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Summer 7-15-1990

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### Recommended Citation

GoodKnight, Glen (1990) "Following The Middle Way," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 16: No. 4, Article 6.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol16/iss4/6>

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### Following The Middle Way

#### Abstract

Continues his “Letter” from issue #61, suggesting that the Society consciously follow a “Middle Way” between fandom and academia, between exclusivity and eclecticism.

#### Additional Keywords

Mythopoeic Society—History and personal reminiscences; Mythopoeic Society—Scope

# Following The Middle Way

Glen GoodKnight

[This is a continuation of "The Letter" printed in the last issue of *Mythlore*, number 61, pages 39-41, 50.]

Those who have read various Editorials and Addresses by myself over the years will recognize the references to The Middle Way. It is a path between two beckoning and opposing extremes, but what these two poles *are* have changed more than once over the years. Let us trace the development of the principle of The Middle Way.

As was said in the last issue, one of the underlying motives of organizing the Society was to attempt to find a balance between the Establishment and the Counter Culture in the turbulent end of the 1960s — no easy task — and attempt to provide a way to reconcile both extremes. While not stated in specific words, this was one of my goals for the Society; it was the first definition of the Middle Way, even if the Way itself was not mentioned, the two poles — the Establishment and the Counter Culture were seen as extremes to be avoided.

I had just recently returned from a dream-fulfilled journey to England to see people and places known to the Inklings, and was also anxious about tensions that had developed within the Society. The first reference to "The Middle Way" was made in the May 1975 issues of *Mythprint*: "The Mythopoeic Society treads the middle way between isolated exclusivity of interest ('sectarianism') on the one hand, and unfocused eclecticism ('latitudinarianism') on the other. Soon after this, at the 1975 Mythopoeic Conference, I made an address entitled "An Enlargement of Being" which was subsequently published in *Mythlore* 11. After quoting the above words from *Mythprint*, I said "There are extreme attitudes that can be found within the Society on either side of 'Middle Way.'"

There is what I see as an error of diffusion, or lack of focus, which in its milder form would have us completely and conveniently ignore the Christian element of the authors, and indeed spiritual implications in literature generally. Those who hold this view seem to be made uncomfortable concerning any such implications, even when this element arises naturally in a discussion or study of literature. This eclectic "meant-axe" approach of only taking from an author that which is acceptable to one's current limited understanding of the meaning of the author's work is wrong. We are misled if we fail to realize each author's work is a fusion of elements which cannot be separated without distortion. The more extreme form of this attitude would have the Society abandon its central commitment to the three authors, and become a generalized "fantasy fandom." While the nature of the Society is determined by the majority of its members, as the founder of this Society and one intimately acquainted with its many activities for nearly eight years, I believe that such an alteration in the purpose that the Society has maintained since its formation would be disastrous, for the Society itself as much as for any of the members.

No other group than the Inklings, certainly not in the last hundred years, has produced more material, both in the genre of myth and fantasy and in critical theory about it, than they have. By their being joined together in time and space as they were, their similarity is not only of ideas and theory, but also of common atmosphere. In a world which was becoming increasingly disillusioned by its own vision of reality, seeking answers in forms of religion, political systems, science, and psychology, our three authors found a system of cosmic order and created a myth to contain it. They were more concerned with myth as a work of art and an conveyor of truth, than as the end point of a long string of influences. Many persons, including members of this Society as well as myself, have found a special difficulty to define our delight with the three. While being indebted to many other writers as well, we hold them in unique regard, and wish to know their work better. The above reasons seem to make more than an adequate literary defense for an organization specially devoted to those men, if such a defense is really required. I recognize there are those who do not find this defense sufficient. To them I would say: Even though the Society does indeed function on may levels for many kinds of people... we exceed the bounds of the possible to seek to please the wishes of all persons in all ways.

There is, I believe, an opposite error of attitude: the idea that the Society should serve as an evangelical Christian organization. ....if each members would indeed read the primary works of the three authors, and "taste and see" what is to be encountered in that reading. How indeed persons do interact with this literature is beyond the scope of my reason for founding the Society.... In this context, the Society's aim is to provide a medium of exchange rather than to be a bearer of doctrine. The Society best fulfills its function if it does not set bound to its members' philosophies by adopting a religious or literary philosophy of its own..... I would have all Society members reject religious sectarianism and literary cultishness, whether or not it would bring some apparent benefits — a thing I sincerely doubt....

In summary, I would not have the Society compromise the religious beliefs of the three authors, nor elements of that belief in their works, nor would I have the Society presume to interpret as an organization the meaning of that belief. By taking this position, I do not in any way mean to limit individual members in their interpretation.

I have taken this moment to discuss "errors of attitude" on either side of the Society's middle course, in hopes of clarifying the situation and clearing the air, and in hopes of making the advantages of The Middle Way more obvious. I seek more than ever the Society's fuller maturity as a literary organization — balanced, united in intellectual honesty, and worthily fulfilling its stated purpose.

The dilemma of walking between the desire of some that the Society take a specific religious position (sectarianism) and those who desired to see the Society dilute or ignore its central purpose (latitudinarianism) in itself, has not been a burning issue since 1975, and least when its concerns it taking a specific sectarian position.

The continued desire in some people to expand the Society's interests did continue, and caused me to give an address two years later at the 1977 Mythopoeic Conference, later printed in *Mythlore* 17, entitled "Going on in The Great Dance." After reading passages from Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* and Lewis' *Perelandra* on the Great Music and the Great Dance, I added the following:

The Mythopoeic Society as part of the great dance has made some stumbles and mistake moves. No dancer can gain the stability, agility, and grace in the dance without learning through his mistakes, his stumbles, lurches, and yes, even falling on his face.

The Dance is unending yet ever changing, change, even unexpected change, is good within a perceived framework.

I would like to touch on the some-time expressed opinion that the Society should expand its interests. I would reply that it should deepen rather than expand. Some may disagree, but an organization is not the same entity as an individual human being. As part of the Great Dance with its interwoven complexities, we as individuals benefit from an ever growing awareness of the existence both surrounding us and within us. To honestly feel growth in one's self is a true joy. A human's potential for growth can go in a great many directions. To formally apply this to an organization such as this is to invite chaos, since each member would want to see his [or her] own interest added to the express purpose. Applying this kind of growth to the Society we could arrive at Tolkien, Lewis, Williams and Robert E. Howard, or Tolkien Lewis Williams and Sherlock Holmes, or Tolkien, Lewis, Williams and Frisbee collecting, or Tolkien Lewis, Williams, and Calendar Reform. In the formal sense we cannot become the Something for Everybody Society and continue to be a viable meeting ground for the already stated purposes of the Society. But on a personal level, this does not and should not prevent us from sharing our other interests with those we meet.

In the past I have used the phrase "We tread the Middle Way" implying the Way of the Great Dance. I now repent of the term "tread." Light of feet, we must step nimbly and lightly to completely enjoy the ecstasy of the Dance. Love of life and its source is the key to being a good dancer. At times the pace, the beat, even the melody become obscured from our jaded and distraught senses — if so, be still for a time. Surely the tempo will return, far more audible and joyous than before. We listen, we become aware, we enter into the movement, our spirits stir before the rising breeze...

And the Dance goes on.

One of the ways the philosophy of The Middle Way was developed was to follow a middle course between organized science fiction fandom and formal academia. When the Society was begun, neither example was strongly copied, although both did provide forms and practices to be adapted to the Society's needs. But as the Society continued to develop and draw people from different areas, the difference of tone and style of these two groups particularly have caused friction. This lead me to write "On the Middle Way" in *Mythlore* 35 in 1983:

The idea of the Mythopoeic Society following the Middle Way is far from new, and it has served the Society well over the years. You might ask "Following the Middle Way between what alternatives? There are several different answers to this. These alternatives could be between the devotion to

one author, as many groups hold, and to open-ended whole genres of writing. In this respect, the Society is neither. It is focused on three writers while holding wide ranging interests in different genres. But that distinction is not the one I wish to discuss here; rather the Middle Way between "fandom" (a term that has nearly as many definitions as there are fans) and "scholars" or "academia."

To some this is an irreconcilable dichotomy, but I fail to see it that way. Rather, *within the context of the Society*, there is a spectrum of attitudes, approaches, and modes of behavior. Both extremes are stereotyped, particularly by those in the opposite camp. Frequently these prejudices arise because of an initial negative reaction to the surface differences, without going beyond to discover the real worth within. For some, the need for a "them vs. us" attitude is deep-seated and prevents any tolerance or realistic understanding. These prejudicial stereotypes abound, and regrettably the extremes of both camps provide fuel for these. I have met stuffy, dray-as-dust academics and immature, bubble-headed fans, and feel uncomfortable with both.

Speaking generally, it is not likely for the foreseeable future that fandom and academia will be at ease with each other (despite encouraging exceptions) and that the tension is bound to continue to affect the Mythopoeic Society. But the future of the reading of books does not look altogether bright, due both to cultural changes generally and the double-edged booming electronics revolution. The definition of literacy is bound to be quite different in the next century. These changes may or may not cause an alliance or synthesis of fandom and academia. The future can only at the best of times be dimly intimated, and, to echo Gandalf, our responsibility is to till the soil of the present.

I feel such a synthesis is possible in the context of the Society because it was founded upon the devotion to Tolkien, Lewis, Williams and seeks to serve *all* who are interested in them. It was *not* meant to serve either organized fandom or academia. It is intended to be as inclusive as is possible, not exclusive. Both fandom and academia have a specialized vocabulary, which may serve them well, but does tend to exclude those not active in their respective circles, creating the impression of aloof indifference to others.

From my perspective, I find that the majority of Society members are a happy blend [in attitude] of the fan and the academic. Indeed the Society has attempted to take the best qualities of both approaches. Ironically, the Society has paid a price for this Middle Way. The extremes in both camps have seen the Society as "selling out" to the opposite side. Some "fans" have thought of the Society as overly dry and serious; some "scholarly types" have thought of the Society as frivolous and unsubstantial. Suspect or rejected by both extremes is strong proof to me that we are indeed following the Middle Way. It is a pity that the extremes of both sides seem to be unaware of the criticism of the Society from the other side. But then all of this is far less important than the real reasons why most people are attracted to the Society. The synthesis I have spoken of is an attempt to combine (among other things) that personal enthusiasm for the literature and the creative outgrowths that spring from it with the qualities of reasoned study, standards of expression, and ongoing dedication....

I have found that the majority of both "fans" and "academics" I know are warm, knowledgeable, and intelligent human beings first and foremost, and well worth the

(Continued on page 39)

watched over us, let the flowers and trees now listen in silence! O Lord of the West who kindles the stars, I, the Nightingale, sing to thee!"

An alternative rendition of line 3 could be "let the flowers and trees listen here below!"

Such is one Elvish linguist's view of "Lúthien's Song," and it is not intended to be the final word on the subject. No doubt better glosses could, and will, be contrived. It is merely hoped that this article will serve as a stimulus for discussion and provide a starting point for the work of other translators.

This article was first printed in a slightly different form in issue 9 of *Vinyar Tengwar*, the publication the Elvish Linguistic Fellowship. Pat is quoting from an article by Chris Gilson that appeared in *Parma Eldambers* 8.

**Following The Middle Way**, (continued from page 36) knowing. When involved in a discussion with them about TLW or related matters, I find these labels of little importance.

It should be noted that there are others in the Society who are neither in SF organized fandom or academia. At least two groups occur to me here: those in various religious communities who are primarily interested in the spiritual values found in mythopoeic literature, and the individual reader who is not in organized fandom, not in academia, and not affiliated with a religious community, but enjoys Tolkien, Lewis, and/or Williams and their related genres.

You may be one of these individual readers referred to, or you may see yourself as identifying with one of the other three camps, or you may see yourself as belonging to two or all three of the groups (as many do). In *any case*, the Society seeks to serve *all* who find value and interest in its purposes. Instead of creating dichotomies, let us recognize and respect the spectrum that does in fact exist, not magnifying it but keeping it in its secondary importance to the Society's real purpose.

If we are to fulfill our purpose and follow the Middle Way, we should not seek to please one group above and beyond another. In this context, it is ironic that the overwhelming majority — something like 97% from what I detect — of both academia and SF fandom have very small interest in the purpose of the Mythopoeic Society.

It is also curious that *Mythlore*, in the way it has evolved and its present status, is criticized by some as being towards the scholarly side of the road. There are two things to note about this. First, *Mythlore* seeks to carry out the definition of the Society found both in its Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws:

The specific and primary purpose is to educate persons in the study, discussion, and enjoyment of myth, fantasy, and imaginative literature, especially the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams. [emphasis added]

*Mythlore* focuses in on the word *study*, taking it seriously, while at the same time through its letters, columns, reviews, and artwork, considers *discussion* and *enjoyment* in their sequential order. If we use the commonly accepted tools and modes of scholarship in this study, I do not see why this should give offense to anyone. Some point to the fact that many of our paper writers are instructors and thus members of academia, as if being a professional in the field

of one's interest somehow discredits a person. There is the claim that these people are under the gun of "publish or perish," and that publication of this material gives them "brownie points" in their profession. Be it as it may, *Mythlore* does not take either the credentials or lack of credentials of a writer of a particular paper into account, only the merit of the paper *itself*. Indeed the juried system we have reinforces this. Our material comes from *many* sources.

Secondly, while the above should be true under any circumstances, I see the so-called "scholarly emphasis" of *Mythlore* as a balance weight to other several facets of the Mythopoeic Society. Taken as a whole, I think the Society has the chance of achieving a balance between "fans" and "scholars." Of course, there is a question of taste, and here no one is a winner with all the people all of the time.

The Mythopoeic Society is a "fan" group in a certain sense, but it is meant to be much more — broader and deeper. It is intended to be a learned literary organization, but one that infuses its scholarship with real personal interest and creativity.

The letter I quoted in the last issue made me at the time stop and think seriously on the danger of focusing on the Society itself at the expense of where it is supposed to be going. It is like looking at a beautiful container instead of what it contains. Of course we want a good organization, and it is something we must constantly work on improving, but the content must *not* be ignored or glossed over. If we do, we will not only lose the Middle Way, we will be off the road with no sense of direction. The Middle Way keeps us on the course, moving forward.

Some people who read *Mythlore* feel only like observers, who only want the information, with no personal involvement. I say, come and join the Dance. Others are truly glad to be united and to have a sense of identity with others people that share their keen and devoted interests. To you, I say, participate in a way that effects what you want to see done, and be aware of potential problems that would have us abandon the Middle Way, which has served us so well.

There will probably always be people who will seek to take advantage of what is there, using the established resources, sometimes with little concern as to what the structure is intended to accomplish. This is our current and ongoing danger, that people using the Society with little regard of its purpose, will change it beyond recognition for the rest of us now and for those who come later. Members should not assume there is perfect concord within the Society. It is disheartening to encounter people who want this kind of change, and sometimes I ask myself is this all to be for naught? But *then* I come upon a person through a letter, a submission, or by meeting them at a Mythopoeic Conference, who is so thankful that they have at last found a group of people who share their same love of Tolkien, Lewis, and/or Williams and their genres, and how for years they thought they were nearly the *only* one. This, in addition to knowing so many good people through the Society, makes it all worth while and gives me the motivation and indeed the joy to continue my involvement with it.