



Office of Faculty Research

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# May 2007 Research Reporter

## The Company They Keep: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as Writers in Community by Dr. Diana Glycer

In the introduction to her new book, The Company They Keep: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as Writers in Community (The Kent State University Press, 2007), **Diana Glycer** offers a telling example of how common sense can run in the face of gilded consensus. She explains how, as she fell in love with Tolkien’s Hobbit series, then Lewis’s writing, and then Charles Williams’ “The Place of the Lion,” she was thrilled to learn that the three were not only friends but members of the Inklings, a group that met weekly in Oxford for close to twenty years to discuss each other’s writing projects. She was fascinated by the nature of the group and the significant influence they must have had on each other as writers. She was equally fascinated to find that most scholars denied any mutual influence at all. Indeed, the Inklings themselves went to great lengths to discredit the notion that any one of them had either influenced or been influenced by any of the others. Glycer writes:

*“Why such forthright denial of influence? ... I was mystified. Tolkien, Lewis, Williams, and the other Inklings met regularly, read their works aloud to one another, discussed and critiqued each other’s manuscripts, and revised and rewrote their work, and people say they didn’t have any influence on each other? That didn’t sound plausible.” (xvi)*

Many scholars go wrong, Glycer contends, in assuming that influence and imitation are inextricably linked, and these same scholars use this misunderstanding to show that, since the individual members of the Inklings wrote works that were so dissimilar, they couldn’t possibly have influenced each other. To make her point, Glycer introduces Lewis’s idea of the “Second Friend,” a congenial adversary who, precisely because he is an adversary, often exercises a formidable influence on one’s own growth. Glycer writes, *“Their differences brought their personal convictions into sharper relief and allowed them to articulate these distinctions with greater strength and clarity.”*

As a guide for her book, Glycer uses rhetorician Karen Burke LeFevre’s taxonomy of resonators, opponents, editors, and collaborators (LeFevre claims these are the four primary ways texts are influenced in community) to show how the Inklings impacted each other’s work. The remaining chapters in her book discuss in more detail the related ideas of community and mutual influence, the effect of referencing one another in books and articles, and the essence of creativity, which Glycer believes only happens in community and thus necessarily depends on outside influences. The creative act of writing, in other words, always involves more than simply putting ink to paper. It includes talking and listening to others, and in some cases, borrowing from them.

Beyond the generous scholarship of her study—the book has over forty pages of tantalizing notes!—Glycer’s writing is seamless. Many scholars are keen to put their two-cents’ worth of commentary in wherever they can, with the net effect akin to being in the middle of a conversation that is constantly interrupted. Glycer is content, however, to let the Inklings speak for themselves. As a result, the reader is magically transported into the very company of the Inklings, and this becomes a book—and I mean this as high praise—that makes you want to grab a pint in solidarity before reading further. (Continued on Page 2)

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## The Company They Keep: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as Writers in Community by Dr. Diana Glycer

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- Michael Bruner

Throughout her study, Glycer shows a very adept eye for seeing the hidden currents that serve as influences among writers, which makes this book as much a study about the act of writing in community as it is about the Inklings themselves. One need not be interested in the Inklings to be taken by this book, in other words. But the true pearls in this study come from the insights Glycer provides into the relationships among the Inklings themselves. It's a fascinating case-study in group dynamics and the creative process, and because the two main subjects of the book, Tolkien and Lewis, also happen to be two of the past century's most important writers, the book serves as a lens into the mechanism of genius, as well. Contrary to popular opinion, genius doesn't spring from the lone hobby shop of some anti-social recluse.

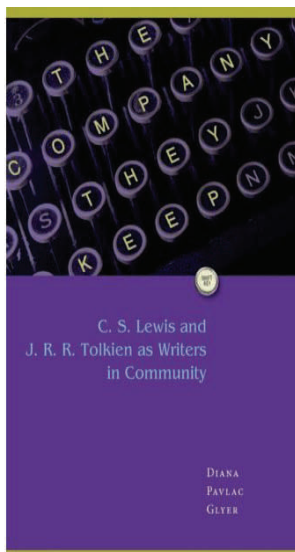
That Tolkien wasn't fond of Lewis's religious writings; that no one much liked Tolkien's sense of humor; that T.S. Eliot and Dorothy Sayers were close to some of them (particularly to Lewis) and collaborated with them on projects—tidbits like these are offered on virtually every page, too, and make for truly entertaining reading. And the extensive quotes alone are worth the price of admission into this wonderful, almost leisurely study (Glycer has done the heavy lifting for us). The end result is a feast for anyone interested in the process of writing in general and the Inklings in particular.

John Donne once wrote, "Ask not for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee." We are all connected by invisible threads of influence, and none of us can remain unaffected by those whose lives we share (and even those whose lives we don't). The Inklings were no exception. The particular fecundity of their work as separate authors had everything to do with their mutual friendship as colleagues and editors, collaborators and "Second Friends." As Glycer herself writes toward the end of this marvelous study:

*When individuals work together, they shape each other's work in various ways. For the Inklings, this included providing inspiration to embark on new projects; offering support in times of discouragement and confusion; shaping texts for proportion, mood, and direction; criticizing drafts so severely that projects were abandoned and sections of documents were deleted; competing in ways that motivated them to continue writing; editing both rough drafts and finished texts; working together to produce joint projects, large and small; creating fictionalized characters based on one another; writing poems about each other; reviewing books and articles written by one another; and including specific references to one another in their work.*

We write in community, sometimes with colleagues alongside us, but always in communion with those who have come before. Glycer's contribution to this community, to the "unending conversation" of the creative life, is a welcome and needed one. When you read this book, you are in good company indeed.

—Michael Bruner



**Dr. Mark Eaton, Professor of English, has done extensive research and writing on the intersection between literature and film; one of his latest offerings is an erudite and thought-provoking exploration of the cinematic adaptations of two Henry James novels,**

***The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*.**

**Dr. Mark Eaton**, Professor of English, has done extensive research and writing on the intersection between literature and film; one of his latest offerings is an erudite and thought-provoking exploration of the cinematic adaptations of two Henry James novels, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*. The central paradox of these adaptations, as Eaton observes, is the successful alliance between James's cultured high modernist fiction and mainstream contemporary cinema. Ironically, the novelist himself was chagrined by the mainstream tastes of the reading public in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: faced by the popularity of pulp fiction, James feared for the durability of his own works. He therefore sought to distinguish his work from this lowbrow culture by creating protagonists who consider themselves superior to their contemporaries in taste and intelligence. He appealed to a small circle of cultured readers who would identify with such refined literary characters, and thus succeeded in separating himself from the plebian proclivities of the masses.

In light of James's deliberate efforts to differentiate his target audience from the lowbrow readers who devoured the popular fiction of his time, the question must be asked: Why have James's works become such a successful medium for popular film adaptations? Eaton addresses this question by observing that the demarcation between high and low culture has shifted significantly since James's time, first with the emergence of "middlebrow culture" in the mid 1920s, and then with the leveling of cultural hierarchies generally in postmodernism. According to Eaton, "nobrow" culture has arisen from the collapse of the distinction in social status marked by highbrow and lowbrow culture.

Within nobrow culture, the same individual who dips into a novel by Henry James may go to see a movie produced for a mass audience. This trend has been accentuated by the rise of art house cinema, which often seeks to combine the highbrow medium of literature with the lowbrow medium of film. Adaptations of Henry James's novels thus fall into this nobrow space between literature and movies occupied by independent filmmakers. Miramax, producer of the successful film adaptation of *The Wings of the Dove*, has brought such independent films further into the mainstream of American film production by appealing to a broad, college-educated audience who are more interested in cinematic entertainment than wading through a densely written Henry James novel. The adaptation of *The Golden Bowl* by Lion's Gate was less successful, perhaps because it was marketed less widely, appealing to a more elite audience of educated upper middle class moviegoers who would be drawn to the use of sepia stills, black-and-white newsreel footage, and allusions to *Citizen Kane*. As Eaton asserts at the conclusion of his penetrating analysis of the marriage of Henry James and mainstream filmmaking, "James's novels must be adapted and marketed to supremely indifferent nonreaders in the nobrow culture of twenty-first-century America if they are going to attract anything approaching a mass audience." Mark Eaton's article "Miramax, Merchant Ivory, and the New Nobrow Culture: Niche Marketing *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*" is published in *Literature/Film Quarterly* 34.4 (Fall 2006): 257-66.—Beth Jones

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We welcome your input!!

While viewers are invited to sympathize with the struggle of an impoverished fisherman or an urban day laborer, Italian Neo-Realist cinema does not create a one-to-one correspondence between poverty and virtue or wealth and evil:

**Dr. John R. Hamilton**, Professor of Theater, Film, and Television, has written an informative and engaging article on the paradoxical importance of private ownership in the socialist films of post-World War II Italy. Ironically, according to the cinematic works of socialist Italian filmmakers such as Vittorio De Sica, Luchino Visconti, and Roberto Rossellini, “the possession of a tool of commerce is the key to self sufficiency and upward mobility.” However, the narratives created by these leftist directors are far from the slick and predictable rags-to-riches tales regularly produced by Hollywood filmmakers. These postwar Italian films display the sharp edges of Neo-Realist cinema, “known for a sparse style of shooting on actual locations, with mostly nonprofessional players.” Their plots are usually “gritty” and “unsentimental,” their protagonists struggle unsuccessfully with the overwhelming challenges of poverty and powerlessness, and communism is implicitly evoked as the potential healer of individual and societal ills.

While viewers are invited to sympathize with the struggle of an impoverished fisherman or an urban day laborer, Italian Neo-Realist cinema does not create a one-to-one correspondence between poverty and virtue or wealth and evil: poor characters are sometimes devious, and the rich may exercise compassion for the poor. Even well-meaning communists may fall short of recognizing or fulfilling the protagonist’s material or psychological needs. The only dependable social institution is *la famiglia*, the nuclear family. In the most famous of Italian Neo-Realist films, *Bicycle Thieves*, the Roman day laborer, Antonio, is comforted by his young son after all of Antonio’s efforts to recover his bicycle and his livelihood have failed.

Although the protagonists of Italian postwar films usually fail in their striving for the possession of private property with its guarantee of corresponding financial security, the beautiful cinematography of these films more than compensates for the fatalism of their storylines. Orson Welles once commented after viewing Visconti’s work that “he had never seen such artistic compositions of poverty.” Likewise, De Sica prided himself on the aesthetic poetry of his films: he cast his amateur actors with meticulous attention, and carefully choreographed his crowd scenes. As Hamilton observes, it is the emotional strength of *la famiglia* and the creative artistry of filmmaking that ultimately triumph over the individual rights of private ownership or the societal potential of communist dogma in Italian postwar Neo-Realist film. “Communism and the Ironic Value of Property in Italian Neo-Realist Cinema” was published in the *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Volume 20, No. 4 (Fall 2006): 61-70.—Beth Jones



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