

C.S. Lewis and the classics

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C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien both came up to Oxford to read classics—that is, the literature, history, and thought of ancient Greece and Rome. Tolkien quit half way through, with second-class grades, while Lewis completed the course and won a prestigious ‘double first’, before embarking on a career as a student of English literature. So Lewis was trained as a classicist, and that training pervades his work, from the adapted myth of Psyche in *Till we have faces*, and the erudite Greek and Latin quips and quotations which ornament *The pilgrim’s regress* as well as his voluminous correspondence, to the exuberant irruption of the wine god Bacchus into Narnia, depicted in *Prince Caspian*. The myths of Rome and Greece played a role in Lewis’s spiritual transformation too, in both his boyhood adoption of atheism and his return to Christianity. This seminar will examine the role of the classics in Lewis’s life and work, focusing on his own published writings but also considering the context of British society at the time, when a classical training was considered central to a good education.

Additional student learning outcomes

Students who have taken this seminar will:

- have gained an understanding of Lewis’s education and the important role played in it by the study of Classical texts
- have read a broad selection of Lewis’s work, and examined the role of the classical tradition therein
- have considered how Lewis used categories derived from his studies of Greece and Rome to conceptualise his presentation of Christian faith

Required reading

Euripides, *Bacchae*, (trans. G. Murray, 1906)

C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian* (1951)

——, *Surprised by joy* (1955)

——, *Till we have faces: a myth retold* (1956)

A.T. Reyes, ed, *C.S. Lewis’s lost Aeneid* (2011) (Please read the introduction, as well as Lewis’s translation.)

Recommended reading list

Apuleius, *The golden ass*, trans. R. Graves (1950)

M. Beard and J. Henderson, *Classics: a very short introduction* (2000)

M. Edwards, ‘Classicist’, in *The Cambridge companion to C.S. Lewis*, ed. R. MacSwain and M. Ward, (2010), 58–71

C.S. Lewis, *The pilgrim’s regress* (1933; new edn 1943)

——, *The discarded image* (1964)

——, *An experiment in criticism* (1961) [esp. chapter 5]

——, *The allegory of love* (1958)

——, *Collected letters*, ed W. Hooper, 3 vols, (2000–6) [esp. vol. 1]

R.W. Livingstone, ed., *The legacy of Greece* (1921)

A. McGrath, ‘A gleam of divine truth: the concept of myth in Lewis’s thought’, in A. McGrath, *The intellectual world of C. S. Lewis* (2013), 55–82

P.A. Montgomery, ‘Classical literature’, in *Reading the classics with C.S. Lewis*, ed. T.L. Martin (2000), 52–71

D.T. Myers, *Bareface: a guide to C.S. Lewis’s last novel* (2004)

G. Sayer, *Jack: a life of C.S. Lewis* (new edn 1997)

P.J. Schakel, *Reason and imagination in C.S. Lewis: a study of Till we have faces* (1984)

C. Stray, *Classics transformed: schools, universities, and society in England, 1830–1960* (1998)

Additional reading

H. Carpenter, *The Inklings* (1978)

- W.G. Johnson and M.K. Houtman, 'Platonic Shadows in C.S. Lewis' *Narnia Chronicles*', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 32 (1986), 75-87
- D.W. King, *C.S. Lewis, poet: the legacy of his poetic impulse* (2001)
- D.W. King, ed., *The Collected Poems of C.S. Lewis* (2015)
- C.S. Lewis, *English literature in the sixteenth century excluding drama* (1954)
- A. McGrath, *C.S. Lewis: a life* (2013)
- , *The intellectual world of C.S. Lewis* (2013)
- J. Patrick, *The Magdalen metaphysicals: idealism and orthodoxy at Oxford, 1901-1945* (1985)
- G. Tiffany, 'C.S. Lewis: The Anti-Platonic Platonist', *Christianity and Literature* 63 (2014), 357-371
- A. Walker, 'Scripture, revelation, and Platonism in C.S. Lewis', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (2002), 19-35
- A.N. Wilson, *C.S. Lewis: a biography* (1990)