The Man Behind the Myth: J.R.R. Tolkien
Why I’m Interested:

Oxford Professor J.R.R. Tolkien was a man who blended both the scholarly world and the fictitious world, creating works that have lasted for generations. Among some of his notable works are *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, both of which are world-wide successes. Furthermore, in the scholarly world, Tolkien brought *Beowulf*, the oldest written story in the English language, back into the literary world as a serious work of literature that needs to be read. Many critics had falsely read it as a historical document instead of an epic poem, and Tolkien sought to change that—and did (Carpenter 133-4). He changed how philology is studied and taught and written. And he even changed how Chaucer was understood with his essay on the *Reeve’s Tale* (143).

In the literary world, Tolkien is the modern Father of Fantasy, reopening the genre as it were. While there were certainly many before and after, Tolkien’s mythic work shines brightly of something that is not only noteworthy but wholesome. He sought to write a mythology for England, one that would be beautiful and hearken back to England’s ancestors of old (97-8), while at the same time hoping that his work would inspire others to learn heraldry and its stories and culture (Tolkien Intro).

Tolkien wrote much of his work during the Modernist Period, a time when faith was forgotten, and values that had stood for hundreds if not thousands of years were questioned and lost. If in doubt, just research the “Roaring Twenties.” Tolkien was strictly against such conduct. His *The Lord of the Rings* and other works, shine forth as a light in a darkening world, discussing the true merits of friendship and heroism, especially in the cases of Frodo and Sam and Merry and Pippin and Aragorn. He speaks for freedom, even when evil overwhelms and the characters have lost all, as with the comparison of Denethor and Théoden who both lost their families, the former succumbing to the enemy, the other standing up for what he knew to be right. And even when a man does succumb, as in the case of Boromir, Tolkien shows it is not too late to regain lost honor.

Tolkien stood up to the failing morals in a way that reached millions; not only is he an example—he is an inspiration. That is why I am interested in Tolkien.

***

On a personal note Tolkien is the man who opened my mind to Fantasy—or the Land of Faery—as he put it in his critical essay “On Faery Stories” (this also greatly helped bring the fantasy genre out of obscurity). This may not seem important, but to me, it has made all the difference. I first read *The Lord of the Rings* in middle school (which was unheard of at the time—you can’t believe all the odd stares I got from the other kids when they beheld the massive books). I felt of myself, somewhat as an outsider,
and even a little dumb. I remember my inability to focus (I drew instead) and the ridicule my teachers would give me for it. To make matters worse, during the seventh grade, I was isolated from my friends because of a ridiculous “teams” system in my middle school which literally divided the school into parts, each team not being allowed into the other team’s “base.” Beyond that, I read at slightly under the normal reading level, being still in the sixth grade, and when I got my test scores back to show this—it was more than humiliating. I was almost an entire year behind mentally, than what I was physically. But that all changed when I “found” Tolkien. I didn’t breeze through the books—I had to digest them. But when it was over, not only had I found some confidence (which is important to a twelve-year-old), my reading level sky-rocketed to a college and plus level, something no other single work or class has ever been able to do before or after.

**Chronology:**

- Born January 3, 1892 in Bloemfontein, Orange Free State in South Africa
- When just learning to walk, a tarantula bit him on the foot. Though Tolkien doesn’t explicitly remember the tarantula, he does remember running away in fear from something through the long dead grass. While he doesn’t especially dislike spiders, there are giant, evil spiders in several of his stories.
- Due to the hot temperatures, he had to remain inside and dress all in white and his mother remarked he looked like a fairy. However the heat by the time he was three was not good to his health so his mother took him to the coast and then to England in April, 1895. His dad planned on coming but was not able to afford it for some time and then in November contracted rheumatic fever. February 15, 1896, he was dead.
- November 1904, Mother diagnosed with diabetes and passed away.
- They moved to Sarehole in the summer—huge impact as this was out in the countryside and served his imagination well.
- Loved hearing stories of his ancestors
- 1908 he meets Edith Bratt
- 1910 After failing to receive a scholarship at Oxford he is forbidden to see her by his ward, Father Francis Morgan
- August-September 1911 Begins work on the Misty Mountains after visiting the Swiss Alps, particularly between Interlaken and Lauterbrunnen, says, like Bilbo, that he would very much like to see mountains again. He drew much of his inspiration from this trip with such instances as the Lightning Battle in the Hobbit, Rivendell and Dunharrow. From a hike between Interlaken and Lauterbrunnen
- January 1914 He and Edith become engaged
• Summer 1915 Begins training as an officer as well as seriously writing his poetry, which will later turn into his stories
• 22 March 1916 He and Edith are married. June he embarks for France
• 1917 Writes “The Book of Lost Tales” which later becomes The Silmarillion
• 1918 Joins the staff of Oxford English Dictionary
• 1922 Begins work on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight with E.V. Gordon
• 1924 Becomes a Professor of English Language at Leeds University
• 1925 Elected Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford
• 1926 Becomes friends with C.S. Lewis and they form “The Coalbiters,” which will later become “The Inklings”
• 1930 Begins work on The Hobbit but abandons it before it is finished
• 1936 Lectures on Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics, resurrecting the old manuscript to its former glory as something more than just a historical document but as an epic heroic tale. Tolkien finishes The Hobbit and it is accepted for publication by Stanley Unwin
• 1937 Begins work on The Lord of the Rings
• 1939 Delivers lecture On Fairy Stories which helped to solidify fantasy again as a legitimate genre
• 1949 Finishes work on The Lord of the Rings
• 1954 The Fellowship of the Ring and The Two Towers are published by Allen and Unwin
• 1955 The Return of the King is published – It is important to note that the manuscript was written as one novel but was split apart into three books by the publishing company
• 1959 Tolkien retires from Professorship
• 1962 Publication of The Adventures of Tom Bombadil
• 1964 Publication of Tree and Leaf
• 1967 Publication of Smith of Wooten Major
• 1971 Edith dies
• September 2, 1973 Takes ill while visiting friends and dies in a nursing home
• 1977 Publication of The Silmarillion edited by Christopher Tolkien.

(see The Tolkien Reader; J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography)
Helpful Internet Sites

www.davidslife.com/funstuff/tolkien/reviews.htm -- A good site to find scholarly reviews


www.tolkienestate.com -- The official website of J.R.R. Tolkien

www.tolkiensociety.org/index.html -- an international organization registered in the U. K. as an educational charity devoted to helping others learn more about the life and works of J.R.R. Tolkien
Biographical Impressions

Trees were important to Tolkien. In fact, he loved them, and in several of his stories, trees were not only a part of the setting, or as a symbol of purity, but also a part of his mythology. Going back to his childhood, it is easy to understand why.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa. The high heat was terrible to his health though, and so much of his time, he was consigned to stay indoors—until his father planted a grove of Cyprus trees, chiefly for him, so that he could play and explore, without the constant beating of the sun. It was here that Tolkien’s love for growing things and wonder waxed and became an important part of his life (Skull 27).

But fun in the grove didn’t last long. By the time he was four, his family—save his father—moved back to England. The move saved his life, but his father lost his a few months later due to a fever and a brain hemorrhage. It was tragic, and the family trudged on in poverty, keeping as close as they could.

His mother told him stories of his ancestors, encouraging his love of history and reading. He even composed his own dragon story too, which he remembers only a philological fact: “My mother said nothing about the dragon, but pointed out that one could not say ‘a green great dragon’, but had to say ‘a great green dragon’. From this moment on he “was taken up with language” (Carpenter 31).

A few years later, he went on to Oxford, where he honed his love for language and writing. He met his encouraging wife, Edith, of whom he wrote several stories in his mythology. And after the war, he worked on the Oxford New English Dictionary, furthering his love of language and eventually becoming professor at the age of thirty-two, which was remarkably young at the time.

It was in Oxford where Tolkien met C.S. Lewis. Both men were fascinated by mythology and quickly formed a strong friendship. At first they discussed Norse mythology and the various gods and giants intermingled with the politics of the school. They read and commented on each other’s poetry and eventually Tolkien submitted a larger poem “The Gest of Beren and Lúthien” (later became a part of The Silmarillion) which Lewis thoroughly loved. From then on, Lewis became one of Tolkien’s biggest supporters—encouraging him to publish The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings.

For all their friendship and encouragement though, the two men could not see eye to eye on religion, which was a common topic of debate. Thus far, Lewis admitted that Tolkien was right about God’s existence, but he was not sold on Christianity until Tolkien appealed to Lewis’s sense of myth. At first Lewis resisted saying that myths are lies. But Tolkien responded stating emphatically that no they are not. And after their
conversation Lewis converted to Christianity. This is how Tolkien explained it:

You call a tree a tree, and you think nothing more of the word. But it was not a ‘tree’ until someone gave it that name. You call a star a star, and say it is just a ball of matter moving on a mathematical course. But that is merely how you see it. By so naming things and describing them you are only inventing your own terms about them. And just as speech is invention about objects and ideas, so myth is invention about truth. (151)

He further explained that mythology, however shakily, still brings the reader—and writer—closer to truth. So that despite the fact that his greatest tales such as The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings do not have direct appearances of god as Lewis’s tales do, god and truth are nonetheless there, and touch the reader in ways that only myth can.

It was not long after that Lewis encouraged Tolkien to write something grander. Said he, “Tollers, there is too little of what we really like in stories. I am afraid we shall have to try and write some ourselves” (172). Tolkien wrote “The Lost Road” which adhered to his mythology, incorporating Sauron—the great villain of The Lord of the Rings. But little success came of it at the time. And his fellow professors began even looking at him with a little contempt, as though he could not produce anything worth merit.

But then, on a summer day while he was grading essay exams, a student left a sheet blank. Said he:

One of the candidates had mercifully left one of the pages with no writing on it (which is the best thing that can happen to an examiner) and I wrote on it: “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit”. Names always generate stories in my mind. Eventually, I thought I’d better find out what hobbits were like. (175)

World-wide acclaim awaited. The Hobbit began as another story simply to amuse and satiate his desire of discovery and what a hobbit was. He hastily wrote the entire manuscript, except for the ending, and then let it sit for several years. But as chance would have it, a former student of his picked up the manuscript and sent it to a friend who worked for Stanley and Unwin. In just a little over a month, after fixing the ending, The Hobbit was published, and by Christmas the entire first edition was sold out.

His publishers pressed him for more material and he quickly responded by writing the first two chapters of The Lord of the Rings. But work went slowly for many years. In fact, C.S. Lewis had to push Tolkien to finish as it were, and whenever he would, Tolkien would exhaust himself for months making great strides. But then he would revise, and stop, then
resume sometimes after months, sometimes after years.

Finally, after twelve years, and working his mythology into the books, scrupulously checking each passage to ensure it was correct historically, geographically, and mythologically, it was complete. It was a great effort of which Tolkien wrote:

Said he:

The Christian may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed. So great is the bounty with which he has been treated that he may now, perhaps, fairly dare to guess that in Fantasy he may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation. (194) It is written in my life-blood, such as it is, thick or thin; and I can no other.” (208)

In this final statement, Tolkien revealed how he made such a successful and worthwhile work: he made his work, his mythology, a part of him.

Principle Critics

Christopher Tolkien, the youngest son of J.R.R., is a professor at Oxford University and editor of several of his father’s posthumous works such as *The Silmarillion, The Children of Húrin, The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun*, and many others. To each of these, Christopher writes a critical preface, and has written and commented on several of his father’s works. He is referenced several times over in regards to his father’s work and seeks to continue the legacy. Christopher is in charge of the Tolkien estate.

Humphrey Carpenter is the author of several notable biographies, including the authorized J.R.R. Tolkien biography, as well as the children’s book series *Mr. Majeika*. Carpenter’s work has successfully illuminated the true character and mind of J.R.R. Tolkien. Anyone wanting to know more about the Tolkien, his methods, his hopes, and his ideas for his mythology would do well to search out Carpenter’s biography.

C.S. Lewis, author of the successful *Chronicles of Narnia* series and several others both nonfiction and fiction books, also wrote several articles about Tolkien’s works in magazines such as *The Times*. Tolkien’s and Lewis’s works are both frequently compared, and Lewis frequently cited for his thoughts on Tolkien’s work. Lewis was a professor at Oxford University until his untimely death in 1963.
Critical Interpretations

Tolkien, Beowulf, and the Barrow-wights:
By Patrick Callahan

Patrick Callahan argues that the Barrow wights of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* are very similar, if not the same as the dragon in the end of *Beowulf* and that by understanding this point explains why the scene is in the novel at all. His reasoning is that both are supernatural creatures each living in a Barrow filled with treasure. Callahan argues that “action renders moral principle” and that it is because of this that the Barrow-wight episode is justified and furthermore that the virtue or moral is generosity in its highest form of courage and self-sacrifice (5). The Barrow-wight, as the dragon, resembles the curse of selfishness and greed of the evil kings of the past who seek to guard their treasure for eternity. But unlike the dragon, Tolkien’s wights are vampire-like to symbolize that the existence of evil preys on the existence of good (8). However, like Beowulf sacrificing himself to slay the dragon, so to, thematically, did Frodo sacrifice himself, calling upon the powers of goodness to invoke Tom Bombadil’s aid. Frodo, as well as Beowulf, could have run away from the threat, yet they chose to stay. Just like in Beowulf, the act that cleanses selfishness is to spread out the treasure for all to have in one final act of generosity. Only by selfless valor can evil be destroyed. By looking at the episode in this light, it becomes clear why Tolkien included this and many other of the trials that Frodo and his companions faced, not so much to further the plot as to further the virtuous idea of selflessness.

Two Rings to Rule Them All
By Jamie McGregor

Jamie McGregor asserts that despite Tolkien’s claim of no relationship between his One Ring and the ring in *Die Nibelungenlied*, he essentially rewrote or corrected Wagner’s epic. Because of Tolkien’s claim, not many have looked into the relationship. McGregor goes on to say that *The Lord of the Rings* was written partly in spite of Hitler, and because of his intense dislike of the tyrant, would also not want to be associated with Wagner who was also a German. And furthermore, Tolkien disliked Wagner, especially his revolutionist ideas, and socialist agendas, Tolkien himself being quite conservative. Thus, the similarities between *Die Nibelungenlied* and *The Lord of the Rings* came about because Tolkien sought to correct Wagner. McGregor then draws nine plot stages/comparisons between Wagner and Tolkien, the first beginning with the supernatural force that creates the ring and the last with the ring’s destruction by a greed-driven robber who is blind to his own safety. After which, McGregor draws comparisons of Éowyn to Wagner’s Brünhilde, Sauron to Wotan, Gandalf to the Wanderer, and Barad-Dûr to Valhalla. McGregor concludes by stating...
Tolkien’s “denial of any connection was likely intended to avoid a false appearance of kinship where he intended opposition” (151).

**The Comedy of Enchantment in *The Lord of the Rings***

By Christopher Garbowski

Garbowski argues that *The Lord of the Rings* is a tale not only to build up Christian culture, but also to show that God is near and that true art is a religious experience. He begins his essay by making the distinction that there are essentially two types of Christian religious thought: analogical and the dialectical, the former where God is close to the people and the world, and the latter where God is distant. He then goes on to discuss how *The Lord of the Rings* is a comedic work, more in the sense of a happy ending. “Happiness,” he states, “is the proper end of a virtuous life, whereas joy is the proper end of a fantasy” (275). And that ultimately, the fairy story is a kind of conversion story, bringing the reader from despair to joy (276).

During the modernist era, of which Tolkien was against, the modernists believed that with advancing secularization art becomes religion. However, according to Garbowski and Tolkien, art is a part of religion and at its highest form is a religious activity. True fairy stories help to sharpen reason and embrace religion as well as good science. Moreover Tolkien recognizes monsters as symbols of internal vices that need to be overcome. And through the character of Frodo, Tolkien demonstrates that evil cannot be destroyed by an incarnate being of his own will but that that must be combined with grace. In order for Frodo’s will (or anyone else for that matter) to be strong enough stop evil (along with grace), he must not only resist evil but actively seek to destroy it.

McGregor then discusses several aspects of myth and community and concludes by saying the ultimate goal of Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings* is to build up a Christian culture (283).

**The Precious and the Pearl: The Influence of *Pearl* on the One Ring**

By Noah Koubenec

Koubenec argues that Tolkien essentially used the same themes as the Middle Ages dream *Pearl* in his epic mythology. He begins by stating how curious it is that the Ring’s powers are undefined, simply assumed to be military power and empire, but a closer examination shows how closely related the Ring and the Pearl are. *Pearl* the dream vision, has at its central theme the human problem of loss (121). The One Ring has as its central power, the power to preserve, so that the wearer’s life is greatly lengthened. In *Pearl* there is also the intense desire to preserve one’s life and in the dream it was New Jerusalem. He then discusses how the people of Númenór were obsessed with the idea of reaching Valinor and how remarkably similar this is with the Jeweler’s desire to go the New Jerusalem. However, both
Valinor and the New Jerusalem are only enterable by divine appointment.

He then asserts that there are various philological similarities such as the repeated word *precious*. The Jeweler paws his pearl calling it his “precious pearl” and Gollum paws the ring calling it “my precious”.

But even more than that, the pearl and the Ring fail to console the owner as both promise to do so. Instead, the two treasures are essentially addictions that cause overwhelming grief at their loss. Both works seem to be a warning against such vices.

Koubenec concludes by stating that Tolkien’s genius was not by creating something entirely new, but by creating resonance with known myth. And that *Pearl* was fundamental in the “creative forging of the Ring” (131).

**Creative Response**

Tolkien believed in sub-creation. To celebrate both this idea and the time period in which he lived, I carved a pumpkin of Queen Victoria at about the same time as her Diamond Jubilee.
Annotated Works Cited


