

*The Inklings: Religion and Imagination in the works of  
C. S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and their circle*



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**“The Inklings”** was the half-serious name of a group of scholars, writers and friends, situated in Oxford during the decades surrounding World War II, whose works of fantasy, mythology, and theology have had a far-reaching influence. They gathered on Thursday evenings in the Magdalen College rooms of C. S. Lewis, to read aloud and discuss their works in progress (*The Lord of the Rings*, *Out of the Silent Planet*, and others); they could also be found regularly on a Tuesday morning chatting together at the Eagle & Child pub. Roughly nineteen scholars and writers drifted in and out of this informal fellowship.

The main focus of this course is on C. S. Lewis, the literary historian, religious writer, and fantasist, and J.R.R. Tolkien, the philologist and mythographer of Middle-earth. We will also study two other important Inklings: Owen Barfield and Charles Williams. Dorothy L. Sayers, though not a member of the Inklings, is included because of her intellectual kinship to the group and its aims and her close ties to Williams and Lewis. We’ll discuss their shared concerns, note their differences and tensions, and read, read, read, with a view to understanding their literary and religious visions.

Expect to do a lot of reading – active reading, which means taking notes as you read, outlining chapters on occasion, and preparing questions for discussion. Readings will come in all shapes and sizes. In addition to non-fiction works of religious, literary and philosophical reflection, we are reading large chunks of fiction, including the first two books in C. S. Lewis’s space trilogy, and J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. Occasional letters will help our authors come to life.

### Some Inklings concerns we'll examine:

- Representations of good and evil, moral struggle and sacrifice, fate and free will, sin and redemption, despair and hope, friendship and loss
- The power of words, the virtue of reading, the risks and rewards of criticism
- Medievalism, traditionalism, and the recovery of mythic and allegorical modes of thought
- Christian Romanticism: Imagination in the service of faith and reason
- Responses to war, industrialism, environmental degradation, and social change

### Readings

The following books are required and available for purchase at the Smith College bookstore in the lower level of the Campus Center. They are also on reserve in Young Library. Many of them are available as Kindle or other ebooks as well. If you already own any of these books, feel free to use the editions you have; if purchasing them for the first time, these are the editions I recommend.

- C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (Scribner paperback)
- C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (Scribner paperback)
- C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Harcourt/Harvest Book paperback)
- J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: 50th Anniversary, One Vol. Edition* (Mariner Books paperback; it includes *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King* in a single volume as Tolkien intended; and it incorporates corrections and valuable additional material)
- J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (Del Rey paperback)
- *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Christopher Tolkien and Humphrey Carpenter (Mariner Books)
- Also in the bookstore, but not required: Neil Isaacs and Rose Zimbaro, *Understanding The Lord of the Rings: The Best of Tolkien Criticism*

Additional required readings, marked with ☼, are on Moodle. You'll need to bring the assigned readings to class on the days they are scheduled to be discussed.

For each author we study, please read the biographical entry from *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, posted in the introductory section of our Moodle site.

## SCHEDULE

### WEEK 1 INTRODUCING THE INKLINGS

**Thursday:** first class meeting

☀C. S. Lewis, why do we read? Excerpt from the epilogue to *An Experiment in Criticism*, 1961 (to be handed out in class)

☀J.R.R. Tolkien, why invent a mythology? Excerpt from a 1951 letter to publisher Milton Waldman (to be handed out in class)

☀Owen Barfield, “The Rediscovery of Meaning,” *Saturday Evening Post* (to be handed out in class)

### WEEK 2 FAIRY STORIES AND PLANETARY ROMANCES.

**For Tuesday:**

☀J.R.R. Tolkien “On Fairy-Stories” (we’ll focus on the second half, from the section on “Children” to the end)

☀C. S. Lewis, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to be Said”

☀Tolkien and Lewis on Fairy Stories: Questions to think about

☀”Oxford’s Influential Inklings,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, excerpt from *The Fellowship*

**For Thursday:**

C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, chapters 1-11

☀*Out of the Silent Planet* Study Guide

### WEEK 3 THE SPACE TRILOGY continued, from Mars to Venus

**For Tuesday:**

C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, entire

☀ C. S. Lewis, The Discarded Image, chap. 5: “The Heavens” and Epilogue

☀*Out of the Silent Planet* Study Guide -- bring a passage that illustrates one of the themes in the discussion questions

Recommended:

☀Some sayings of the biologist J.B.S. Haldane (critic of Lewis and model for Weston)

☀C. S. Lewis, “A Reply to Professor Haldane”

**For Thursday:**

C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra*, chaps. 1-10

☀*Perelandra* Study Guide

## WEEK 4 THE PLANETARY ROMANCE CONTINUES – from *Perelandra* to *Surprised by Joy*

### For Tuesday:

C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra*, chaps. 11-17

☀ *Perelandra* Study Guide

### For Thursday:

The following in C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*:

- the brief preface
- Chapters 1 to the beginning of chapter 6, stopping at this line in chap. 6:  
*What does a certain type of examiner mean when he says, 'To show up work like this is an insult to the examiners?'* (= pp. 1-91 in the Harcourt/Harvest Book paperback)
- Chapter 8, “Release” (=pp. 118-131 in the Harcourt/Harvest Book paperback).

☀ *Surprised by Joy* study guide

## WEEK 5 LIGHTNING FROM A CLEAR SKY

### For Tuesday:

The remaining chapters in C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (pp. 132-238 in the Harcourt/Harvest Book paperback)

☀ *Surprised by Joy* study guide

☀ Owen Barfield, excerpt from *Poetic Diction* and material from “The Great War”

☀ Addison’s Walk and *Mythopoeia*

### For Thursday:

☀ C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory”

☀ C. S. Lewis, “Transposition”

## WEEK 6 THE LORD OF THE RINGS – INTRODUCTION

### For Tuesday:

Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings – The Fellowship of the Ring - Book One*, Tolkien’s Foreword to the second edition and the Prologue “Concerning Hobbits, and other matters.”

☀ C. S. Lewis, “The Hobbit” and “Tolkien’s ‘The Lord of the Rings’”

## FIRST PAPER (ON LEWIS) DUE WEDNESDAY

### For Thursday:

Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings – The Fellowship of the Ring - Book One*, chapters 1-5.

☀ *The Lord of the Rings - The Fellowship of the Ring - Book One - Study Questions*

**Note:** Be sure to consult the LORD OF THE RINGS SYNOPSIS AND CHAPTER TITLES document on Moodle as we move through the book.

**WEEK 7**

View these two Tolkien documentary films (links are on Moodle), which provide essential background:

*J.R.R.T.: A Film Portrait of J.R.R. Tolkien* (1996 documentary narrated by Judi Dench)

*J.R.R. Tolkien Creator of Middle-earth Documentary* (from disc 3 of the extended edition of the Peter Jackson film *The Fellowship of the Ring*)

**Week 8 THE LORD OF THE RINGS -- THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING – BOOK ONE, continued, and BOOK TWO**

**For Tuesday:**

Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings – The Fellowship of the Ring - Book One*, chapters 9-12.

Also: the following from *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*:

- Letter 5 August 1916 letter to a friend and fellow member of the TCBS (Tea Club and Barrovian Society) written from the front. On “Friendship to the Nth Power.”
- Letter 131, pages 143-146 only (save the rest for when we read the *Silmarillion* excerpt).
- Letter 163 7 June 1955 to the poet W.H. Auden, describing how he came to write *LotR*
- Letter 165 30 June 1955 to Houghton Mifflin, explaining his background.
- Letter 186 April 1956 on the main themes of *LotR*.
- Letter 213 25 October 1958 describing himself as a Catholic and a hobbit
- Letter 142 2 December 1953 discussing the Catholic and Marian influence on *LotR*

For background, read some time during our Tolkien weeks:

☀ “Tolkien on Tolkien.”

☀ J.R.R. Tolkien, “A Secret Vice,” from J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 198-223.

☀ W. H. Auden, “The Hero is a Hobbit”

☀ Tom Shippey, “Creation from Philology in The Lord of the Rings”

☀ Tom Shippey, “Tolkien as a Post-War Writer”

**For Thursday:**

*The Lord of the Rings – The Fellowship of the Ring - Book Two*, chapters 1-10 [stop at chapter 5 if you run out of steam]

## **Week 9 *THE LORD OF THE RINGS – THE TWO TOWERS – BOOKS THREE and FOUR***

**Tuesday: Book Three** To make our way through the next stage of this astonishingly complex narrative (which begins an intricate interlace pattern after the Company is divided at the end of Book Two), our best bet is to keep tracking the major characters.

With that in mind, please choose a character to focus on. We'll write about this briefly in class. In general, what do we know at this point about your character's strengths, weaknesses, cultural traits, likes and dislikes? What obstacles or temptations have they faced? How have they changed? (You could also choose to focus on a pair of characters).

### **Thursday: Book Four**

We'll proceed in a manner similar to our discussion of Book Three. Our discussion will explore the Sam-Frodo-Gollum triangle, and the role of "pity and mercy," suspicion and trust, as they make their way together to Mordor. We'll also meet Faramir.

Please be sure to consult Tolkien's *Letters* for any light they may shed on the character (or pair of characters) you've chosen to focus on.

## **WEEK 10 *THE LORD OF THE RINGS – THE RETURN OF THE KING – BOOKS FIVE and SIX***

### **Tuesday: Book Five**

In Book Five, we begin to see the sundered plot strands reweave themselves, and a complete fabric emerge. And with that complete fabric, a theme that was somewhat in the background will now take center stage: the theme of kingship and stewardship. As you read your way through Book Five, think about these kings (or king-like) figures, and their knights, squires, or servants:

Denethor, Faramir, and Pippin as Denethor's squire  
 Théoden, Éowyn, and Merry as Théoden's squire  
 The Witch-King  
 Gandalf  
 Aragorn

By what authority (and by what ritual or symbolic means), does each of these characters assume his or her position of leadership and/or service? What qualities of leadership or service does each character exhibit? How is kingship corrupted? How is it redeemed?

### **Thursday: Book Five and the Beginning of Book Six**

We'll pick up where we left off in Book Five. Here are the major topics we want to be sure to discuss as we continue to explore themes of kingship, leadership, service (and their counterfeit or

corrupted versions).

- Aragorn and the Oathbreakers
- Éowyn (disguised as Dernhelm) and Merry in the Battle of the Pelennor Fields
- The Houses of Healing (and Aragorn's role as healer-king)
- And the startling choice "to challenge the Black Gate and the might of Mordor"

Please also read **the first four chapters of Book Six**, in which we follow Sam and Frodo on the final stage of their harrowing journey to Mount Doom.

## WEEK 11 *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* concluded

### For Tuesday: An Inklings-moot

Reading:

- *The Lord of the Rings*, Book Six, entire
- ☼W.H. Auden, "At the End of the Quest, Victory"
- And the following from Tolkien's *Letters*:
  - Letter 91 To Christopher (29 November 1944) on ways the story might end
  - Letter 181 About the Quest, Frodo's failure, sacrificial situations, Elves as artists
  - Letter 183 Detailed response to Auden's review of *Return of the King*
  - Letter 246 On Frodo's failure, and fate; Tolkien's most revealing letter on *The Lord of the Rings*

Discussion will take place initially in small groups. Please focus on one or more of these questions, and select one or more relevant passages to discuss with your group:

- Upon reaching the chasm at Mount Doom, Frodo makes a shocking declaration. How should we interpret Frodo's final act?
- What is Gollum's part in the resolution of the story?
- How would you describe the character you chose to focus on? How does your character change in the course of the story, and what part does your character play in its resolution?
- Who is the hero of the tale?
- In chapter 4 ("The Field of Cormallen"), we learn of the fulfillment of the Quest and the reunion of the fellowship. This is the crowning Eucatastrophe. In Sam's unforgettable words, "O great glory and splendour! And all my wishes have come true!" (p. 954). But in the aftermath, the fellowship is once again divided. The long awaited marriage of Arwen and Aragorn is tinged with mortality and loss. And *The Lord of the Rings* ends (in chapter 9) with Frodo, Gandalf, and Bilbo accompanying the Elves to the Grey Havens, while Sam and the other hobbits stay behind. What kind of Happy Ending is this?

- In chapter 8 (“The Scouring of the Shire”), the hobbits return to find a ruined Shire misgoverned by Lotho, the son of Otho and Lobelia Sackville-Baggins. Lotho is in thrall to Saruman who, as “Sharkey,” is now greatly reduced in stature though not in malice. Does it make sense that such evils can still flourish, given that the One Ring has been destroyed and Sauron defeated? Is it anticlimactic for the hobbits to be drawn into yet another, much smaller-scale war?

### **For Thursday: Creation and Subcreation**

Read Letter 131 and Letter 200, and the following excerpts from Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*:

*Ainulindalë* (*The Music of the Ainur*), pages 15-22 and *Valaquenta*, pages 25-32

The creation myth (read with letters 131 and 200.)

*Quenta Silmarillion* (*The History of the Silmarils*), chapters 1-3, pages 35-54;

Beginnings, continued, and the coming of the Elves

## **WEEK 12 MORE HISTORY, TO THE END OF THE THIRD AGE**

### **For Tuesday:**

*Quenta Silmarillion*, chaps. 4-10. More on the Elves, and the captivity and escape of Melkor (read with letters 131 and 212)

*Quenta Silmarillion* chapter 19 (Of Beren and Lúthien), pages 162-187

(compare to *The Fellowship of the Ring* book 1, chapter XI, “A Knife in the Dark”) and part V of Appendix A at the end of *Return of the King*; read with letters 332 and 340

### **For Thursday:**

*Quenta Silmarillion* chapter 23-24, pages 238-255

The Voyage of Eärendil with the Silmaril into the Far West, on behalf of Elves and Men. Eärendil appeals to the Valar, who invade Middle-earth. Morgoth is finally overthrown and cast out from the world.

*Akallabêth* (The Downfall of Numenor), pages 259-282

Tolkien’s version of the Atlantis myth. Cf. letter 131.

*Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age*, pages 285-304 The events of the Third Age, leading to the War of the Ring and destruction of Sauron

☼Also read: John Gardner, “The World of Tolkien” (review of *The Silmarillion*)



**WEEK 13 CHARLES WILLIAMS and DOROTHY L. SAYERS****For Tuesday:**

☼ Charles Williams essays:

“The Index of the Body”

“The Order of the Co-Inherence”

“The Redeemed City”

“The Way of Exchange”

“The Practice of Substituted Love”

☼ C. S. Lewis, Preface, *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*

☼ C. S. Lewis, “The Novels of Charles Williams”

**For Thursday:**

☼ Dorothy L. Sayers:

“Are Women Human?”

“The Human-Not-Quite-Human”

“The Image of God,” from *The Mind of the Maker*, chap. 2.“The Greatest Drama Ever Staged is the Official Creed of Christendom,” from *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World*.

☼ C. S. Lewis, “A Panegyric for Dorothy L. Sayers.”

**SECOND PAPER DUE MONDAY****WEEK 14 Farewell to the Inklings****For Tuesday:** concluding class

## REQUIREMENTS

**I. Class participation** (30% of your grade). The success of the course depends on your careful preparation of assigned readings and your readiness to engage in fruitful discussion. In addition to discussion, participation includes the following:

- *Brief in-class presentation*, in pairs or small groups, designed to shed light on a special topic (such as Tolkien's invented languages, Lewis's wartime BBC radio talks, Barfield & Anthroposophy, a Charles Williams novel, etc.).
- *Occasional in-class writing* (no more than once a week) on your response to or questions about any of the reading for the week.
- *Contribution to "The World of Inklings Scholarship" forum* on Moodle. Post a brief summary and response to a scholarly article relating to one or more of the Inklings from an online or print journal. See the Inklings bibliography on Moodle for suggested journals.
- *Contribution to the "Linklings" forum* on Moodle. Post a brief report on an Inklings-related website (provide the link with a description and critical assessment of its value). Start your search at the Marion E. Wade Center authors' page, which has links to the major societies and their websites (<http://www.wheaton.edu/wadecenter/Authors>).

**II. 5-7-page paper on Lewis** due via Moodle on **Wednesday February 28** (30% of your grade). Further details will be provided in class. **Please upload as a Microsoft Word file.**

**III. 8-10-page paper on Tolkien or on any two Inklings compared** due via Moodle on **Monday April 30** (40% of your grade). Further details will be provided in class. **Please upload as a Microsoft Word file.**