and direction of Tolkien’s work. Flieger notes that “The languages of Middle-earth, in their development, are so striking an illustration of Barfield’s thesis that one might almost think Tolkien had kept *Poetic Diction* at his elbow as he worked” (*Splintered* 65).

R.J. Reilly puts similar emphasis on the importance of Owen Barfield, writing that in his own study of the Inklings as a group, “I have begun with Barfield because I believe that many of the romantic notions common to the members of the group exist in their most basic and radical form in his work” (11). Duriez and Porter acknowledge his prominence by listing him along with Lewis, Tolkien, and Williams in the subtitle of their *Inklings Handbook*.

But if the center of the Inklings was not Lewis or Williams or Barfield, could it have been a different Lewis, that is, Warren Hamilton Lewis? I have heard compelling arguments for the central role that Major Lewis played, claiming that it was his outgoing and gracious personality that formed the social “glue” holding this diverse collection of idiosyncratic academics together.⁴ He alone was widely traveled, and he was in many ways the most sociable member of the Inklings. Douglas Gresham, for example, characterizes him as a widely known and well-respected figure throughout Oxford. John Wain is effusive in his remembrance, describing Warren Lewis as “the most courteous [man] I have ever met—not with mere politeness, but with a genial, self-forgetting considerateness that was as instinctive to him as breathing” (184). And Jill Freud, one of the children evacuated to the Kilns during wartime, simply observes, “He was comfy to be with all the time” (57).

People who knew Warren Lewis comment over and over again on his gift of hospitality, and it is easy to picture him quietly negotiating the wide-ranging Inklings personalities, keeping the relational balance and encouraging the conversation along. We know that he attended virtually all of the meetings of the group, that he prepared refreshments, and that what details we have about the regular meetings of the group come largely from his diary. But it is his warmth

⁴ Nevill Coghill is also described by his friends as being unusually friendly and outgoing. Claude Chavasse, for example, says of Coghill, “Nevill always had a most unusual gift of friendship, unusual in that the strength of his friendship with one never diminished the quality of his friendship with another. Each was particular, and sprang from some shared experience or from some quality in himself which answered the same quality in another. [...] His talent for friendship has done as much for Oxford as his literary and aesthetic gifts” (18).

and personality that seem to be key contributors to the spirit and cohesion of the group.

But if we are going to survey the possibilities, then what about Tolkien? Surely such a celebrated author would play a central role in his local group, particularly when you consider the sheer number of pages he read aloud from *The Lord of the Rings*. In all of my research on this group, I could not find a single instance of a scholar who claimed that Tolkien was the center of the Inklings. Still, I think this possibility deserves some consideration. The best argument for Tolkien's central role is probably found in the fact that participation in formal groups of one kind or another was a consistent feature of Tolkien's life. More than any of the other Inklings, Tolkien was an enthusiastic founder of groups, and groups are not only important but seem crucial to the achievements of his writing career.⁵ One of his earliest and most significant group experiences was with the Tea Club and Barrovian Society, or T.C.B.S.⁶ It was within the support of this circle that "Tolkien began tentatively to write verse" (Carpenter, *Tolkien* 47). Other important groups include Apolausticks, Chequers, the college Essay Club, the Viking Club, and the Kolbítar. This long history of group involvement points to the possibility of Tolkien as a quiet but compelling force that may have initiated Inklings meetings and kept the Inklings centered. One obituary observes, "He was a man of 'cronies' [...] and was always best in some small circle of intimates where the tone was at once Bohemian, literary, and Christian" (qtd. in Carpenter *Tolkien* 236).

⁵ For more information on Tolkien as a member of groups, see Humphrey Carpenter's *Tolkien: A Biography* and chapter 8 of my study of the Inklings, *The Company They Keep*.

⁶ The first group of which Tolkien was a founding member was the T.C.B.S. This group began in 1911 when Tolkien was 19 years old and a student at King Edward's, an all-boys school. Three of the senior boys—John Ronald Tolkien, Christopher Wiseman, and Rob Gilson—worked in the school library and formed the nucleus of a clique which met in the library for tea.

The group of young men was bound together first and foremost by the difficulties of preparing and enjoying tea on the library premises. However, the T.C.B.S. took on an increasingly literary nature when Geoffrey Bache Smith joined their ranks. Smith was a bit younger than the rest of the boys, but, as Carpenter notes, "he himself was a practising poet of some competence" (*Tolkien* 47). And it was "under the influence" of Geoffrey Bache Smith that the club in general and Tolkien in particular "began to wake up to the significance of poetry" (47). This small but enthusiastic group had a large impact on Tolkien: they modeled the behaviors of poets and story tellers, provided critical feedback on his drafts in progress, helped him develop his own critical faculties, recommended reading material that might support and shape his imagination, suggested that certain pieces be started, reworked, completed, or submitted for publication. It is no small matter that all of this early influence took place in a small group setting.

Dialogic Mode

Was Tolkien the real center of the Inklings? Warren Lewis? Owen Barfield? Charles Williams? Or C.S. Lewis? Having considered the evidence, it seems to me that the question itself is the problem. Although Moorman asserts that “every circle must have a center,” I do not believe that a *person* is the center of a typical writing group (27). In fact, most of the research on writing groups suggests that having a single strong personality as the center is at odds with the peer relationships that are central to the way that effective writing groups function. As Anne Ruggles Gere has pointed out, “Because authority resides ultimately in individual members of self-sponsored groups, the relationship among them is essentially nonhierarchical and gives more emphasis to cooperation than competition” (50). Janis Forman, drawing on an extensive research study of two particular writing groups, offers this telling contrast between the writing group that failed and the one that succeeded:

The failed effort was directed by an autocratic leader who claimed total ownership of the document and was impervious to the opinions of others and to the organization's expectations about how writing was to be handled. By contrast, the successful group handled leadership flexibly, divided work equitably, and was receptive to organizational expectations and to various stakeholders' concerns. (xvi)

There is every indication that the Inklings followed this successful pattern of flexible leadership and equitable participation, a pattern that has been thoughtfully elaborated by Gere and by Forman, a pattern that has been described by Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford as “dialogic:”

This dialogic mode is loosely structured and the roles enacted within it are fluid: one person may occupy multiple and shifting roles as a project progresses. [...] Furthermore, those participating in dialogic collaboration generally value the creative tension inherent in multivoiced and multivalent ventures. (133)

This perspective articulated by Ede and Lunsford emphasizes this important truth: within successful writing groups, shared responsibility and shifting roles are not only possible, they are highly desirable. Therefore, it seems to me that Moorman's insistence, and the insistence of others who argue for one or another person as the center of the Inklings, is based on a misplaced faith in hierarchical structures. The evidence suggests that the Inklings functioned in a dialogic mode, with no individual member at its core.

Further insight into how such groups function comes to us from sociological studies of group dynamics. Those who prefer secure statements of roles and functions will find some comfort here. Michael P. Farrell has done considerable research on creative clusters, and like Gere, Forman, Ede and Lunsford, he rejects the idea that a single dynamic leader is the norm for such groups. His research suggests that typical groups require *at least* three different types of leaders: the gatekeeper, the charismatic leader, and the executive manager (395, emphasis added).

The gatekeeper, sometimes called the matchmaker, sets out to “form interesting friendships and to bring those friends together in a setting where they can talk about their ideas” (295). Farrell emphasizes that this process is usually natural and unconscious, that is, the gatekeeper does not labor or strategize, he or she just casually attracts interesting people and then introduces them to one another. As Farrell points out, Lewis fills this role admirably.

The second kind of leader articulated by Farrell is the charismatic leader, “a highly narcissistic novice,” restless and imaginative, and “determined to do something new” (295). If the gatekeeper gathers congenial friends, the charismatic leader attracts enthusiastic admirers. Farrell emphasizes that under the influence of a charismatic leader, group members take greater risks:

The members of the circle, like the members of a gang, goad one another on, encouraging their creative endeavors, until they cross the boundaries of accepted ways of thinking and working in a field. They set a pace for working, and they escalate the level of risky play on the edges of acceptability. While working alone, a member may be tempted to try something new, something even forbidden by authorities in the field; but alone, the person does not follow through on the impulses. When the impulse is validated by other members of a circle, the conflicted member is more likely to act. An outrageous work by one member of the group becomes a dare for the next member. (15-16)

Those familiar with the Inklings will instantly recognize Charles Williams as a prototypical charismatic leader.⁷

⁷ Farrell’s theory of the stages of collaborative circles offers further insight into the part that Charles Williams played in the Inklings. Farrell speculates that groups gather members in their formation stage, then undergo a shift as they enter into what he calls the rebellion stage. “The initial radial network centered on the gatekeeper evolves into a dense network centered on a charismatic leader” (279). Using this model, Lewis could be seen as the gatekeeper, the one who saw the group through the formation stage, but Williams became the dynamic, charismatic leader who led the group into the more productive, powerful, and effective rebellion stage. Farrell says that in this stage, the members feel stronger and more internally cohesive. They raise “the ante” and “openly [share] their most secret,

The third type of leader needed for a group to thrive is what Farrell calls the executive manager, the one with the practical sense, the organizer, or the site coordinator. Warren Lewis fulfills many aspects of this role, serving as host and facilitator, as well as record keeper for the group's activities.

Conclusions

That brings us back to consideration of C.S. Lewis once more. Describing him as a gatekeeper helps to explain the nature of his participation in the Inklings, and it also helps to account for the fact that many of the Inklings point to him as a key figure. He invited many of them to join the group, and he introduced many of them to one another. In fact, he initiated these gatherings in a number of important ways.

So does that at least make him the *founder* of the Inklings? No, not by any means. As we have seen, Farrell stresses that the gatekeeper's role is by definition casual and largely unconscious. The Inklings began in a small and quiet way, no big vision, no charter, no mission statement. No founder *per se*. As David Bratman and other scholars of this subject have taken great pains to emphasize, the early history of the group is shrouded in the mists of time, and no single moment, or even series of moments, has ever been agreed upon as the official start of the Inklings as a distinct group.⁸

Then can we say that Lewis was central in the sense that he was the most *dynamic* member of the group? He was certainly outgoing and opinionated, but it is critical to keep in mind that he was surrounded by others who were equally outgoing and opinionated. Charles Williams, for example, was well known for being loud, emphatic, and dramatic. John Wain tells us that when Williams held forth, "He ranted, and threw back his head, and clutched at the shoulders of his gown, and stamped up and down" (149). Nevill Coghill and David Cecil were both major figures in the Oxford of their day, congenial, rich in friendships, and not the least bit shy. And Hugo Dyson was without a doubt the loudest and most aggressive member, but he was hardly the center of the group. Lewis scholars in particular are wise to remember that Lewis deliberately

undeveloped ideas" (280). As a result, "the exchanges between them [may escalate] rapidly, and the influence of their relationship on their individual work" can be dramatic (280). Using this model, we could say that the Inklings assembled and were somewhat productive through the 1930's. But with the addition of Williams as a charismatic leader in 1939, the group gained courage and focus, took greater literary risks, and produced their most radical and enduring works.

⁸ See especially Bratman's article "The Inklings" in Bruce L. Edwards' *C.S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy*, and also chapter 1 of *The Company They Keep*.

surrounded himself with strong, intelligent, vivid, and dynamic individuals. The Inklings met as peers.

Well, is there *any* justification for calling Lewis the center of the Inklings? Not that I can find. In fact, it is worth noting that Lewis did not situate himself at the group's center. Comments about his particular role strongly support the idea that the group functioned in a dialogic mode. In his remembrance of the group, Derek Brewer observes that Lewis "never attempted to dominate" (137). Chad Walsh writes, "The flow [of conversation] is not a one-way traffic. Lewis is as good a listener as talker, and has alert curiosity about almost anything conceivable" (17). Brewer describes an evening with Lewis and friends, observing, "It was an excellent evening, conversation amusing and intelligent and *monopolised by no one*" (139, emphasis added). He adds, "[Lewis] was the least authoritarian of men" (150).

An anecdote by Theresa Whistler further underscores this point. In an article on David Cecil, she writes, "David knew I admired C S Lewis greatly, as did he. I went to every Lewis lecture: to his electrifying University Sermon on the afterlife, and to the Socratic debating society where he beat down every opponent" (90). This was her impression of Lewis the Mythic Figure. But when Whistler encountered Lewis in the private sphere, a different impression emerged:

[Lewis] played so dominant a solo on all these public occasions, that I was taken aback by the man who came to dinner. In the atmosphere David and Rachel created he sat unassumingly at ease, glad to talk in quartet, all dominance vanished. It was a lively, lovely evening and when he left, on impulse he bent over Rachel's hand and kissed it—the gesture so attractively spontaneous, I wished he would do the same to me! (90-91)

No one monopolized and no one claimed the authoritarian role—this is consistent with descriptions of successful writing groups in general and of the Inklings in particular. It is worth emphasizing that this idea of equality was a common feature of Lewis's thought and a frequent topic of his conversation. His driver, Clifford Morris, has said that Lewis felt equally at home with a group of long-distance truck drivers or a cluster of robed academics. The basis of this ease is best expressed in Lewis's famous sermon "The Weight of Glory," which emphasizes the inestimable value of every single human being. Morris notes,

I know that this idea of the divine in man—the image of Christ in every man—was an ever-present idea in the last years of Jack Lewis's life. He spoke about it often, and it goes a long way toward explaining his attitude to other people, especially those who were his inferior in learning and intellectual capabilities.

I don't think he ever "looked down" on anybody, and he was always willing to learn from anybody. (328)

The very notion of a human center or leader or chairman of a group like the Inklings, then, would go against this idea so foundational to Lewis's view of the world. For all of the criticisms of the group as masculine, old-fashioned, and exclusive, it seems clear that they were well ahead of their time in this way: they were a very effective writing group, functioning in flexible, non-hierarchical, and dialogic ways.

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