

Inklings Forever

Volume 4 A Collection of Essays Presented at the
Fourth Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S.
Lewis & Friends

Article 5

3-2004

C.S. Lewis, Tutor

Joel D. Heck
Concordia University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Heck, Joel D. (2004) "C.S. Lewis, Tutor," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 4 , Article 5.
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol4/iss1/5

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for the Study of C.S. Lewis & Friends at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inklings Forever* by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.

INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume IV

A Collection of Essays Presented at
The Fourth

FRANCES WHITE EWBank COLLOQUIUM

ON

C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 2004
Upland, Indiana

C.S. Lewis, Tutor

Joel D. Heck

C.S. Lewis, Tutor

Joel D. Heck

I want you to imagine that the year is 1950. You are an undergraduate at Magdalen College, Oxford, and you have begun your study of English language and literature. C.S. Lewis is your tutor.

Looking “Along” a Tutorial with Lewis

Since the tutorial is a formal event, you arrive for your tutorial in the New Building, third staircase, third set of rooms, wearing your academic gown. Upon entering you see Tintoretto’s “The Origin of the Milky Way,” a reproduction of a painting from the National Gallery in London with its depiction of Jupiter, Hercules, and Juno, whose milk formed both the Milky Way above and some lilies below. Two armchairs, a large sofa, a dining table and chairs sparsely adorn the room.¹

Lewis sits in his armchair, chain-smoking Wills Gold Flake cigarettes or a pipe, wearing a brown Harris Tweed Jacket, gray flannel trousers, and carpet slippers.² You take the easy chair on the left-hand side of the fireplace.

You read the essay assigned the previous week, perhaps three thousand words or more, while Lewis listens carefully.³ Lewis always does some of the same readings that he assigns you, because of his conscientious concern to provide appropriate critique. He jots down notes on a pad as you read your essay. After the reading of the essay, Lewis pauses and then critiques your essay, following the pattern that Kirkpatrick instilled in him, challenging the use of inexact words or phrases or your interpretation of the previous week’s readings.

He invites you elaborate further on a couple of points you have made. So you elaborate, and the two of you discuss. Lewis suggests that you might care to read what so and so has said on this topic.⁴

Here is an example of that critique, as J. O Reed describes in his diary an essay he wrote in 1950 on Shakespeare’s King Lear, drawing encouragement from Lewis’s reaction:

I am a little nervous before the tutorial (when I am to read the essay which is upon the two plots in King Lear) but all goes well. . . . When I have finished Lewis says my essay was good, well-written, & bringing in an

interesting new theory of my own. The epithet ‘well-written’ is most surprising—tho’ perhaps, touched up, it does not read too badly. Also I think he is surprisingly tolerant of my theory, which at the time had seemed very flimsy to me. When the tutorial finishes, he says my essay was good again & I go off contented.⁵

Reed describes another tutorial with Lewis in which more substantive discussion of various themes took place:

Down at 10 to the tutorial. This continues ‘til 11.15, & contains much interesting discussion on the Relationship of Art & Life—Lewis sees a fullness in our everyday perceptions gained through art—poetry gives us, as it were, emotional or aesthetic “proverbs” to apply to life—We see in a tree all that our reading has told us of trees—Both of their imaginative values through literature and art & their construction and processes through our scientific study.⁶

Near the end of the tutorial, friendly conversation is included. The tutorial ends with an assignment of the next week’s work, including a Reading List, and after about an hour you leave. For those familiar with the Lewis essay “Meditation in a Toolshed,” you have just looked “along” a tutorial with Lewis. Next we look “at” Lewis tutorials, but briefly.

Looking “At” the Tutorial with Lewis

Students of Lewis began each academic term with Collections. During Collections, every student would write two three-hour papers, one on Old or Middle English during the morning and the other on later literature during the afternoon, all of it based on the previous term’s work and work done during vacation. Lewis would conscientiously grade these papers, thirty to forty of them, during the first week of the term so that he would know what sort of progress the students had made and how much they remembered from the last term.⁷

Insight into the course of study in tutorials comes

from Edward L. Edmonds:

Lewis' approach to English Literature was strictly chronological. We started with Anglo-Saxon and finished at 1832. We began with the early Anglo-Saxon prose à la Sweet, e.g. *The Voyages of Ohthere and Wulstan* and through the Saxon Chronicle, to the fiery, more polemical prose of the sermon of Bishop Wulfstan, Archbishop of York, 1002–1023. We also “did” a considerable number of the poems, including “The Fall of the Angels,” “The Seafarer,” “Judith,” “The Phoenix,” and “The Battle of Maldon.” Thence to Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, the 18th century and early 19th century.

In language-study, etymology of words may be out of fashion today, but Lewis insisted on it. He picked up Tyndale's use of “scapegoat” (in his translation of the New Testament from the Greek in 1525). Milton's coinages, “pandemonium” or “ethereal,” for example, received close attention. We noted Milton's strikingly transitive use of the verb “scowl” in “scowls o'er the darkened landscape snow and showers.” His reference to “charm of earliest birds” took us back to Anglo-Saxon “cyrm”; to the “charms” too, which we had already studied, as well as to other later usages, by Sir Walter Scott, for example.⁸

In 1925, Lewis averaged four tutorials a day, three in the morning and one in the late afternoon, usually one or two students at a time.⁹ Later, he tutored many more students, reaching a peak of 43 during Michaelmas Term in 1947. The five years immediately after World War II saw the largest contingency of students at Magdalen, as many soldiers returned from the war to continue their education.

Assessment of Lewis's Tutorial Method

C.S. Lewis, the tutor, received mixed reviews from his former undergraduates. Most of them, however, especially the better undergraduates, appreciated his tutorials. His critics, while few, tend to come from those who were ideologically separate from Lewis. Humphrey Carpenter claimed that many undergraduates were frightened by his manner of conducting tutorials,¹⁰ while George Bailey wrote, “. . . Lewis's great fault, perhaps his only one as a teacher, was his basic lack of interest in his students as individuals.”¹¹ Not serious criticisms, but criticisms nevertheless.

However, many of his students would challenge that characterization. Charles Arnold-Baker wrote to

me, stating, “Intellectually arrogant he certainly was not—he was actually tolerant—but he would not accept the weak and insipid undergraduate who thought that the world owed him a degree. It was said that he would eat an undergraduate for breakfast. Not so! He respected anyone who had done their homework. If sometimes he bit deeply into an intellect, he did so because it was his job.”¹² A. E. F. Davis stated, “He was, above all, a gentlemanly and jovial man of learning, exact in factual accuracy but ready for any form of argument.”¹³

W. J. B. Owen, an English professor at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, agreed. Owen stated, “. . . he was a splendid tutor. . . . I learned much of scholarly method and clear thinking from this process, and also, perhaps, a gracious approach to pupils which I tried to adopt as a teacher myself.”¹⁴

Edward Edmonds agreed with this characterization of Lewis the scholar who held high standards and would accept nothing but the student's best effort: “Lewis made no concessions; and perhaps for the first time I learned to submit to stringent criticism. But, he was never cynical or sarcastic; and his own frequent change of intellectual stance taught me one very valuable lesson for my own students later on, namely that no one should be regarded as an absolute authority. Thus, much as he respected Tillyard, Tillyard for him was not the only authority on Milton, any more than A. C. Bradley's views of Shakespeare were the exclusive ones.”¹⁵

Another of his former students also challenged the view of Carpenter and Bailey. Stating that Lewis's affectionate soubriquet in one group of students was “Papa Lewis,” Paul Piehler claimed that “the idea of Lewis being intimidating among those guys [a group of his students] would have raised incredulous laughter.”¹⁶

Lest one think that Piehler came to Oxford already enthralled with Lewis, he has written: “All my Catholic relatives were crazy about Lewis, thought it marvelous that I would be in HIS college. I was correspondingly dubious, envisioning a tall cadaverous clerical type who would doubtless be maddeningly prone to reduce all literary questions to moral or religious platitudes, so no doubt he'd prove a serious distraction from the studies I intended. I was at that time an almost totally convinced anti-clerical atheist, having read something of all the great iconoclasts of that era, Freud, Frazer, Robertson, etc.”¹⁷

Lewis seems to have been differently received by different students. Those who were shy probably did not appreciate Lewis's direct style, nor did those who were not dedicated to their studies, such as John Betjeman, the later poet laureate of England. Former student Peter Bayley has written, “Lewis valued time as few men I have met, before or since, have done.”¹⁸ Those who were wasting Lewis's time would know it.

But the students who came to learn, who came to be challenged and to grow soon discovered the joy of learning.

Peter Bayley described this Lewisian approach to tutorials in more detail. Bayley wrote, “Even more alarming was his ceaselessly active, almost aggressive conduct of the tutorial. . . . There was something unintentionally rebuffing about Lewis’s intellectual supremacy.” Lewis was a brilliant man, confident in his learning, anxious to impart that learning to students, and not willing to put up with less than a student’s best effort. When Lewis once wrote on a student’s paper, “Load every rift with ore,” he was encouraging the use of examples and quotations, inviting the student to read widely and incorporate concepts from that reading into his writing.¹⁹ As Luke Rigby once wrote, by showing his appreciation and his enthusiasm for learning, Lewis instilled confidence in his students and also demanded effort, both of which resulted in learning.²⁰ Perhaps most important of all, however, Lewis directed his opposition to the views that were held and never to the people who held them.²¹ Those who were unable to distinguish between the viewpoint and the person failed to see the charity with which he treated people and the challenge with which he treated poor logic or unsubstantiated views.

John Lawlor wrote, “One quickly felt that for him dialectic supplied the place of conversation.” After some time, Lawlor came to appreciate “the weekly bout in which no quarter was asked or given.”²² Edward Edmonds wrote,

Always he was probing, always testing to see how far a particular student could go. He once handed me the philosopher Owen Barfield’s book *Poetic Diction* and asked me to read and comment on it. . . . He loved to throw out challenges and see if a student would pick them up.²³

Rachel Trickett, English Tutor at St. Hugh’s in Oxford, brought both disparate viewpoints together when she wrote, “Pupils who survived the combat of his tutorials learned to love and rely on his humanity and loyalty and his stealthy generosity.”²⁴ A. E. F. Davis summarized Lewis the person and Lewis the tutor, when he wrote, “He was, above all, a gentlemanly and jovial man of learning, exact in factual accuracy but ready for any form of argument.”²⁵

This material adapted from Chapter 7 of *Irrigating Deserts: C.S. Lewis on Education* by Joel Heck, forthcoming in 2005 from Concordia Publishing House.

Notes

- ¹ Bayley, “From Master to Colleague,” In *C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table*, edited by James T. Como. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1992, 77.
- ² Email correspondence with Donald Whittle, January 31, 2003. After war service, he took his degree in Modern History (1947–1949), when Lewis helped with tutorials for the History group. He did a term with Lewis on the Political Science paper in the Modern History Degree, consisting of a study of Aristotle, Hobbes, and Rousseau.
- ³ Bayley, “From Master to Colleague,” 6.
- ⁴ Edmonds, “I was there: Recollections of C.S. Lewis at Magdalen,” 1.
- ⁵ Unpublished diary of J. O. Reed, Wednesday, February 8, 1950.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, Friday, June 9, 1950.
- ⁷ Brewer, “The Tutor: A Portrait,” In *C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table*, edited by James T. Como. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1992, 52.
- ⁸ Edmonds, “I was there: Recollections of C.S. Lewis at Magdalen,” 3.
- ⁹ Green and Hooper, *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*, 81.
- ¹⁰ Carpenter, *The Inklings*, 20, 58.
- ¹¹ Bailey, “In the University,” 88.
- ¹² Personal correspondence with Charles Arnold-Baker, February 16, 2003.
- ¹³ Personal correspondence with A. E. F. Davis, February 17, 2003.
- ¹⁴ Graham, *We Remember C.S. Lewis*, 59f.
- ¹⁵ Edmonds, “I was there: Recollections of C.S. Lewis at Magdalen,” 1f.
- ¹⁶ Email correspondence with Paul Piehler, June 2002.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Bayley, “From Master to Colleague,” 7.
- ¹⁹ Personal correspondence dated January 31, 2003, from F. L. Hunt, who took tutorials from Lewis in Oxford during the early 1950s. This quotation comes from Keats’s letter to Shelley on August 16, 1820, evidently alluding to the Mammon episode in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, Book II, Canto VII, stanza xxviii, “Embost with massy gold of glorious gift, And with rich metall loaded every rift,” with the idea that Keats wanted to richly textured verse. Thanks to J. O Reed for this insight.
- ²⁰ Rigby, “A Solid Man,” In *C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table*, edited by James T. Como. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1992, 39.
- ²¹ Stevens and Lyne, eds., “Centenary Readings from C.S. Lewis,” 4.
- ²² Lawlor, *C.S. Lewis: Memories and Reflections*, 3, 9.
- ²³ Edmonds, “I was there: Recollections of C.S. Lewis at Magdalen,” 11.
- ²⁴ Graham, *We Remember C.S. Lewis*, 62.
- ²⁵ Personal correspondence with A. E. F. Davis on

February 17, 2003.