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Gender and Inklings Friendship

by Candice Frederick and Sam McBride

In *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis depicts friendship, in contrast with affection and Eros, as wholly non-biological and disinterested. "The species, biologically considered," Lewis says, "has no need of it." Yet Lewis relies on biology for certain of his claims regarding friendship, particularly the biological categories of male and female. Women and men cannot be friends or experience the same quality of friendship that same sex friends enjoy, Lewis claims. In fact,

> [I]n most societies at most periods Friendships will be between women and women. The sexes will have met one another in Affection and in Eros but not in this love. For they will seldom have had with each other the companionship in common activities which is the matrix of Friendship. Where men are educated and women not, where one sex works and the other is idle, or where they do totally different work, they will usually have nothing to be Friends about. (*The Four Loves* 105)

Lewis is correct that women do have companionship in common activities, for many have the uniquely feminine tie to childbirth and caring for the young. This is a strong commonality and unifying factor tracing back to the beginning of time to modern day "care ethics." Even in times of so called "female inferiority," women have bound together to find strength in their implied state of weakness

Yet Lewis's views are not valuing this aspect of women's friendship. Note, for example, his phrase, "where one sex works and the other idle." Lack of education or the fact that one tends and cares for the environment of children and home, hardly constitutes "idleness." In fact, most women (and men who share in household duties) have the utmost respect for the time, energy, patience, and organizational skills that go into such a commitment. Lewis's off-hand comment is, to say the least, an elitist—even prejudiced—view of what women actually do.

Lewis does not entertain the notion that a woman might not want to trade the joys and tribulations of living close to her emotions for a life of intellectual indifference. Who is to say that it is less rewarding to share the pride of a child's development over a discussion of, say, the meaning of "farewell" (a topic which once resulted in a detailed Inklings debate). There are women who would consider such a discussion a waste of precious time, and an activity that is hardly empowering to the future of humankind. Admittedly, this is reverse snobbery, where the life of the sheltered intellect is pitied for its lack of the human touch. Yet Lewis is so unaware of the nature of women's friendships that he cannot conceive that others outside his immediate group could see his views as pitiable.

Lewis exhibits a distaste for qualities that society labels "feminine": nurturance, intuition, respect for feelings. In *The Personal Heresy* Lewis claimed he was against the idea that poetry expressed the poet's feelings. This is a limiting statement and one which his later writings contradict. The ability to feel and write with emotion about the human condition is what makes his friend Ruth Pitter's poetry so moving and heartfelt. It is indeed ironic that Lewis respected and liked her poetry very much without seeing clearly that the wellspring of her gift came from what he sought to deny: the universal appeal and connection of matters of the heart.

In addition to exhibiting a distrust of the feminine within friendship, Lewis is eager to avoid the taint of homosexuality. Though in *Surprised by Joy* Lewis penned what is virtually a defense of pederasty (as practiced at Malvern College), he goes to great pains to show that qualities such as affection are not homosexual when found in an example of friendship from Tacitus:

> [A]ll those hairy old toughs of centurions in Tacitus, clinging to one another and begging for last kisses when the legion was broken up . . . all pansies? If you can believe that you can believe anything. (Carpenter 93)

Just why this is such a big issue is not apparent on the surface. Affection in friendship need not point to homosexuality. The homosexual/friendship issue goes deeper and may, as we maintain, be connected by the hidden issue of homosexuality's societal link to femininity and its emotional nexus. This would explain, at least in part, Lewis's aversion to feminine qualities in the true, manly art of friendship at its best.

The *Four Loves* was written after his marriage to Joy Gresham, and is often thought to reflect her influence. Yet evidence exists that his marriage and subsequent widowing modified, at least subconsciously, his published views on friendship. His marriage forced him to confront what may be termed his "emotional side." He emotionally "grew up" and the mask of logic gave way to the beauty only found in a truly gifted writer who is in tune with his feelings. An example is a poem he wrote when his wife was dying and he was "laid open" to his feelings, which begins with the lines:

> All this is flashy rhetoric about loving you.
> I never had a selfless thought since I was born. (*Poems* 109-110)

Lewis spoke, after his wife's death, of her friendship having meant more to him than those of any of his male friends.

So, Lewis comes full circle in his attitude toward women and friendship. However unconscious he may have been of this change, Lewis's deep love for and abiding friendship with Joy contradict some of the assertions he makes regarding friendship within *The Four Loves*. How can such a contradiction be explained? One school of thought excuses gender bias, such as that exhibited within Lewis's essay, as culturally induced and involuntary. This may be partly the case, yet if we place Lewis into a larger context, we cannot so easily dismiss his earlier statements as "normal" for a male in his culture. Although living and writing in the 1800s, the English philosopher John Stuart Mill and some of his associates (including clergy) felt quite

differently about the abilities of and relationships with women, although Mill's was an even more restrictive time. Mill certainly had a similar rigorous education in logic, Latin and Greek, but reflected on the shortcomings and narrowness of such and made an effort to broaden his emotional horizons.

Looking back on his life after a nervous breakdown, Mill "began to believe . . . that cultivating the inner person was just as important as bettering a person's living conditions or improving the laws that shaped the outward circumstances of his life" (Rose 104). Mill, somewhat like Lewis, became friends with and years later married a women whom he felt in all ways was his intellectual equal. By all biographical accounts, it was their friendship that sustained their years together in its various stages. In addition, there were enlightened clergy around the same time who felt friendships between the sexes that fostered mutual intellectual interests were important to the quality of life of the women involved. Lewis and the Inklings, in contrast, simply take the usual, prejudicial road, and if he reflected on the implications of what he was saying, there is no evidence of such.

Even within Lewis's own historical moment, other groups of intellectuals and creative writers had effectively integrated males and females. In Paris, Gertrude Stein fostered informal meetings of writers and artists. She and her life partner Alice B. Toklas presided over a salon which allowed interaction between highly creative individuals such as the painter Pablo Picasso, poet Ezra Pound, and novelist Ernest Hemingway. Many of the characteristics of that modernism which Lewis so disliked (stream-of-consciousness narration, fractured imagery) were first displayed and discussed in Stein's living room. In New York, the Algonquin Round Table centered around Dorothy Parker and her acerbic wit. The Round Table (also sometimes styling itself The Vicious Circle) joined journalists, critics and authors, such as Robert Benchley, Alexander Woolcott and Edna Ferber, in witty conversation and large quantities of alcohol.

In Lewis's own country, the Bloomsbury group included Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell. The two sisters formed an intellectual circle of writers and artists. The group met regularly on Thursday evenings from 1907 through 1915, and remained linked as friends after that date. The focus of this group was art, literature, and ideas, and their reputation as an intellectual circle was so strong that by the 1930s and the founding of the Inklings, the term Bloomsbury connoted a snobbish, insular aestheticism. No doubt this image is one which the Inklings sought consciously to oppose, just as their manner of dress opposed the dandied, tidy and effeminate figure implanted at Oxford and associated with homosexuality.

It is a point of fascination and reflection as to why there have been so few comparisons made between the Inklings and the Bloomsbury group, despite the fact that they lived and wrote in the London area at the same time. We know that Lewis did not care for the "moderns," but he was familiar with some of the writings of Virginia Woolf. Lewis and Mrs. Moore read Woolf's *Orlando* together. One of the Inklings, Hugo Dyson, met Woolf and had socialized with the group. In some ways these two groups were parallel. Both the Inklings and Bloomsbury were isolated and tended to socialize within their own closed group of like-minded friends.

Yet these two supportive groups could hardly have been more opposite in composition and ideology. The Bloomsburies were as united in their progressive outlook as

the Inklings were in their defiance of progressivism. Bloomsbury was a mixed group consisting of men and women, highly talented and educated that felt comfortable with heterosexuality, homosexuality, alternative living styles, and a high tolerance of gender differences. For whatever reason, be it social, political, or spiritual, Bloomsbury chose to reject much of the gender stereotyping that the Inklings relished as part of their identity.

Woolf addresses these gender issues In her little book entitled *Three Guineas*. Her point of departure in this work is in answering three requests she has received for donations (guineas): for a women's college building fund, for a society promoting the professional employment of women, and one to help prevent war and protect intellectual liberty. In this dissertation she points out the obvious. Women are not included in the academic system in the same way that men are; professional women are limited in opportunity to advance and in salary compensation; and war is a men's game. For Woolf, the serious philosophical question women need to ponder long and hard at the places where they ponder—over the soup pot, washing dishes, tending children—is whether they even want to enter the world of men. Do the "daughters of educated men" want to enter this "procession" of men and all that it entails?

Woolf says it best in her own words:

> Let us never cease from thinking—what is this "civilization" in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies [academic pomp] and why should we take part in them? What are these professions and why should we make money out of them? Where in short is it leading us, the procession of the sons of educated men? (63)

Woolf is not sure that the sort of academic processions in which men like the Inklings were involved—the processions of academia, the processions of male camaraderie and clubs—are something women should even consider emulating, for what good has it done the human condition? Is it not these processions that have reigned war over the centuries? This is the question and it is deeply philosophical and spiritual; one that in itself is of the intellectual ilk comparable to the best philosophical discussions of the Inklings. Of course, the existence of women who can think like Virginia Woolf would be a challenge to the belief in female intellectual and religious inferiority.

The notion of "friendship" practiced by the Inklings has obvious limitations. Intellectual circles such as the Bloomsbury group and Stein's Paris group show that intellectually stimulating and creative conversation can take place in a mixed-gender group. At the same time, they emphasize what the Inklings sought to avoid within their group: the impact of sexual tension on friendships. The homosexual and heterosexual romantic liaisons within the Bloomsbury group were, to say the least, complicated. The Inklings insistence that members be both male and heterosexual avoided such complexities, allowing the freedom to focus only on ideas.

Yet focusing only on ideas is itself a limitation in two ways. First, since as Lewis argues, friendship is a category of love, what kind of love is fostered by avoiding true intimacy? No doubt, the members of the Inklings had human concerns that could not be vented in the venue offered by Inklings meetings and whole parts of their being that

went unshared. It would be fair to say that they knew each other well but not intimately, because intimacy cannot be devoid of matters of the heart; love and friendship are such matters. It will remain an issue of pure conjecture to ask if the members besides Lewis would have liked to share the more personal aspects of their lives. Upon approaching this taboo, an Inkling was given, by words or body language, a warning by Lewis not to tread in this area.

Second, the cerebral friendship based on a world of "ideas," besides being limiting, excludes many of the characteristics that are labeled feminine. These are the very characteristics that some highly educated men, like John Stuart Mill, sought to fill in order to be more "complete" and happy. Among the Inklings women were considered uninteresting people who talked of issues that were of little importance, such as household concerns. This bias cannot be divorced from Lewis's own household, dominated by the figure of Mrs. Moore, who was considered, according to Warnie, boring, childish, and silly. For C.S. Lewis, a man who had limited access to women in his life, and whose initial attraction to Mrs. Moore was apparently sexual (Sayer 89), an assumption that women were uninteresting (or at least were interesting only in an erotic or affectionate way) would be the predicted view to maintain.

However, there is evidence that Lewis had contact, often primarily by mail, with many women who were highly talented and educated, women who had the intellect, conversational skills, and creativity to merit a place among the Inklings. For years he wrote, and occasionally visited with the poet, Ruth Pitter. Lewis admired the work of Dorothy Sayers, Rose Macaulay, the Anglo-Saxon scholar Dorothy Whitelock and a scholar-nun with whom he corresponded, most often identified simply as Sister Penelope. As professors and professionals, the Inklings chose to ignore evidence all around them of competent women. Yet these women were not invited to the Inklings for the simple fact that they were women; based on Lewis's assumptions that friendship did not exist between male and female, he would have assumed that the mere presence of a female would require Eros or affection (as illustrated in the Bloomsbury group), or worse yet, charity. Any of these other forms of love would have inhibited the type of friendship Lewis valued. To this extent, Lewis's form of friendship is remarkably elitist.

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