

An Evening with the Inklings

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You may have heard of the new Inklings Research Institute of Canada, co-directed by Trinity Western University professors Monika Hilder and Stephen Dunning. Over the past few weeks, CBC Radio 1 Ideas has featured a special program on the Inklings ñ a literary group including C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and others.

The first member of the Inklings addressed was C.S. Lewis, the widely renowned author of children’s books such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*; theological works like *Mere Christianity*; and the spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy*. Lewis was multi-talented, writing poetry as well as countless books intermingling his Christian faith with topics such as Greek and Roman mythology, theology, and philosophy.

Throughout his youth and young adulthood, Lewis was often troubled by the rift in his own mind created by his love for myth, fiction, and fantasy, and his sharp, rational intellect that dismissed them as false and foolish. Lewis believed that reason and rationality were the only things relevant to reality, and that all the things he loved, such as poetry, mythology, and fiction, were part of an unreal fantasy that had no relevance in real life. This way of life however, eventually led Lewis to the conclusion that while reason and rationality may be true, they were infinitely duller and less interesting than all the things that were imaginary.

It was during his undergrad years at Oxford that Lewis met Owen Barfield. Barfield was a philosopher, poet, and author of *Worlds Apart* and numerous others works exploring the evolution of consciousness. Through their mutual love of poetry and imagination, Barfield helped Lewis realize that the spheres of reason and imagination did not clash, but rather enhanced each other, and were both significant in real life. As Lewis later said, “Enchantment, far from dulling or emptying the world, gives it a new depth and dimension. I do not despise real woods because I have read of enchanted ones, rather, the reading makes all woods a little enchanted.”

During his time at Oxford, Lewis also met J.R.R. Tolkien, author of the well-known books *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Both Tolkien and Lewis had returned from the First World War deeply impacted by the horror and carnage they had witnessed. For Lewis, the war served to re-enforce his already atheistic views, and caused him to see life through a lens of meaninglessness and dark rationalism. By the time Lewis met Tolkien, however, he had rejected the rationalistic, atheist moral philosophy he previously embraced, and had come to the belief that there was in fact a God who created the Universe. Lewis had turned from atheism and embraced belief in God, but did not see the link between his faith and the man who was hung on a cross 2000 years ago. He still saw Christianity itself as a myth. A beautiful myth to a man who loved mythology, but nonetheless untrue.

Though Tolkien and Lewis were friends, there was one issue they always disagreed on; Lewis was a Protestant Christian and Tolkien was a Christian Catholic. While this was a cause for dispute, the two continued to read each other's work and share ideas. In spite of their difference in belief, it was Tolkien who led Lewis to accepting the Christian faith as not only mythically beautiful, but also historically true. In fact, it was Tolkien that led Lewis to accept the Christian faith. In the words of Alister McGrath, Professor of Theology at Kings College and author of *C.S. Lewis A Life: Eccentric Genius and Reluctant Prophet*, "Christianity engages both the imagination and reason, it tells a story which captivates our imagination, but that story also conveys intellectual substance. It's saying: this is the way things really are."

It was also during his time at Oxford that Lewis met poet and playwright Charles Williams, author of supernatural thrillers such as *The Place of the Lion*, *War in Heaven*, and *All Hallows Eve*. Williams introduced Lewis to Romantic Theology, the idea that we can see the love of Christ for His Church within the love of a husband and wife. Williams' ideas appealed to the mystical side of C.S. Lewis, and the spiritual idea that human beings desire more than a rational explanation for the world around them greatly infiltrated Lewis's life and work.

The Inklings were steeped in the ideals of Classical thought. Living in a time when the Modern era was just emerging, they found Modern ideals lacking in significant ways. Professor Monika Hilder states that "the Inklings are important because they critiqued Modernity's loss of belief in objective moral truth, and that has all the consequences. All the problems of modernity which include individualism, the over privileging of analytical reason, scientism, totalitarianism, genocide, the destruction of the environment. All this results from moral relativity.

Each of these authors explores questions of meaning and moral values that are crucial in the modern age. Their works aren't just great pieces of literary art, they are also profound philosophical writings on what it means to be human and how we encounter the divine in an age determined to remove it from our midst.

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