

C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and the Inklings

There's a rumor going around that C. S. Lewis was an irritable introvert, isolated and lonely and scared to death of girls. Maybe it all comes from some grim stereotype of smart people or college professors or, maybe, published writers. That whole image is completely wrong. Lewis wasn't an introvert. Or a loner. No, he was a large man with a booming voice, a hearty laugh, a robust enjoyment of everyday life. And that is why he was a man with friends.

It makes sense if you think about it. His writing is so warm. His ideas are so engaging. His approach is so inviting. The lively, personal voice that emerges from the written page reflects the heart of a man who lived his life in community. Every season of Lewis's life was marked by strong personal connections. He was very close to his brother, Warren. As the two boys grew up together, they wrote stories and illustrated them with maps and watercolors. Later, he became good friends with Arthur Greeves, a neighbor, and they shared boyhood secrets and favorite books. In college, Lewis became a member of a small circle of serious poets, and from that literary circle, he and Owen Barfield emerged as fast friends. When he started his first teaching job, he got to know a bright young linguist named Tolkien. They discovered common ground in their love of Norse mythology.

Lewis's entire life, early and late, was marked by this kind of sustaining friendship. But right in the middle of his life, at the very heart of it all, was a group of fellow writers called the **Inklings**. The group started informally—Lewis and Tolkien found that they greatly enjoyed one another's company, and so they cultivated the habit of meeting on Monday mornings for beer and conversation. Lewis wrote about it in one of his letters: "It has also become the custom for Tolkien to drop in on me on a Monday morning for a glass. This is one of the pleasantest spots in the week. Sometimes we talk English school politics: sometimes we criticize one another's poems: other days we drift into theology or the state of the nation; rarely we fly no higher than bawdy and puns."

Lewis and Tolkien continued to meet, week after week, to talk and joke and criticize one another's poetry. Over time, these literary critiques proved to be so interesting and so useful that they invited other writers to join them. The group just kept growing. Eventually, a total of 19 men became members of the Inklings. Their meetings moved from Monday mornings to Thursday nights. Late nights. The members arrived around 9:00, or 9:30, or even later.

When half a dozen members had assembled, Warren Lewis would produce a pot of very strong tea, the men would sit down and light their pipes, and C. S. Lewis would call out, "Well, has nobody got anything to read us?" Someone always did. Out would come the rough draft of a story or a poem, and the others would settle down to listen, to encourage, to critique, to correct, to interrupt and argue and advise. They'd continue

this way, reading aloud, energetically critiquing, until two or three in the morning. And meetings went on like this every week for nearly twenty years.

The range of manuscripts that the Inklings brought to meetings was rich and remarkable. Lewis read *Out of the Silent Planet*, *The Great Divorce*, *The Problem of Pain*, *Miracles*, and others, many of them chapter by chapter as they were written. He read some of his poetry, including “Donkey’s Delight,” and, at one point, he shared a long section of his translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. He also read *The Screwtape Letters* to the group, and the **Inklings** loved them. According to one of the members, *The Screwtape Letters* “really set us going. We were more or less rolling off our chairs.”

Tolkien brought along each new chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*, week after week as they were written. He also shared original poetry, excerpts from “The Notion Club Papers,” and sections from *The Hobbit*. Others read poetry, plays, literary studies, academic papers, biographies, histories. Charles Williams read his novel *All Hallows’ Eve*; David Cecil read excerpts from his biography *Two Quiet Lives*; Owen Barfield read a short play about Jason and Medea; Warren Lewis read *The Splendid Century*, a history of France.

Listening to drafts and offering energetic feedback occupied the better part of every **Inklings** meeting. Nothing could be more simple—a small group of tweedy British men, meeting week after week in Lewis’s rooms at Magdalen College, sitting on the shabby grey couch, drinking tea, reading and talking. But as they met throughout the 1930’s and 40’s, extraordinary things began to happen. They generated enormous creative energy. They forged strong personal connections. And together, they helped bring to light some of the greatest literary works of this past century.

Lewis was effusive in expressing his appreciation for the **Inklings**. To emphasize their importance, he said, “What I owe them all is incalculable.” And to emphasize their enjoyment, he asked, “Is any pleasure on earth as great as a circle of Christian friends by a good fire?” Lewis was a man with friends. And a man with friends who made a difference.

Diana Glyer explores Lewis’s friendship with the Inklings in her new book *The Company They Keep: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as Writers in Community*. When she isn’t sitting by the fire and talking with the members of her own writing group, the Niños, she teaches English at Azusa Pacific University.

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Official Website of C.S. Lewis