

Language by Tolkien

In the late 1990s, the British writer and scholar J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* was polled "book of the century" by the English public on four different occasions. Soon after, the 2001 movie version of the first part, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and the 2002 follow-up of the second, *The Two Towers*, created an even greater resurgence of mass appeal for the fantasy epic which had first gained world-wide readership in the 1960s. Despite consistent disparagement by some "serious" critics, Tolkien stands firmly among the ubiquitous authors.

For most of his lifetime, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973) was known mainly as a gifted but obscure Oxford philologist and Old English scholar who had rekindled interest in important Old and Middle English texts such as *Beowulf*. Originally a by-product of Tolkien's love for words and languages, the author's story-writing—a craft he considered both amateur work and an expression of Divinity in Man—inspired a new genre of literature. Moreover, his essays on "fairy-stories" offered rousing assumptions about the meaning, scope, and consequence of Christian art.

I. Life

While perhaps the least of the four avenues to an understanding of Tolkien the Author (biographical, scholarly, literary, theoretical), the importance of the mythwright's life in the formation of his

conceptions of art is—how could it be otherwise?—nevertheless vital. Humphrey Carpenter published the hitherto unsurpassed authoritative biography *Tolkien* in 1977 (now HarperCollins, 2002), and offered ingress to the writer's mind.

Although born in Bloemfontein, South Africa, and descended from a German family ("Tolkien" is a dialect variant of "tollkühn," daftly undaunted), J. R. R. T. understood himself quintessentially a rural Englishman. His mother's family, the Suffields of Evesham, had inhabited the West Midlands for time immemorial. Similar to Tolkien's somewhat-contemporary A. E. Housman's poetic affection for nearby Shropshire, it is from the Warwick- and Worcestershire country that the learned author drew his sense of identity: Tolkien told that his "halflings" were in a sense a reflection of the pleasant English peasantry. Moreover: "I am," he wrote (from Tolkien's *Letters* no. 213, also ed. Carpenter, Houghton Mifflin, 2000), "in fact a Hobbit (in all but size). I like gardens, trees and unmechanized farmlands; I smoke a pipe, and like good plain food (unrefrigerated). . . . I like and even dare to wear in these dull days, ornamental waistcoats. I am fond of mushrooms (out of a field); have a very simple sense of humour (which even my appreciative critics find tiresome); I go to bed late and get up late (when possible). I do not travel much." The ravaging of the ancient forests of Fangorn in *The Lord of the Rings* and the lament of the tree-herd ents at the destruction of the countryside by the evil orcs reflect both

Tolkien's love for trees and his sense of loss of rural England, of which he felt he was voice and part.

Tolkien lost both his parents at a very young age: his father at three and his mother when he was twelve years old. His maternal wellspring, however, had instilled in her son a thirst for foreign languages, and her Catholic faith. Both factors would become decisive in Tolkien's life. While in grammar school in Birmingham, Tolkien privately studied relatively obscure languages such as Welsh, Finnish, and Gothic in addition to acquiring the required fluency in Latin, Greek, and French. Soon, he also began inventing his own tongues, later resulting in several elvish dialects and fragments of at least half a dozen other languages.

As ward of the Catholic priest Francis Morgan, Ronald and his younger brother Hilary grew up devout faithful of Rome. Tolkien's mythopoeic imagination and his sense of religious duty clashed, perhaps for the only time, when Morgan forbade the young man's romance with Edith Bratt. A fellow orphan, Edith boarded in the same house as the Tolkien brothers. Soon enamoured, Edith inspired a pivotal character for the body of mythology Ronald was creating as he aimed to give England stories resounding with the powerful Germanic spirit of Norse myth, the later *Silmarillion*. Tolkien described Edith, "Her hair was raven, her skin clear, her eyes bright, and she could sing—and *dance*" (she had once danced for Tolkien in the woods). In his stories, she became the elven princess Lúthien, whom the mortal hero Béren first glimpses through trees, dancing among hemlock. They married after Ronald had turned 21 and received his B.A. from Exeter College, Oxford, in 1915.

The young scholar was immediately drafted to serve at the Somme as a lieutenant with the Lancashire Fusiliers until 1918, when he came down with "trench fever." Professor [Tom Shippey](#), philologist and author of *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (Houghton Mifflin, 2002) and *The Road to Middle Earth* (Houghton Mifflin, 2003), and others have suggested that Tolkien's war experience places him among

other "traumatized authors" of the twentieth century such as [George Orwell](#), Kurt Vonnegut, William Golding, and Tolkien's friend [C. S. Lewis](#), who came to terms with their "bewilderment" of industrialized warfare through the medium of fantasy. [Shippey points out](#) that Tolkien's characters frequently find themselves literally "bewildered" in the wild of Middle Earth, disconnected and able to rely only on their own perseverance, and that the Evil of Mordor starkly resembles that of totalitarian states. Tolkien did compose parts of the *Silmarillion* while in the trenches in France. Publicist David Mills likewise places Tolkien's work in the post-war tradition of reeling individuals in search of a tradition, similar to the characters of T. S. Eliot, Graham Greene, and Evelyn Waugh.

Returned to England, Tolkien earned his M.A. from Oxford in 1919, then proceeded to work as a private tutor, and with the Oxford English Dictionary. By 1920, he became reader, then professor of English in Leeds. Oxford University appointed him Professor of Anglo-Saxon in 1925, and of English Language and Literature in 1945, a position he retained for fourteen years. During his years in Oxford, Tolkien became part of a group of friendly scholars called "The Inklings" (quintessentially portrayed in Humphrey Carpenter's *Inklings*, HarperCollins, 1997). The fellowship included such men as [C. S. Lewis](#), the publicist [Charles Williams](#), and the literary critic Owen Barfield, and provided a fertile and appreciative audience for many of Tolkien's works in progress.

After publication of *The Hobbit* in 1937, and more so after finishing the unlikely "sequel" *The Lord of the Rings* in 1955, Tolkien gained increasing fame as a fantasy author. He retired from teaching in 1959. On behest of Edith the Tolkiens left Oxford for the seaside town of Bournemouth in 1968, where the author's wife died three years later. J. R. R. T., by now showered with prizes, decorations, and honorary doctorates, returned to Oxford. [Clyde S. Kilby](#) provides a portrait of the older Tolkien in *Tolkien and the Silmarillion* (Lion, 1977).

Kilby joined the author to assist him in editing his grand mythology, the *Silmarillion*, for publication while Tolkien became increasingly irritated with his celebrity status and unwelcome (and often insensitive) attention from his fans. So it was that the mythwright died in 1973, far from hobbitish obscurity. Tolkien had had Edith's gravestone engraved with the name of his mythic elven princess Lúthien. Buried next to her, his headstone bears that of her heroic mortal lover, Béren.

Tolkien's life and work have been written about extensively. [Tom Shippey's](#) *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (Houghton Mifflin, 2002; interview [here](#)) and *The Road to Middle-Earth* (Houghton Mifflin, 2003) are semi-biographical evaluations of the author's work and philosophy, as is [Joseph Pearce's](#) *Tolkien: Man and Myth* (HarperCollins, 1999).

II. Scholarship

Although by now most noted for his work as a creative writer, Tolkien's scholarship in English philology likewise remains influential. Among the works he produced were the early *Middle English Vocabulary* (Clarendon, 1922) and translations now included in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl* and *Sir Orfeo* (*Gawain* Clarendon 1925, now HarperCollins, 1991), much of which were done while Tolkien was reader, then professor of English in Leeds from 1920 to 1925. Tolkien translated *Sir Gawain* with his Leeds colleague E. V. Gordon, and would later collaborate with his former tutee on *Pearl*.

After he was appointed to the chair of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University in 1925, Tolkien published comparatively little, mainly due to perfectionism. Among his output is an essay on the *Ancrene Wisse: The English Text of the Ancrene Riwe* (Oxford University Press, 1962) and a treatise on *Hali Mei'bad* ("Holy Virginity"), both of which he argued were taught, standardized texts in the Middle Ages. Carpenter points out in *Tolkien* that "his paper on the dialects of Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale* [in *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 1934] is required reading for anyone who wishes to

understand the regional dialects of fourteenth-century English." The passionate philologist also wrote on the Anglo-Saxon poem *Exodus*, on *The Life and Passion of St. Juliene*, and the Middle English *Katerine*.

In 1936, Professor Tolkien delivered the pivotal lecture "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" to the British Academy. Tolkien asserted that this Old English poem had generally been misassessed by previous critics, and that it was crafted with high intricacy, with intentional use of peripheral allusions, and precise reasons for the occurrent monsters the hero battles. During his remaining twenty-three years as chair of Anglo-Saxon and of English Language and Literature at Oxford, Tolkien continued to contribute scholarship on a plethora of other Old and Middle English texts.

The retired professor published the volume *Tree and Leaf* (HarperCollins, 2001) in 1964, focusing more distinctly on composition theory. The book included the lecture "On Fairy-stories" he had given at St. Andrew's in 1939, and "Leaf by Niggle," a story originally published in *The Dublin Review* in 1945. Later editions added the poem "Mythopoeia."

Among Tolkien's posthumous scholarly publications are *Finn and Hengest: The Fragment and the Episode*, edited by Alan Bliss (now HarperCollins, 1998), and his essay miscellany *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (now HarperCollins, 1991). Michael Drouot is editor of a recently discovered, previously unpublished revision by Tolkien, *Beowulf and the Critics—Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies*, Vol. 248 (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2002).

III. Crafting Literature

Wheaton College professor [Clyde S. Kilby](#), a friend and collaborator of Tolkien's, has remarked that the narrative-crafter best revealed his creative process in "Leaf by Niggle," published in *Tree and Leaf* (HarperCollins, 2001). The story tells of the painter Niggle, who feels he is somewhat of a failure for consistently overreaching his grasp. Rather than attempt to

paint another tree, which he longs to do, Niggle decides to focus on “a single leaf caught in the wind.” His image grows, “sending out innumerable branches . . . Strange birds came and settled on the twigs and had to be attended to,” until an entire country bursts forth. Niggle is dissatisfied in spite of the burgeoning magnitude of his painting, caught between its loveliness (to him) and his fear that it is fake. After his death, however, he finds that his picture has become alive. “It is a gift,” he concludes.

Likewise, the creative work of J. R. R. Tolkien is his intertwined desire to create a Norse-hued myth for England and to grant the languages he studied into being a feasible backdrop. Thus, most of his writing is in fact quite dissimilar to his best-known books, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien began to compose the mythical stories of the later *Silmarillion* while he was still a teenager, both in verse and prose. Inspired by Icelandic and “genuine” Celtic myth, by the word-chime of Welsh, and by the melancholic, heroic air of the Anglo-Saxon lays, young Ronald made languages (among them, at least five related dialects of elvish, entish, dwarvish, the Black Speech, various human dialects, and fragments of an “angelic” tongue), a cosmogony, a cosmos both metaphysical and mundane, an intricate geography and anthropology complete with flora, fauna, various races and civilizations with corresponding histories and literatures, all of them found on the western coast of the continent he called, in the Norse tradition, Middle Earth.

The Silmarillion was not published until after Tolkien’s death, but it provided the context for almost all his adult fiction. Tolkien’s earliest creative publications are more or less juvenile poems, albeit often already with a mythic tone (“The Battle of the Eastern Fields”), or a child audience in mind (“Goblin Feet”). Both in Leeds and in Oxford, he wrote more poetry, some in earlier forms of English, many of which would resurface revised to various extents in *The Lord of the Rings*. “The Adventures of Tom Bombadil” (later republished in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil and Other Verses from the Red Book*,

Houghton Mifflin, now 1991) first appeared in *The Oxford Magazine* in 1934. The poem drew on the stories Tolkien invented for his children during a vacation, based on a doll belonging to his son Michael. Its plot, too, already bears a strong resemblance to the Bombadil episode in *The Lord of the Rings*.

A collection of humorous poems, some in Old English, composed by Tolkien, E. V. Gordon, and others for the Viking Club in Leeds were publicized in 1936 as *Songs for the Philologists*. One year later—around the time Tolkien gave his *Beowulf* lecture—George Allen & Unwin of London printed the children’s book *The Hobbit: or There and Back Again*. In it, the strange wizard Gandalf interrupts the peaceful life of Hobbiton in the peaceful rural utopia of the Shire, enticing the complacent hobbit Bilbo Baggins to join a troop of dwarves on an adventure. Hired as a “thief,” Bilbo tags along as the company makes its perilous way through lonely and sometimes magical wilderness towards the Lonely Mountain, where they successfully battle the dragon Smaug and reinstate the dwarf Thorin Oakenshield as King Under the Mountain. C. S. Lewis reviewed *The Hobbit* for the *Times* noting that “to the trained eye some characters will seem almost mythopoeic.” It was equally enthusiastically received by the public, sold out within three months, and became an instant classic.

The rather allegorical “Leaf by Niggle” in *The Dublin Review* in 1945 and the children’s story “Farmer Giles of Ham” in 1949 followed. Quite a contrast, then, was the scholar’s invented ending to the Old English “Battle of Maldon” titled “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son” (1953).

Tolkien’s publishers had long petitioned the overly revision-prone perfectionist for a sequel to the *Hobbit* set in Middle Earth and, contrary to the *Silmarillion* he offered them, featuring hobbits. The first and second parts of Tolkien’s outstanding centerpiece work *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers* appeared in 1954, quickly followed by the conclusion of the trilogy, *The Return of the King*,

the year after (*The Lord of the Rings* first became available in one volume in 1968). The work centers around a quest conducted by the hobbit Frodo and his gardener Sam Gamgee, aiming to destroy the tool of ultimate evil power, the One Ring. Tolkien's epic narrative places the rather undistinguished pair in the midst of overwhelming, violent, and heroic struggles marking the end of one of the pre-Christian ages in Middle Earth, drawing into it much of the *Silmarillion* mythology, and ending in a battle between the forces of freedom (elves, dwarves, ents, hobbits, men) and corruption (orcs, trolls, and other evil creatures headed by the horrific Black Riders, or Nazgul) in which the fate of the earth hangs in the balance between the dominion of the evil lord Sauron and the enchanted loveliness of the peaceful.

After his masterpiece, Tolkien returned to verse with the children's poems "Once Upon a Time" and "The Dragon's Visit" in *Winter's Tales for Children* in 1965. *The Tolkien Reader* consisting of earlier essays and stories became available in 1966, and *Smith of Wootton Major*, somewhat of a children's fairy tale pre-shadowing *The Lord of the Rings* in less distinctive terms, in 1967.

Many J. R. R. Tolkien by-products reached publication in the wake of the huge popularity of *Lord of the Rings* on U. S. campuses in the 1960s. They include a song book with melodies by Donald Swann on which Tolkien collaborated and to which he contributed remarkable calligraphy, titled *The Road Goes Ever On: A Song Cycle* (HarperCollins, now 1978) in 1967. Posthumously, his son Christopher Tolkien oversaw the publication of much of the author's art work, his charming *Father Christmas Letters* in 1976, and, finally in 1977, *The Silmarillion*. Since then, most of Tolkien's fragments and manuscripts have also become available, beginning with *Unfinished Tales* in 1980.

Various Tolkien companions are available, among them Colin Duriez's *J. R. R. Tolkien Handbook* (Baker, 1992)—Duriez, by the way, also wrote *Tolkien and C. S. Lewis* (Paulist Press, 2003), an examination of the complex relation-

ship between the two Inklings friends. The "classic" Tolkien companion is, however, *The Complete Guide to Middle-earth* (Ballantine, 1978) by Robert Foster.

IV. Theory

With his increasing popularity in the 1960s, critics seized upon Tolkien's work, usually focusing on either the question of fantasy literature, on what many saw as allegorical social criticism, or, increasingly, on his premises.

Tolkien's most immediate influence on literature was in inciting what skeptical critics have derided as an escapist and simple-minded genre: fantasy. Tolkien's legacy permeates much of the fantasy that is still being written, often epic and in trilogy format, consistently in Tolkien's many-stringed narrative technique, and not seldomly set in similar wooded, half-wild worlds where elves, dwarves, orcs, and sorcerers who frequently bear what one of Tolkien's early critics (in his case, falsely) called "eye-splitting Celtic names" abound.

Tolkien's characters serve as recurrent archetypes—to an extent even in more divergent authors like the later Peter Beagle, Terry Pratchett, and Neil Gaiman: the not quite incarnate Dark Lord is ubiquitous; benign, witty wizards are pitched against powerful treacherous ones; heroic men in search of, in ignorance, or in denial of their royal heritage (not infrequently attached to or descended from elven princesses) come into their own; stern-faced councils of gandalf- and elrondesque near-immortals meet to bequeath world-saving quests on diminutive-seeming individuals; fellowships of diverse characters of different races traverse creative continents in quest for magical objects on which the fate of the world hinges; battles of vast magnitude abound; and more specifically, while men differ, most twentieth century dwarfs are Tolkien's dwarves essentially, and most elves his eldar.

Patrick Curry has written an apology against the escapist "heresy," *Defending Middle-Earth* (HarperCollins, 1998), and the essay collection *Tolkien and the Critics: Essays on J. R. R.*

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (U. Notre Dame, 1968) gives some insights into early receptions of *The Lord of the Rings* among literati. Another less religiously motivated examination of Tolkien's work is Jane Chance's *Tolkien's Art: "A Mythology for England"* (Macmillan, 1979).

Tolkien always denied *The Lord of the Rings* was meant allegorically for anything (he disliked [C. S. Lewis's Narnia](#) books exactly for that reason), or that they were to be read primarily as social or political criticism. Rather, he intended the narrative to be illustrative. Tolkien was profoundly Catholic, and his idea that myth (or fanciful and seemingly unrealistic fiction) would convey profound truths is rooted in the Christian concepts of Divine revelation and human co-regency. In his [interview](#) with MARS HILL AUDIO, [Joseph Pearce](#), author of *Tolkien: Man and Myth*, explains how Tolkien's theory of creative writing centers around sub-creation, and points to "Leaf by Niggle" as an example.

Tolkien wrote the poem "Mythopoeia" (also in *Tree and Leaf*) to reiterate that sub-creation is a necessary human act of worship for the then-skeptic C. S. Lewis: "man, sub-creator, the refracted light / through whom is splintered from a single White / to many hues, and endlessly combined / in living shapes that move from mind to mind." In "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien explains, "The incarnate mind, the tongue, and the tale are in our world coeval. . . . In such 'fantasy,' as it is called, new forms are made; Faërie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator."

Rolland Hein places Tolkien amidst other near-contemporary Christian mythophili such as C. S. Lewis, Chesterton, L'Engle, MacDonald (and even Dante) in *Christian Mythmakers* (Cornerstone, 2002). Verlyn Flieger's *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's Work* (Kent State U., 2002) focuses closely on Tolkien's idea of co-creation, his creative devotion to

philology, and his confluence with co-Inkling Owen Barfield. [Joseph Pearce](#) edited *Tolkien: A Celebration* (Ignatius, 2001), in which fourteen Tolkien scholars, among them George Sayer and Walter Hooper (C. S. Lewis's biographer), Stephen Lawhead, Tolkien's friend Robert Murray, and Kevin Aldrich (on time in *The Lord of the Rings*), write about the author's literary legacy and spiritual values. [Bradley Birzer](#) authored *J. R. R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-earth* (ISI Books, 2003), which he discusses in [an interview](#).

Mark Eddy Smith has authored a very approachable work, *Tolkien's Ordinary Virtues* (InterVarsity, 2002), in which he examines the moral example of Tolkien's characters.

Two works with a theological slant are forthcoming: In *The Gospel According to Tolkien* (Westminster John Knox, 2003), Ralph Wood examines how the essentially Christian cosmic structure of Middle-Earth, including a moral one, surfaces throughout the pre-Christian narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*; and Fleming Rutledge examines Tolkien's religious allusions and motifs in *The Battle for Middle-earth: Tolkien's Divine Design in The Lord of the Rings* (Eerdmans, 2003).

V. Links

The most extensive bibliographical listing available can be found at [The Tolkien Society web page](#). The official web site of *The Lord of the Rings* movies can be found [here](#). [Ardalambion](#) is a rather comprehensive site on Tolkien's languages.

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