

THE OXFORD INKLINGS: TOLKIEN, LEWIS, WILLIAMS

Professor James S. Cutsinger

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 world 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 an aborted Second Coming in an English village. These books will be supplemented by several of the authors’ literary and theological essays. A special emphasis will be placed on the relationship between the worlds these men created and their Christian understanding of divine creation as well as on their efforts to fathom, through imagination, the deepest meaning of the claim that “myth became fact” in Jesus Christ.

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. In keeping with the University's "ten percent rule", 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. *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 February 11, an essay on Lewis by March 22, and an essay on Williams by April 26. (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

Jan. 12, <i>Essays</i> , "Prologue", "Thursday Evenings"	Jan. 14, <i>Silmarillion</i> , "Ainulindalë", "Valaquenta"
Jan. 19, <i>Silmarillion</i> , 1-4	Jan. 21, <i>Silmarillion</i> , 5-9
Jan. 26, <i>Essays</i> , "On Fairie Stories"	Jan. 28, <i>Silmarillion</i> , 10-13
Feb. 2, <i>Silmarillion</i> , 19	Feb. 4, <i>Essays</i> , "Letter to Milton Waldman"
Feb. 9, <i>Silmarillion</i> , "Akallabêth"	Feb. 11, Open Discussion
Feb. 16, <i>Till We Have Faces</i> , I, 1-5	Feb. 18, <i>Till We Have Faces</i> , I, 6-9
Feb. 23, <i>Essays</i> , "Descriptione", "Christianity"	Feb. 25, <i>Till We Have Faces</i> , I, 10-13
Mar. 1, <i>Till We Have Faces</i> , I, 14-17	Mar. 3, <i>Till We Have Faces</i> , I, 18-21
Mar. 8, Spring Break	Mar. 10, Spring Break
Mar. 15, <i>Essays</i> , "Myth", "Weight"	Mar. 17, <i>Till We Have Faces</i> , II, 1-4
Mar. 22, Open Discussion	Mar. 24, <i>The Place of the Lion</i> , 1-3
Mar. 29, <i>The Place of the Lion</i> , 4-6	Mar. 31, <i>Essays</i> , "Myth", "Precursor"
Apr. 5, <i>The Place of the Lion</i> , 7-9	Apr. 7, <i>The Place of the Lion</i> , 10-11
Apr. 12, <i>The Place of the Lion</i> , 12-14	Apr. 14, <i>Essays</i> , "Love", "Success"

Grading Scheme

I. Contributions to Class-Discussion (One-third of final course grade)

One-third of the student's final grade will be based on contributions to class-discussion. Constructive participation is not something that can be fully quantified, but the following scale provides some basic guidelines:

A = Excellent. One of the top few contributors in the class.

B = Above Average. Generally a strong contributor.

C = Average. Someone who is occasionally "on", but not dependable.

D = Below Average. A student who hardly ever contributes.

F = Unacceptable. A student who never contributes.

It should be understood that the highest grades do not necessarily go to those who are the most long-winded or who merely speak with the greatest frequency. What Professor Cutsinger looks for—and endeavors to model—are contributions, however lengthy or numerous, which reflect a careful, thoughtful reading of the assigned materials and which help the whole class better understand the meaning and implications of those readings.

II. Essays (Two-thirds of final course grade)

Each student will be asked to write three essays; the two best essays are used in determining a final grade at the end of the term. Professor Cutsinger has very high standards when it comes to writing. Here is how he converts these standards into grades:

A. This is an essay that demonstrates a real mastery of both readings and discussions; the author's claims are well-grounded in quotations from the readings, and connections are made where appropriate to points considered in class-discussion; the paper is imaginative and provocative in its approach and thorough in its presentation; it is focused throughout on a single idea, clearly introduced and faithfully pursued, and it contains very few, if any, grammatical, logical, or mechanical errors. It is a pleasure to read.

B. This is an essay that is more or less logically and grammatically sound, with fewer than ten stylistic errors or infelicities; it is enriched by quotations from the readings and by allusions to class-discussion, though these are not as well integrated into the argument as in an "A" paper; the author says nothing that is really wrong, but the approach is pedestrian and the interpretation is lacking in genuine insight. This is a solid piece of work, but it takes no risks and is rather boring.

C. This is an essay that has possibilities, but it fails to bring those possibilities to fruition; the reader has a vague sense of where it is heading, or at least wants to head, but it is "out of control": the syntax breaks down with disappointing regularity, there are conceptual inconsistencies ("x" is said on p. 1, but then the

very opposite, “not-x”, is affirmed on p. 3), and the mechanics tend to be sloppy, with frequent formatting, typographical, and spelling errors. The “underbrush” of mistakes is so thick that reading is laborious.

D. This is an essay that shows every sign of having been thrown together at the last minute; foolish mistakes make it clear that the author has not read the books carefully; the writing is “all over the map”, and one searches in vain to find a single line of thought or thread of argument; the presentation is disfigured throughout by mechanical errors, to say nothing of syntactical and interpretive problems. The paper, in short, is slipshod, unintelligent, and unimaginative, and it is truly painful to read.

F. This grade is ordinarily reserved for an essay that fails to appear by the deadline announced in the syllabus, though on very rare occasions it is affixed to a piece of writing that is so abysmally bad as to have been better had it never been composed.