



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

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Volume 9  
Number 3

Article 13

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10-15-1982

## Matters of Grave Import: A Column

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### Recommended Citation

Ellwood, Gracia Fay (1982) "Matters of Grave Import: A Column," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 9: No. 3, Article 13.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol9/iss3/13>

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Submission Deadline: November 30, 2023

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### Matters of Grave Import: A Column

# Matters of Grave Import

## A Column by Gracia Fay Ellwood

### Part of the Mystery

My introduction to our three authors began in 1960 during my last year as an undergraduate, when, for some unknown reason, I read *THAT HIDEOUS STRENGTH*. That I should have paused in my desperate pursuit of knowledge long enough frivolously to read an unassigned novel is still mysterious to me; but I did, and I remember sitting up virtually all night, drenched with sweat, turning the pages with trembling hands. This was worth losing a day's Greek verbs over...

I was ready to make time to read more things by this man Lewis. I mentioned him to my favorite English teacher, who "highly recommend[ed] the Narnia allegories." I hastened to the library card catalogue to find *The Narnia Allegories*, but to my disappointment it wasn't there. I did find a prequel to *HIDEOUS STRENGTH* with the meaningless title *PERELANDRA*, and gobbled it down with excitement almost equal to my first. I also read *THE PROBLEM OF PAIN* and wrote to Lewis, receiving in reply the gracious letter published in my column in *MYTHLORE* 22.

During my graduate studies at the University of Chicago I read Mary Shideler's *THE THEOLOGY OF ROMANTIC LOVE* in connection with my study of Dante, and knew that Charles Williams pulled together more experiences vital to me than any writer I'd ever encountered. Incidentally, I was thus prepared for insight when a fellow student, Robert Ellwood, fell into intoxicating visions of the Glory after seeing the back of my head in chapel. During our courtship we tried a few Exchanges with figures from the past who meant much to us. There was no noticeable effect (on us, anyway).

The summer of 1964 Robert put a book called *THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING* into my hands, his manner one of solemn awe. "You have to read this; you'll never know me until you do." I had already heard him say, only half-seriously, that it would be a good idea to substitute this book by Tolkien for a certain unfortunate portion of the Scriptures, so I could not doubt that a milestone in my mental life was at hand. Happily I had just finished my degree at Chicago--my anxious, driven approach to learning was by no means gone--so I was able to sit down and share Frodo, Sam and Gandalf's Adventure. Already under *The Shadow of the Past* I recognized the familiar trembling/sweating/midnight oil phenomena, which reached almost unbearable intensity in the uncanny events at Weather-top. As the company neared Parth Galen I became increasingly uneasy, frequently checking the maps--how could Frodo get to Mount Doom in so few pages?

I soon found out, Robert happily handing me the second and third volumes, all of which he had bought and read as they were published in the 1950's. No written or spoken word gave away the ending for me; I waited and labored until the Ring actually fell into the Cracks of Doom. The relief was so great that I floated away on a river of tears in the Field of Cormallen. (I still do.)

I finally made it to *The Narnia Allegories* in the summer of 1965, when I married Robert, and generously gave him a set as a wedding present. During our honeymoon we hiked up the lower slopes of Mt. McKinley in Alaska, a Narnian book in pocket, stopping now and then to read a chapter idyllically together.

That winter Robert discovered a tiny ad in *THE NEW REPUBLIC* for a proposed organization, The Tolkien Society, and we responded. The first *TOLKIEN JOURNAL* was a single mimeographed sheet put out by a high school student named Richard Plotz. He grew, and it grew.

We spent the academic year of 1966-67 in Japan, where I kept happily busy writing an essay on hero symbolism in *LORD OF THE RINGS*. Editor Plotz was interested, but as the essay shot up like Jack's beanstalk, I decided to do another of comparable length to put with it, and try for book publication. (It came out in 1970 as *GOOD NEWS FROM TOLKIEN'S MIDDLE EARTH*.)

Having settled in Los Angeles, in the fall of 1968 we found another ad, this one in the *HOLLYWOOD FREE PRESS*, for Bilbo and Frodo's Annual Birthday Party to be celebrated by the Mythopoeic Society. I added a diaphanous cape to a gown recently worn to a wedding, and off we went. At that historic event I met one of the artists whose work I'd noticed in the *TOLKIEN JOURNAL*, and a small but redoubtable version of Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, who punctuated her objections to any aspersions upon her size with vigorous jabs with her umbrella. Several of those present were in Narnian costume, and I found that this extraordinary organization celebrated the works of all three of my mentors. I had come home.

I could go on for many columns narrating the events of the years that followed, but having indulged myself in so much verbiage about my pre-Society adventures, I will try to sum up briefly under three heads what the Society has meant to me. The first few years I plunged with zest into a buzz of activities--branch discussions, Mythcons, the Performing Arts Workshop meetings, costume picnics, and extracurricular events such as kidnap parties, all of which gave me a chance to lose that intense drivenness and be a heedless adolescent for a while. Better late than never; I recommend it enthusiastically.

Secondly, the Society has meant to me friendships such as would make life worth living even if it held nothing else. I have enjoyed the company of old-standby members of the Mydgard branch monthly for twelve years, and hope to do so for decades more. And a few other Society members have become, along with Robert, not only philia-friends to discuss mythopoeic ideas with, but bearers of grace in my need and sharers of all that is closest to me.

Finally, many core insights of Lewis, Tolkien and Williams have given me Joy and freedom such as one finds but seldom. In particular, I shall nev-

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 er forget the huge relief and delight of learning from Screwtape that humility means, not having a low opinion of one's own talents and other assets, but simply to have no bias in one's own favor: to be able to "design the best cathedral in the world, and know it to be the best, and rejoice in the fact, without being any more...glad at having done it than he would be if it had been done by another."

One of the things for which I am grateful to Tolkien (together with trees and jewels and Recovery) is the cluster of images in which he has made Hope live. "...In the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach." Facing the overwhelming powers of evil and death, one can make Denethor's choice--or Theoden's--and make all the difference.

My debt to Charles Williams is so immense that it seems even more ridiculous than with the other two to try to highlight it in a paragraph. But, basically, his insights about the Glory turned a multiverse into a universe for me. Who else had had the courage to assert, in the face of all the pronouncements of psychology and common sense, that what we see when we fall in love is real and that it is the rest of the world that is blind? And that although the experience passes, the knowledge of that reality in every person can transform a life. The most boring person we know, the most arrogant or commonplace or depraved, bears the Glory; more, the Glory is one throughout space and throughout time. Here is a link with the matter of the visions of past events that have always fascinated me; here is the basis for unorthodox healing; here is the Inward Light to which as a Quaker I turn in meditation, and which makes me, willy-nilly, a Friend to all creation.

Probably the single experience in the Society's history that best engraved this on my mind was the performance of Dale Ziegler's lovely music to THE GREATER TRUMPS play we did at Mythcon II. "Rise to adore the mystery of Love...You're part of the mystery, if you mean to love."

## REVEL

Revel is a sound fantasy magazine for the blind and others prevented from reading printed material. It is perhaps the only exclusively fantasy magazine for the blind at this time. Revel is a compilation of fantasy stories -- long and short, papers and articles, a column on Tolkien, a bardic presentation, articles from Mythlore -- and a touch of the Celtic in music. It has emerged as a six hour, slow speed cassette which can be played back on a type of cassette equipment issued to the sightless through the Library of Congress. Revel is distributed to any blind person who would like to subscribe for the cost of tape and handling.

The editors' goal is to share the wealth by introducing a semi-professional medium where an exchange between those who do read the printed word and those who mostly can only hear it can take place.

Revel needs readers -- who read well and enjoy reading fantasy aloud. If you would like to read for or make a donation to Revel, please write to Revel, P.O. Box 961, San Francisco, California 94101.

We welcome Revel to The Mythopoeic Society's family of publications. The Society also publishes its monthly news bulletin, Mythprint, at \$6 a year, and its fiction annual, Mythellany, at \$2.50 a copy. Both Mythprint and Mythellany can be ordered from the Orders Department, 1008 N. Monterey Street, Alhambra, California 91801.

## CONTRIBUTORS

We are pleased to further introduce the writers of articles and cover artists.

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Ph.D. in English. She has had a number of articles, stories and poems printed in many magazines, some literary, some sf/fantasy, and in book anthologies. Other Carrollian articles include "Patterns of Unification in Sylvie and Bruno" (pamphlet published by T-K Graphics) and "The Not-Dragons of Lewis Carroll" (forthcoming in Niekas).

Joe R. Christopher

B.A., M.A., & Ph.D. from the University of Oklahoma. His dissertation was on "The Romances of Clives Staples Lewis, and led to the enumerative bibliographies he has published since, including C.S. Lewis: An Annotated Checklist. He lives and teaches in Texas.

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Lucy Matthews

B.A. & Ph.D. from Birmingham University (England) with a special interest in the History of Babylon. She works as an artist for the Daily Express Newspaper. She has illustrated in books and periodicals, and is actively interested in Roman and Celtic British History. She enjoys spending time outdoors and tending a large garden.

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By way of further comment on the pointing out of Tolkien's underlying Christianity in the last issue, this was partly done to counter the idea that is heard from time to time that in effect Lewis and Williams are basically Christian writers and Tolkien was not. While how each of the three expressed themselves as writers is not the same in many ways, including the degree of implicitness vs. explicitness, the basic common source of inspiration cannot now, if it ever could, be denied. The Christian content need not be directly discussed in Tolkien any more than in Lewis or Williams, but when it is revelant neither should it be skirted or denied.

We are very pleased to welcome a Linguistic Editor and Columnist: Paul Nolan Hyde, a man of both great expertise and enthusiasm regarding Middle-earth philology. A great deal of new material is now available on this subject since the publication of The Silmarillion, Unfinished Tales, and The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien. This material will likely grow larger with expected further publications. Dr. Hyde is a welcome addition to serve this continuing interest.