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The Inklings and the Paradox of Friendship

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VII

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The Inklings and the Paradox of Friendship

MariJean Wegert

Honorable Mention, Student Essay Contest

The Inklings and the Paradox of Friendship

MariJean Wegert, Grace College

“Oh for the people who speak one’s own language!” –C.S. Lewis¹

I’ve been reading C.S. Lewis for years now, and he never fails to challenge and inspire. Recently a passage in *The Problem of Pain* caught my attention: “You may have noticed that the books you really love are bound together by a secret thread,” Lewis writes. “You know very well what is the quality that makes you love them, though you cannot put it into words.”² I was drawn to this because I knew exactly what he was talking about. The “secret thread” is a concept that has been lodged deep in me for years, but I had hardly heard it expressed outside of my own thoughts, and certainly never with such clarity. He continued this thought a few lines later: “Are not all lifelong friendships born at the moment when at last you meet another human being *who has some inkling*³...of that something which you were born desiring?”

This was a familiar word. *The Inklings* is the name of the well-known group of authors and intellectuals that met to read their work. Among the members was C.S. Lewis himself, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams. Why the connection? I believe the reference in *A Problem of Pain* was an indirect but deliberate reference to The Inklings, who were a core factor in shaping Lewis’ ideas about friendship and the soul. These ideas were threefold. First, Lewis believed that each soul has a deep and inexpressible identity, a “signature,” that distinguishes it from others. Secondly, that friendship is the recognition of a similar thread or signature in another person. (“What! You too? I thought I was the only one!⁴”) Lastly,

¹ Carpenter 22

² *Problem of Pain* 134

³ Emphasis added.

⁴ *The Four Loves* 64

there is a breach in that bond that leaves each person ultimately longing for heaven and the perfection of relationship. These themes can be found woven throughout all of Lewis's life and works.

If that inkling were to grow and swell into something one could put into words, as Lewis maintains in *The Problem of Pain*, "beyond all possibility of doubt you would say 'here at last is the thing I was made for.' We cannot tell each other about it. It is the secret signature of each soul."⁵ While it may be true that no one can tell one another about this "secret signature" or "secret thread," it was the thread that drew The Inklings together. Lewis himself wrote of The Inklings: "To be sure, we had a common point of view, but we had it before we met. It was the cause rather than the result of our friendship."⁶ He expounds on this idea in *The Four Loves*:

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)... And instantly they stand together in an immense solitude.⁷

When he first came to Oxford, Lewis was haunted by the absence of the comradeship he so hungered for. In a letter he mourned that he could not share his enjoyment of the beauty of his surroundings: "I wish there was anyone here childish enough (or *permanent* enough, not the slave of his particular or outward age) to share it with me. Is it that no man makes real friends after he has passed the undergraduate age?"⁸ Of course, he was soon to find that kinship with Tolkien and later Charles Williams and several other very influential friends, many of which made up The Inklings. Lewis recognized the deep and desperate thirst of the soul for comradeship. His books were woven with this concept, and he realized there was a disparity between the thirsting for a soul-friend and the quenching

⁵ *Problem of Pain* 134

⁶ Carpenter 100

⁷ *Four Loves* 64-65

⁸ Carpenter 22

of that thirst. His ideas on Joy were often linked to this view as well, as is especially seen in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, in that he viewed Joy as the longing or desiring of something that only the realization of heaven can fulfill. *The Problem of Pain* continues,

You have stood before some landscape, which seems to embody what you have been looking for all your life; and then turned to the friend who seems to be seeing what you saw - but at the first words a gulf yawns between you, and you realize that this landscape means something totally different to him, that he is pursuing an alien vision and cares nothing for the ineffable suggestion by which you are transported.⁹

A gulf, an alien vision – these words carry a tragic weight. But Lewis isn't the only one to suggest such a thing. Tolkien understood his sentiments: "Our whole nature at its best and least corrupted, its gentlest and most humane, is still soaked with the sense of 'exile.'" ¹⁰ The poet Matthew Arnold understood it too, independently portraying the same idea in his poem, "The Buried Life."

I knew [men] lived and moved
 Trick'd in disguises, alien to the rest
 Of men¹¹

Even the writer of Proverbs had a grasp on the isolation of the soul. He wrote in Proverbs 14:10, "Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can share its joy."¹²

Each of these men was able to express his own taste of the "alien vision," the "exile" each soul is bound to on earth. They all had come to terms with the fact that everyone is damned to a life in this world, to some extent, alone. However, Lewis cherished his vision of friendship dearly and, in a sense,

⁹ *Problem of Pain* 134

¹⁰ Carpenter 182

¹¹ Arnold 283

¹² Proverbs 14:10

lived by it. He said in his later years, "To this day the vision of the world which comes most naturally to me is one in which 'we two' or 'we few' (and in a sense, 'we happy few') stand together against something stronger and larger."¹³ His ideas were laced with a strong poetic vision and romanticism. The phrase, "We happy few" was derived from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, in a moving scene as the king rallies his troops, calling out:

"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers,
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother!"¹⁴

The weight and beauty of these lines is difficult to overlook, and it is obvious that Lewis was impacted by the sentiment expressed and, at least in some form, strove for the manifestation of it in his own life. His involvement in World War I had to have affected his concept of "brotherhood" or friendship, as did his early connection with his closest friend, Arthur Greeves. Arthur not only helped Lewis *define* friendship but also to *embody* it for the first time. He was one of the first people that Lewis ever met that felt the same winds of "northernness," (a deep, mood-laden impression first experienced by Lewis in a poem by Longfellow and George Macdonald's *Phantasies*). Their friendship began by sharing that taste of Joy. Then he began to expand and transform Lewis's former perspective of beauty and delight by giving him new eyes. Arthur persisted in persuading Lewis that the attraction and wild beauty he found in "northernness" could be found in the concrete world of reality as well. Cynthia Marshall writes that, "this time, instead of pulling him into another world and making this world seem paltry by comparison, Joy began to transfigure *this* world. His earlier experiences of Joy began to mingle with the beauty of the ordinary, the homely, as he had begun to sense that beauty through the influence of Arthur Greeves."¹⁵ This new insight was absolutely indispensable in some of his best works, such as *The Chronicles of*

¹³ Carpenter 161

¹⁴ Craig 628 (Act IV scene iii)

¹⁵ Marshall 106

Narnia, which are teeming with the richness of everyday pleasures combined with the thrilling excitement of the fantastical.

Many of Lewis's stories echoed his vision of soul-friendships, or "kindred spirits" as Anne of Green Gables would call them. Sometimes the longing was presented in a distorted form, ravished by sinful nature. In *That Hideous Strength*, one of the main characters, Mark Studdock, is continuously yearning to be a part of (as Lewis termed it) an "Inner Circle," and as a result becomes involved the N.I.C.E, a devilish, power-hungry group hell-bent on world domination. Lewis shows through Mark's point of view the desire of every human being to *belong* to something, or to "be on the inside," but also that acting on that longing for the wrong reasons will inevitably have disastrous effects. Lewis offers St. Anne's, a safe place full of loving people, as a foil to the not-so N.I.C.E., and is Mark eventually finds his sense of place and kinship.

The idea of kinship manifested itself as strongly in Lewis's life as in his writings. In fact, all of the Inklings seemed to possess a warm sensitivity to each other as heart-friends or fellows. They savored their relationship through many creative mediums, but especially through the artistic expression of words. Once, Tolkien began to write an epic poem about the Inklings (in the style of *Beowulf*) that expressed poetically the timbre of their friendship better than any "description" or "explanation" could (Translated into readable English from Anglo-Saxon): "Lo! We have heard in old days of the wisdom and cunning-minded Inklings, how these wise ones sat together in their deliberations, skillfully reciting learning and song-craft, earnestly meditating. That was true joy!"¹⁶ Another time, in a similar style, C.S. Lewis wrote to an author named E.P. Eddison, entreating him to visit "one or two fast friends of mine who still, in this age, delight in noble books, that is in strange adventure, heroic feats, good manners, and the report of fair lands." Lewis promised to offer him "the best cheer and feast we can or may

¹⁶ Carpenter 176

devise.”¹⁷ Sometimes the Inklings went on walking-tours of the English countryside, which was an opportunity for them to discuss vast amounts of literature, debate philosophy, and argue religion. During one of these, “Warnie” (Warren) Lewis, C.S. Lewis’s brother, made a comment that exhibited the curious and rare nature of their ideas about connectedness: “Down on the river was a perfect mill house where we amused ourselves by dreaming of it as a home for the Inklings,”¹⁸ he wrote. This caught my attention simply because I have dreamed up places for my friends and me to live also; it is a way of putting into a story the close-knit bond I share with them. I can easily imagine the Inklings doing the same. A poem by Charles Williams expressed the noble sentiment of the Inklings as well:

“Where, while the days made man of me
My love felt yours amazedly
Men splendid among men.”¹⁹

Lewis, especially, valued the primal masculinity that drew him and his friends together. He writes,

Long before history began we men have got together and done things. We enjoyed one another’s society greatly; we Braves, we hunters, all bound together by shared skill, shared dangers and hardships, and esoteric jokes.²⁰

The Inklings relished the ideals of the knights of old, who were loyal to each other above all else. In *Surprised By Joy*, Lewis quotes *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a preface to chapter three: “For all these fair people in hall were in their first age; none happier under the heaven; their king, the man of noblest temper. It would be a hard task today to find so brave a fellowship in any castle.”²¹

¹⁷ Carpenter 190

¹⁸ Carpenter 204

¹⁹ Williams 1

²⁰ Carpenter 167

²¹ *Surprised by Joy* 42

As for Lewis himself, the Inklings, and many others, had the highest regard for him. He understood the deep desire for kinship and the battle on earth that he was destined to fight for that kinship. And fight he did! Remember that poem Tolkien wrote after the style of *Beowulf*? He got as far as this line: “One of [The Inklings] was Hlothwig (Lewis), the dearest of men, broad and bright of word...”²² And Dr. Robert Harvard, a member of The Inklings and Lewis’s own physician, said of him, “he gave one a warmth of friendship which I have never met anywhere else,”²³ and “He was the link that bound us all together.”²⁴

I think the triumph of Lewis’s ideas about friendship is that he found a paradox and welcomed it. An inkling of companionship, an inkling of understanding, an inkling of Heaven is all we get in this world, and that inkling is what Lewis embraced. He found that it has magnificent potential. Tapping into this potential not only brought his friends together, but it also affected thousands of readers generations to come. Those who read Lewis’s work can catch still a glimpse of the kinship God created us for, and with him exclaim, “What! You too? I thought I was the only one!”

²² Carpenter 176

²³ Carpenter 171

²⁴ Carpenter 252

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