

South Carolina College 384C

THE OXFORD INKLINGS: TOLKIEN, LEWIS, WILLIAMS

Fall, 2007: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:00 – 12:15 P.M.

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From the 1930s to the early 1950s, a group of Oxford friends, several of them university dons, gathered regularly in the rooms of the Magdalen College tutor of English. Referring to themselves as the “Inklings”, they came together not only for the warmth and collegiality of late-night fireside chats, but to read aloud to each other the books they were writing, books whose distinctive blend of Christian faith, Platonic vision, and Romantic imagination stands in striking contrast to the general intellectual spirit of most twentieth century literature. The tutor of English was C. S. Lewis, widely known for such works as *The Narnia Chronicles* and *The Screwtape Letters*, and among the friends to share his hearth were J. R. R. Tolkien, the now famous creator of Middle-earth, and Charles Williams, whose novels, often described as supernatural thrillers, are a remarkable combination of mysticism, magic, and theology.

Although each of these men wrote in a variety of genres, the primary aim of this seminar is to explore their worlds of fantasy. We shall focus on three of the Inklings’ most provocative tales: Tolkien’s *Silmarillion*, the epic prelude to *The Lord of the Rings*; Lewis’s *Till We Have Faces*, his classic retelling of the myth of Cupid and Psyche; and Williams’s apocalyptic novel *The Place of the Lion*, a story of the Second Coming in an English village. These books will be supplemented by several of the authors’ literary and theological essays. Of special interest will be the relationship between the worlds these men created and their Christian understanding of Divine creation as well as their efforts to fathom, through imagination, the deepest meaning of the claim that “myth became fact” in Jesus Christ.

The three books are available for purchase at the South Carolina Bookstore (801 Main Street); the supplementary essays have been collected in a reader of photocopied materials, available at Universal Copies (1120 College Street).

Method

The seminar will be conducted as a Socratic discussion. Each class begins with a question about the reading for the day, and it is expected that students will join with the instructor and each other in a shared conversational inquiry. A premium is placed on precision, explanation, and defense. Students will be held doubly accountable: for courteously listening to the contributions of others and for patiently justifying their own observations. While it is sometimes thought that Socratic conversation is less rigorous than a more didactic and professorial style, its rigor is simply of another kind. In the serious cross-examination of a great work, the course of conversation is often unpredictable; it is certainly less linear than in the “traditional” classroom. But the intellectual commitment required—the daily vigilance—demands a preparation and yields a mental fitness not promoted by other forms of learning. These advantages will be pressed to the full in this course.

Requirements

1. *Reading.* In keeping with Socrates’ observation that “it is better to deal thoroughly with a little than unsatisfactorily with a lot” (*Theaetetus*, 187e), reading assignments are relatively short. Students are expected to study the assigned texts very closely and carefully, however; underlining important words and

passages and maintaining a dialogue with the authors through copious marginal comments are essential preparations for class discussion.

2. *Attendance*, both prompt and regular. There will be a penalty of one letter grade per absence for unexcused absences in excess of two. And attendance means punctuality; tardy arrivals and seminars are a disastrous mix.

3. *Constructive participation*. For obvious reasons, this course is not for students who prefer an education they can simply ingest as the passive takers of notes; it is for those who enjoy the acts of thinking and reflection and argument. Frequent contributions to class discussion are not merely desirable; they are essential. One third of the final course grade will be based on class participation.

4. *Opening questions*. The instructor and students will take turns posing the opening question; each student will be asked to accept this responsibility once during the semester.

5. *Essays*. Students will write three essays of 5-6 pages each. Neither book-reports nor research-papers, these essays should be viewed instead as continuing conversations with the authors. An essay on Tolkien is due by September 27, an essay on Lewis by October 30, and an essay on Williams by December 10. (Early submissions will be most gratefully accepted.) Professor Cutsinger's *Breviary of English Usage*, which can be found on his website under "Teaching", will be used in his commentary on these essays. Grades received on the two best essays will be used in calculating the final course grade (one-third each).

Schedule

	Aug. 23, Introduction
Aug. 28, Tolkien, "Ainulindalë", "Valaquenta"	Aug. 30, Tolkien, <i>Silmarillion</i> , 1-4
Sept. 4, Tolkien, <i>Silmarillion</i> , 6-9	Sept. 6, Tolkien, "On Fairie Stories"
Sept. 11, Tolkien, <i>Silmarillion</i> , 11-13	Sept. 13, Tolkien, <i>Silmarillion</i> , 19
Sept. 18, Tolkien, "Letter to M. Waldman"	Sept. 20, Tolkien, "Akallabêth"
Sept. 25, Lewis, <i>Faces</i> , I, 1-5	Sept. 27, Lewis, <i>Faces</i> , I, 6-9
Oct. 2, Lewis, "Descriptione", "Christianity"	Oct. 4, Lewis, <i>Faces</i> , I, 10-13
Oct. 9, Lewis, <i>Faces</i> , I, 14-17	Oct. 11 Fall Break
Oct. 16, Lewis, <i>Faces</i> , I, 18-21	Oct. 18, Lewis, "Myth", "Weight"
Oct. 23, Lewis, <i>Faces</i> , II, 1-4	Oct. 25, Williams, <i>Lion</i> , 1-3
Oct. 30, Williams, <i>Lion</i> , 4-6	Nov. 1, Williams, "Precursor", "Myth"
Nov. 6, Williams, <i>Lion</i> , 7-9	Nov. 8, Williams, <i>Lion</i> , 10-11
Nov. 13, Williams, <i>Lion</i> , 12-14	Nov. 15, Williams, "Success", "Love"

Nov. 20, AAR Meeting (No Class)

Nov. 22, Thanksgiving (No Class)

Nov. 27, Williams, *Lion*, 15-16

Nov. 29, Conclusions

Office Hours

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:30 – 10:30 A.M.; or by appointment.