

The Inklings: Canon, Criticism, and Genre Fiction

A small group of friends in mid-twentieth-century Britain, nicknamed the “Inklings,” invented the genre of fantasy as we know it. But J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and their lesser-known colleagues Charles Williams and Dorothy Sayers weren’t just writers of popular fiction; they were also passionate readers of medieval and early modern literature whose scholarship on classic works fueled their creation of new ones. By uniting “high culture” like *Beowulf*, the *Divine Comedy*, and *Paradise Lost* with despised “genre fiction” like science fiction, fantasy, detective novels, and children’s books, they reached wide audiences and have had enduring influence on Anglophone culture.

In this junior tutorial, we’ll use the writings of these four friends to explore several different kinds of intertextuality. We’ll read major works of medieval and early modern literature alongside twentieth-century fiction, studying the relationship between canonical models and the later writers who respond to and reinvent them. We’ll read the Inklings’ scholarship on literature and their creative writing together, understanding criticism as a creative endeavor and creative writing as a form of criticism. And we’ll read our four authors as a tight-knit coterie in conversation with one another, thinking about how a group of like-minded contemporaries can influence each other and the wider world. Along the way, we’ll also investigate the special affordances of marginal genres like fantasy, science fiction, detective fiction, and children’s literature, and we’ll question what makes writing “popular” or “literary,” “academic” or “public.”

Readings will include substantial excerpts from *Beowulf*, Dante, Spenser, and Milton; a variety of fiction, poetry, scholarship, public writing, and letters by the Inklings; and theoretical texts on intertextuality, canonicity, translation, and genre to engage with in writing your own final paper.

Course Goals

In this course, you will learn how to do original scholarly research in the field of English and write a 20-25 page research paper. We will work closely together through each stage of the writing process, from research to revision, to hone not only your final paper but your skills as a student and scholar. You will practice working with a wide variety of resources, including letters, journals, biographies, essays, and contemporary reviews, and using a number of theoretical and methodological approaches, especially dealing with issues related to intertextuality and genre. Finally, for those of you personally interested in creative writing, I hope that working with these scholar-authors will help you understand your own writing as an engagement with a long literary tradition, producing new understandings of the works you most love to read, revising or reinventing them to suit new contexts, and translating them for wider audiences.

Required Texts

Beowulf (trans. Tolkien)
Purgatorio (trans. Sayers)
The Lord of the Rings

Perelandra

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe

All Hallows Eve

Gaudy Night

Printed reader with chapters, articles, excerpts, etc.

Grading

Participation and assignments	20%
Short paper	10%
Prospectus and annotated bibliography	15%
Draft	15%
Final paper	40%

Schedule

Note that each week has two topics: a content topic focused on the writings of Tolkien, Lewis, Williams, Sayers, or some combination thereof, and an auxiliary topic dealing with theory, methodology, or your writing process for the final paper.

Week 1: Meet the Inklings + The Plan of the Tutorial

Lewis, *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, "Preface"

Lewis, *The Four Loves*, "Friendship"

Selection of letters and reviews

Humphrey Carpenter, "Introduction" to *The Inklings*

T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and Individual Talent"

Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, "Figures in the Corpus," in *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*

Week 2: Tolkien as Scholar + Imagining the Monstrous and Fantastic

Beowulf (translated by Tolkien)

Tolkien, "The Monsters and the Critics"

Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories"

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)"

Rosemary Jackson, "The Fantastic as a Mode" in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*

Week 3: Tolkien as Novelist + Defining the Genre of Fantasy

Tolkien, *The Return of the King*

Tzvetan Todorov, "Literary Genres" from *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*

Tom Shippey, "Lit and Lang" from *The Road to Middle Earth*

Jesse Weiner, "Classical Epic and the Poetics of Modern Fantasy" in *Classical Traditions in Modern Fantasy*

Week 4: Lewis as Scholar + Theorizing Intertextuality

Milton, *Paradise Lost*, books 4, 8-9

Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, "Dedication," "Epic Poetry," "Milton and St. Augustine," "The Doctrine of the Unchanging Human Heart"

Williams, "Milton," from *The Image of the City and Other Essays*

Harold Bloom, "Prologue" from *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*

Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel"

Week 5: Lewis as Science Fiction Writer + Writing Coterie

Lewis, *Perelandra*

Sanford Schwartz, "Paradise Reframed: Keeping Time on Venus" from *C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier: Science and the Supernatural in the Space Trilogy*

Adam Roberts, "Defining Science Fiction" from *Science Fiction*

Raymond Williams, "The Significance of Bloomsbury as a Cultural and Literary Group"

Alan Jacobs, "Preface" to *The Year of Our Lord 1943*

SHORT ESSAY (6-8 pages) DUE at noon the day before class

Week 6: Williams and Sayers as Scholars + Translation Studies

Sayers, "Introduction" to *Inferno*

Purgatorio (translated by Sayers)

Williams, *The Image of Beatrice*, "Introduction"

Sayers, "...And Telling You a Story: A Note on the Divine Comedy"

Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies*, "Central Issues" and "Poetry and Translation"

Week 7: Williams's "Spiritual Thrillers" + Canon and Authority

Williams, *All Hallows' Eve*

Barbara Newman, "Charles Williams and the Companions of the Coinherence"

Seamus Heaney, "Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet"

Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, pp. 1-12, 21-29.

Week 8: Sayers's Detective Fiction + The Margins of the Academy

Sayers, *Gaudy Night*

Selected reviews of *Gaudy Night*

Edmund Wilson, "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?"

Williams, selections from *The Detective Fiction Reviews of Charles Williams*

Ann McClellan, "Alma Mater: Women, the Academy, and Mothering in Dorothy L. Sayers's *Gaudy Night*"

PROPOSAL AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE

Week 9: Lewis as Children's Writer + Allegorical Methods

Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Book I, cantos 1, 10-12

Lewis, "The Faerie Queene" from *The Allegory of Love*
Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*
Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children"
Zohar Shavit, "Preface" and "The Self-Image of Children's Literature" (pp. 33-43), from *The Poetics of Children's Literature*

Week 10: Biographies and Private Writings + The Position of the Author

Lewis, excerpts from *The Pilgrim's Regress* and *Surprised by Joy*

Selected letters

Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author"

To do: Identify and evaluate the available biographies on the author about whom you'll be writing, and choose the most scholarly and reliable source. Be prepared to talk about your search, the options, and the reasons for your decision with the class.

To do: Select an additional letter or journal entry by your author to share with the class. Please email the text or scan of the letter to Kathryn by 5 pm the day before class.

OUTLINE DUE at noon the day before class

Week 11: Tradition, Canon, History + Assessing Arguments

Lewis, "Introduction to Athanasius's *On the Incarnation*"

Lewis, "Cliche Came Out of Its Cage"

Lewis, "Men Without Chests" from *The Abolition of Man*

Sayers, "Creed or Chaos?"

Sayers, "The Lost Tools of Learning"

John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, "Canonical and Noncanonical: The Current Debate"

Week 12: Writers on Writing + The Process of Academic Writing

Tolkien, "Leaf by Niggle"

Tolkien, "Mythopoeia"

Lewis, "On Stories"

Sayers, "The Image of God" from *The Mind of the Maker*

COMPLETE DRAFT DUE at noon the day before class

Week 13: Poetry + Revision

Lewis, "Evolutionary Hymn," "As the Ruin Falls," "After Prayers, Lie Cold," "Scanzons"

Tolkien, "The Cat and the Fiddle," "Song of Beren and Luthien," "Galadriel's Song of Eldamar,"

"Lament for the Rohirrim," "In Western Lands Beneath the Sun"

Williams, selections from *Taliessin through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars*

In class: Workshop drafts.

Week 14: Presentations

PAPER DUE