

A STORIED FRIENDSHIP: A LOOK INTO THE LIVES OF C. S. LEWIS AND

J. R. R. TOLKIEN

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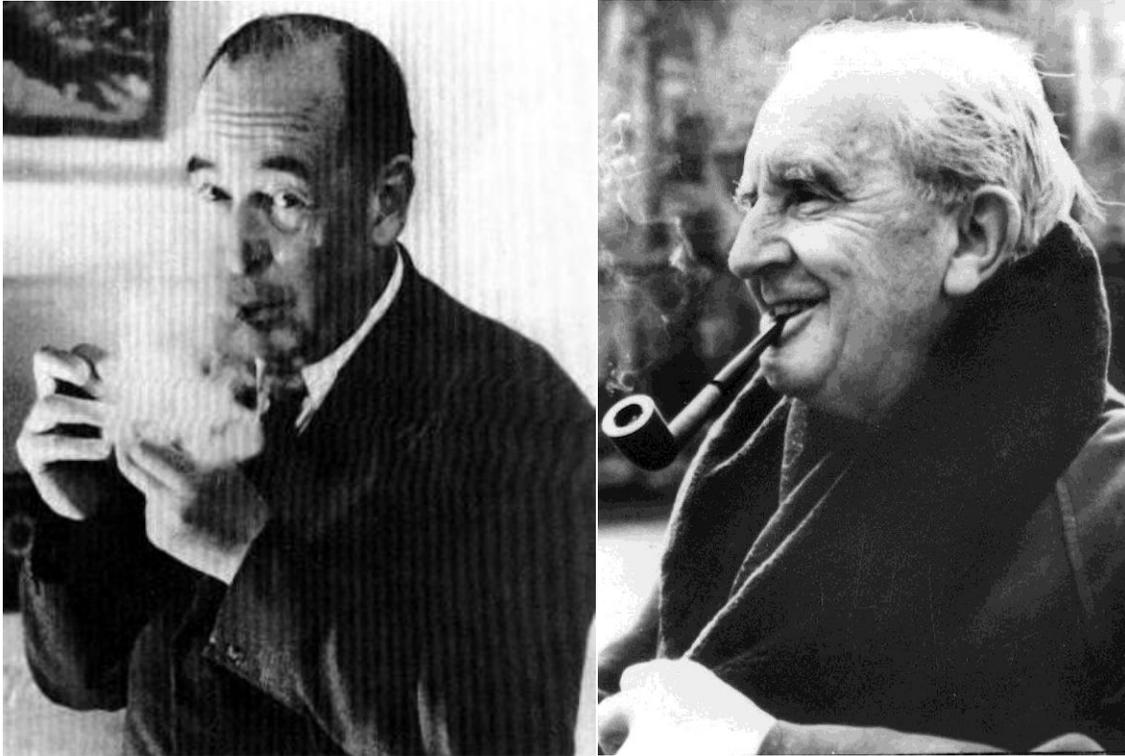
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## Abstract:

This paper focuses on the monumental friendship between two iconic writers of the twentieth century, C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. Meeting early during their careers as Oxford professors in the 1920s, the two men soon became close through their shared love of literature, language, and Christianity. Over the course of their 35-year friendship they enjoyed many powerful, enigmatic discussions and encouraged one another to pursue writing in their own ways. Out of this camaraderie *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, two iconic series of the modern age, were born. In these novels lives the powerful spirit and complex intrigue of both Lewis and Tolkien. Their complex imaginations, love of mythology, and above all fascination with the Christian narrative contributed to the success of their novels and are responsible for their continued relevance today. Without the support of the other, neither man seems likely to have completed their famous works on their own or to have developed such a strong and profound Christian faith. This paper seeks to explore the meaningful friendship that so shaped the personal lives and careers of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien.

## A Storied Friendship: A Look into the Lives of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien

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*"Friendship arises out of mere Companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden)."*

- C. S. Lewis, The Four Loves

## I. Introduction

If history proves anything, it is that the meeting of two great minds produces incredibly profound, lasting results when they compound their ideas and allow their passions to expand uninhibited. C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien were two such men. Both Oxford professors of language and literature, the men shared professional as well as personal interests. They are most known today for their serial literary success with Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. These authors redefined fantasy in the twentieth century, rehabilitating the lost art of mythologizing for a popular, modern audience. They influenced one another deeply in their writing, each leaving their mark upon the other's work. Beyond fiction they shared matters of faith, love, and loss demonstrating the power of true friendship over the course of their lives. It is this bond that we will explore and how it impacted Lewis, Tolkien, and those around them.

I first came to this topic when studying C. S. Lewis for a history biography project. The more I read the more I saw Lewis as a new sort of intellectual who dabbled in literature, theology, drinking, hiking, and writing. He refused to allow his peers to classify him as a drab Oxford don, instead relishing in the vibrant worlds of Norse mythology, modern fiction like that of George MacDonald, and his own mythical Narnia. Right by his side through this dignified rebellion was the famous J. R. R. Tolkien. Before I began my research I hardly knew that the two were friends let alone partners in defiance. The more I read the more I desired to explore the dynamic interplay of encouragement and critique, of raucous laughter and deep pondering, that characterized their relationship. Out of this fascination my project was born.

While the two were undoubtedly cherished friends, something beyond camaraderie characterized their friendship. They shared a unique intellectual bond that often trumped more intimate, personal matters. In his letters to Tolkien, Lewis always affectionately called him

"Tollers" and Tolkien naturally adapted to calling the other "Jack," Lewis's preferred nickname over his given "Clive." But as late as 1957, only six years before his death, Lewis wrote concerning Tolkien in a letter, "I don't know what the J. stands for, but he's usually called Ronald."<sup>1</sup> How could it be that someone, who for thirty years had dined twice a week and shared countless informal conversations with a man he called his friend, did not know the other's given first name? And how could it be that when Lewis married in 1956 Tolkien was one of the last to know and heard the news second-hand? Could they really be as close as history suggests?

The truth lies in the nature of this titanic friendship, that unusual intellectual bond which was unlike any other. Lewis and Tolkien were both immense lovers of literature and language and intense Christians in any increasingly secular world; it is here that they found common ground and grew to appreciate the other's mind and soul. Tolkien, the philologist at heart, worked into his Merton Fellowship at Oxford through his love of language itself. He saw language as "an end in itself, an object of study, something to enjoy and play with."<sup>2</sup> He taught Lewis to appreciate the syllabic qualities of words, to linger on each sound and digest it fully. On the other hand, Lewis viewed language as "a tool to be used, a means to express ideas and images."<sup>3</sup> Under Lewis's watchful eye, Tolkien learned to express powerful ideas through the language he so loved, transporting his beliefs by a seaworthy vessel into the outside world. Working off of their specialties and shared interests, together they melded their passions and built Narnia and Middle Earth, cementing their place in literary history.

Richard Purtill states that what drew the two men together originally was that both were poets and teachers, understood language as an artful means of expression, and saw mythology as

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, "25 May 1957," *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, Vol. III: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy 1950-1963*, edited by Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 584.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Purtill, *Lord of the Elves and Eldils: Fantasy and Philosophy in C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), 69.

<sup>3</sup> Purtill, *Lord of the Elves*, 69.

the height of written art. This love of ancient myths caused Tolkien to invite Lewis to his informal gathering of English enthusiasts that eventually turned into the famous Inklings club. Here the two could discuss great works, debate theology, and even present their own personal manuscripts for critique. As they began to explore the possibility of literature in their own ways, Lewis adapted his love of fairy tales by taking the Christian myth and adapting it for his own uses while Tolkien set to work inventing his own extensive mythology. Satisfied at the individuality of their own work, the two friends nevertheless followed each other's work and supported its progress through to completion. Arguably the most lasting legacy of the Inklings club is the result of these labors of literature.

Researching this friendship was a fascinating journey through personal letters, diaries, first-hand accounts, and secondary literature on both Lewis and Tolkien. As two very famous authors, both men boast a large body of literature concerning both of their lives. The most fascinating pieces of information come in the personal accounts each kept of his life. From a young age Lewis wrote extensively in a diary, in letters to his family and friends, and in personal memoirs. His volume *Surprised by Joy* is a partial autobiography covering his early intellectual career and conversion to Christianity. Additionally, Lewis's biographer Walter Hooper worked to publish *All My Road Before Me*, a transcript of the journal Lewis kept between 1922-1927. Though he gave up the practice of keeping a journal after 1927, this collection provides a unique insight into a young Lewis' world up until the year he encountered Tolkien at an Oxford meeting. Perhaps the largest wealth of information, however, comes through the many volumes of letters Lewis wrote that have now been published under Hooper's supervision. Along with letters to Tolkien himself, many others provide valuable insight into the two professor's relationship.

In Tolkien's case, the information is just as plentiful. Much like with Lewis, many biographers and literary reviewers have assumed the challenge over the last half a century and there is no sign of stopping. Unfortunately, the autobiographical accounts are rather less accessible than those of Lewis, though a great many do exist under wraps. Tolkien did keep a diary for much of his life, but as of yet these papers remain unpublished in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. In addition, Tolkien biographer Humphrey Carpenter published a collection of his letters but the volume is only a partial representation. In his selection, Carpenter mentions that only two letters of Tolkien's to Lewis survive today because Lewis kept very few letters and often misplaced even the most important documents.<sup>4</sup> Despite this truncated compilation, there is still plenty of evidence for the close bond these two men shared over nearly 35 years.

So let us plunge into the lives of these literary juggernauts, the famous ringleaders of the Inklings, and discover what gave birth to such a beautiful partnership. We shall explore their lives at Oxford, their professional achievements, and their debates on Christianity. It is important to understand where these men came from and how they interacted with one another to fully grasp their position within twentieth-century literature. Let us move forward into exploring the friendship of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 58.

## II. Their Early Lives

At first glance, the upbringing of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien may seem as different as can be for two men who would later become professors of English at Oxford. One born a Catholic in South Africa and the other a Protestant in Ireland, their upbringing could hardly be more opposed. Yet both young men faced similar experiences in their early encounters with mythological literature, their loss of parents, and their experience of trench warfare in World War I. By the time their paths collided at the beginning of their professional careers, both had been molded and shaped by the turbulent world around them. In order to understand who these men were at the time of their meeting in 1926, we must first explore their upbringing and what characterized their early years.

J. R. R. Tolkien was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa on January 3, 1892 to Mabel and Arthur Tolkien. Arthur, a bank clerk, had moved with his wife to South Africa a few years earlier where both Tolkien and his younger brother Hilary were born. When Tolkien was only four years old, Mabel decided that the English climate would be better for her young boys and moved the three of them back to Birmingham with Arthur expected to follow closely after. Unfortunately, Arthur was struck with rheumatic fever and died before he could make the journey. As a result Mabel raised the children with the help of her parents in England and Tolkien had no lasting memories of the father he barely knew.



Figure 1: A young Tolkien

From a young age, Tolkien showed a surprising interest in books and writing, learning to read and write by the age of four. Mabel encouraged her son's bookish tendencies and devoted herself to teaching him and his brother quality writing and penmanship. Tolkien also had an overactive imagination and spent much of his childhood romping around the hills and forests creating fantastical stories at every turn. Humphrey Carpenter mentions that this trait was distinctly reminiscent of Arthur's side of the family, saying, "The Tolkiens' always liked to tell stories that gave romantic coloring to their origins."<sup>5</sup> Tolkien himself was no different and along with his brother created elaborate imaginary worlds in the Birmingham countryside, a scene that would later greatly influence his mythical Hobbiton.

A big change to the family dynamic came when around 1900 Mabel converted to Catholicism despite receiving substantial backlash from her Protestant family. She chose to raise her boys in the Catholic faith and found a friend in the helping hands of Father Francis, the local priest. Soon thereafter Mabel was diagnosed with diabetes and quickly took ill, falling into a diabetic coma and dying in late 1904. Tolkien and his brother were sent to live with an aunt in the city though they continued to spend most of their time at the Oratory Church with Father Francis. The priest eventually set the boys up in a house nearby the church that let rooms from which they could continue their education.

As he continued through primary and secondary school, Tolkien discovered a deep passion for the English language and an aptitude for Latin, Greek, French, and German. He was fascinated by their linguistic structure and the common elements between the various languages, an interest that would eventually lead him into his career as a philologist. His discovery of texts written in Middle and Old English were particularly intriguing and he began his obsession with Anglo-Saxon literature. These discoveries also led him to create his own languages at a highly

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<sup>5</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1977), 19.

sophisticated level. From a young age Tolkien created Latin and Greek style words along with his cousins and brother, soon realizing that he might be able to invent a completely new language which was, as Carpenter points out, "only English, French, or Latin in disguise."<sup>6</sup> This creative exercise became a crucial element to his series *The Lord of the Rings* where each mythological race had its own Tolkien-invented language. The complexity of these characters and their individual languages made his creation ever more realistic and complex.

At his new home near the Oratory Church Tolkien met one of the most important and influential people in his life, Edith Bratt. At nineteen years old she was three years his senior and completely captivating. The two youths immediately struck up a friendship and soon proclaimed their love for one another. Alas, the match was disapproved of by Father Francis, Tolkien's legal guardian, and after Edith moved away Tolkien was forbidden from speaking to her until he was 21. With the heartache of Edith's departure Tolkien focused instead on his schooling, forming a group called the Tea Club Barrovian Society. The T.C.B.S., as it was known to its members, was an informal gathering of Tolkien and his classmates where the studious young men congregated together to recite poems and old myths for the enjoyment of all.<sup>7</sup> Tolkien took great pleasure in this club and formed close bonds with the other boys. At the same time, he worked diligently to attain a coveted scholarship to Oxford. Though he failed the first time, in 1911 Tolkien received the award and moved to Oxford to pursue his literature and language studies.

At university, Tolkien pursued his new-found fascination with Germanic literature, a discovery made known during the existence of the T.C.B.S. He also enjoyed studying Comparative Philology, thrilled that others shared his love of language. His move to Oxford also facilitated a reunion with Edith and before long the two were engaged. Edith agreed to convert to

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<sup>6</sup> Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien*, 36.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

Catholicism even if it estranged her family and they married on March 22, 1916. At this point the war in Europe was in full swing and though many of his friends and family enlisted, Tolkien desired to continue his studies at Oxford. He eventually enlisted in a plan where he could train at Oxford until he received his degree and then be shipped out as a specialist in signaling. Thus in June of 1916, Tolkien left the comfort of Oxford for the trenches of France.

The Great War left an unforgettable impact upon Tolkien for the rest of his life.

Carpenter relates the immediate shock Tolkien must have experienced:

For signallers such as Tolkien there was bitter disillusionment, as instead of the neat orderly conditions in which they had been trained they found a tangled confusion of wires, field-telephones out of order and covered with mud, and worst of all a prohibition on the use of wires for all but the least important messages (the Germans had tapped telephone lines and intercepted crucial orders preceding the attack).<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the struggle of simply doing his job, Tolkien faced constant fear of attack, horrible sanitation and living conditions, and the loneliness of war. He never forgot what he termed the



Figure 2: Tolkien in his military uniform

"animal horror" of trench warfare. These memories would haunt his writing later on, best seen in the chapter "The Passage of the Marshes" in *The Lord of the Rings*. Fortunately, Tolkien did not have to endure war for very long. In a stroke of luck, he was struck with trench fever so severely that he was transported back to Birmingham after a couple weeks in the field hospital. While the rest of his company went on the attack in France Tolkien recovered in England, becoming the only man from his unit to survive the war.

After several months being in and out of hospitals in England, Tolkien was finally released just at the war's end and convinced the army authorities to station him in Oxford where

<sup>8</sup> Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien*, 83.

he could be with Edith and accept an offer to work on the staff of the New English Dictionary. After being released from the army, he continued in this capacity until 1920 when the post of Reader in English Language at the University of Leeds opened and he successfully applied. This position proved to be the perfect professional stepping stone because in 1925 he applied for and received the Professorship of Anglo-Saxon studies at Oxford. He took on the new job with extraordinary vigor and excitement, thrilled to be studying and teaching a body of literature he loved and regarded so highly. As a professor, Tolkien was required to give thirty-six lectures each year; however, in his second year he felt the number was insufficient to convey his topic and delivered 136 lectures to his students.<sup>9</sup> It is precisely this tenacity and exuberance that brought Tolkien into the perception of another Oxford man, C. S. Lewis, when the two finally crossed paths.

Just a few years after Tolkien and his mother made their way back to Birmingham from South Africa, C. S. Lewis was born in Belfast Ireland on November 29, 1898 to Albert and Flora Lewis. From a young age, Lewis developed a very distinct and independent personality. At the age of about 5 or 6, he declared to his family that he desired to be called "Jacksie," a nickname which stuck with him his entire life in its shortened form of "Jack."<sup>10</sup> He also formed an avid appetite for reading, fed by his father and his mother, who was a "voracious reader of good novels."<sup>11</sup> In April of 1905, his family, which consisted of his parents and an older brother Warren (affectionately called "Warnie"), moved to a more spacious house on the outskirts of Belfast.<sup>12</sup> Here, Lewis had his first taste of the beautiful Irish countryside full of a wild and vibrant nature.

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<sup>9</sup> Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien*, 135.

<sup>10</sup> Alister McGrath, *C.S. Lewis—A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet*, (Illinois: Tyndale House, 2013), 9.

<sup>11</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1955), 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

Much like the Tolkien boys, Lewis and Warnie, along with their childhood friend Arthur Greeves, spent their youth creating imaginary worlds in the rugged outdoors and through the numerable halls of their country home. The Irish culture around them, steeped in the tradition of storytelling and known for its vivacious mythology and love of language, was a strong influence in their young lives. Surrounded by such great stories, Lewis developed an insatiable



**Figure 3: Lewis and his older brother Warnie**

intrigue for mythology. Much like Tolkien, Lewis also wrote his own stories and mythologies in his adolescence. Though he abandoned fiction for a time, his later imaginary world of Narnia reverts back to this original interest, reflecting the Irish landscape and infusing the mythological directly into the story.

Lewis's mother Flora became very ill with abdominal cancer in early 1908. Her decline was swift, and Flora died on August 23, 1908 when Lewis was a mere boy of nine. The emotional trauma rendered on the young Lewis was irrecoverable. Because his father sent him away to Wynard Boarding School in England only two weeks after his mother's death, he had virtually no time to process or mourn. This near banishment caused a great rupture in Lewis's relationship with his father from which neither man would recover even until Albert's death.

More than a third of Lewis's autobiographical *Surprised by Joy* focuses on his schooldays at various institutions in England, none of which he paints in a decent light. Forced to leave home after his mother's sudden death, Lewis found himself in a whirlwind that refused to abate for the rest of his schooldays. Over a period of six years, Lewis attended Wynyard School, Campbell College, Cherbourg School, and Malvern College, all of which he describes by

pseudonyms in *Surprised by Joy*.<sup>13</sup> Such transience between schools, not typical for the day, is the result of several unlikely events in the young life of Lewis: a headmaster who was officially certified as insane, a respiratory illness that sent him home to Ireland, and a transfer to a school near that of Warnie so the brothers would be closer together. At each school, Lewis remained utterly fatalistic about his education. After reading one description of a school as a Nazi concentration camp, one might be surprised that Lewis himself went into the business of educating others.<sup>14</sup> It was also in this environment that Lewis lost his Christian faith which was an integral part of his upbringing as a Protestant in Ireland. Despite these downfalls, there were much greener pastures ahead for Lewis in the lands of learning.

After much debate and discussion, Lewis finally convinced his father to allow him to take part in a private tutorship with William Thompson Kirkpatrick, Albert Lewis's former headmaster at Lurgan College. Lewis desperately needed an individual form of education where he could study unbothered by school politics and childhood immaturity. Kirkpatrick's Socratic, almost aggressive manner of teaching by debate greatly appealed to Lewis because Kirk challenged his every answer until he could properly defend his view. Kirk was precisely the probing mind Lewis needed to keep his interest and expand his mind. Without a doubt, Lewis began to develop his characteristic debate style "based on evidence and reason, rather than personal intuitions" during his studies with Kirk.<sup>15</sup> The old professor dared him to substantiate every claim, causing him to raise his dialogical game. Kirk himself reveled in the fact that Lewis

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<sup>13</sup> This deliberate decision to hide the identity of his schools was meant to protect their reputation which Lewis was not hesitant to lambast. His accusations are at times quite brutal, leading us as modern readers to inevitably question whether they are accurate recollections of the conditions or if his memory was perhaps tainted with time to only remember the worst.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis devotes an entire chapter to the Wynyard School debacle entitled "Concentration Camp" in *Surprised by Joy*. Though he later admitted that his account was an exaggeration of truth, this experience nevertheless left him with the startling impression of dereliction and misuse.

<sup>15</sup> McGrath, C. S. *Lewis—A Life*, 40.

had what he called a "literary temperament" far beyond his years and hungered after knowledge in a similar fashion as his own.

Following his tutorship with Kirk, Lewis took and passed the entrance examinations to Oxford. Unlike his first experiences living in England, Lewis told his father that he found Oxford to be a wonderland of possibilities: "This place has surpassed my wildest dreams; I never saw



Figure 4: Lewis during his schooldays

anything so beautiful, especially on these frosty nights."<sup>16</sup>

Compared to his "concentration camp" English schooling, Lewis now found England welcoming and magical, a conducive environment for the learning which he desired to receive. Studying classics and literature in the typical Oxford tutorial system, whereby students worked individually with the mentorship of a don, Lewis found his

niche. Unfortunately, this intellectual paradise was short-lived. Similar to Tolkien, Lewis was forced to enlist in the Oxford University Officers' Training Corps in early 1917 and soon had to put his education on hold as he headed off to France.

Unlike his later friend, however, Lewis makes very little reference to his war experiences in any of his writing. Spending only around ten pages on this momentous chapter in his life in *Surprised by Joy* (much of which actually focus on the books he read while on deployment), Lewis appears to regard this period of little importance later in life. Perhaps for him the war was simply a roadblock to his education, an annoyance that had to be endured. And though his later fiction does tell tales of war, they are images of heroic battles full of glory and honor, scenes entirely unlike the trenches of Europe. This omission of a critical chapter in his life begs the

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<sup>16</sup> Letter to Albert Lewis, "7 December 1916," *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. W. H. Lewis (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966), 32.

question of whether Lewis really was as unaffected by war as he claims or if his denial was a method of coping with the unimaginable horrors of war. Either way, after a bout with trench fever and a minor shrapnel wound Lewis similarly returned to England just before the war's end and was soon back in the comfort of Oxford.

Once home, Lewis continued his studies in classical language and literature and found a home with his friend Paddy Moore's mother and sister. Paddy had not survived the war and so Lewis adopted himself into their family to support and care for them. In Mrs. Moore, Lewis found a supportive, motherly figure and the comfort which was lost too early in his own life. He found emotional stability in the family structure that Mrs. Moore analogously provided and which he did not have with his own flesh and blood. Lewis finally felt at home.

After the completion of his undergraduate degree and a failed attempt to secure a fellowship in classics at Magdalen College within Oxford, Lewis decided to pursue his true love in graduate school with English literature. Unsurprisingly, Lewis graduated with highest honors and jumped into the professional world of academia. Though he initially faced worry at lost opportunities, Lewis finally struck gold. On a whim, he applied for the Magdalen College Fellowship and Tutorship in English, a position within his own alma mater which he wrote to his father he expected to have no chance of receiving: "A Fellowship in English is announced at Magdalen and of course I am putting in for it, but without any serious hopes as I believe much senior people... are in for it."<sup>17</sup> But with a little luck and a collection of experience behind him, Lewis received the position and began his long stay at Oxford. Within two short years his path would cross with Tolkien who was enjoying his post at Pembroke College and the two men would begin one of the greatest and most influential friendships of their lives.

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<sup>17</sup> Letter to Albert Lewis, "April 1925," *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, 100.

### III. Kolbitars: A Love of Literature

In 1926, the future seemed bright for two young Oxford dons. Tolkien had recently settled into his position in the Anglo-Saxon chair of Pembroke College and Lewis had taken up residence at the neighboring Magdalen College. Both men had promising futures in their departments and big ideas for the direction their careers would go. Neither could anticipate the imbalanced reality in which Tolkien held his first position for twenty years before accepting his coveted language chair in 1945 while Lewis remained without an official professorship for his entire career. Alienated by his peers for his popular commercial success as a Christian apologist and fiction writer, Lewis was sidelined for several appointments throughout his career. But it must be said that through all his professional struggles Lewis never lost sight of the real reason he studied literature which initially drew him to Tolkien.

At first glance the two seemed to be destined for separate worlds and even agreed that they existed in different spheres of reality. Lewis was raised an Ulster Protestant, writing, "At my coming into the world I had been (implicitly) warned never to trust a Papist, and at my first coming into the English Faculty (explicitly) never to trust a philologist. Tolkien was both."<sup>18</sup> Their different beliefs and different interests placed them on opposite sides of many debates both culturally and intellectually. While Tolkien was interested in the minute details of language, Lewis was fascinated by themes and overall ideas in literature. Tolkien enjoyed reading texts strictly before the Victorian era while Lewis found interest in a broader selection of time periods. And as Tolkien remained a devout Catholic for his entire life, Lewis had recently divorced his Protestant upbringing in favor of a staunch brand of atheism.

When the two first met at an English Faculty Meeting at Merton College on the evening of May 11, 1926 each regarded the other without much thought of their potential camaraderie.

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<sup>18</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 216.

Lewis, a rather thickset and broad man, regarded the slight Tolkien with respect but remarked on his rather opinionated views in his diary that evening:

I had a talk with him afterwards. He is a smooth, pale, fluent little chap—can't read Spenser because of the forms—thinks the language is the real thing in the school—thinks all literature is written for the amusement of *men* between thirty and forty—we ought to vote ourselves out of existence if we were honest—still the sound-changes and the gobbets are great fun for the dons. No harm in him: only needs a smack or so. His pet abomination is the idea of 'liberal' studies. Technical hobbies are more in his line.<sup>19</sup>

This skeptical evaluation hints at their fundamental differences as educators and academics, but Lewis clearly sees potential in their ability to converse and relate to one another. Though he disapproves of Tolkien's limited range of literature, he seems to anticipate a role in broadening Tolkien's horizons. Perhaps from the start Lewis hoped to sway Tolkien towards a more holistic interest in literature.

Regardless, as Walter Hooper writes, "within a year or so any initial antipathy was long forgotten, and they were meeting in each other's rooms and talking far into the night."<sup>20</sup> The two became intimate first through a club Tolkien created called the Kolbitars which was founded around his love of old Icelandic and Norse mythology. Similar in form to the T.C.B.S. of his school days, the Kolbitars (Icelandic for "coalbiters," a pun referencing old storytellers who gathered around the fire so close they seemed to



Figure 5: A school-aged Tolkien

<sup>19</sup> C. S. Lewis, "11 May 1926," *All My Road Before Me: The Diary of C. S. Lewis 1922-1927*, edited by Walter Hooper (London: Harper Collins, 1991), 393.

<sup>20</sup> Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (London: Collins, 1974), 82.

bite the coals) provided a chance for the literarily-inclined to read works aloud and discuss their potency. By January 1927 Tolkien had invited Lewis to join his club and they began to work together translating myths in Old Icelandic, at which Tolkien was very adept and Lewis was eager to learn. The demanding endeavor fed Lewis's passion and he was, as he shared with his close friend Arthur Greeves "realizing a number of very old dreams in the way of books—reading *Sir Gawain* in the original... and, above all, learning Old Icelandic."<sup>21</sup>

As time passed and Lewis became more engrossed in work and the Kolbitars, he began to anticipate the club's weekly meetings with increasing excitement. Though it added to his busy life, the social interaction and stimulating conversation of the group challenged him in a delightful way. Tolkien was the supreme tutor, easing his colleagues into the ancient languages bit by bit. He even took to stopping by Lewis's rooms here and there for individual conversations, "discoursing of the gods & giants & Asgard for three hours... for the fire was bright and the talk was good."<sup>22</sup> The two men soon discovered their mutual interest in mythologies and were encouraged by the group recitations. In a world moving quickly towards modernization and technology, the Kolbitars became a refuge for an older way of thinking where one could appreciate the beautiful intricacies of language.

It was not until about three years into their relationship that the both Lewis and Tolkien really began to understand that the other intimately shared not only the enjoyment but the thrill they each received from reading Norse mythology and Old English epics. Lewis wrote to Greeves, "he [Tolkien] *is*, in one part of him, what we were."<sup>23</sup> Tolkien filled the void of the childhood games where Lewis, Greeves, and Warnie had created bounteous mythical worlds

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<sup>21</sup> C. S. Lewis, "26 June 1927," *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, Vol. I: Family Letters 1905-1931*, edited by Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 701.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, "17 October 1929," 838.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, "30 January 1930," 880.

around them. Having shared with Lewis that he desired to create an entire mythology, Tolkien fully opened up the realm of creative possibility to him. The endeavor was enormous; to create a mythology was to artificially construct the entire history, hopes, and fears of an imaginary world. Even considering such a possibility was both admirable and imitable to Lewis.

Tolkien's sense of the mythical was grounded in both the Birmingham countryside in which he grew up and in his Catholic faith. He often looked back on his childhood with an idyllic perspective, remembering his home as a pastoral scene from ages past. As Lewis wrote,

Tolkien once remarked to me that the feeling about home must have been quite different in the days when a family had fed on the produce of the same few miles of country for six generations, and that perhaps this was why they saw nymphs in the fountains and dryads in the wood—they were not mistaken for there was in a sense a *real* (not metaphorical) connection between them and the countryside... We are synthetic men, uprooted. The strength of the hill is not ours.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to showcasing Tolkien's views on the actual veracity of myths, Walter Hooper points out that this quote is also an allusion to Psalm 95:4. Tolkien's heavy influence, both in literary theory and in Christianity, is made explicit for the first time in this letter written by a Lewis still struggling into religion from a defiantly atheistic period of his life. Tolkien appears to have provided the lens through which Lewis began to view the world both as magical and Christian even as early as 1930.

Tolkien's ideas of creating his own mythology expanded at an alarming rate and, with the encouragement of Lewis he began to brainstorm images of his burgeoning characters. A small carefree hobbit, evil Orcs, and wise Ents began to creep into his imagination. Occasionally he would share these ideas with Lewis, some of which manifested in unfinished manuscripts or elaborate maps, but mostly the ideas struggled to stay contained within his imagination. He and Lewis instead kept their love of myth alive through the continued Kolbitar meetings as well as

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<sup>24</sup> Lewis, "22 June 1930," *The Collected Letters*, Vol. I, 909.

annual trips to see Wagner's *Ring* cycle in London.<sup>25</sup> Soon enough the two professors spent much of their spare time together indulging in one form of literary delight or another. They expanded each other's vocabulary and interests, voraciously devouring all manner of fairy tales and fiction.

The foundation of the Kolbitars was not entirely for pleasure, however. Tolkien founded the club both as an amusement and as a way to promote his ideas regarding the structure and content of the Oxford English syllabus. At this time, the English literature and language program was facing the pressures of modernization and its professors debated the need for a new syllabus. There were two main parties in the discussion. The first, to which Tolkien staunchly belonged, emphasized the importance of ancient and medieval texts while the second, where Lewis found his sympathies, desired to include modern literature which included anything published after Chaucer. It is important to note, however, that Lewis was not a modernist in any sense. While Tolkien was undoubtedly more of an old-world professor than he was, "Lewis read much more widely than Tolkien among modern writers, and disliked much of what he saw."<sup>26</sup> What Lewis really desired was room in the syllabus for recent fairy tales and fantasies like those of his beloved George MacDonald.

On the other side, Tolkien believed so strongly in his stance on the sole importance of classical texts that he decided to create a club entirely focused on ancient works of literature, hence the creation of the Kolbitars. By exposing the other professors to such passionate and intriguing ancient works he hoped to win their favor to his side of the syllabus debate. In the case of C. S. Lewis, he succeeded. Though wary to forgo all recent English literature, Lewis found common ground in their mutual love of ancient mythologies. Here Tolkien could share his great

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<sup>25</sup> A contemporary of theirs named Derek Brewer admits that though this trip likely only occurred every couple of years, Lewis and Tolkien nevertheless indulged in the music and stories of Wagner whenever possible.

<sup>26</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and their Friends* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978), 158.

delight in stories such as *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Pearl* and demonstrate the power of language. Over time he convinced Lewis of the necessity to focus on building a literary foundation with the ancient works and the two men spearheaded the new successful project. The resulting syllabus focused heavily on the importance of medieval literature for its linguistic value and a sense of continuity in the language. This new system they created remained in use for more than twenty years.<sup>27</sup>

As the two grew in friendship and began to work more closely at Oxford, their patterns of thinking became more aligned and they found themselves headed in similar directions. They both saw themselves as against modernism and the modern spirit, both in literary and intellectual spheres. Their fight against brash change characterized much of their friendship as they became bastions of classical study. Colin Duriez, a Lewis scholar, says:

At the core of the friendship of Tolkien and Lewis was their shared antipathy to the modern world. They were not opposed to dentists, buses, draft beer, and other features of the twentieth century, but what they viewed as the underlying mentality of modernism. They were not against science or scientists, but the cult of science, found in modernism, and its tendency to monopolize knowledge, denying alternative approaches to knowledge through the arts, religion, and ordinary human wisdom.<sup>28</sup>

Alternative approaches to wisdom such as fairy tales and fantasy were the basis of their friendship and their intellectual passion. Without works of the imagination like this, which science seemed so ready to sublimate, these men would be completely different individuals. Their project over time became to rehabilitate these lost artifacts of fancy for the modern era, to clothe the fantastic in acceptable terms.

Tolkien and Lewis continued to grow closer to one another over the next several years. Not only did they spend more time together, first through the Kolbitars and later through the

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<sup>27</sup> Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 157.

<sup>28</sup> Colin Duriez, *Tolkien and C. S. Lewis: The Gift of Friendship* (Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2003), 107.

famous Inklings club, but their professional lives grew more alike. In so many ways these men grew into their roles as co-creators of the new fairy-tale genre. In addition, Tolkien played a crucial role in Lewis's arduous conversion to Christianity. Though the later never became Catholic, Tolkien led him to a greater understanding of God and the truth of what they both called the "Christian myth."

#### IV. The Oxford Christians

Before he became internationally known as a Christian apologist and commentator, Lewis went through a period of staunch atheism. Perhaps driven by his experiences with the trauma of war or the rationalist style of his influential tutor Kirkpatrick, Lewis began his career as an Oxford don strictly opposed to the idealism and very notion of faith. Much like other intellectuals of the time he relied heavily upon reason and logic, condemning those foolish enough to believe in a divine being. He saw Christianity as a weakness of those who could not tell the difference between the imaginary and reality. But Lewis always sought after truth and through his fascination with mythology became obsessed with finding authenticity in ancient tales, both Christian and pagan. Literature was for him a map to the psyche that held real human truths.

His entire life, even since childhood, Lewis described experiences with what he termed "Joy." These fleeting moments which he often felt in the rugged Irish nature opened his mind to a sublime, ethereal connection that was as completely overwhelming as it was brief. He later described these encounters as both terrifying and awe-inspiring.<sup>29</sup> A young Lewis debated over whether these experiences were moments of contact with a divine force or if they were simply a heightened awareness of the vast beauty of nature. Later in his first few years as a professor at Oxford, Lewis began to fear that these encounters with "Joy" represented something more powerful and worryingly wrote to his friend Owen Barfield:

Terrible things are happening to me. The 'Spirit' or 'Real I' is showing an alarming tendency to become much more personal and is taking the offensive, and behaving just like God. You'd better come on Monday at the latest or I may have entered a monastery.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, he later used these same two characteristics in describing his Christ-like savior Aslan in Narnia.

<sup>30</sup> Letter to Owen Barfield, "3 February 1930," *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, 141.

Lewis was terrified to accept the possibility of a higher power because it undermined the fervent rationalism by which he lived his entire life. He resisted belief as long as he possibly could, but by 1931, no longer able to dismiss his intangible experiences, Lewis reluctantly accepted that he had converted to theism.

Christianity, however, still lay beyond Lewis's approval. He saw nothing special in the 2000 year old story of Christ's death and could not justify its relevance to modern society. It was here that Tolkien entered the scene, leaving an impact on Lewis that forever shaped the rest of his life. Over a decade later Lewis noted this influence, writing to a friend, "[Hugo] Dyson and Tolkien were the immediate human causes of my own conversion."<sup>31</sup> The incident he refers to occurred on the evening of September 19, 1931. Lewis, Tolkien, and their colleague Hugo Dyson were enjoying a pleasant evening in Lewis's rooms at Magdalen College when the conversation turned towards Christianity. Lewis, a theist at this point, acknowledged the validity of the Christian narrative as a religious story but concluded that there was nothing particularly unique about a story where God came to earth, died, and was resurrected. To him, the Gospel narratives were simply a reworking of the common "dying god" myth found in many other traditions.

Tolkien responded with a different interpretation saying that Christianity included the best parts of a pagan myth with the important quality that the events actually occurred in documented history. Lewis later wrote of that night:

What Dyson and Tolkien showed me was this: that if I met the idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story I didn't mind it at all... again, that the idea of the dying and reviving god (Balder, Adonis, Bacchus) similarly moved me provided I met it anywhere *except* in the Gospels. The reason was that in Pagan stories I was prepared to feel the myth as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond my grasp even tho' I could not say in cold prose 'what it meant.' Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> C. S. Lewis, "21 December 1941," *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, Vol. II: Books, Broadcasts, and the War 1931-1949*, edited by Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 500.

<sup>32</sup> Lewis, "18 October 1931," *The Collected Letters, Vol. I*, 977.

This fact that Christianity was a historically documented religion appealed to Lewis's rational mind and convinced him that this particular myth was actually true. Not only did it support his experiences with Joy interceding upon his daily life just as Christ interceded in affairs on Earth, but it resolved his abstract theism to a grounded reality.

The basis of Lewis's initial antipathy towards Christianity originated in his theories concerning myths. Lewis believed that mythologies were ultimately based on lies because they attempted to define the finite in infinite terms and extrapolate fact from fiction. Though he enjoyed their narratives, he believed they were nothing more than entertainment. Tolkien argued against him, saying that myths represented real perceptions of the world and simply showcase the viewpoint of early human beings. While we take for granted that a tree is simply an organism and a star is a ball of inanimate matter, the ancients saw the entire world around them as magical. All of creation was fantastically divine and so their mythologies reflect their awe and wonder at the reality of their world. Therefore, underlying all myths is real human truth. Tolkien argued that the dying god myths like that of Christ and Lewis's many other examples all pointed to the universal truth that humans are incapable of saving themselves and need divine intervention. The unique feature of the Christ story is that it existed within a real, verifiable historical context.

After this conversation, Tolkien's argument consumed Lewis's thoughts and he spent the next two weeks wrestling with and fighting his looming conversion. In the end, his rationalism satisfied, he gave in to this justification and wrote to Arthur Greeves on October 1st, "I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ—in Christianity... my long night talk with Hugo and Dyson had a good deal to do with it."<sup>33</sup> The fact that Tolkien did not divorce myth from history appealed to his intellectual senses and, as the most reluctant convert, he became a Christian. Retaining some of his Protestant Ulster upbringing Lewis became an

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<sup>33</sup> Lewis, "1 October 1931," *The Collected Letters, Vol. I*, 974.

Anglican, though he continued to develop and explore his often unorthodox faith for the rest of his life. His Irish attitude, influenced by the years of political strife between Protestants and Catholics, occasionally clashed with Tolkien's fervent papist beliefs, yet Tolkien continued to influence the trajectory of his thoughts as the two men relished in their newfound ability to debate Christian principles.

In fact, the different forms their Christian faith took actually contributed to their intimacy as friends. It became customary for Tolkien to drop by Lewis's rooms at the college on Monday mornings where the two would catch up on the week and sometimes explore more intriguing topics. As Lewis recalls, "This is one of the pleasantest spots in the week. Sometimes we talk English school politics: sometimes we criticise 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."<sup>34</sup> But increasingly the topics of their meetings steered towards Christianity, providing intrigue and relief for both men. At home Tolkien had begun to face an increasing animosity between Edith and himself over the Catholic faith she reluctantly accepted when they married. By the time Lewis and Tolkien became close, her anti-Catholic feelings were increasingly vocal and she openly resented Tolkien for taking their children to mass. The two eventually slept in different bedrooms and kept different hours, living almost completely separate lives. Though they remained together for the family, Tolkien was devastated by their growth apart and sought comfort in his friendship and conversations with Lewis.

Surprisingly, the strength of Lewis and Tolkien's Christian friendship lay in the different opinions they had about religion and their ability to amiably debate their beliefs. While such controversy might divide other friends, these two brilliant minds fed off of the quality disputes they shared. They held opposing views on a whole manner of practices. Tolkien upheld the

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<sup>34</sup> Lewis, "22 November 1931," *The Collected Letters, Vol. II*, 16.

Catholic belief that the most important components of the Christian faith were partaking of the sacraments and attending mass. The outward expression of his faith within his religious community was critically important. Lewis on the other hand had come into Christianity intellectually through deduction and reason and emphasized personal justification and interpretation of faith over simple actions. Though he often attended the morning service at Magdalen College, he valued the debates he had with Tolkien and others as crucial expressions of his faith.

Tolkien and Lewis differed theologically as well, most notably on their views of marriage and death. Tolkien maintained the traditional Catholic view that marriage is a church-sanctioned sacrament and a sacred element in one's life. Lewis, rather more progressive, took a binary view on marriage stating that there were two types, Christian and state. His idea of Christian marriage closely aligned with Tolkien's view while his idea of state marriage was only a legal commitment and was neither binding nor lifelong. Tolkien fought against this system arguing that it reduced the significance and sanctity of Christian marriage. He also accused Lewis of hypocrisy saying that though Lewis appears to acknowledge the separation of religious beliefs and practices, he also believes that Christian marriage is the only lifelong commitment suggesting that this is the only "right" marriage. In a drafted letter to Lewis which was never sent, Tolkien accuses him, "I should like to see on what grounds you base your 'two marriage' system!"<sup>35</sup> Since there was no proof of such a plan in the Bible, Tolkien found no need for this separation. This debate later caused great strife in their relationship when Lewis married an American divorcée for immigration reasons and failed to tell Tolkien of his arrangement. Perhaps because he knew Tolkien would disapprove outright, Lewis never mentioned the union to him, leaving Tolkien to hear of the event second-hand.

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<sup>35</sup> Tolkien, *The Letters of Tolkien*, 62.

The other significant matter which divided the content of their debates was the nature of a human body after death. Lewis, with his Ulster Protestant background and progressive approach to religion, later wrote to his brother about one particularly lively debate:

At our Thursday meeting we had a furious argument about cremation. I had never realised the violence of the Papist dislike of the practice, which they forbid. Neither Tolkien nor [Robert] Havard, to my mind, produced a real argument against it, but only said 'you'd find in fact' that it was always supported by atheists; and that a human corpse was the temple of the Holy Ghost. I said 'but a vacated temple' and said it wd. be reasonable to blow up a Church to prevent it being defiled by Communists. They denied this, and said that if you destroyed a chalice to prevent it being used for Black Mass you wd. be mortally guilty: for it was *your* business to reverence it and what the magicians did to it afterwards was theirs. I was surprised at the degree of passion the subject awoke in us all.<sup>36</sup>

This passion, though often divisive, was precisely what brought the two closer together intellectually. Even though they disagreed on many components of their faith, the fact that they could debate these topics and challenge one another while remaining friends only made their beliefs stronger. By hearing alternative viewpoints both men created informed opinions for themselves.

Another benefit of their partnership was that it provided an escape from the increasingly hostile atmosphere of Oxford to a place where Christianity was a welcome topic. At this time, though Oxford was still intimately tied to the Anglican church, the academic realm was becoming more and more secular. Urged forward by the scientific revolution and burgeoning technologies, university life began to push faith away. For professors like Tolkien and Lewis who were openly Christian the rest of the academic community was increasingly exclusive. The two friends took refuge in the faith they shared and formed a sort of support system for one another where they could openly express their faith. In this sheltered setting Lewis began to write apologetic defenses of his faith which unexpectedly became international bestsellers. Works such

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<sup>36</sup> Lewis, "25 February 1940," *The Collected Letters, Vol. II*, 358.

as *Mere Christianity*, *The Great Divorce*, and *The Screwtape Letters* all reflect his rationalist approach to religion and provided countless Christians across the globe with articulate, reasonable defenses of their faith. Lewis soon became a household name throughout England and the United States as his books went on to sell thousands of copies.

Naturally there was a resulting backlash from the Oxford community as Lewis's faith became his best-known feature instead of his professional scholarship. Since he focused his efforts on writing what quickly became popular works of theology rather than literary criticism, his credibility as an Oxford scholar came under attack. This internal prejudice affected Lewis's candidacy for jobs and promotions at Oxford whenever an English chair became available. This upset Tolkien who, even though he did not approve of Lewis acting the part of a theologian, felt the actions of his peers against Lewis were baseless and unfair.<sup>37</sup> He supported Lewis throughout his turbulent career, always maintaining the value of his friend's opinions.

Through all of the controversy and fame surrounding his apologetic works, Lewis remained grounded in the theory of communication he and Tolkien developed together. As Colin Duriez relates, "His basic strategy for defending the faith to contemporary people was born in those persistent arguments of Tolkien in which imagination and reason are reconciled, and in which storytelling is at the center."<sup>38</sup> For both men, constructing and reconstructing mythos was a way to synthesize their beliefs and understand faith in imaginative, stimulating ways. As the two continued to discuss Christianity, Tolkien developed his theory that the gospel exhibited the perfect model of the fairy story which he deemed the *euclatrophe*. This Tolkien term refers to "a remarkable and sudden turn in a story that signals the presence of grace."<sup>39</sup> Both men believed

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<sup>37</sup> Tolkien maintained the belief that theology should strictly remain in the hands of professional churchmen, more specifically in the hands of the papacy. Duriez, *Tolkien and C. S. Lewis*, 124.

<sup>38</sup> Colin Duriez, *A Field Guide to Narnia* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 38.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

that through this pattern the gospel was the fulfillment of human storytelling by bringing elements of the imagination and reality into a perfect, astounding story. The Christian narrative was the ultimate, real myth.

From here each went on to imitate this method by creating their own stories in the *eucatastrophic* style. Tolkien's fiction, later coalescing into the popular collection *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, focused on ever-present danger and moral decay in need of divine salvation; in a sense, Tolkien anticipates but waits to fully realize the "good turn" of the *eucatastrophe*. Lewis, on the other hand, upholds the ethical foundations of his imaginary Narnia and visibly depicts the Christological return in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. He goes on to recreate other biblical accounts in the rest of the Chronicles of Narnia series, a set of seven books in all. Both Lewis and Tolkien's literary and theological interests began to attract a new crowd of sympathetic Oxford thinkers including Owen Barfield, Hugo Dyson, Neville Coghill, and Charles Williams.<sup>40</sup> With this new group of inquisitive minds Lewis and Tolkien continued to deliberate topics which both fascinated and challenged them in a larger setting. Out of this community the famous Inklings club was born and the real fruit of their friendship began to grow.

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<sup>40</sup> Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 121.

## V. The Inklings

In 1936, Lewis wrote to his close friend and fellow literary enthusiast Charles Williams about a group at Oxford which he wanted him to join: "We have a sort of informal club called the Inklings: the qualifications (as they have informally evolved) are a tendency to write, and Christianity."<sup>41</sup> This small blurb perfectly describes the collection of scholars, most of whom shared little in common except their faith and their affinity for writing. The Inklings grew out of the informal meetings between Tolkien and Lewis in Lewis's rooms at Magdalen College that began in 1929; as time progressed, the two drew in select friends and colleagues until a group of regulars met weekly. Different from the Kolbitars where the members focused on translating Old Icelandic and reading Old English epics, the Inklings hosted a freeform, relaxed discussion on new topics or works of literature every week. It is perhaps best described as a literary cigar club, both appealing to the senses and the intellect.

While the exact origins of the Inklings are indistinct, Lewis biographers Green and Hooper suspect "the chief impetus behind it was Lewis's delight in hearing things read aloud."<sup>42</sup> The name itself came from a real literary club founded by an undergraduate named Tangye Lean in University College in the early thirties. Lean enticed both Lewis and Tolkien to advise as faculty members in this group and, though the club was unsuccessful and dissolved after a only few meetings, they adopted the name for their own informal gatherings. The Inklings name was also a clever pun, both suggesting "someone who dabbles in ink" and one whose ideas are not yet fully formed.<sup>43</sup> This dual connotation appealed to both Lewis and Tolkien who used the club to read their own often fragmented writing aloud, provide criticism, and debate nebulous concepts at length.

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<sup>41</sup> Lewis, "11 March 1936," *The Collected Letters*, Vol. II, 183.

<sup>42</sup> Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 161.

<sup>43</sup> Hooper, *The Collected Letters*, Vol. II, 181.

Once initiated around 1932, the Inklings regularly met twice a week. On Tuesday mornings the group collected at the local Oxford pub The Eagle and the Child, affectionately known as the Bird and the Baby to the club members, for an informal and often raucous mid-morning colloquy. The gatherings were bawdy and beer-filled, though if one listened closely the topic of conversation indubitably turned towards theology and literature. These topics were the core of their friendship, the glue that held such a varied community together, and immeasurably important to each Inklings member. Their discussions continued on Thursday evenings in Lewis's college rooms where the conversation usually followed a more orderly schedule. At these more official Inklings meetings, someone would volunteer either a work of their own or one they admired to be read aloud after which the other members would offer their opinions and criticism. First and foremost, the club revolved around this idea of a shared oral culture.

In addition to their semi-weekly meetings, members of the Inklings often satisfied this interest in the spoken word by enjoying local performances of their favorite works. Tolkien and Lewis often attended plays together, such as the "really excellent performance of a *Midsummer Nights Dream*" they enjoyed in February 1940.<sup>44</sup> One particular favorite of the group was Richard Wagner's *Ring* cycle. One year, in preparation for their trip to London to see the opera Tolkien, Lewis, and Warnie Lewis would all read the script of *The Valkyrie* together. Though Warnie could only follow along in English, Lewis and Tolkien eagerly read the original German script in anticipation of the performance. Both their reading the text aloud and hearing the opera performed gave them great pleasure in the written word.

It is hard to characterize the nature of the Inklings in any concrete terms because it held such a diverse membership. In addition to the two founders, the group also welcomed part and full-time attendees such as Charles Williams, Owen Barfield, Richard Havard, Warnie Lewis,

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<sup>44</sup> Lewis, "18 February 1940," *The Collected Letters*, Vol. II, 349.

and Christopher Tolkien over its 17 years. The diverse, varied, and dynamic community of the Inklings reflected the philosophy of its members, that such variance made the community more valuable and effective than a monochromatic group.<sup>45</sup> Together they could more efficaciously discuss and debate, coming to personal conclusions that were both tested and informed. For every member the meetings were a special part in their week and often provided a much-needed respite from the affairs of academia.



**Figure 6: Members of the Inklings including James Dundas-Grant, Colin Hardie, Dr. Robert E. Havard, Lewis, and Peter Havard**

Humphrey Carpenter argues in his study of the group that clubs such as the Inklings were natural byproducts of Oxford's political climate in the 1930s. At the time Oxford was a community characterized by cliques, so it seemed natural for Lewis and Tolkien to found a group to which they might belong. With a campus increasingly hostile towards their open Christianity, no other faction was willing to welcome them in. As a result, they formed their own club that became all the more important to them because it provided a place to belong and to be themselves in a unsympathetic work environment. It also allowed Lewis and Tolkien to find others who shared their sympathies and become a support network for struggling Christian academics. This time period was also characterized by the importance of strong male friendships at the university level. Until recently, Oxford had abided by the practice that professors were church clergymen in some capacity and therefore not allowed to marry. Though that rule had changed and professorships became a secular position, the changes were not fully integrated into

<sup>45</sup> Diana Pavlac Gler, *The Company They Keep: C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien as Writers in Community* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2007), 32.

Oxford life.<sup>46</sup> There still existed a highly prevalent culture of male intellectualism. The Inklings satisfied this need for the next generation of scholars, allowing them to live their own separate lives while still participating in stimulating conversation and refining their literary tastes.

Above all this academic drama, the ultimate role of the Inklings was to support and critique one another's literary careers. This support took many forms, from offering opinions on manuscripts to putting names forward for new job appointments. Ultimately, they encouraged each member to seek his own success in whatever form it took. Tolkien was one of the first members to present his own writing to the group for review. Years before, he had begun a collection of writings and scribbles on his imaginary world Middle Earth. Some of the tidbits were unimpressive, but others were so promising that they prompted Lewis and the others to encourage him to expand his writing and compose a novel. One of the first Inklings to present a full manuscript to the group was Owen Barfield. His book *The Silver Trumpet* not only gained the approval of his peers but of Tolkien's own children who reportedly loved it more than Tolkien's own fairy tales.<sup>47</sup>

Around 1936 or 1937, Tolkien and Lewis made a pact to write more "mythopoeic" stories in an attempt to revitalize a forgotten genre. Out of this wager Lewis's first attempt at fiction was born in his science fiction trilogy. Naturally Tolkien and other members of the Inklings had an intimate role in its progression and development through their criticism and support. Tolkien writes, "I read it, of course; and I have since heard it pass a rather different test: that of being read aloud to our local club... It proved an exciting serial, and was highly approved. But of

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<sup>46</sup> For example, Lewis and many others still lived in (singular) university-provided housing on campus and most professors took their meals in the halls.

<sup>47</sup> In 1936 Lewis wrote to Barfield that he had lent a copy of the novel to Tolkien and, much to Tolkien's disappointment, became the new household favorite. Lewis, "28 June 1936," *The Collected Letters, Vol. II*, 198.

course we are all rather like-minded."<sup>48</sup> His approval is nothing beyond expectation. In keeping with the literary theory they had developed together, Lewis wrote with a purposeful style in which Tolkien found "the blend of *vera historia* and *mythos* irresistible."<sup>49</sup> Their kindred spirits were no happier than when they found delight together in a literary work.

But not every work met immediate approval or commendation within the group. Tolkien did not approve of Lewis's works in popular theology, seeing his attempts at accessibility to be encroaching upon the heretical. When Lewis dedicated his successful novel *The Screwtape Letters* to him, Tolkien was reportedly embarrassed to have his name appear in the work.<sup>50</sup> Later in the second of only two surviving letters Tolkien wrote to Lewis, he eases his own harsh criticism at a previous Inklings meeting offering that "the only just critic is Christ." However, in the spirit of the playful banter that naturally characterized their meetings he finishes, "But I warn you, if you bore me, I shall take my revenge (It is an Inkling's duty to be bored willingly. It is his privilege to be a borer on occasion)."<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps the biggest disappointment of all the Inklings' time was Lewis's failure to attain an official English chair at Oxford. In 1945, Tolkien received one of two Merton chairs in English, thankfully moving past "the dust of miserable Pembroke." After his appointment he wrote to his son Christopher, "My ambition was to get C. S. L. and myself into the 2 Merton Chairs. It would be marvelous to be both in the same college."<sup>52</sup> But such wishes would never be realized. Whether due to the prejudice against Lewis's Christianity or his divisive success as an

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<sup>48</sup> Tolkien, "18 February 1938," *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 29.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, "4 March 1938," 33.

<sup>50</sup> It became common practice for members of the Inklings to dedicate their work to those within their literary club. Both Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* and Lewis's *The Problem of Pain* were dedicated to the Inklings.

<sup>51</sup> Tolkien, "Septuagesima (25 January) 1948," *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 128.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, "30 January 1945," 108.

apologetic writer, the selection committee passed him over in favor of a young appointment.<sup>53</sup> Instead of receiving the chair of modern literature, Lewis remained in his associate role at Magdalen College unable to climb the professional rungs to success.

Yet through all the disappointment, and all the success, the Inklings club continued to flourish and its members continued to grow by its influence. Lewis and Tolkien in particular came to rely heavily upon the meetings as a critical part of their week. If there was ever any obstacle to the group convening, Lewis would often seek Tolkien out at his home so they might still enjoy a heartening conversation.<sup>54</sup> These two minds were truly the heart and soul of the Inklings. Their conversations were more than simple encouragement, they were necessary for the satisfaction of their intellects. Unfortunately, the busyness of life often got in the way. Tolkien wrote to Lewis while he was away from Oxford in 1943, "I begin to think that for us to meet on Wednesdays is a duty: there seems to be so many obstacles and fiendish devices to prevent it."<sup>55</sup> He worried that patterns of absence would become more common as time went on and their lives grew increasingly busy.

In many ways, he was right. With Lewis called away to deliver a series of radio talk shows during World War II, there were often large gaps between official Inklings meetings in the early 1940s. Tolkien wrote to his son in despair, "Life has been such a rush... I haven't seen C. S. L. for weeks."<sup>56</sup> When he finally "managed to have a colloquing with the brothers Lewis and C.

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<sup>53</sup> Tolkien famously wrote of Oxford's resolute prejudice against Lewis: "In Oxford you are forgiven for writing only two kinds of books. You may write books on your own subject whatever that is, literature or science, or history. And you may write detective stories because all dons at some time get the flu, and they have to have something to read in bed. But what you are *not* forgiven is writing popular works, such as Jack did on theology, and *especially* if they win international success as his did." Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 340.

<sup>54</sup> See an example in his letter to his brother Warnie on December 3, 1939: "We had a very pleasant evening drinking gin and limejuice and reading our recent chapters to each other—his from the new *Hobbit* and mine from the 'Problem of Pain.'" *The Collected Letters*, Vol. III, 302.

<sup>55</sup> Tolkien, "20 April 1943," *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 59.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, "9 December 1943," 65.

Williams," the talk of logistics and personal woes often clouded their sacred colloquy.<sup>57</sup> The change came at an unfortunate time for Tolkien who was struggling mightily with his marriage to Edith. Unlike Lewis who had a much larger pool of close friends including Arthur Greeves, Charles Williams, Owen Barfield, and Warnie, Tolkien kept a smaller selection of confidants. He became jealous of Williams in particular whom Lewis nearly hero-worshipped for his literary skill and who had begun to take up much of Lewis's time and attention. In a sad twist of fate, this problem soon resolved when Williams unexpectedly passed away in 1945. This loss, while devastating, briefly brought Lewis and Tolkien together once more with renewed vigor and the two collaborated on a *Festschrift*, a collection of essays, in William's honor.

Their continued relationship during this period of their lives is difficult to typify. Of course they shared a deep mutual respect for one another and truly cared about the other's well-being, but they also increasingly recognized their fundamental differences as people. Lewis once wrote of Tolkien, "He is the most unmanageable man (in conversation) I've ever met... It will be only by luck if you get anything relevant to your own problems."<sup>58</sup> Perhaps it was the introduction of other influential minds into their previously intimate circle, but after the late 1940s Lewis and Tolkien recognized the key differences in their theology and mannerisms progressively more and more. In response the two gradually adapted, focusing on their roles as literary critics over their roles as confidants.

Nevertheless, Tolkien and Lewis remained ever protective of one another and the sanctuary they had built within the Inklings. When Lewis began "getting too much publicity for his or any of our tastes," Tolkien rallied to his defense saying, "It is a pity newspapers can't leave

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<sup>57</sup> Tolkien, "18 January 1944," *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 67.

<sup>58</sup> Lewis, "30 March 1962," *The Collected Letters*, Vol. III, 877.

*people* alone and don't make some effort to understand what they *say*."<sup>59</sup> Though he might not approve of its content, he supported his friend's writing much as Lewis did for him through writing published reviews of his books and continuing to hear his manuscripts read aloud. One piece they never lost was their regard for the importance of the expressive imagination.

In the end, the Inklings club dissolved just as subtly as it had arrived. Though the informal Monday morning meetings at the Eagle and the Child continued to the last week of Lewis's life in 1963, Carpenter remarks that the official Inklings evenings came to an end "almost imperceptibly, and for no apparent reason."<sup>60</sup> Perhaps this end reflected the growing distance between Lewis and Tolkien; without the characteristic closeness between the two founders the club perhaps was destined to fail. In its seventeen years of existence (roughly 1932-1949), the Inklings ushered in countless creative works by its members, fostered a growing appreciation of the oral culture Lewis so loved, and became an accepting space for other marginalized Christians in the intellectual sphere. The club remains one of the best known and most impressive literary collusions of the twentieth century.

The written legacy of the Inklings is nearly incalculable. Though they never set out to change modern literature with their personal musings and scribbling, the resulting masterpieces defined the fiction of their era. The works of Charles Williams, J. R. R. Tolkien, and C. S. Lewis, while never meant for international consumption, became some of the most successful books to ever come out of England. The brotherhood of intellectuals also left a huge impact on each of its members. The powerful alliance of the Fellowship of the Ring in Tolkien's *Lord of the Ring* series is perhaps the best example of the memory left by the Inklings' strong companionship. Even in Tolkien's imagination, a community of friends remained the most important factor to

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<sup>59</sup> Tolkien, "1 March 1944," *Letter of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 68.

<sup>60</sup> Carpenter, *The Inklings*, 226.

real success, whether that success came in the countryside of Oxford or the rugged wilderness of Middle Earth.

## VI. Two Modern Novelists

Now we must dive into the real living legacy of the famous Lewis and Tolkien friendship, their works of fiction. These are the reason both are household names even fifty years after their death. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* did something with fiction that no one had ever attempted before. Though the new-found genre of science fiction was on the rise in popularity, no fantasy story ever attempted to totally recreate not only another world but an entire history and mythology to support it. The byproducts of Lewis and Tolkien's genius are self-contained masterpieces that represent the best of the imagination. Not only that, but together they successfully rehabilitated the fairy tale genre for children and adults alike. The stories entertain and educate all ages and for this reason remain relevant today.

It is not surprising that both men turned to the fantasy genre to express themselves. Tolkien and Lewis shared a philosophy of literature that emphasized the truth behind humankind's expressive nature. Tied closely to their theology that people are created in the image of God, they believed that humans speak and communicate through truths even when they speak through figurative language. Humphrey Carpenter writes:

Man is not ultimately a liar. He may pervert his thoughts into lies, but he comes from God and it is from God that he draws his ultimate ideals... therefore, not merely the abstract thoughts of man *but also his imaginative inventions* must originate with God, and must in consequence reflect something of external truth.<sup>61</sup>

Lewis and Tolkien both believed that the imagination, and thereby fiction, could create and illustrate ideas that the literal mind could not articulate. The freedom of the expressive mind allowed them to access meanings through a better facilitated medium. Writing fiction was the answer to their lifelong search for expression of their joined intellect and faith.

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<sup>61</sup> Carpenter, *The Inklings*, 43.

But simple fiction would not satisfy all their needs. Tolkien and Lewis needed something that would both astound the imagination and inspire, that would generate both fear and great love. They turned, of course, to the idea of the *romance* in the classical sense of the term. In a romance honor, bravery, charity, humility, and love conquer all; in a sense, the romance is governed by Christian virtues. And, as both agreed, a romance must contain "at least a hint of another world."<sup>62</sup> The romance allowed them to illustrate intangible ideas and exemplify values in their characters. They could create meaning out of the imagination rather than simply reinstating literal truths. It was a chance to exercise their creative faculties and, for Lewis, to try a markedly different approach to sharing intimate beliefs than used before.

Despite all this similarity in intention and form, Lewis and Tolkien went about writing their fiction in their own unique ways. Lewis wrote easily and quickly, only revising sparingly. For him, the simple exercise of writing was cathartic, a fun and entertaining method to release images from his head onto paper. His process was thoroughly enjoyable and as carefree as a walk through the Magdalen gardens. Tolkien, on the other hand, labored extensively over his fiction to the point of neurosis. He wrote quickly but revised both constantly and so painstakingly slowly that it is a wonder he ever submitted anything for publication. He viewed his writing as a diligent task that demanded precision to the very last detail. Unsurprisingly, Lewis's list of published works dwarf's Tolkien's own. Yet apart from their different styles and methodologies, many other aspects of their works were intimately connected and, as mentioned before, each man had a critical role to play in the publication of the other's work.

Up until the mid-1930s, Lewis had never attempted to write fiction beyond the Norse-style mythologies he fiddled with as a youth and Tolkien had only scribbled small stories for the entertainment of his children. But the Inklings meetings spurred a desire within them to write

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<sup>62</sup> Lewis, "25 March 1933," *The Collected Letters, Vol. II*, 103.

something they had never before attempted and they agreed that together they would venture into fiction writing. It was agreed that Lewis should write "space travel" stories and Tolkien should write "time travel" stories. Though Tolkien's side of the bargain was never fully realized, this pact gave birth to Lewis's "Space Trilogy" novels that achieved nominal fame. After reading the first few chapters in an Inklings meeting, Tolkien noted that the story appeared to be a mythical development of Christian doctrine. While it is unclear whether Lewis intended this from the beginning or was spurred forward by Tolkien's encouragement, he soon became fascinated with this idea of repainted Christian doctrine in fictional worlds. Before long, he had in mind a new project.

The Chronicles of Narnia were not originally conceived of as a holistic, seven book series that retold Christianity through a mythical landscape, though this is precisely what they came to do. The first book Lewis began writing was *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and it came into his imagination through a series of images. For many years, Lewis later wrote, he had imagined an image of a faun walking through a snowy wood with a red umbrella and a collection of parcels under his arm. With his science fiction series succeeding, Lewis decided to explore this image and with the addition of a quaint family of English schoolchildren and a powerful lion Narnia was born. Even during its early stages Lewis knew his book was a reimagining of the Christ story. From the moment he pictured Aslan, he knew "it was the Lion of Judah himself who leaped into these stories of his own volition and for his own purposes."<sup>63</sup> Through the imaginary landscape of Narnia, he believed he could create a modern myth that recalled what he believed was the greatest myth of all.

During the construction of his series, Lewis vehemently fought against the idea that he was writing allegory, insisting instead that what he wrote were "supposals" of imagined

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<sup>63</sup> Mark Eddy Smith, *Aslan's Call: Finding Our Way to Narnia*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 12.

scenarios where one might suppose what could play out in similar circumstances. In other words, though Aslan embodies the salvific savior role for Narnia he is not directly analogous to Christ. This fervent assertion by Lewis may be due to Tolkien's heavy criticism of allegory. Rather than alluding to some other story, Tolkien believed one should recreate meaning through fresh, realistic stories. The poignancy and believability of this new realm would point towards the truth the author desired to divulge.

Lewis took these ideas to heart, but nevertheless approached his novels differently than Tolkien did his. Tolkien wrote of Lewis, "His mythology (incipient and never fully realized) was quite different [from mine]. It was at any rate broken to bits before it became coherent by contact with C. S. Williams and his 'Arthurian' stuff."<sup>64</sup> This argument of inconsistency constituted the main resistance Lewis received from Tolkien and the rest of the Inklings. His Chronicles combined fauns and dryads with Father Christmas and a Christ-like savior which the other authors thought to be mutually exclusive topics. All in all, they believed the story was too scattered and incoherent to stand. Tolkien harshly criticized what he saw as the disjointed collection of mythos, hoping to bring his friend some semblance of unity in his work.

This disapproval made a powerful impact upon Lewis. Though he retained the key elements to his story of which his colleagues disapproved, he worked intensely to make Narnia a believable world. In the end, his endeavor proved successful and the Chronicles sold incredibly well both in England and across the world. Though he always retained some doubts because of the Inklings' tepid response, Narnia became the fulfillment of his desire to write mythopoeia. It was a chance to journey back to the magical Irish countryside of his youth where magical creatures really existed and animals could speak. The Chronicles have remained in print and continued to sell since his death in 1963 and even inspired a popular three-movie series.

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<sup>64</sup> Tolkien, "12 September 1965," *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 361.

Similar to Lewis, Tolkien also came to write his famous *Lord of the Rings* series and his breakout novel *The Hobbit* through a persistent image in his mind that begged to be explored. As Inklings biographer Gareth Knight relates, Tolkien received his inspiration when "the hobbit, a creature previously unknown to him, popped into his mind while he was marking examination papers."<sup>65</sup> Tolkien became obsessed by this small creature and began to weave hobbit-themed bedtime stories for his children. He explored their quirky English-like propriety and their quaint land of the Shire, telling tales of tea-time and regular hobbit folly. But when he shared his private musings with Lewis, Tolkien found that "Mr Lewis says hobbits are only amusing when in unhobbitlike situations."<sup>66</sup> This remark encouraged Tolkien to explore the greater world in which the Shire might belong and what might happen if a Hobbit strayed too far from home.

While it might be romantic to imagine this simple genesis, Lewis said long after *The Hobbit* was published that the most important inspiration behind Tolkien's Middle Earth novels was not simply an image of a hobbit but rather Tolkien's great love for studying and creating language. Lewis wrote that the mythology "grew out of the private language which Tolkien had invented: a real language with roots and sound-laws such as only a great philologist could invent."<sup>67</sup> As part of the "original Hobbit audience," Lewis knew that Tolkien created an imaginary land not simply to visualize a storyline but to bring his skills in philology to light.<sup>68</sup> By creating a land peopled by various races of intelligent beings, Tolkien could labor to create many separate languages that were not only linguistically accurate but were supported by entire histories and mythologies of their people. When we look at his fictional works, we must remember that beyond the trilogy and *The Hobbit* he also wrote an extensive prelude called the *Simarillion*

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<sup>65</sup> Gareth Knight, *The Magical World of the Inklings* (Dorset: Element Books, 1990), 57.

<sup>66</sup> Tolkien, "24 July 1938," *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 38.

<sup>67</sup> Lewis, "24 September 1951," *The Collected Letters, Vol. III*, 113.

<sup>68</sup> Tolkien, "7 December 1942," *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 58.

which divulges these complex histories in full detail. For Tolkien, the brilliance of fiction came not only by its ability to astound and transport the mind but in its believability.

From their inception Lewis was incredibly supportive of Tolkien's novels, writing reviews for *The Hobbit* in *The Times* and *The Times Literary Supplement*. He found it unusually good, providing a brilliant exploration into the world of fairy tales they both enjoyed so much. When he first read any of the work, Tolkien had no intention of bringing it to completion as a novel. Lewis, however, was astounded by the potential he saw and wrote to Arthur Greeves,

Since term began I have had a delightful time reading a children's story which Tolkien has just written. I have told of him before: the one man absolutely fitted, if fate had allowed, to be a third in our friendship in the old days, for he also grew up on W. Morris and George Macdonald. Reading his fairy tale has been uncanny—it is so exactly like what we wd. both have longed to write (or read) in 1916: so that one feels he is not making it up but merely describing the same world into which all three of us have the entry. Whether it is really *good* (I think it is until the end) is of course another question: still more, whether it will succeed with modern children.<sup>69</sup>

Lewis enjoyed much more of a hands-on role in the creation of Tolkien's novels than Tolkien had with his. Delighted in the "cosmic struggle... mediated through an imaginary world," he urged his friend to feed his fancy and delve further into Middle Earth.<sup>70</sup> Once Tolkien published his works Lewis immediately and continually recommended them with high regard to his friends, colleagues, and the countless fans who wrote to him.

Lewis's role in the creation of *The Lord of the Rings* was very different than Tolkien's tacit approval of Narnia. Tolkien was the kind of writer who needed constant encouragement to finish his work. As Diana Glyer noted, "Tolkien was a notorious non-finisher."<sup>71</sup> Without the Inklings to egg him on, he admitted that he never would have seen the project through to

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<sup>69</sup> Lewis, "4 February 1933," *The Collected Letters, Vol. II*, 96.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, "29 October 1944," 631.

<sup>71</sup> Glyer, *The Company They Keep*, 57.

completion.<sup>72</sup> Lewis was persistently critical of Tolkien's work, urging him to rewrite and reword in a way he never did with his own writing. He was especially critical of the many lines of verse in the books, saying they were out of place and regrettably poor. Being the perfectionist he was, Tolkien took his criticism to heart and would often go home and rewrite the section over and over until he was satisfied it was just right. This encouragement was the reason C. S. Lewis biographer Alister McGrath called Lewis the "midwife to Tolkien's masterpiece."<sup>73</sup>

Lewis was particularly pleased when Tolkien decided to expand the ideas he had begun in *The Hobbit* and write a trilogy continuing the story of the One Ring in Middle Earth. Calling *The Lord of the Rings* "the book we have all been waiting for," Lewis was enamored with its combination of myth and human truth to create a powerful emotional response.<sup>74</sup> After reading the last two chapters of the first volume aloud to Lewis, Tolkien wrote, "He approved with unusual fervour, and was actually affected to tears by the last chapter."<sup>75</sup> Though the first hobbit story appealed to his fancy and interest, Lewis believed the trilogy exemplified the heart of Tolkien's mythology. It blended together all of the key qualities of the romance and the fairy tale that they both loved. With nominal success for *The Hobbit* at its release, Lewis rallied to "do all in [his] power to secure for Tolkien's great book the recognition it deserves."<sup>76</sup>

But the opinion that Lewis held of the series might be different than what Tolkien originally intended. Unlike Lewis who wrote his Chronicles as "supposals" of the Christ narrative, Tolkien explicitly makes any Christian themes in his books covert and hidden. Many critics have justified this choice as a reflection of Tolkien's own personal history. Raised

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<sup>72</sup> In 1944, Tolkien wrote to his son Christopher that Lewis "is putting the screw on me to finish [my story]. I need some pressure, & should probably respond." Tolkien, "30 March 1944," *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 68.

<sup>73</sup> McGrath, *C. S. Lewis—A Life*, x.

<sup>74</sup> Lewis, "2 August 1956," *The Collected Letters, Vol. III*, 537. He later wrote to a fan who had enjoyed *The Hobbit* but had yet to read *The Lord of the Rings*, "Oh but, believe me, you are still only paddling in the glorious sea of Tolkien... [*LOTR* is] 3 volumes and nearly as long as the Bible and not a word too long." ("14 October 1958," 662).

<sup>75</sup> Tolkien, "31 May 1944," *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 83.

<sup>76</sup> Lewis, "4 December 1953," *The Collected Letters, Vol. III*, 281.

Catholic by his mother and firm in his faith throughout his life, Tolkien's Christianity could be characterized as quiet, practiced, and inherent. Much of the same could be said about his novels. Tolkien never explicitly discusses God or any divine being in *The Lord of the Rings*. While many characters have magical powers, the closest any come to the Christian God is Gandalf in his sacrificial death and resurrection. But unlike Aslan's near-parallel with Christ, the comparison stops there. Tolkien clearly viewed his faith as a more private matter than Lewis who, through both his fiction and his apologetic works, championed an open dialogue about his beliefs. Perhaps it is fair to say that when Lewis says that Tolkien's trilogy "will rank, along with the *Aeneid* as one of what I call my 'immediately sub-religious' books" he was imposing too much of his own agenda onto Tolkien.<sup>77</sup>

Ultimately in their roles as writers, both Lewis and Tolkien exercised incredible influence over one another. Though Lewis wrote somewhat comically about his friend that "you might as well try to influence a bandersnatch," he had more of an impact upon his works than he realized. Tolkien felt a heavy debt towards Lewis for his success as an author:

Lewis was a very impressionable man, and this was abetted by his great generosity and capacity for friendship. The unpayable debt that I owe to him was not 'influence' as it is ordinarily understood, but sheer encouragement. He was for long my only audience. Only from him did I ever get the idea that my 'stuff' could be more than a private hobby. But for his interest and unceasing eagerness for more I should never have brought *The L. of the R.* to a conclusion.<sup>78</sup>

Their legacy as friends is evident in their works of fiction and will stand for many generations to come. Books for all ages, interests, and purposes, they created a new level of imaginative creation for the twentieth century.

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<sup>77</sup> Lewis, "27 October 1949," *The Collected Letters, Vol. II*, 991.

<sup>78</sup> Tolkien, "12 September 1965," *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 361.

## VII. Conclusion

Though their friendship lasted nearly forty years, Tolkien and Lewis unfortunately did not remain as close as they were in the golden days of the Inklings. The exclusive Oxford politics

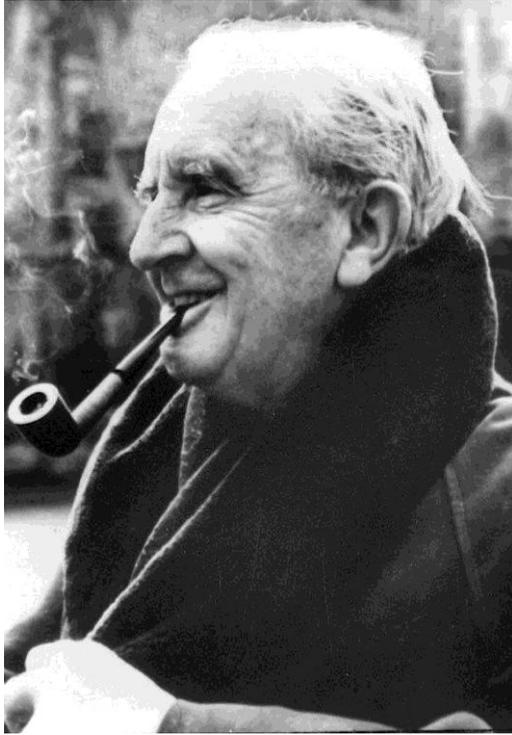


Figure 7: J. R. R. Tolkien

continued to plague Lewis's professional career until he finally achieved an appointment at the rivaling Cambridge in 1954. While this new job provided security and a chance to begin anew in the academic world, it also resulted in a larger geographical and emotional distance between him and Tolkien. The Inklings meetings fizzled to an end and whenever the two could meet up, Tolkien noticed that Lewis "took refuge in 'literary talk'" as an escape from domestic hardships like Warnie's alcoholism that troubled him.<sup>79</sup>

They continued to share meaningful conversations, but increasingly without the addition of personal details of their lives.

Many factors led to the fracturing of their friendship. In a letter to his son, Tolkien wrote, "We were separated first by the sudden apparition of Charles Williams, and then again by his marriage... of which he never even told me."<sup>80</sup> Lewis's affinity towards Williams began with the same impetus as his closeness with Tolkien: their similar views of literature. But whereas Lewis and Tolkien held mutual respect and esteem for one another, Lewis regarded Williams as far above his intellect and idolized his work. Tolkien grew resentful of their closeness and Lewis's utter dedication to the other man. In addition, Lewis's vocal lack of sympathy for Catholicism

<sup>79</sup> Tolkien, "21 March 1957," *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 256.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, "Undated, likely November or December 1963," 341.

began to wear upon Tolkien the older he grew. Simply looking for a friend with whom to discuss and deliberate, he instead found opposition and argumentation. Nevertheless, every now and then when the two could journey back to simpler topics Tolkien remarked that "it was like a glimpse of old times: quiet and rational."<sup>81</sup>

In the 1950s, Lewis met a woman who changed his life in more ways than one. Recently there has been much speculation on the relationship between C. S. Lewis and Joy Davidman Gresham, who married in 1956, including a movie called *Shadowlands* that depicts a reluctant but inspired love story. Others claim their marriage was strictly a political move to keep Joy and her two sons from being deported back to America. Regardless of their true relationship and the nature it took, Lewis failed



Figure 8: Joy Davidman Gresham and C. S. Lewis

to tell Tolkien of this life-changing commitment, something for which his friend never forgave him. Tolkien was deeply hurt that Lewis chose not to confide in him when making such a big decision and credited this omission as part of their distancing.

It may seem strange that Lewis would fail to tell one of his closest friends that he was getting married. One possible explanation is that if the marriage was just a secular marriage (following Lewis's two-marriage system) he simply did not see the union as that important. But as Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper comment, the real answer might be more complex:

Why did Lewis not take Tolkien into his confidence about Joy? Tolkien was a happily married man, he loved his friend, and he clearly wanted to help. On the other hand, Lewis knew Tolkien regarded marrying a divorcee as a very serious matter. Tolkien would of course strongly disapprove of Jack's marriage to Joy. Lewis probably decided against talking to Tolkien about the matter because he knew what his advice would be; as he had

<sup>81</sup> Tolkien, "10 February 1952," *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 161.

already decided what course he was going to take, he saw no point in either asking for, or hearing, that advice.<sup>82</sup>

It would seem that perhaps Tolkien's strictly Catholic definitions of marriage are ultimately why Lewis did not approach his friend either before or after the commitment took place. Tolkien lamented that he "learned of it long after the event" and never forgave his friend for deceiving him.<sup>83</sup>

Only a few short years later, Lewis became very ill. In the summer of 1963 he slipped into a short-lived coma and doctors feared his end was near. Tolkien was one of his few visitors during this time and helped keep his spirits high in the face of lingering illness. Though he briefly regained his strength and returned home with his brother Warnie, Lewis's health eventually slipped back and he died in his home on November 22, 1963. Hardly any famous person has died in such obscurity as Lewis, for his own passing was far overshadowed by the assassination of

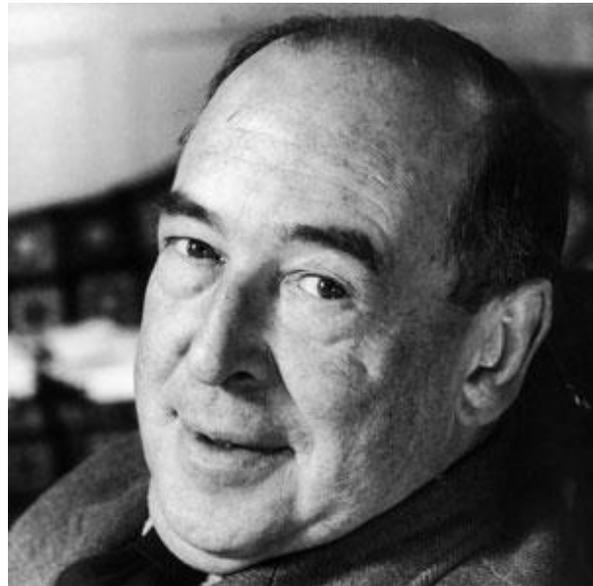


Figure 7: C. S. Lewis

American President John F. Kennedy that same day. In the days following his death Tolkien, Havard, and a young James Como attended a requiem Mass in Lewis's honor before proceeding to the small Anglican churchyard where he was to be buried. There, an emotionally-overcome Warnie conspicuously missing from the crowd, they buried the friend they had known and loved.

The loss shook Tolkien like no other he had ever known. Though he refused to write an obituary or contribute to a memorial volume for his late friend, Tolkien was immensely saddened

<sup>82</sup> Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, 382.

<sup>83</sup> Tolkien, "Undated, likely November or December 1963," *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 341.

by Lewis's death and wrote extensively of his passing to his intimates. To his daughter, he shared:

So far I have felt the normal feelings of a man my age—like an old tree that is losing all its leaves one by one: this feels like an axe-blow near the roots. Very sad that we should have been separated in the last years; but our time of close communion endured in memory for both of us.<sup>84</sup>

Perhaps Tolkien simply needed to express his loss in his own terms rather than broadcast them to the world. His relationship with Lewis was deeply personal and he likely saw it best kept that way. Ironically, Tolkien's own obituary in the *Times* ten years later "was probably written years before by C. S. Lewis."<sup>85</sup> Then again, Lewis was always the more vocal and verbose of the two.

In the end, all that remains are memories of the beautiful, dynamic friendship that rang through the halls of Oxford for so many years. There is no way to know the deep effect each man had upon the other but by looking at the numerous imprints they made upon one another's life and works. It is simply best to end knowing that the relationship forged out of love for mythos and a shared Christian spirit was unlike any other. They treasured one another, immortalizing their memories in the books they lovingly penned. To finish, let us read two closing remarks by the indefatigable friends about the love they shared and the memories they always to preserved.

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<sup>84</sup> Tolkien, "26 November 1963," *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 341.

<sup>85</sup> Tolkien died on September 2, 1973. Colin Duriez, *The C. S. Lewis Chronicles: The Indispensable Biography of the Creator of Narnia Full of Little-Known Facts, Events and Miscellany* (London: BlueBridge, 2005), 297.

*"C.S.L. of course had some oddities and could sometimes be irritating. He was after all and remained an Irishman of Ulster. But... he was generous-minded, on guard against all prejudices, though a few were too deep-rooted in his native background to be observed by him... Still I wish it could be forbidden that after a great man is dead, little men should scribble over him, who have not and must know they have not sufficient knowledge of his life and character to give them any key to the truth."<sup>86</sup>*

*- J. R. R. Tolkien*

*"I don't think Tolkien influenced me, and am certain I didn't influence him. That is, didn't influence what he wrote. My continual encouragement, carried to the point of nagging, influenced him v. much to write at all with the gravity and at that length. In other words I acted as a midwife not as a father. The similarities between his work and mine are due, I think, (a) To nature-temperament. (b) To common sources. We are both soaked in Norse mythology, Geo. MacDonald's fairy-tales, Homer, Beowulf, and medieval romance. Also, of course, we are both Christians."<sup>87</sup>*

*- C. S. Lewis*

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<sup>86</sup> Tolkien, "30 August 1964," *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 350-1.

<sup>87</sup> Lewis, "23 September 1963," *The Collected Letters*, Vol. III, 956.

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