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Tolkien and the Other Inklings

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Abstract

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Additional Keywords

Owen Barfield; Christianity; friendship; Inklings; C.S. Lewis; J.R.R. Tolkien: influences; Charles Williams

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The Inklings

The group did not have any consistent documentation such as the careful minuting of the fictional Notion Club, Tolkien's portrait of an Inklings-type group of friends, set in the future. Humphrey Carpenter's excellent study, *The Inklings*, draws on the key sources: the diaries of Major Warren Lewis, C.S. Lewis's letters to his brother in the early months of the Second World War, Tolkien's long letters to his son Christopher while in South Africa with the RAF in that war, Lewis's introduction to *Essays presented to Charles Williams*, and reminiscences by Inklings such as John Wain, Commander Jim Dundas-Grant, Christopher Tolkien and others. The Inklings expanded, I believe, from the deep friendship between Tolkien and Lewis, a remarkable association comparable to that between Wordsworth and Coleridge in literary significance. Lewis, in his book, *The Four Loves* explains the process by which friendship expands (the least jealous of loves, at least according to Lewis):

In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald's reaction to a specifically Caroline joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him "to myself" now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald. Hence true Friendship is the least jealous of loves. Two friends delight to be joined by a third, and three by a fourth, if only the newcomer is qualified to become a real friend . . . Of course the scarcity of kindred souls – not to mention practical considerations about the size of rooms and the audibility of voices – set limits to the enlargement of the circle; but within those limits we possess each friend not less but more as the number of those with whom we share him increases.

(Lewis, 1977a, pp. 58, 59)

In his book Humphrey Carpenter lists the various Inklings in a long list – but, in a letter to Bede Griffiths in December 1941, Lewis has quite a short list. He is explaining his dedication to *The Inklings* in his recently published *The Problem of Pain*. He lists Charles Williams, Dyson of

Reading (H.V.D. "Hugo" Dyson), Warren Lewis, Tolkien, and Dr. "Humphrey" Havard. He explains Tolkien and Dyson as the "immediate human causes of my own conversion" to Christianity. Remarkably, the name of Owen Barfield does not appear. In fact, Barfield rarely was able to visit. On one occasion, Lewis grumbles that Barfield is visiting on a Thursday, which means he'll attend *The Inklings* and Lewis will have less time to himself with him! It was later that *The Inklings* swelled further to include Colin Hardie, Lord David Cecil, John Wain and others. Christopher Tolkien attended as soon as he was back from South Africa, and became a significant member. It was upon this larger group that Tolkien drew inspiration for "The Notion Club Papers", and it is likely that he read it all to them. Warren Lewis records in his diary, Thursday 22nd August, 1946, about "Tollers" reading "a magnificent myth which is to knit up and concludes his Papers of the Notions Club". This would have been "The Drowning of Anadûnê" (now published with "The Notion Club Papers" in *Sauron Defeated*). A further complexity of *The Inklings* is that there were two patterns of meetings: Tuesday mornings in the Bird and Baby pub (The Eagle and Child, St. Giles) – except when Lewis took the Chair in Cambridge, when Monday mornings were more suitable – and Thursday evenings, usually in Lewis' rooms in Magdalen, but often in Tolkien's in Merton College. The Thursday evenings were of more literary interest, as here members would read to each other work in progress, receiving criticism and encouragement. Much of the "new Hobbit", i.e. *The Lord of the Rings*, was read in this way, sometimes by Christopher instead of Tolkien senior. After 1951 the term, *The Inklings*, no longer appears in Warren's diaries and it is probable that about two years before the Thursday meetings dried up, though the Tuesday meetings (or Monday ones) continued until 1962. The key years of *The Inklings*, in terms of their literary significance, are probably therefore from, let's say, the mid nineteen-thirties until near the end of 1949. The death of Charles Williams was a great blow to the group, particularly Lewis, and the fifties marked a gradual cooling of the friendship between Lewis and Tolkien which I believe was the heart around which the Inklings formed and grew. The

situation was not helped by “Hugo” Dyson exercising a veto against Tolkien reading from the unfinished *The Lord of the Rings* at Inklings meetings. A further complexity was introduced by Lewis’s at first only intellectual friendship with Joy Davidman, but that is another story. It is valuable to look at some of The Inklings in relation to Tolkien. Not all Lewis’s friends appealed to Tolkien, or at least not to the same extent, as in the case of Charles Williams.

1. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis

The friendship between the two men goes back to the time when Tolkien moved to Oxford from Leeds in 1926. The two met at an English Faculty meeting and it was not long after that that they discovered they shared similar worlds and their association began, often talking far into the night. Lewis remarked that

friendship with [Tolkien] marked the breakdown of two old prejudices. At my first coming into the world I had been (implicitly) warned never to trust a Papist, and at my first coming into the English Faculty (explicitly) never to trust a philologist. Tolkien was both. (Lewis, 1977b, p. 173)

Let’s first look briefly at the influence of Tolkien on Lewis, then the importance of Lewis to Tolkien.

1. There is firstly the influence of Tolkien’s Christianity. Lewis was originally an atheist and Tolkien helped him to come to faith. The pattern of his persuasion is vividly captured in the poem, “Mythopoeia”, published in the new edition of *Tree and Leaf*.

2. The second, related, element of Tolkien’s influence is his view of the relation of myth and fact. The view can be seen as a theology of story. Tolkien had worked out a complex picture of the relation of story and myth to reality. This involved a view of how language itself relates to reality, as story and language were, for Tolkien, part of one human inventive process. He says that it dawned on him, as an undergraduate, that story and language were “integrally related”. Tolkien saw the Gospel narratives – a story created by God himself in the real events of history – as having broken into the “seamless web of story”. Story – whether preceding or subsequent to the Gospel events – is joyfully alive with God’s presence. The importance of story became central to C.S. Lewis, expressed for example in his seminal *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961).

3. The third element, also related, is Tolkien’s distinctive doctrine of sub-creation, the view that the highest function of art is the creation of convincing secondary or other worlds. Without the impact of Tolkien’s view of sub-creation on Lewis we may not have had Malacandra, Perelandra, or Glome, particularly Perelandra, one of his most successful creations, or even Narnia.

Turning the other way, what was Lewis’ importance to Tolkien? Lewis clearly didn’t influence Tolkien’s writing in the way Tolkien influenced his. In Lewis, rather, Tolkien found a ready listener and appreciator. This listening was institutionalized in The Inklings’ Thursday night gatherings,

where much of *The Lord of the Rings* was read. In fact, Tolkien confesses that without Lewis’ encouragement it is unlikely that he would have finished *The Lord of the Rings*! We might speculate that if the Thursday meetings had continued, with the associated dynamic of Tolkien and Lewis’s friendship, there would exist today tellings of the tales of Beren and Lúthien, and perhaps also of Túrin Turambar, and other key stories of the First Age, nearer the scale of *The Lord of the Rings*. The two friends had a great number of shared beliefs that transcend what Tolkien had in common with other Inklings friends, such as Barfield and Williams. These convictions derived from shared tastes, and particularly from their common faith, which though Orthodox, had an original cast, to say the least. For me, in considering the remarkable Inklings, Lewis and Tolkien always steal the show.

a. They saw the imagination as the organ of meaning rather than of truth (which made their romanticism distinctive). Imaginative invention was justifiable in its own right – it did not have to serve in a didactic medium, and didn’t have the burden of carrying conceptual truths. Though Lewis was more allegorical and explicit than Tolkien, both writers valued a symbolic perception of reality. A further central preoccupation of Lewis and Tolkien is imaginative invention (most obviously expressed in Tolkien’s concept of sub-creation). This was related to their view of the function of imagination as the organ of meaning rather than of truth. Products of the imagination were a form of knowledge, but knowledge discovered by making, essentially not accessible in any other way.

b. They also shared a sense of the value of otherness – or otherworldliness. Great stories take us outside of the prison of our own selves and our presuppositions about reality. In so far as stories reflect the divine maker, they help us face the ultimate Other – God himself, distinct as creator from all else, including ourselves. The very well of fantasy and imaginative invention is every person’s direct knowledge of the Other. Lewis writes:

To construct plausible and moving “other worlds” you must draw on the only real “other world” we know, that of the spirit.

(Lewis, 1982, pp. 35-36).

Imaginative worlds, he says somewhere, are “regions of the spirit”.

c. For both men, this all-pervasive sense of the other is focused in a quality of the numinous. Both successfully embodied this quality in their fiction.¹

d. Also important to both men was a desire to embody a quality of joy in their work. Though associated with Lewis (e.g. through his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*), joy is distinctive too in Tolkien’s fiction, and supremely valued by him, as his essay “On Fairy-Stories” makes clear.

e. Both Tolkien and Lewis were preoccupied with pre-Christian paganism, particularly what might be called enlightened paganism. Most of Tolkien’s fiction is set in a pre-Christian world, as was his great model, *Beowulf*,

¹ I explore the theme of the numinous further in my *The Tolkien and Middle-earth Handbook* (1992), pp. 192- 194.

according to his own interpretation of that poem. Similarly, Lewis explored a pagan world in his fine novel, *Till We Have Faces*. Even while an atheist, Lewis was attracted by pagan myths of the North, and the idea of a dying god. In one of his *Latin Letters*, Lewis speculates that some modern people may need to be brought to pre-Christian pagan insights in preparation for more adequately receiving the Christian Gospel. Tolkien undoubtedly shared this view of pre-evangelism.

To point out these shared concerns is not to downplay important differences, often of emphasis, between Tolkien and Lewis. Their differences gave a dynamic to their friendship.

2. Tolkien and Charles Williams

The relationship between Williams and Tolkien has been superbly explored by Humphrey Carpenter in his biography and in his study of *The Inklings*. Late in his life Tolkien recalled that he and Williams liked one another, but had little to say to each other at a deeper level. While Williams appreciated Tolkien's chapters of *The Lord of the Rings* which were read to *The Inklings*, Tolkien found he had little taste for Williams' writing, though he made an effort to savour them. There seems to have been some jealousy on Tolkien's part about Lewis's friendship for Williams, which had distracted from their own association. Also he felt that Williams had been an only partly digested influence on Lewis's writings, particularly on the third science-fiction story, *That Hideous Strength*. Williams' play, *The House of the Octopus*, is mentioned in "The Notion Club Papers", where it is clear that Tolkien believed, no doubt with some sadness, that Williams' work would fall into disfavour with future readers. Tolkien recognized his own limitations in failing to appreciate Williams, respecting him, and valuing his perceptive comments on chapters of *The Lord of the Rings* as they were read. He contributed his essay "On Fairy-Stories" to the posthumous tribute, *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*. At one stage he wrote an affectionate poem to Williams, complaining of his difficulty in understanding his writings, but valuing his person nonetheless:

When your fag is wagging and spectacles are
twinkling,

when tea is brewing or the glasses tinkling,
then of your meaning often I've an inkling,

your virtues and your wisdom glimpse . . .²

Williams is important for his encouragement of Tolkien at a time when he particularly needed it, as he slogged away at finishing *The Lord of the Rings*. He is also important in helping Tolkien to be aware of his own imaginative limitations as he struggled with Williams' work, work of a person he admired. It also helps the modern reader to put Tolkien in perspective in comparison with Williams' richly imaginative work. Tolkien was struggling with his then private mythology and could see the artistic struggles of Williams, who could not succeed in making his work

accessible to contemporary readers. At least, Tolkien didn't believe he was succeeding, and few will deny the obscurity of Williams' work. Williams was at the other end of the spectrum from Lewis, whose work Tolkien felt was often too obvious.

3. Tolkien and Barfield

I have already pointed out the paradox that Owen Barfield is considered one of the core Inklings, even though he rarely attended Inklings meetings. He contributed a chapter to *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* that was approved by the Inklings, including Tolkien. His influence on the Inklings was mainly through his book, *Poetic Diction* (1928), and through the many discussions between Barfield and Lewis from undergraduate days until Barfield left Oxford to become a solicitor. Tolkien seems to have accepted Barfield's basic thesis as thoroughly as Lewis did. Verlyn Flieger has demonstrated Barfield's importance to Tolkien's thought and fiction in her study of Tolkien, *Splintered Light* (1983). Barfield took up writing again after his retirement but it was his early work that was of central importance to Tolkien and Lewis. His essay in the Williams volume clarifies his basic position. The fact that Barfield is widely considered to be a core Inkling, though he rarely attended meetings, underlines his great impact on Lewis and Tolkien. An example of affinity between basic ideas of Barfield and Tolkien can starkly be seen in an appendix to *Poetic Diction*, where Barfield writes of allegory and myth:

Allegory [is] a more or less conscious hypostatization of ideas, followed by a synthesis of them, and myth the true child of Meaning, begotten on imagination.

(Barfield, 1952, p. 201)

Barfield speaks of Greek philosophers *contaminating* their original myths with allegory. A modern poet creates a new myth, or makes a true use of an old one, according to Barfield, if he or she succeeds in directly embodying concrete experience, rather than his or her idea of that experience. If the poet only deals with ideas, he or she has only invented an allegory, or has made allegorical use of a myth. Barfield's distinction between allegory and myth rings true of Tolkien's perception, leading to his dislike of allegory, and his concern, for example, about Lewis's fondness for allegory. We can also find Tolkien-like concepts in Barfield's view of prehistoric human consciousness, which he saw as unitary, not fragmented into subject and object. It was "a kind of thinking which is at the same time perceiving – a picture-thinking, a figurative, or imaginative, consciousness, which we can only grasp today by true analogy with the imagery of our poets, and, to some extent, with our own dreams." Such an attention to dreams, and to shifts in consciousness with developments in language, is typical also of Tolkien, and brings us to his unfinished "Notion Club Papers".

4. "The Notion Club Papers"

The Papers are a second attempt (the first being *The Lost*

² The whole poem is quoted in Carpenter, 1978, pp. 123-126.

Road) at time-travel, in response to a challenge that Lewis and Tolkien set themselves to write a time- or space-travel story. (Lewis's response was the first of his space trilogy.) According to Humphrey Carpenter, *The Lost Road* has elements of an idealized portrait of the father-son relationship between Tolkien and his son Christopher. Similarly, "The Notion Club Papers" idealizes the Inklings. Neither contains direct biography or autobiography. Both however concern the discovery of clues to the lost world of Númenor through strange words seemingly discovered rather than invented by Tolkien-like people exceptionally sensitive to language. The later work appreciates the value of a group or community of people in building up together an imaginative picture of the past. The insights into the past achieved imaginatively are in a curious way as objective as the seemingly hard facts of traditional history. This objectivity is demonstrated by the intrusion of a great storm in late twentieth-century Oxford which derives from the calamity which befell Númenor – perhaps a rare Charles Williams touch in Tolkien's writings! As well as language, the Inklings-like discussions of the Notion Club concern the status of dreams, and time- and space-travel via that medium. Behind it is an exciting exploration of the place imagination has in putting us in contact with objective reality, resisting the view that imagination is purely subjective and individualistic. Christopher Tolkien – who was a member of The Inklings at the time Tolkien created this idealized picture of them – assures us from his intimate knowledge that there is no direct correspondence between characters in the Notion Club and actual Inklings. However, there are hints of actual characters, e.g. parallels between Dolbear and Dr. Humphrey Havard, and between Dyson and Arry Lowdham. The extent that the picture is idealized can be discovered by comparing "The Notion Club Papers" with Humphrey Carpenter's powerful reconstruction of an Inklings evening in his study of *The Inklings* (Part 3, Chapter 3). Discussion (as is revealed in Warren Lewis' diary) ranges far and wide, which was very much to C.S. Lewis' taste. The Notion Club discussions are very much more focused around linguistic and dream issues, more to Tolkien's own taste (not

that Lewis and others wouldn't have been interested in these issues – in fact the Papers were read to The Inklings, as I mentioned above). However, despite being idealized, they do acknowledge the value of a community of like-minded thinking and imagining. There is not the isolation of *The Lost Road*, with only the father and son.

5. Christopher Tolkien

I have already referred to the importance of Christopher Tolkien in understanding "The Notion Club Papers", as he was an Inklings at the period on which the Papers are based (though of course set in the future). It mustn't be overlooked that Christopher Tolkien was a key member of The Inklings. His insights into the group illuminate his commentary on the development of *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Furthermore, he was an essential element of Tolkien's original audience during the composition of his works, so important in encouraging him to continue. Humphrey Carpenter points out that, in the early 1930s, it was only Christopher Tolkien and C.S. Lewis that knew of the existence of *The Silmarillion* as such, and had parts of it read or told to them. As I said, Carpenter believes that Tolkien's relationship with Christopher is idealized in *The Lost Road*. He helped his father, furthermore, with the construction of maps of Middle-earth. His absence in South Africa during the Second World War was a further incentive for his father to write and to send instalments of *The Lord of the Rings*. Finally, this surviving Inklings has dedicated very many years to editing and publishing his father's unfinished work, not least achieving some kind of final order to the published *The Silmarillion*.

Conclusion

In all too short a time, I have tried to take a look at Tolkien's relation to the other Inklings, especially C.S. Lewis, Williams, and Barfield, particularly looking at affinities and differences between them, and what he owed to them. I have also looked at the importance of Christopher Tolkien to Tolkien's work. "The Notion Club Papers" has been briefly discussed as an idealized portrait of The Inklings.

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