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RINGS, SWORDS, AND MONSTERS: EXPLORING FANTASY LITERATURE

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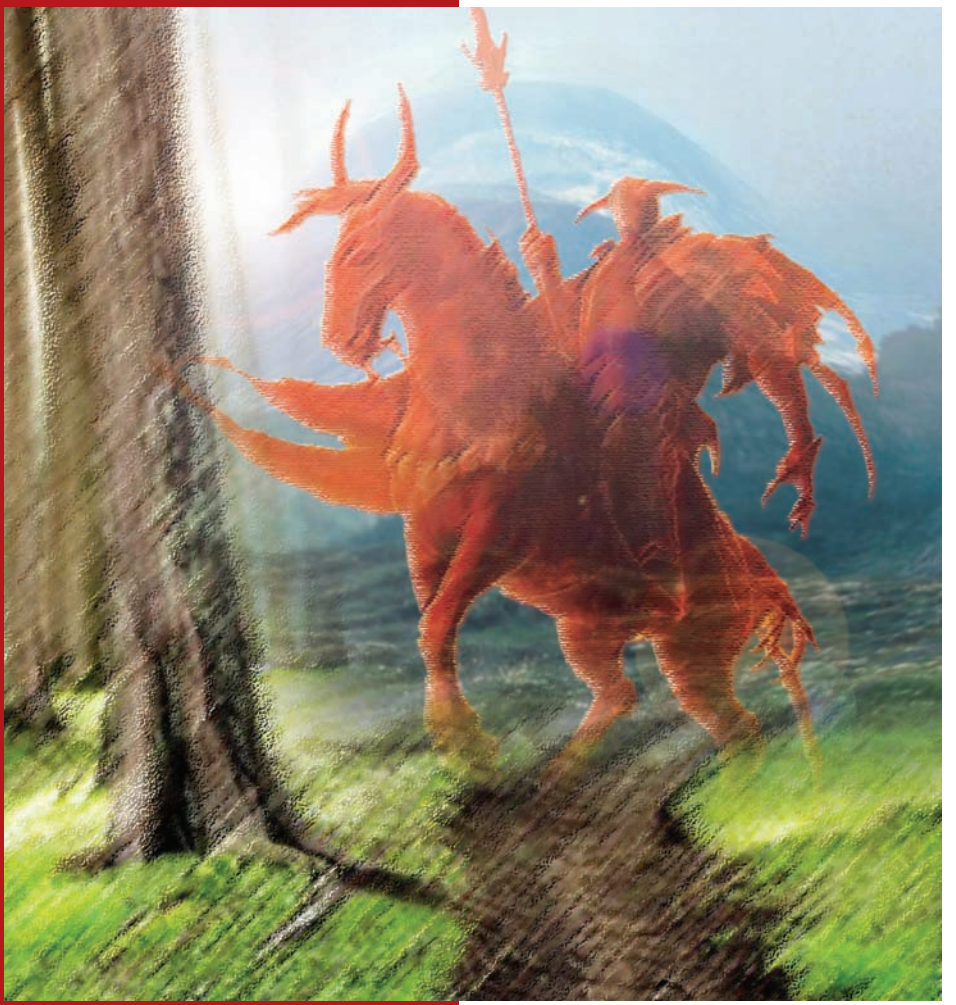

Professor Michael D.C. Drout
WHEATON COLLEGE

Rings, Swords, and Monsters:
Exploring Fantasy Literature

Professor Michael D.C. Drout

Wheaton College

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Exploring Fantasy Literature

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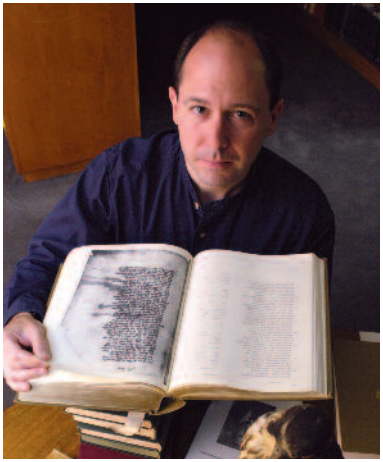

About Your Professor

Michael D.C. Drout

Michael D.C. Drout is the William and Elsie Prentice Professor of English at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, where he teaches courses in Old and Middle English, medieval literature, Chaucer, fantasy, and science fiction.

Professor Drout received his Ph.D. in medieval literature from Loyola University in 1997. He also holds M.A. degrees from Stanford (journalism) and the University of Missouri-Columbia (English literature) and a B.A. from Carnegie Mellon.

In 2005, Professor Drout was awarded the Prentice Professorship for outstanding and innovative teaching. The Wheaton College class of 2002 awarded him the Faculty Appreciation Award. He is editor of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Beowulf and the Critics,* which won the Mythopoeic Scholarship Award for Inklings Studies for 2003. He is also the author of *How Tradition Works: A Meme-Based Poetics of the Anglo-Saxon Tenth Century* (Arizona Medieval and Renaissance Studies). Drout is one of the founding editors of the journal *Tolkien Studies* and is editor of *The J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia* (Routledge).

Drout has published extensively on medieval literature, including articles on William Langland's *Piers Plowman, Beowulf,* the Anglo-Saxon wills, the Old English translation of the *Rule of Chrodegang,* the *Exeter Book* "wisdom poems," and Anglo-Saxon medical texts. He has also published articles on Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* books and Susan Cooper's *Dark Is Rising* series of children's fantasy novels. Drout has written an Old English grammar book, *King Alfred's Grammar,* which is available for free at his website, www.michaeldrout.com. He has given lectures in England, Finland, Italy, Canada, and throughout the United States.

Drout lives in Dedham, Massachusetts, with his wife Raquel D'Oyen, their daughter Rhys, and their son Mitchell.

Introduction

The overwhelming success of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films and the *Harry Potter* series aptly demonstrates that the fantasy genre is alive and well in the new millennium. The very names of authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Terry Brooks evoke ripe tales of heroism and the clash of good versus evil in magical, faraway lands. The rich collection of King Arthur tales have also captured the imagination of millions and resonates with audiences to the present day. And the fantasy genre continues to evolve, with stories of magical realism begging the question of just what should be properly labeled fantasy.

Should fantasy be considered serious literature, or is it merely escapism? In this course, renowned professor Michael D.C. Drout examines the roots of fantasy and explores the works that have defined the genre. Through his incisive analysis and deft assessment of what makes these works so very special, Drout supplies a deeper insight into beloved works and provides a better understanding of why fantasy is such a pervasive force in modern culture.

Lecture 1:
What Is Fantasy Literature?:
Genre, Canon, History

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Richard Mathews's *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination.*

antasy literature is usually defined the same way that Supreme Court Judge Potter Stewart defined obscenity: "I know what it is when I see it." Magic, heroes, monsters, castles, and quests are all elements that make up fantasy, but mainstream or nonfantasy literature can have any of these or, sometimes, none of them.

The Fantasy Genre

Fantasy is a genre, a category. The word genre can be descriptive, or it can be pejorative—when literary critics write of genre fiction, they are signaling that the works they are discussing are not serious literature but perhaps should be examined as examples of popular culture.

Mapping out the boundaries of the fantasy genre is very difficult. It is obviously related to science fiction, historical fiction, horror or ghost stories, and romance. Any one work can be both fantasy and another one of these genres, but it is difficult to find any rules that cover them all.

A good rule of thumb is that fantasy and science fiction are about things that physically cannot happen, while historical fiction is about things that *could* have happened, but didn't. Romance tends to cut across the other genres and says more about the behavior of the characters in the story. To then separate fantasy from science fiction, we can note that fantasy is (usually) set in an imaginary past while science fiction is (usually) set in an imaginary future.

Fantasy is generally contrasted with realism, but this is a problematic distinction, not least because no one can agree on how to define realism. Following Henry James, many critics would say that realism attempts to describe the physical world and psychological states of characters in such a way that the work of literature creates an illusion in the reader's mind of another, equally real world. But literary scholars have shown that almost everything about realism is actually convention rather than any specific fidelity to any kind of language: there is no linguistic test that can be used to separate a work of realist fiction from a work of fantasy. Works are realistic because we think they are realistic.

Fantasy often uses very realistic physical descriptions (often of landscape). It can examine deep psychological motivation in the same way that realistic novels do. It sometimes bears a closer relationship to the realities of physics and biology than do contemporary realist novels.

So it seems that creating a formal definition of fantasy is not a successful approach to understanding it. Another approach might be to examine a

large number of works that are considered fantasy to see what they have in common.

Works of Fantasy

J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* defines fantasy. Other works that are obviously fantasy include Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* books, Terry Brooks's many *Sword of Shannara* books, Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* series, T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, and Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood* and *Lavondyss*.

Some of the books on this list might be fantasy but are also in other genres. For example, at the intersection of fantasy and children's literature you would find Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising* series, Lloyd Alexander's *The Chronicles of Prydian*, and at least the first three of Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* books. There are other books in the children's genre as well that have fantastic or otherworldly elements but aren't always considered to be in the "fantasy" genre: *Alice in Wonderland* or Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* or George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*. Then at the intersection of romance you might find *The Once and Future King*. At the intersection of fantasy and science fiction might be Robert Zelazny's *Nine Princes in Amber*.

If we look at all of these books, the ones that are considered by consensus to be fantasy and those that are on the margins of the genre, we see that they have in common that they are *long*—many are series (three, five, six, seven, or more books). They have magic—events happen that contradict the laws of mundane physics. There are often otherworldly creatures from mythology or the author's invention—hobbits, elves, dwarves, dragons, "Old Ones," "Cauldron Born," wizards, talking trees. But many of these fantastic elements (particularly magic, less so creatures like elves and dwarves) are also found in works that are not usually considered to be part of the fantasy genre, the magical realist novels of authors such as Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Umberto Eco, Italo Calvino, and Salman Rushdie.

Defenders of Fantasy

But there must be something different about fantasy—is it that all fantasy writers are just poor writers, writing for money and success rather than art? If Tolkien had written as well as Rushdie, would he be a magical realist rather than the father of the fantasy genre?

Some defenders of fantasy literature argue that what separates fantasy from mainstream literature, including magical realism, is the ethical and moral perspective of fantasy. Fantasy is seen as being pro-religion, even pro-Christianity, and more in tune with "traditional values" than mainstream literature. However, it is very difficult to find any one consistent ideology in all of fantasy literature; Tolkien is different from Le Guin, who is different from Donaldson.

If ideology is not the glue that holds the genre together, then perhaps the real difference is popularity. Maybe the reaction of readers to fantasy is the key: the popularity of fantasy is unsurpassed by any genre other than romance. "Fantasy is mass market," one publisher supposedly said. "Everything else is niche."

None of these empirical-approach definitions is intellectually satisfying. Each hints at the truth, but each also seems to have very serious flaws. Perhaps instead of trying to fit fantasy in to modern literature, we could try to determine if fantasy is the rebirth of a genre that seemed long dead—traditional epic, founded on stories that were passed along as part of the oral tradition. But fantasy uses modern techniques that were never a part of oral tradition (stream of consciousness, unreliable narrators, flashback, time shifts). Thus fantasy cannot be simply a rebirth. It must be a new hybridization, wherein elements of the traditional epic are mixed with modern techniques and applied to modern concerns. In this way, although fantasy is intimately tied to tradition, that tradition is being used to make an entirely new thing.

With very impressive results, as we shall see.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How would you define fantasy literature? Try to write a 200-word dictionary definition.
2. What literary works would be the best examples of fantasy literature? Explain why.

Suggested Reading

Mathews, Richard. *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Other Books of Interest

Clute, John, and John Grant, eds. *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999.

Sandner, David. *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004.

Lecture 2:
Origins of Modern Fantasy

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Tom Shippey's *The Oxford Book of Fantasy Stories* (introduction).

t is possible to find fantastic elements in literature back to the very beginnings. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* has the monstrous giant Humbaba. The works of Homer have monsters, magic, and the actions of the Olympian gods. Closer to home, *Beowulf* includes the monster Grendel, his mother, and a fire-breathing dragon. But it is not really accurate to categorize these works as part of the fantasy genre. As far as we can tell, they were just literature, whatever that might mean: the magic and the monsters and the gods are not treated by the authors as being particularly unexpected. We cannot say that these stories are consciously working in a fantastic genre.

Victorian Roots

It is more accurate to trace the roots of the fantasy genre, at least the immediate roots, to the nineteenth century and its flowering of popular literature of all kinds. The Victorians developed differentiated and specialized markets for different kinds of literature. Children's literature, adventure literature (a subset of children's literature originally, but later made explicitly for adults), and the almost stereotypically popular Victorian ghost stories all form the foundations for the twentieth-century genre of fantasy literature.

Surveying the breadth of Victorian popular genres would be far beyond the scope of this lecture. Instead, let us examine some of the more significant and long-lasting works that were written in this time period and went on to influence the development of fantasy in the twentieth century.

Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* is often called the greatest children's story of all (this is hyperbole). One of Carroll's great tricks—subsequently adopted by other writers of fantasy—was his ability to roll one adventure along after another without the pauses and elaborate justifications found in much other fantastic literature. Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* also just piles one fantastic idea on top of another. George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* is nearly as fully in the children's genre as *Alice,* but some developments in this book show how fantasy could cross over into other areas: the violence in *Princess and the Goblin,* for instance, occurs in battles and military engagements, very unlike that in, say, Grimm's fairy tales.

A Fantastic Continuum

If we were arranging a continuum, we might put *Alice in Wonderland* at one end: entirely a children's book (though loved and appreciated by adults). Then we could add MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*, which adds to the

fantastic elements of *Alice*'s heroism, violence, and elements of boy–girl romance. At the further end, we might have H. Rider Haggard's adventure novels, which are strongly grounded in heroism and romance but at least attempt to depict violence realistically (the fight scenes are vividly done). And Haggard, on occasion, enters into the fantastic (as does Kipling, who admired Haggard greatly).

Haggard's adventure stories were aimed at boys and men. Although Haggard was enormously influential through novels like *She* and *King Solomon's Mines*. I want to talk about one of his less famous novels: *Eric Brighteyes*.

In this novel, Haggard pulls together material from all of the major Old Norse sagas and weaves it into one exciting story. Tolkien himself said that it was as good or better than all other "historical fiction" treatments of the early medieval period. Eric Brighteyes is a stereotypical Nordic hero: very handsome, very young, very strong, very brave—and rather stupid. Eric loves the sweet, kind Gudruda and is coveted by the evil Swanhild (thus adding a romance element to the adventure story). His strength and fearlessness allows him to accomplish many feats, including climbing impossibly high falls and defeating Skallagrim the berserker (a character who is only tangentially similar to his Old Norse namesake, Egil Skallagrimsson). At every turn, Eric's heroic qualities are met by the evil magic of Swanhild, until in the end, all three lives end in tragedy.

Haggard, like William Morris, was able to stitch together a great variety of fragmentary tales from the Icelandic sagas and from Icelandic and Germanic history. Haggard and Morris both showed how the northern materials needed to be reconfigured from their disordered medieval form into narratives that are palatable for the modern audience. They are thus the originators of a long tradition of fantasy stories that attempt to make sense of the confusing and incomplete narratives of the Middle Ages.

Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* adapts (among other things) the Irish story of St. Brendan's voyage to the west of west, and as such it was particularly interesting to Tolkien, who is just the most famous writer in a long-standing British tradition of imagining a paradise far to the west of England (but not as far as America). *The Water Babies* begins on a very Dickensian note, telling of a young, deprived chimney sweep named Tom, who is eventually turned into a water baby and then swims through the rivers, to the sea, to the furthest west of west, where he forgives his old, evil master and brings about his conversion. Kingsley, who was a clergyman, demonstrated that a fantasy story could have strong religious ideals (his "Mother Carey" is a nickname for the Virgin Mary) and still contain fairies and magic. Some of the style of Kingsley's book, particularly his rather bizarre and funny lists, can be found in T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, and the intrusive narrator of *The Water Babies* has cousins in *The Hobbit* and some early children's fantasy.

The Arthurian Genre

Finally, there is the wildly popular Arthurian genre. Arthurian romance has a pedigree that goes back at least until the twelfth century with Chretién de Troyes through the Breton lais and Marie de France, to Chaucer, the anonymous author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* and Malory. Partly

because it has this long pedigree, Arthurian literature is usually considered simply serious literature (by virtue of being old) or romance (which is an older genre, with roots far back in the Middle Ages) rather than fantasy. Arthurian literature has also had an uneasy relationship with magic, with some traditions treating magic merely as a plot device and others more interested in magic itself. It is impossible to generalize with complete accuracy, but much of the time in Arthurian literature the magical elements are subordinated to male-female relationships, to the ethical aspects of the stories, or to the description of adventure (Malory spends an awful lot of space recapping tournaments). It is worth noting that, at times, Arthurian literature has been both mainstream and serious: Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* is a romantic retelling, in poetic form, of the Arthurian stories. The social class, educational background, and interests of the audience for Arthurian literature, the obviously adult themes of romance, and particularly, the *continuous* tradition of Arthurian literature all work to move it out of the fantasy genre and into mainstream literature.

Both Arthurian and children's literature add to fantasy the absolutely essential element of nostalgia—which comes from a Latin phrase meaning "our house"—the idea that there is an unrecoverable but beautiful past for which we mourn. Nostalgia connects fantasy to childhood or to periods of time—such as the Middle Ages before the wars of religion, or the "belle epoche" before World War I—when people believed life was simpler and better.

The flowering of fantasy, children's literature, and Arthurian literature in the Victorian age also founded a more modern tradition to which subsequent fantasy literature can be directly connected. These works set the stage for the development of fantasy after World War I in the person of J.R.R. Tolkien, born at the end of the Victorian Age and who, after growing up in the belle epoche and seeing that idyllic time shattered by World War I, went on to be the greatest fantasy writer of the twentieth century.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What are the roots of the fantasy genre?
2. What nineteenth-century works influenced the development of fantasy literature in the twentieth century?

Suggested Reading

Shippey, Tom. *The Oxford Book of Fantasy Stories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Other Books of Interest

Haggard, H. Rider. *Eric Brighteyes: The Works of H. Rider Haggard*. Rockville, MD: Wildside Press, 1999.

Prickett, Stephen. *Victorian Fantasy*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005.

Lecture 3:
Tolkien: Life and Languages

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Humphrey Carpenter's *Tolkien: A Biography.*

here is no question that J.R.R. Tolkien is regarded as the greatest fantasy writer in English and that his *Lord of the Rings* is considered *the* masterwork. There is not even any real challenger. So where did he come from? How, if he did not "invent" the fantasy genre, did his works become so successful?

Tolkien's Early Life

His early biography is only somewhat helpful. Tolkien was born in 1892 in Blomfontein, Orange Free State (now a part of South Africa). His father, Arthur Tolkien, who was descended from German immigrants to England, had a posting in Orange Free State from his job with the Bank of Africa. Tolkien's mother, Mabel Suffield, was from an old West-Midlands family.

In 1895, Tolkien, his mother, and his younger brother Hilary traveled to England. Arthur Tolkien was never able to rejoin his family, as he died of fever in February 1896. Tolkien's mother raised the two boys; the family lived first in the city of Birmingham and then in the countryside in the small village of Sarehole. In 1900, Tolkien's mother converted from the Anglican Church to Roman Catholicism. For this she was ostracized from her family and cut off from financial support. By 1904, the strain of raising and supporting the children, combined with her diabetes, became too much for Mabel Tolkien, and she died, leaving the boys as orphans. A Catholic priest, Father Francis Morgan, was the boys' guardian and raised them from that time on.

There are three major elements of Tolkien's early life that seem to have most influenced him, all of which are related to his mother: 1) the loss of his mother and his happy life in the English countryside, 2) Roman Catholicism, and 3) skill with languages.

The loss of his mother and of his happy life in the English countryside seems to have generated a strong nostalgia in Tolkien. Nostalgia, from the Greek word *nóst(os)*, which means a return home, is the feeling of the desire to return home to a place you cannot return. Tolkien made nostalgia (in its emotionally powerful but not pathological sense) a central emotional driver of his mythology. Middle-earth has seen more glorious days, and its inhabitants, particularly the immortal elves, are well aware of this. The land is filled with ruined works that are beyond the skill of the contemporary inhabitants to rebuild. The past was beautiful, but you cannot go back there. Tolkien's nostalgia was very personal, but nostalgia was also a dominant motif in much of the literature, particularly the poetry, created by the generation (which included Tolkien) who had served in World War I.

Roman Catholicism was also intensely personal for Tolkien, but he very deliberately did not make religion explicit within his literature. His belief in Roman Catholicism also kept Tolkien from the fashionable atheism and rejection of traditional morality that separated so many other twentieth-century artists from the morals, ethics, and traditions of their readers. Although *The Lord of the Rings* is Catholic only below the surface, the very fact that it does not reject the value system of a great many middle-class, religious readers may have contributed to its popularity and influence.

Tolkien and Language

Tolkien's gift for languages also seemed to come from his mother. He was already advanced in Greek and Latin at King Edward's School in Birmingham, and he also knew French and German. Tolkien also learned Middle and Old English and began to study the discipline of philology: the love of words. When he discovered a grammar of Gothic, an entire new world opened up for him, and he began to invent new languages based on the principles he had learned. This linguistic creation, which began long before and continued long after Tolkien's student days at Oxford, was the foundation for everything that came along later: Tolkien invented stories to create characters who could speak his languages.

Tolkien created his languages not simply from his fertile imagination, but through the discipline of philology as developed throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by scholars such as Jakob Grimm (of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*), Franz Bopp, and Eduard Sievers. Germanic philology was used to *describe* languages based on sound patterns and sound changes—Tolkien was able to run the process in reverse and *invent* languages through the same processes of phonological description. Tolkien's two major invented languages, *Quenya* and *Sindarin*, are based, respectively, on the phonology of Finnish and of Welsh. But Tolkien wrote his own grammars and invented his own vocabularies, and the languages were constantly changing.

Philology and Creativity

Finally, there is medieval literature, Tolkien's academic discipline. Tolkien himself worked very hard not to separate what he called "lit" and "lang"; that is, he thought that the study of literature without the study of language was an impoverished discipline and vice versa. So Tolkien brought the sensibility of a lover of literature and a creative artist to his study of language and he brought the rigor and logic of philology to his artistic creations and literary interpretations.

Tolkien studied Anglo-Saxon works such as *Beowulf*, Middle English works such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the works of Chaucer, and less-familiar texts in early Middle English such as *Ancrene Wisse*. His scholarship led him to disputed questions, some of which were impossible to resolve and which he then incorporated into his fiction: such as the meaning of the Middle English word "wodwos" (which he derived from the Old English word "wuduwasa"). His scholarly contributions include "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," which is the single most important essay ever written about *Beowulf*, and which continues to shape criticism of the poem: Tolkien argued that *Beowulf* was a great poem, an effective piece of literature, and he showed how the entire work hung together.

His essay on "*Ancrene Wisse* and *Hali Meidhad*" was groundbreaking: he proved that a version of Old English had still been spoken in England long after the Norman Conquest, and he did this by examining only the spelling of certain words in an obscure group of manuscripts: but he was such a good philologist that he could ferret out lost history from mere spelling variations.

Problems in medieval literature are often called "cruces"—they are "tortured" passages that can be obscure or can have more than one interpretation. Tolkien would examine a crux, such as the line "eotenas ond ylfe ond orc-neas" (trolls, elves, and animated-corpses) in *Beowulf*, and try to develop a convincing story that could explain why elves were listed among monsters supposedly spawned by Cain, when Ælfwine and Ælfred, which mean "elf-friend" and "counseled-by-elves," were popular names among the Anglo-Saxons (why would people name their children after monsters?). From his wrestling with the cruces of medieval literature, and his solutions, Tolkien developed some of his most powerful imaginative creations.

The key to understanding Tolkien is in seeing that his rigorous, dry, hard-nosed philology and wildly imaginative, free-flowing creativity were completely intertwined.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What are “cruces” in medieval literature and how did they influence Tolkien’s fantasy?
2. How did Tolkien’s love of language affect his stories?

Suggested Reading

Carpenter, Humphrey. *Tolkien: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

Other Books of Interest

Drout, Michael D.C., ed. *Beowulf and the Critics by J.R.R. Tolkien*. Tempe, AZ: Arizona Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 2002.

Hammond, Wayne G., and Christina Scull, eds. *J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.

Turgon, ed. *The Tolkien Fan’s Medieval Reader*. Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Cold Spring Press, 2004.

Lecture 4:
Tolkien: *The Hobbit*

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit.*

he Hobbit was Tolkien's first publishing success and the only book written for children that he published during his lifetime. It demonstrates the evolution of Tolkien's style and also illustrates the nexus between children's literature and fantasy from which Tolkien's later work evolved. *The Hobbit* began as a story for Tolkien's children and was heavily influenced by other children's books, particularly *The Marvelous Land of Snergs* by E.A. Wyke-Smith, but also, perhaps, Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*. Tolkien had been working on his mythological works for over fifteen years when he wrote *The Hobbit*. These, later published in *The Silmarillion* and *The History of Middle-earth*, dealt with the ancient history of the elves as well as the creation of the world and the dealings of the first Dark Lord, Morgoth.

A Mediator Between Two Worlds

Although he did not know it at the time, Tolkien's famous first line, "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit," began the development of the key concept that would cause the success of *The Lord of the Rings*: Tolkien had created a character who could *mediate* between the medieval stories he loved so much and the world of his twentieth-century, middle-class readers.

Bilbo Baggins, the protagonist of *The Hobbit*, is thoroughly bourgeois. Yet he is brought into contact with the legends of the North: dwarves, dragons, heroes, talking eagles, and a man who can change himself into a bear. Bilbo's middle-class reaction to these creatures and peoples allows the material to be brought into the twentieth century without the difficult "high style" of the medieval texts, but also without irony. If Tolkien feels the need to comment on Thorin's very legalistic reasoning, he can do so from *within* the story, even though Bilbo represents a sensibility that is entirely outside the medieval epic tales.

The psychological development of Bilbo is also very different from that of any medieval hero. Although he lives in a world of trolls, goblins, dragons, and heroes, he is in some ways not a part of that world, being concerned with pocket handkerchiefs, hot breakfasts, and comfortable beds. He has to learn to be a hero, and even when he becomes one, he is a hero with distinctly practical and middle-class attitudes.

Class-based Analysis

Class-based and Marxist analyses of literature are notoriously dull and heavy-handed, but in the case of *The Hobbit,* they *may* be somewhat informative—

as long as we do not take them too seriously or push them too far. Bilbo begins as a middle-class hero (he has inherited his money, and he has a nice hobbit-hole, but he doesn't seem to be a member of an aristocracy) who is brought into contact with the heroic world by the visit of the wizard Gandalf and the dwarves. Although Thorin and company interpret the world through an ancient and aristocratic prism ("bring our curses home to Smaug . . ."), in dealing with Bilbo they adopt the language of a commercial transaction, from the "help wanted" ad scratched on the door by Gandalf to the language of the contract letter.

We can apply class-based analysis to some of the monsters in *The Hobbit*. The first to be encountered, the trolls, speak with lower-class accents as if they were poor laborers (although they are actually robbers). Their violence threatens Bilbo, who has been insulated from such things in his safe, middle-class life. Note also that he is just as appalled by their manners (as is the narrator) as by their physical behavior. The next set of monsters, the goblins, can also be taken as representing a lower class, but rather than poor laborers, they are anonymized factory workers: every goblin is interchangeable, except for the Great Goblin. They are creatures of machines and slavery. The next threat comes from untamed nature—the evil wolves, the Wargs, who threaten Bilbo and the dwarves. They are in stark contrast to the tamed nature found in Beorn's animals. Finally, Smaug, the dragon, represents a threat to middle-class Bilbo not from below (like the laborers and animals) but from above: Smaug represents the greedy aristocracy, who, unlike the middle-class, hoard their money and do not circulate it through society (which is what Bilbo eventually does, making sure that the treasure goes for the reconstruction of commercial towns).

Updating Old Forms

The Hobbit taught Tolkien how to use the medieval material that he so loved: the scene in which Bilbo steals the cup from Smaug comes from *Beowulf*, but it is mediated through both Bilbo and the narrator. Beorn and his house also come from *Beowulf*. Tolkien realized that by modernizing spellings, he could incorporate Old English or Old Norse words without making them too jarring for the modern reader: "Beorn," which means both "warrior" and "bear,", and the "Arkenstone," which in Old English would be the more difficult to pronounce "eorclan stan," or "Mirkwood," which in Old Norse is "myrk-vidr."

Tolkien brought *The Hobbit* into contact with his larger legendarium, but allusively: he mentions the three kindreds of the elves, introduces Elrond the half-elven, and has an evil Necromancer living in southern Mirkwood. This technique of simply mentioning, as if such things were already known, elements of the legendarium created the sense of a vast background to the secondary world that Tolkien used so effectively in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Then there is the Ring, which at first was just a device for Tolkien to equalize Bilbo with the more heroic, physically powerful figures: here the Ring is just a piece of technology, but Tolkien later realized that it was the one logical link between *The Hobbit* and a sequel.

Although *The Hobbit* is in the end a children's book and is far less complex than *The Lord of the Rings*, it does provide some very interesting theoretical puzzles. For example, the chapter "Riddles in the Dark," as originally written in the first edition, had Gollum planning to give the Ring to Bilbo if the hobbit won the riddle contest. As Tolkien struggled to write the sequel, he realized that such a scene was incompatible with the new conception of the Ring. When the chance to revise *The Hobbit* came around, Tolkien rewrote the chapter into its present form. But because he knew many people would have read the original chapter, he introduces the idea, in *The Lord of the Rings*, that Bilbo had told a lie about the riddle game as a way of making a stronger claim to the Ring. This becomes very confusing when a reader encounters only the post-revision version of the chapter and has no idea what lie Bilbo is confessing to. Tolkien enjoyed such puzzles and possible contradictions in his work, and he did not simply revise them away but often figured out how to explain them the way a scholar would explain a variant in a medieval or ancient text.

What Tolkien learned from writing *The Hobbit* has been adopted by subsequent fantasy writers: elements of the children's story can be taken up and developed in complex, sophisticated ways. The psychological journey of the protagonist is important: it is more interesting for readers when the hero is not just a Conan the Barbarian type but rather someone who can mediate between the bourgeois world of the reader and the heroic world of the tradition. Finally, "vast backcloths," a sweeping grandeur of history and tradition, can be invoked by slight—but consistent—allusions. All of these techniques were developed much further in Tolkien's masterwork, *The Lord of the Rings*.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What are some of the reasons for the success of *The Hobbit*?
2. How did Tolkien bridge the gap between the bourgeois world of his readers and the fantastic realm of *The Hobbit*?

Suggested Reading

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1973.

Other Books of Interest

Day, David. *Hobbit Companion*. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2002.

O'Neill, Timothy R. *The Individuated Hobbit: Jung, Tolkien, and the Archetypes of Middle-Earth*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1979.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Annotated Hobbit*. Ed. Douglas A. Anderson. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

Lecture 5:
Tolkien: *The Fellowship of the Ring*

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring.*

It took Tolkien nearly twenty years to complete the sequel to *The Hobbit* that his publishers asked for immediately after the children's book became a success. Readers wanted more hobbits, but Tolkien felt constrained by the promised "happily ever after" ending of *The Hobbit*, so he decided that the protagonist of the sequel should be a cousin or nephew. Tolkien right away knew that Bilbo's magic ring would link the two stories, but it took him several revisions before he figured out how the story would work. Tolkien determined that the Ring (about which, he wrote in a draft: "not very dangerous") was in fact the most dangerous object in his Middle-earth.

One Ring to Rule Them All

The Ring was made by and belongs to Sauron, the Dark Lord, who is attempting to conquer all of Middle-earth. It was lost many years ago, but now it is trying to get back to its master, who is seeking it. With the Ring, the Dark Lord is effectively invincible. If the Ring were to be destroyed, the Dark Lord would fall. Furthermore (and this is the key gimmick) the Ring cannot be used for good: it is somewhat sentient, and it can turn anyone who uses it for domination into a slave of the Dark Lord. The only way to destroy it is to take it to Mount Doom in the heart of the land of Mordor and throw it into the lava. The Ring is safe with Frodo because he does not desire dominion over others, but Frodo himself is not safe, as he is being sought by the servants of the enemy. And over time, the desire that the Ring creates takes a terrible psychological toll on the bearer.

Although Tolkien had worked out these key points by chapter two (after many false starts and dead ends), he still had a great deal of difficulty getting the story going and even getting his protagonists (Frodo, his servant Sam, and two other hobbit companions, Merry and Pippin) out of the Shire and into the wider world. Tolkien takes a couple hundred pages to extricate the characters from the Shire and the "little country" surrounding it: the Old Forest, the House of Tom Bombadil, the Barrow-downs (aspects of each of these had been invented by Tolkien in various poems that he wrote in the 1920s). But these hesitations and pauses ended up creating one of the key aesthetic effects that separates *The Lord of the Rings* from other fantasy: a pattern of action and rest, stress and release. Characters often do the same things (underground journeys, visits to friendly houses, passages through marshes, encounters with unexpected friends) at different points in the narrative, but rather than feeling boring, the repetitions create a sense of layering: the actions in the Shire and the surrounding country prefigure actions that will

happen later in the wider world. This pattern violates the straight-ahead-action style of Tolkien's sources, such as H. Rider Haggard, and it sets *The Lord of the Rings* apart from even its most slavish imitators.

Hobbits, Heroes, and Elves

Tolkien's other great innovation was one he took from *The Hobbit* and expanded: The hobbits are perfect intermediaries between the reader and the vast grandeur of Middle-earth. They experience the text for us, so that Tolkien can write in the third person but have his readers feel as if they were getting a first-person experience. The hobbits are intermediaries, and they are also the protagonists and the heroes. But they are unlikely heroes: they are small, weak, and soft (until the need is on them), fundamentally decent, but worlds apart from the typical hero.

When the hobbits meet such a hero, Strider, sitting in the Prancing Pony, Tolkien creates a situation in which the hero is unrecognized and not respected. He is *not* a modern "anti-hero"—he has no existential self-doubt; he does nothing wrong—but Strider, who is actually Aragorn, the rightful heir to two kingdoms, "looks foul and feels fair." Because he is introduced as Strider, Aragorn never develops the distance from the readers of the narrative that most kingly or princely characters develop. It is another example of how Tolkien tames and naturalizes heroic epic by bringing it into contact with middle-class attitudes and values.

Strider and the hobbits are pursued through the wilderness by the Ringwraiths, the evil servants of Sauron, granted a ghostly, never-ending life, but enslaved to the rings Sauron once gave them. Frodo is stabbed by the Lord of the Ringwraiths but not killed, and eventually the companions reach Rivendell, where Frodo is healed.

Then follows "The Council of Elrond," the most notoriously difficult chapter in *The Lord of the Rings*. Here we learn of the history and politics of Middle-earth through complex speeches and retellings by a variety of characters. Tolkien introduces the theme of "fighting the long defeat," a continued struggle in which one side really has no hope of winning but nevertheless refuses to surrender: a modification of ideas of so-called "Northern Courage" that Tolkien found in the Old English poem "The Battle of Maldon."

He also describes the beauty and sorrow of the elves, another major theme found throughout Tolkien's works. The elves are immortal, reincarnated if they are killed, immune to all disease. Time passes at different rates for them than for mortals. But the elves become weary of the world after enough time, and either fade or travel across the sea to the Blessed Land, where they may have peace. The elves in Middle-earth, however, do not wish to leave their lands and the works of their hands—but the weariness afflicts them. For this reason, long ago, they accepted Sauron's help in the forging of the Rings. The Three Rings of the Elves, although they were never touched by Sauron, would be controlled by the One Ring if Sauron recovered it. And if the Ring is destroyed, all the works of the Three Rings will be undone. So the quest to defeat Sauron is bitter for the elves: even if they win, they will lose their desire to remain in Middle-earth.

Rest and Release

It is eventually decided that the Ring must be destroyed rather than hidden, used, or sent over the sea. Frodo is seen to be the safest guardian, as he is the least likely to be taken over by the Ring. He agrees to carry it to Mount Doom, and Elrond appoints eight companions for him: two men (Aragorn and Boromir, the son of the Steward of Gondor), one elf (Legolas), one dwarf (Gimli, the son of Gloin from *The Hobbit*), the wizard Gandalf, and the other three hobbits. The Fellowship's plan is to proceed south along the Misty Mountains and then cross over at the Redhorn pass. They are foiled by a blizzard and decide instead to pass through the mines of Moria—an abandoned underground dwarf city that has an evil reputation.

In Moria, they are set upon by orcs, trolls, and a gigantic fiery monster called a Balrog (Tolkien's own invention, but developed from Tolkien's work with the Old English word "sigelwara"). Gandalf is pulled into an abyss with the Balrog after saving the company.

This action is followed by one of Tolkien's periods of rest and release, in this case perhaps his most beautiful creation, the elvish forest of Lothlórien, where the Elvish Lady Galadriel wields one of the three elvenrings. In Lothlórien, Tolkien depicts many of his ideas about the elvish world, including the differential flow of time for the elves: what appears to be only a few days to the characters in fact takes a month of time outside the wood.

Galadriel, who is immensely old and immensely powerful, tests the hearts of each of the members of the fellowship, and she gives them valuable gifts: elven cloaks that hide them; *lembas* waybread to sustain them on their journey; a green stone for Aragorn; golden belts for Merry, Pippin, and Boromir; a bow for Legolas; for Sam, a small box of earth; and for Frodo, a phial that contains the light of Eärendil, the evening star. Gimli the dwarf asks for and receives a few strands of the Lady of Lórien's hair.

The fellowship then takes boats down the Great River Anduin; as they get closer to having to make a choice between going to Gondor, where the Ring could at least temporarily be housed in the great city of Minas Tirith, or directly toward the Dark Lord's realm of Mordor, Boromir becomes more and more restless. At the council, he argued that the Ring should be taken to Minas Tirith, if not as a weapon of war, then as security against Sauron's overrunning the city. Boromir does not truly believe that the ring would be able to force *him*, a true-hearted man, to evil.

Eventually, desire for the Ring—to use to defend his city against the overwhelming armed might of the Dark Lord—drives Boromir mad, and he attempts to seize the Ring from Frodo. Frodo and Sam flee, and at the same time the company is attacked by orcs. Frodo and Sam cross the river and set out on their own. The book ends with the Fellowship thus broken. Frodo and Sam have traveled from the safety of their home, the Shire, and under the protection of their wise and powerful companions. Now, with the loss of Gandalf and their separation from the rest of the fellowship, they must grow up enough to take care of themselves.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why is it impossible to use the Ring for good purposes?
2. What aesthetic effects separate *The Lord of the Rings* from other works of fantasy?

Suggested Reading

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

Other Books of Interest

Rosebury, Brian. *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Shippey, Tom. *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

Zimbardo, Rose A., and Neil D. Isaacs, eds. *Understanding The Lord of the Rings: The Best of Tolkien Criticism*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

Lecture 6:
Tolkien: *The Two Towers*

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Two Towers.*

It is worth noting that Tolkien did not envision *The Lord of the Rings* as a trilogy and that it was only published as three books because of financial constraints. However, the three-part structure is a good way of organizing the six-part substructure (Tolkien organized the story into six "books," two of which are found in each volume).

Complicating the Story

The Fellowship of the Ring sets up Tolkien's basic plot structure and introduces the main characters. But Tolkien, unlike most other fantasy writers, does not maintain a linear plot. In *The Two Towers*, Tolkien begins *interlacing* his narratives, developing a new set of complexities and allowing himself to create intricate effects of irony, tension, and symmetry. Even the title of the book is ambiguous. The two towers may be Orthanc, the abode of Saruman, the good-wizard-gone-bad, and Barad-dûr, the fortress of Sauron, the Dark Lord. But the tower of Cirith Ungol, in which Frodo is imprisoned, could be substituted for Barad-dûr.

After the breaking of the fellowship at the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien had to introduce different narrative points of view for the first time in *The Lord of the Rings*. Up to this point, although the narrative is given in third-person omniscient form, the point of view was very closely tied to the hobbits: what they see and know, the reader knows. In *The Two Towers*, we get a third-person omniscient narrator linked to Aragorn (briefly) and Gimli, then to Pippin, then to Merry and Pippin, and then to Frodo and Sam.

Tolkien complicates the point of view, and he also complicates the plot. To the confusion of generations of readers, Tolkien here plays up a second enemy whose name begins with S: Saruman, the wizard who was once the head of the White Council, but who has now turned to evil, though he is not a true servant of Sauron, hoping instead to become a rival and, he hopes, replacement, for the Dark Lord. Thus we have two somewhat different antagonists and two different views of evil.

Doing the Right Thing

The Two Towers begins with the death of Boromir, who has been slain by the orcs who captured Merry and Pippin. Here we see Tolkien's interest in the idea of *redemption*: what Boromir tried to do with Frodo was terribly wrong, but because Boromir was a moral person he was able to recognize this wrong and atone for it by sacrificing himself against the orcs. Thus he dies at peace and even may be transfigured in some way (Tolkien is ambiguous).

Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli decide that they cannot leave Merry and Pippin

behind, even to help Frodo—although his is the real quest. At this point, Tolkien illustrates personal loyalty and decency overcoming geopolitical concerns: although Frodo's capture would end in the enslavement of the world, the three hunters cannot leave Merry and Pippin to be tormented by the orcs. This approach illustrates Tolkien's consistent rejection of the idea that the end justifies the means, and it shows him at his least modern and most traditional.

The section also introduces the idea of doing the right thing without any real hope: the orcs are very far ahead, they are armed, and they are many. Yet Aragorn and company pursue them, and in the end it is for the best, though from a tactical point of view it was a terrible decision.

Merry and Pippin suffer through a terrible journey with the orcs, but they learn of divisions within the ranks of the enemy: the orcs of Saruman despise the orcs of Mordor, and vice versa, and both want the hobbits for the reward that they will bring. The hobbits are able to leverage this division to bring about their escape, in concert with an attack upon the orcs by the Riders of Rohan. The hobbits run into Fangorn forest after a Mordor-orc, Grishnákh, attempts to run away with them, but is killed in doing so. In Fangorn, the hobbits meet Treebeard, an ent, or tree-shepherd, and one of Tolkien's most beloved creations. Treebeard becomes fond of the hobbits, and their news (about Saruman's orcs) causes the old ent (he is the most ancient living creature in Middle-earth) to attempt to rally his people to attack Isengard, the stronghold of Saruman.

Saruman, meanwhile, is readying an attack against Rohan, whose riders have met Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli. They borrow horses from the riders and promise to return them to the King of Rohan, but first they follow the trail of the orcs to Fangorn forest, where they find the tracks of Merry and Pippin. Seeking the two hobbits, they encounter an old man in the forest who is, in fact, Gandalf, brought back from death after his encounter with the Balrog. He is now "Gandalf the White" and is ready to help to lead the battles against Saruman and Sauron.

Medieval Influence

In *The Two Towers,* Tolkien begins to bring additional heroic cultures and civilizations into his story, most importantly the Rohirrim, who speak Old English and are modeled in many ways on the Anglo-Saxons. Although *Beowulf* had been a strong influence on *The Hobbit*, Tolkien's medieval sources had been, up to this point, less influential on *The Lord of the Rings*, but with the Rohirrim he begins to bring his own scholarly materials into his story.

Gandalf, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli go to Edoras (an Old English word that means "the courts"), where they meet King Theoden (his name is an Old English word for "king"). There they find that Theoden has been manipulated and weakened by his advisor, Gríma Wormtongue, and that he blames Gandalf for bringing bad news. Gandalf heals Theoden and convinces the king to lead his warriors to a battle at the ancient stronghold of Helm's Deep, where a large battle is fought and, with the help of the ents, Rohan has the victory.

The riders then go to Saruman's fortress at Isengard, where Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli are reunited with Merry and Pippin. Gandalf casts Saruman from the order of the wizards and breaks his staff, and at that

moment, Gríma Wormtongue, now Saruman's servant, hurls a crystal globe from the tower.

This globe is a palantír, a device for seeing from afar. Pippin takes the palantír while Gandalf is sleeping and discovers that Saruman and Sauron had been in contact through the artifact. Pippin nearly betrays all to Sauron, but does not. Gandalf then takes him to ride away to Minas Tirith, the citadel of Gondor and the major obstacle to Sauron's military (as opposed to magical) conquest of Middle-earth.

The point of view then shifts to Frodo and Sam, who have crossed the river and are attempting to fulfill the quest by going to Mordor and destroying the Ring. They meet Gollum, who has spent many years tracking Bilbo (and now Frodo) in order to regain the Ring.

Taken by the Enemy

The relationship after Gollum swears to help Frodo is one of the most psychologically complex in *The Lord of the Rings*. More than any other being in Middle-earth, Gollum understands the psychological torture the Ring is inflicting upon Frodo, and more than anyone else, Frodo understands what Gollum had experienced through all of his years with the Ring. The close link between Gollum and Frodo was accentuated beautifully in Peter Jackson's movies, in which the computer-generated Gollum is given blue eyes identical to those of the actor who plays Frodo.

Gollum guides hobbits out of the maze of the broken hills of the Emyn Muil, through the festering Dead Marshes, and to the Black Gate of Mordor, where Frodo learns that entry in that direction is impossible because of the huge fortifications and sleepless guard. But Gollum says that he knows of another way into Mordor and agrees to lead Frodo there.

On the way to Gollum's secret entrance, the hobbits are captured by Faramir, the brother of Boromir and a captain of Gondor. Here we meet the Númenoreans, a "high" race of men who still remember elvish lore. Faramir holds himself bound by a rash promise not to take the Ring, and he helps Frodo and Sam even though he distrusts Gollum's purposes.

Gollum leads Frodo and Sam into a secret mountain pass next to Minas Morgul, the city of the Ringwraiths. On the Stairs of Cirith Ungol, Gollum almost repents, but in a scene of which Tolkien said, "I wept after I wrote that," Sam's harsh words harden Gollum's heart.

Frodo and Sam discuss whether or not they are within a story, and Sam asks of Gollum: are you the hero or the villain? A key interpretive question of *The Lord of the Rings*, and one that has great bearing on "the problem of evil" that is so central to the greatest fantasy literature, is whether or not Gollum is, in his own mind, the hero of his own story, or is he so broken that this is impossible.

Gollum leads the hobbits into the tunnels of Shelob, a gigantic spider-creature. She stings Frodo, but Sam drives her away. Thinking Frodo dead, Sam takes the Ring, but a few moment later, when orcs find Frodo's body, Sam learns that Frodo is in fact only paralyzed. He chases after the orcs, but finds himself locked outside of the tower: the line "Frodo was alive, but taken by the enemy" is one of the great cliff-hangers in literature.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How does Tolkien complicate the plot in *The Two Towers*?
2. How does Tolkien examine the idea of stories within stories?

Suggested Reading

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Two Towers*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

Other Books of Interest

Burns, Marjorie. *Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's Middle-Earth*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005.

Croft, Janet Brennan. *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 2004.

Lecture 7:
Tolkien: *The Return of the King*

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Return of the King.*

lthough there have been plenty of fighting and battles in the first two books of *The Lord of the Rings*, it is in *The Return of the King* that Tolkien focuses on the subject of war.

Parallel Actions

Tolkien also continues his examination of two separate heroic cultures: that of Rohan, based loosely on the Anglo-Saxons (or, on their ancestors, the Goths), and Gondor, a higher and more sophisticated culture that can be seen as the Rome of Middle-earth.

Merry and Pippin are now separated, and Tolkien is able to use their parallel actions to create contrasts between the cultures of Rohan and Gondor. Merry becomes the esquire of Theoden, the King of Rohan, and Pippin enters the service of Denethor, the Steward of Gondor. The two different ceremonies of fealty—one informal and short, one with a great deal of formality and ritual—underscore the differences between Rohan and Gondor.

The Dark Lord sends his armies against Minas Tirith, and things go poorly for Gondor. The city is in flames, its defenses failing and its great gate broken before help can arrive.

Denethor, the Steward of Gondor and the father of Boromir and Faramir, goes mad at the apparent death of Faramir and the triumph of the Dark Lord, and attempts to burn himself and his son alive. Pippin summons Gandalf to prevent this, and we see how Tolkien treats the problem of pride and despair among the great.

On the battlefield, the Rohirrim arrive at dawn to break the siege and are achieving victory before the Lord of the Nazgûl leaves the gate of the city, summons a fell flying beast, and swoops down to terrorize the men and panic the horses. Theoden is thrown from his horse and mortally wounded, and the Nazgûl stoops to the kill. But he is hindered by Éowyn, the king's niece, who has defied orders and come to the battle disguised as a man (and carrying Merry). She destroys (with Merry's help) the Lord of the Nazgûl. It is worth noting that the defeat of the Lord of the Nazgûl by Éowyn is one of the only traditionally heroic moments (single combat between one person and one monster) in *The Lord of the Rings*. Éowyn brings forth another World War I archetype: the warrior-woman, modeled on Joan of Arc.

But even with this heroism, that battle would have been lost, as a fleet with black sails swept up the river. But it is Aragorn, leading the men of southern Gondor, who have overcome the Corsairs of Umbar and seized their ships.

But even after the "eucatastrophe" of the horns of Rohan coming unexpect-

edly or the fleet with black sails turning out to be Aragorn, or the death of the Lord of the Nazgûl, the defenders of the West know that they are still doomed if the Ring cannot be destroyed. In "The Last Debate," the Captains of the West resolve to risk all to distract Sauron from Frodo's presence—they will assault Mordor even though they have no hope of winning.

Sauron toys with the Captains of the West by showing them Frodo's mithril coat and Sam's sword, but book 5 ends with repetition and variation from *The Hobbit*: "The Eagles are coming!" This demonstrates quite explicitly part of Tolkien's technique: it is repetition, yet Pippin himself notes the variation ("But that was Bilbo's tale . . ."). Tolkien invokes cyclic time in parallel with progressive time (see also the Mirkwood spiders/Shelob, the goblin caves/Moria, Mirkwood/the Old Forest/Fangorn).

In book 6, Sam must rescue Frodo from the tower of Cirith Ungol. Sam realizes that he cannot use the Ring without Sauron detecting him, but the two competing tribes of orcs slaughter each other almost completely. Thus he is able to enter the tower and rescue his master. But Shagrat the orc escapes with the mithril coat, Sam's sword, and Frodo's cloak.

It is these items that Sauron has shown to Denethor, not merely the fleet of the Corsairs of Umbar, that have driven the steward mad: he was certain that Sauron had captured the Ring, but Tolkien does not make this explicit at any stage, a trick that makes the reader experience Denethor's madness the same way Pippin does.

The Return Journey

Frodo and Sam travel across Mordor, a journey characterized by hunger, thirst, and exhaustion. Finally, they arrive at Mount Doom and begin to climb. Frodo says he can see nothing and remember nothing, except the image of the Ring like a wheel of fire.

Gollum, who had betrayed them to Shelob, attacks them on the slopes of Mount Doom: this attack rouses Frodo, and he continues to the Sammath Naur, the Chambers of Fire. Sam intends to kill Gollum, but he finds that he cannot. He follows Frodo up the mountain. But in the Chambers of Fire, Frodo is unable to do what he came to do. Gollum, however, attacks Frodo, bites off the finger with the Ring, and then falls into the abyss, destroying the Ring. Gollum thus ends up saving the world from Sauron. But Gollum is only there because of Frodo's mercy. So Frodo has succeeded by putting himself in the right place and continuing to show mercy to Gollum.

The large-scale drama of the epic concludes in marriage, as a traditional epic does. Aragorn and Arwen (Elrond's daughter and Galadriel's granddaughter) are united, mixing the various separate lines of the human-elvish crossbreeding that Tolkien had set up in *The Silmarillion* (Arwen is in fact Aragorn's first cousin many, many times removed).

The traditional "falling action" pattern of the return journey and the tying up of loose ends is interrupted by the hobbits returning to find the Shire damaged by Saruman. They must lead a revolt so that hobbits can once again have freedom.

The Price of Freedom

One criticism against Tolkien is that his characters keep doing the same thing, but these similarities in the macrocosm are very different in the microcosm: there is always variation, even in underground journeys or fights with spiders, and the memory of the previous action makes the secondary action more fraught with meaning. The repetition has also empowered Jungian archetype analysis or discussion of John Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* thesis, but I think a more useful discussion would be to see Tolkien as recapitulating, with variation, his original, successful tableau. For many readers, the repetition becomes similar to the way childhood events are then amplified and enlarged in adulthood, and there is a very strong theme throughout *The Lord of the Rings* of the hobbits growing into maturity—this links *The Lord of the Rings* to its roots in children's literature.

Even after the successful Scouring of the Shire and the death of Saruman, there is no peace for Frodo in Middle-earth: he has had to lose the Shire so that it can be saved. Although many readers (including myself) have tried to read the final scene as Frodo and Bilbo gaining eternal life with the elves in the blessed land, Tolkien was very clear that although the ringbearers were going to be healed, they would not be granted eternal life. Sam's return to the Shire and his laconic "Well, I'm back" is a line of simplicity and heartbreaking loss, and tempers the happy ending of *The Lord of the Rings* with an acknowledgment of the terrible price that some have to pay for the freedom of others.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is interesting about Éowyn's defeat of the Lord of the Nazgûl?
2. How is the "happy ending" tempered at the conclusion of *The Return of the King*?
3. Who is the real hero of *The Lord of the Rings*? Frodo? Aragorn? Sam? Gandalf? Gollum? Why is this question difficult to answer?

Suggested Reading

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Return of the King*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

Other Books of Interest

Dickerson, Matthew. *Following Gandalf: Epic Battles and Moral Victory in The Lord of the Rings*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003.

Garth, John. *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

Petty, Anne C. *Tolkien in the Land of Heroes*. Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Cold Spring Press, 2003.

Lecture 8:
Tolkien: *The Silmarillion, Unfinished Tales,* and Other Posthumously Published Work

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion.*

or decades after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, readers clamored for *The Silmarillion*, the legends of the First Age of Middle-earth. But when the book, edited by Christopher Tolkien, was finally published in 1977, readers were disappointed at how different the early, legendary material was from the accessible, hobbit-centric *Lord of the Rings*. Several years later, Christopher Tolkien published *Unfinished Tales*, and then followed, at a pace of almost a book per year, the twelve-volume *History of Middle-earth*, which documented Tolkien's "continuing and evolving creation." Scholars have called the stories, poems, annals, descriptions, and plans in *The History of Middle-earth* Tolkien's "Legendarium."

The Order of the Works

The posthumously published works create a challenging series of literary-theoretical problems for readers of Tolkien. First, in what order should the works be read? The stories of *The Silmarillion* take place chronologically before the events of *The Lord of the Rings*, and reading the latter work with the knowledge of the former greatly enriches the allusions Tolkien made to his own invented histories and languages. Christopher Tolkien appears to believe that *The Silmarillion* should be read first, then *The Hobbit*, and then *The Lord of the Rings*. But obviously a great many readers encountered *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* long before *The Silmarillion* was published, and, in fact, although Tolkien had written many of the stories in *The Silmarillion* long before he completed *The Lord of the Rings*, he was continuously revising, adapting, and adding material for the two decades between the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* and his death in 1973: it was a fixed *tradition,* although there were no fixed *texts.*

Thus, if we are interpreting fantasy through author intent, we would read in one order, but if we were looking for reader response, or literary history, we would look at another. There is also the problem that *The Silmarillion*, because it is not mediated through the eyes of the bourgeois hobbits, is alienating to those not used to the style of the Icelandic epics or even *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

Thus, for this course, I have followed what might be called the traditional order, although I note that Tolkien may not have approved this order. On the other hand, Tolkien might not have approved *The Silmarillion* as it was published in 1977. Christopher Tolkien has come to have his own doubts, noting that he created a single, coherent narrative out of material that his father had left filled with contradictions and lacunae.

A Real Mythology

A Hungarian scholar named Gergely Nagy has figured out that it is the contradictions, gaps, borrowings, misremembered quotations, snatches of poetry incorporated into prose, and changing names that in fact gives Tolkien's work the effect of real "mythology." Nagy has shown that *The Silmarillion* "feels" like myth exactly because it presupposes (and to some degree creates) a great chain of reading, of texts behind texts. This is an important insight not only into the mind of Tolkien but into the aesthetic and emotional effects fantasy literature can produce.

The Silmarillion itself is the story of Middle-earth from its creation by Eru, "The One," through its shaping by the Valar, "the Powers," archangel-like beings, to the fall of the most powerful of the Valar, Melkor, who becomes Morgoth, the first Dark Lord and the original master of Sauron. The focus through most of the book is on the elves, the eldest of the "children of Eru" (men are the younger) and their fruitless, hopeless war to regain the jewels known as the Silmarils from Morgoth.

Before the creation of the Sun and Moon, light in Middle-earth came from the Two Trees in Valinor, the blessed home of the Valar. One tree is silver and the other golden. Fëanor, the greatest of the elves, fashions three jewels that contain the blended light of the two trees. Morgoth, the Dark Lord, who has hoodwinked the Valar and the Elves into thinking that he has reformed, covets the jewels, and, enlisting the aid of a gigantic evil spider, Ungoliant, he attacks Valinor, kills the two trees, and seizes the Silmarils.

Feanor and his sons swear revenge on Morgoth and lead an army of elves from Valinor back to Middle-earth (from whence they had originally come). But in his arrogance and haste, he alienates the Valar and then leads a kinslaying against other elves in order to take their ships from them and sail back to Middle-earth. In Middle-earth, the elves enter into a long war against Morgoth, and there the elves create fair realms and works of beauty that are then destroyed in the wars.

Three Stories

There are three major stories within this larger narrative: of Beren and Lúthien, of Túrin, and of Eärendil.

Beren is a mortal man who falls in love with Lúthien, the daughter of Thingol, the king of the grey elves, and his wife Melian, an angelic being. Lúthien is the most beautiful elf who has ever lived. Thingol the king, hoping to rid himself of Beren but unwilling to kill him personally, says that Beren may marry Lúthien if he can bring Thingol a Silmaril from Morgoth's crown. Beren takes up the quest, and after many adventures, he and Lúthien manage to enter into Morgoth's fortress, where Lúthien's song causes the Dark Lord to fall into sleep. Beren cuts one Silmaril from Morgoth's crown, but then, when he tries to get another, the knife breaks and Morgoth begins to wake. Beren and Lúthien are waylaid by a gigantic wolf, but Beren thrusts the Silmaril into his face. The wolf bites off Beren's hand and goes mad from the burning of the Silmaril. Eventually, Beren and Lúthien return to Thingol, and he accepts Beren as son-in-law. The wolf also attacks, and in slaying the wolf and regaining the Silmaril, Beren is killed. Lúthien then lets herself die and pleads

before the Valar for Beren to be returned. Eventually, the bargain is struck that Beren will be allowed to live, but Lúthien must become mortal. They live out the rest of their days, but Lúthien in the end does truly die, the only one of the immortal, reincarnated elves to pass from the world.

The Túrin story is even more tragic. Based on the Finnish tale of Kullervo, the tale of Túrin Turambar shows the evil power of Morgoth's curse on one family. Túrin ends up accidentally killing a good friend, convincing the elves of a hidden city to enter into more open warfare (leading to their doom), and, worst of all, marrying and impregnating his sister (she has lost her memory, and he has not seen her since she was
a very small child). All of this tragedy is intertwined with the story of Glaurung, the first of all the dragons. Túrin ends by slaying Glaurung, but then, when he discovers his incest, he kills himself. Yet Túrin was the greatest of all the ancient heroes of men, and Tolkien hints at a prophesy that on the final judgment day of Middle-earth it will be Túrin who leads the army of the good against the armies of Morgoth.

The Eärendil story was the germ of Tolkien's entire mythology: the word appears in an Old English poem and seems to refer to the evening star (Venus). In Middle-earth, Eärendil is the son of a heroic man, Tuor, and an elf-princess (Idril). He marries Elwing, the granddaughter of Beren and Lúthien (and so also of mixed elvish and human blood). When the sons of Fëanor attempt another kinslaying in order to capture for themselves the Silmaril Beren and Lúthien had recovered, Elwing, who is wearing it, throws herself into the sea. She is turned into a bird and flies to Eärendil on his ship. With the light of the Silmaril he is able to penetrate the magic shadowy seas that the Valar have set to guard their realm. He pleads before the Valar for aid for elves and men in Middle-earth, and the Valar are moved to bring a great host and defeat Morgoth. Eärendil's ship, and he with the Silmaril on his brow, are put into the sky, thus creating the evening star.

Also in *The Silmarillion* is the *Akallabêth,* the story of the downfall of Númenor, a piece of Tolkien's mythology that deals with men rather than elves. Númenor is "The Land of the Gift" awarded to certain kindreds of men as a reward for fighting against Morgoth. It is a happy land, but eventually the Númenoreans become jealous of the eternal life of the elves and, in sublimation of this desire, turn to war and conquest. They defeat Sauron, but they bring him as a prisoner back to Númenor, where he corrupts them and convinces the king to attack Valinor to wrest eternal life from the Valar and elves. The Valar lay down their guardianship of the world and Eru, the One, changes Middle-earth forever, sinking Númenor beneath the sea (this is Tolkien's link to the Atlantis story) and making the world globed, so that people can no longer sail to Valinor unless they are elves. The Númenoreans who are faithful and escape the downfall are the founders of the realms of Gondor and Arnor in Middle-earth: they are Aragorn's ancestors.

These stories all demonstrate Tolkien's incredible imaginative gifts, but they have never been as widely read and loved as *The Lord of the Rings*. It is not so much that there are no cute, furry-footed hobbits, but that the essential mediating effect of the hobbits is absent. *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales,* and *The History of Middle-earth* do not utilize the modern conventions that Tolkien adopted for *The Lord of the Rings*. They relate events at a distant remove from most of the actions of the protagonists, thus failing to provide the reader with an effective interface between the invented medieval world and the modern.

But the value of *The Silmarillion* (apart from its own intrinsic value, which appeals greatly to some, myself included) is that it shows the process by which pseudo-myth may be created and also demonstrates that the great success of *The Lord of the Rings* is not due only to creativity but also to Tolkien's blending of the medieval and the modern, using the full range of modern narrative techniques to make the old material more palatable to the modern audience.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. In what order should Tolkien's works be read?
2. What is the value of *The Silmarillion*? How does the book create "myth"?

Suggested Reading

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Silmarillion*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.

Other Books of Interest

Chance, Jane, ed. *Tolkien the Medievalist*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Flieger, Verlyn. *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World*. Rev. ed. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2002.

Flieger, Verlyn, and Carl F. Hostetter, eds. *Tolkien's Legendarium: Essays on The History of Middle-earth*. New York: Greenwood Press, 2000.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *Unfinished Tales: The Lost Lore of Middle-earth*. New York: Del Rey, 1988.

Lecture 9:
Tolkien: Criticism and Theory

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Tom Shippey's *The Road to Middle-earth.*

olkien is so massively influential in fantasy literature because he not only wrote the most successful fantasy of all time, but because he was also a penetrating critic and deep-thinking scholar.

Tolkien and *Beowulf*

Tolkien's most influential piece of scholarship is his 1936 British Academy lecture, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." This lecture is credited with forever changing *Beowulf* scholarship: before Tolkien, the story goes, scholars did not recognize *Beowulf* as an effective poem, only as a storehouse of otherwise-lost knowledge about the Germanic North. After Tolkien, it was recognized that *Beowulf* was a great poem and that the monsters (Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon) were an essential part of the poem, not a childish embarrassment. First of all, this is not quite true, as there were plenty of critics before Tolkien who thought *Beowulf* was a great poem. Secondly, it would seem to apply more to the history of Old English scholarship than to fantasy literature. But, in fact, Tolkien's words about *Beowulf* have been widely influential beyond Anglo-Saxon studies. One of the key poems in the English canon was a great work of art, a work worthy of being compared to the works of Homer and Virgil, and this poem had at its center, Tolkien argued, an interest in monsters. No longer could monsters or the fantastic be dismissed by calling them childish. This argument has been used, sometimes successfully, by critics of fantasy literature, who argue that the presence of monsters, wizards, or hobbits does not necessarily relegate a text to inferior status.

The actual argument of "The Monsters and the Critics" hinges on the "allegory of the tower," in which Tolkien writes:

> A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labor, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: "This tower is most interesting." But they also said (after pushing it over): 'What a muddle it is in!' And even the man's own descendants, who might have been expected to consider

> what he had been about, were heard to murmur: "He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion." But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea.

The man is the *Beowulf* poet, the tower is *Beowulf*, the stones are the old stories of the Germanic North, now lost. The friends who push the tower over are the critics who have missed the point of *Beowulf*. This allegory could be applied to almost any other piece of literature misunderstood by critics, and the critic who agrees with Tolkien can picture him or herself atop the tower, looking out at the sea. Critics like this romantic view of themselves. Tolkien also interprets the theme of *Beowulf* in a way that can be applied to his own literature: "That man, each man and all men and all their works must die": it is this, the fundamental idea of loss (linked to the idea of nostalgia, longing for that place to which one can not return), that is so characteristic of the best fantasy literature.

Anglo-Saxon Stories and Faeries

Tolkien's other scholarship, although it makes important technical contributions to Old and Middle English studies, is not particularly relevant to fantasy literature. His "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm's Son," an alliterative poem and accompanying essay, attempts to change critical perceptions of the Old English poem "The Battle of Maldon." In this poem, in which the English are defeated by invading Vikings, the English leader Beorhtnoth allows the Vikings to cross over from an island to the mainland in order to have a more "fair" fight, thus giving up an important English advantage. Beorhtnoth is soon killed, and his men are also slaughtered on the battlefield. In his poem and essay, Tolkien subtly argues that Beorhtnoth had read too much Old English heroic poetry and, thus besotted, loses the lives of his men to whom he had a responsibility. Subsequent critics have not accepted this argument, but they do address it, and the argument shows how Tolkien's thought shifted away from "Northern courage" toward a more antiwar approach.

Tolkien is also influential outside of Anglo-Saxon studies because of his essay "On Fairy-Stories," which is quoted in nearly every study of fantasy literature. Unfortunately, "On Fairy-Stories" is exceedingly difficult to follow, as Tolkien's argument twists and turns around many disputed points. Some critics, myself included, think the essay as a whole is somewhat incoherent, and it certainly is difficult to explicate the entire argument as a series of logically related postulates. But the essay *has* given subsequent authors and critics a vocabulary with which to investigate the workings of fantasy.

"On Fairy-Stories" develops the idea of a *secondary world* that is created by humans (who are, in Tolkien's view, denizens of the primary world created by God). This idea has influenced not only nearly every critic who has written of the creation of imaginary worlds in fantasy literature, but has also shaped a great many writers who have taken up Tolkien's challenge to create thoroughly realized and consistent secondary worlds. Tolkien's poem *Mythopoeia* develops the idea of the "secondary world" and sub-creation as a natural human right and tendency, but this poem, because of its publication history, has not been read as often as it should be by critics.

"On Fairy-Stories" attempts to rehabilitate the idea of "Faerie" not as a place of twee little tiny fairies but, as it is depicted in the Middle English poem *Sir Orfeo,* which Tolkien edited and translated, a place of surpassing strangeness, beauty, and terror. Tolkien's elves, particularly in the early versions of his "Legendarium," have a lot in common with the dangerous fairies of *Sir Orfeo;* Tolkien points out in "On Fairy-Stories" that "fairies," or "elves," are otherworldly, powerful, dangerous, and very much desired.

Tolkien argues that fantasy can and should produce "arresting strangeness" and that its effects, when done well, are "recovery, escape, and consolation." Tolkien's work has consistently been judged by these three criteria by critics (particularly the Christian critics) who have taken up Tolkien's own evaluative system to judge his work.

Escapism

Tolkien says that escape is one of the main functions of fantasy literature, and that this is not a bad thing at all: escape from prison or from ugliness or from sorrow is, after all, a worthy desire. But fantasy literature has often been criticized for being escapist: with the pleasure that it gives it distracts people from the world in which they live. There is a distinct and unpleasant whiff of some of the more repellent elements of Marxism-Leninism in this critique, the idea that any relief from misery is a bad thing because it postpones the anger that will lead to revolution.

Criticism of escapism can also be linked to the ideas of Henry James, who did so much to shape modern ideas of literature and realism: for James, literature should produce the illusion of reality, so that nothing should be allowed in literature that could not happen in real life. Even though linguistic analysis has shown that realistic literature is just as subject to conventions and patterns as any fantasy, the idea that the best literature is "real" is deeply embedded in many forms of contemporary criticism.

Tolkien disagrees that realism is the primary aim of literature. Instead, some literature has the purpose of creating joy in the minds of readers; the moment when this joy is created is one of "eucatastrophe" (good catastrophe). An effective fairy story "does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief."

Although Tolkien notes that "Tragedy is the true form of Drama," he asserts that the opposite is true of fantasy: the consolation of the happy ending is essential to good fantasy.

That fantasy literature is filled with happy endings—though in the best, most moving fantasy, like that of Tolkien himself, Le Guin and Holdstock, there is a very high price paid for that happiness—is a key distinction that separates fantasy from mainstream literature. The happy ending as an element of works with great emotional power and aesthetic quality is one of the most important contributions of fantasy to the wider world of literature.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why is Tolkien so influential in fantasy literature?
2. How can Tolkien's ideas in "On Fairy-Stories" be applied to his literary works?

Suggested Reading

Shippey, Tom. *The Road to Middle-earth*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

Other Books of Interest

Chance, Jane. *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2004.

Curry, Patrick. *Defending Middle-earth: Tolkien: Myth and Modernity*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

Flieger, Verlyn. *A Question of Time: J.R.R. Tolkien's Road to Faerie*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1997.

Lecture 10:
Imitations and Reactions:
Brooks and Donaldson

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Terry Brooks's *The Sword of Shannara* and Stephen Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, Unbeliever.*

he success of *The Lord of the Rings* and the figure of its author, "The Professor," has cast a very, very long shadow across all fantasy literature written since the 1960s. Every writer in the genre has to somehow deal with Tolkien. This is what Harold Bloom calls an "anxiety of influence," which he locates in the figures of the Romantic poets, each struggling to at once pay homage to previous masters, to fit into the tradition, but at the same time to be new and original.

Tolkien's Shadow

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, authors tried either to imitate Tolkien or to escape from his shadow. Certainly not the best, but perhaps one of the most representative, is Terry Brooks, whose 1977 *The Sword of Shannara* is almost an exact copy of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings,* both in major plot devices and minor detail (it lacks only a volcano). There are pseudo-hobbits (Shea and Flick Ohmsford, unfamiliar with the wider world), a wizard (Allanon), heroic men (Balinor and Menion Leah), a gruff dwarf (Hendel), and two elf-brothers (Durin and Dayle). There is an evil dark lord (the Warlock Lord) with evil, black-cloaked minions (the Skull Bearers), and so forth. The gimmick in the story is that the Sword of Shannara is the only weapon that can defeat the Warlock Lord, and Shea is the only surviving heir of Shannara (he has some elvish blood).

For all its derivative nature, there are some flashes of originality in the book. The idea that the Sword of Shannara can destroy the Warlock Lord because it forces him to face the truth about himself is very clever (though the philosophical problem could be developed at much greater length), and the characters who later enter into the story, particularly Keltset the great rock troll, are far less imitative. And once Brooks had written the Tolkien out of his system, some of the later *Shannara* books, such as *The Elfstones of Shannara,* developed original ideas such as the Elcrys, a tree that protects the world from demons and which was created by an elf maiden willing to be permanently transformed into the magical tree.

Brooks is seen as having opened the floodgates for imitations of Tolkien, although this seems to have been true only with regard to publishers—writers, by their own admission, had been writing fantasy, Tolkienian and otherwise, on their own. But the success of *Shannara*, especially given the fact that its writing was pedestrian and generic, began the fantasy mass market. Brooks was not able to take Tolkien's step and create a completely separate secondary world: his was set in a future after a technological annihilation.

Stephen Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* used the *Narnia* trick of parallel worlds linked to each other.

Thomas Covenant

In the real world, Thomas Covenant is a modern American man who has lost everything since developing an unexplained case of leprosy. But in the magical, parallel world of "the Land," Covenant is the reappearance of the ancient hero Berek Half-hand. And Covenant is the bearer of the White Gold, a ring that has ultimate power (although Covenant does not know how to use it) within the Land. The Land is a beautifully realized image of health and vitality. Its enemy is Lord Foul the Despiser, who seeks, like all Dark Lords, world domination. His enemies are the Lords, who, through study and self-discipline, have learned to access the powers of the Land for healing and beauty.

The Land is thus a very Tolkienian world, but Covenant is not a Tolkienian hero. Almost immediately upon arriving in the Land, he rapes a young woman (he is driven partially insane by the restoration of feeling that he had lost with his leprosy). He also resists being the savior of the Land, refusing to learn how to use the White Gold and constantly refusing to believe in the Land, which he sees as a threat to his sanity back in the primary world. As a reluctant, severely flawed hero, Covenant is far more in the tradition of mainstream, twentieth-century fiction than he is in the fantasy tradition. One would find it hard to come up with a character less like Frodo or Sam in *The Lord of the Rings*. But Covenant's character allows Donaldson to explore themes of healing and damage that are quite different from Tolkien's. The Land as a whole is very much like Tolkien's Lothlórien or Rivendell, but Covenant's corruption, within his own body and spirit, weakens the Land for him: the decay is intrinsic rather than extrinsic.

There are many flaws in Donaldson's work. For him, as for Humpty-Dumpty in *Alice in Wonderland*, words mean what he says they mean, and so we get "despite" treated as a noun with specialized meanings. Donaldson also writes by thesaurus, resurrecting and misapplying words like "roynish" (which is an obsolete French term meaning "ruinous"). He is never content to have a character look out a window instead of an oriel or sing a lament rather than a threnody. And Donaldson's free-verse poetry is so bad that it makes Tolkien's sometimes clunky efforts seem models of pure verse. The biggest flaw, however, is that Donaldson's secondary world does not hang together as well as Tolkien's, either linguistically or historically. Without the background of the invented languages, Donaldson's terminology flails from Celtic to Slavic to Semitic with no rhyme or reason. This lack of linguistic consistency severely weakens the secondary world of the Land even in all its undeniable beauty.

But despite Donaldson's debt to Tolkien, and despite all of the flaws of the books, *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* was at least partially artistically successful. The beauty in Tolkien's world, as he says of Lothlórien, bears no stain: Frodo cannot be in the end healed within Middle-earth. In his later, more philosophical works, such as the "Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth," Tolkien writes that Middle-earth was "marred" by Morgoth, the first Dark Lord, and could only be healed if the creator of the world entered his own creation and sacrificed himself with it: in other words, the incarnation, death, and resurrec-

tion that are central to Christianity. Donaldson imagines how healing could occur without divine intervention (though Covenant does in the end meet the Creator): his symbol of the White Gold, at once not pure but leading to cleansing, and his images of health and disease investigate potent themes that Tolkien had neglected.

Shannara and Covenant, then, expanded the types of characters and situations that fantasy would handle even as they labored in the shadow of Tolkien without ever matching him in aesthetic terms. To avoid the anxiety of influence, and the somewhat baleful influence of Tolkien's shadow, writers would have to find ways to create fantasy that were not continually engaged with *The Lord of the Rings*, either in imitation of it (Brooks) or in reaction to it (Donaldson).

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is meant by Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence"?
2. Where do Terry Brooks and Stephen Donaldson succeed as writers of fantasy literature? How do they fall short of what Tolkien accomplished?

Suggested Reading

Brooks, Terry. *The Sword of Shannara*. New York: Del Rey, 1983.

Donaldson, Stephen. *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, Unbeliever*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

Other Books of Interest

Senior, W.A. *Variations on the Fantasy Tradition: Stephen R. Donaldson's Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1995.

Lecture 11:
Worthy Inheritors:
Le Guin and Holdstock

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Earthsea Trilogy* and Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood.*

he previous lecture argued that Tolkien casts such a long shadow across fantasy literature that subsequent writers have been drawn into imitation and are therefore inferior to him. But even the imitators and reactors have created effective fantasy literature, and there are a few authors who could be considered Tolkien's heirs who have created works of literary art that at least have earned the right to be considered alongside *The Lord of the Rings*.

The Next Tier

Ursula K. Le Guin and Robert Holdstock managed to create fantasy that has much of the power of Tolkien, and their works live up to the aesthetic standards he set, but without the exceptionally close imitation performed by Brooks and Donaldson. Le Guin and Holdstock also both deal with Tolkienian issues—language for Le Guin and the traditions of the British Isles for Holdstock—with originality and deftness.

Ursula K. Le Guin is, in my opinion, the second greatest writer of fantasy literature in English. Although she herself talks about being confined to the fantasy/SciFi ghetto, she has in fact had some mainstream respect, having her stories included in various anthologies, even *Best American Short Stories*. Tolkien took the methods of philology and literary scholarship and used them to generate languages and cultures that never existed. Le Guin's approach is similar: she is the anthropologist of unknown civilizations. Le Guin's technique of using the approaches of anthropology to create literature is almost certainly the result of her being the daughter of the immensely important anthropologist Arthur Kroeber, one of the great scholars who developed the discipline and methodology of anthropology in the early twentieth century.

Le Guin, like Tolkien, can move from intimate descriptions of individual plants or artifacts to sweeping, historical narratives. But it is not so much what she says as the way she says it. The *Earthsea* books—originally a trilogy (*A Wizard of Earthsea*, *The Tombs of Atuan*, and *The Farthest Shore)*, later augmented with *Tehanu*, *The Other Wind*, and *Tales from Earthsea*—are Le Guin's most famous and successful fantasy. But in what seems to be her most personally loved work, *Always Coming Home*, she develops exactly the sort of wide-ranging "backcloths" of a fictional culture imagined by Tolkien: *Always Coming Home*, which depicts the Kesh, a Native-American people living in Northern California in the far future, contains poetry, art, cosmology, language, and drama.

Earthsea

The *Earthsea* books are more conventional fantasy, so we will focus on them. They begin with Ged, a young man with enormous power for wizardry but a lack of discipline. He travels through Earthsea, an archipelago, and comes to the School for Wizards on Roke Island, where he learns the craft of magic.

Magic in Earthsea comes from names: the Old Speech gives a wizard power over the physical world by knowing the true names of objects and people. Know something's true name and the appropriate spell, and, if you have inborn power, you can control that thing or person.

Le Guin creates a magical system and then examines its implications: the plots of the first three *Earthsea* books revolve around names. In *Wizard*, we find out what happens when two things have the same name: Ged, through a foolish act of power, has unleashed a shadow-monster. Unlike all other creatures in Earthsea, it seems to have no name and cannot be controlled. But when Ged names the Shadow with his own name, he merges the two separate entities together, giving them one name and restoring balance—Le Guin's term is "equilibrium"—to the system.

In *The Tombs of Atuan*, Tenar is a young girl taken from her family to be the One Priestess of the ancient Tombs. She has her name taken from her and is renamed Arha, the Eaten One, supposedly the eternally reincarnated spirit of the first priestess. Here she presides over sacrifices, continues ancient rites, and explores the hidden Labyrinth beneath the Tombs: the Labyrinth contains the greatest treasure of the Tombs, treasure that many men have died seeking. One day Arha is shocked to find a foreign man in the Tombs. It is Ged, who has come seeking the lost half of a magical ring that can bring peace. Arha traps Ged within the Labyrinth, but then she comes to care for him and eventually leads him to the treasure. She thinks to set him free, but he refuses to go without her—using his wizardry, he recalls to her her old name: "You can be Tenar, or you can be Arha, but you cannot be both," he says. The name Ged had applied to two entities and the world could only be healed when the name was returned to unity; Tenar must choose to have only one name for herself. At that moment, she is healed and free.

This relationship between names and things is made more complex in *The Farthest Shore,* the final book in Le Guin's original trilogy. Because of a spell made by a crazed wizard who sought to permanently escape death, magic is running out of the world: names no longer have their power. The wizard, in his spell, gave up his own name, and so cannot be controlled. Ged and young Arren, a prince, travel through the archipelago searching for this wizard. They eventually end up on the furthest island, Selidor, where the bones of a famous dragon and a hero lie buried in the dunes. Here Ged and Arren enter into the realm of death and find the dry spring from which magic is draining from the world. Ged expends all of his power in one spell to shut the door and "With all the skill of his life's training and with all the strength of his fierce heart, Ged strove to shut that door, to make the world whole once more."

Ged saves the world, and Arren becomes the king who can reign under the sign of peace recovered from the Tombs of Atuan, but Ged's power is gone and he retires to his home island of Gont to seek the calm and silence he has never had.

It was nearly twenty years between *The Farthest Shore* and the next book, *Tehanu*: *The Last Book of Earthsea. Tehanu* is Le Guin's attempt to make one of the *Earthsea* books feminist, and it has both the strengths and the flaws of feminism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. There is a strong focus on physical violence toward women, on rape, on disfigurement, and on the dehumanization of men who had power once but do no longer. Tenar and Ged are living together on Gont (after the death of Tenar's husband) and Tenar adopts a little girl, Therru, who has been horribly burned by her father.

It seems clear at the end that Therru is in fact a dragon, born (at least temporarily) in a human body. But until that point, Le Guin seems to revel in depicting the cruelties that others force upon the child, including the threat of rape or murder.

In *Tehanu*, Le Guin's focus on language changes from the abstract operations of the linguistic system to the social positions of the people using the languages. Although she had never made much of the all-male nature of the wizards in previous novels, here she discusses the interplay between masculine and feminine and between essentialism and contingency. *Tehanu* has seemed to many readers—including me—both heavy-handedly political and aesthetically flawed. It seemed that Le Guin, in attempting to address political issues, had lost her touch of creating a vivid secondary world filled with appealing characters.

The Other Wind

But Le Guin redeems *Tehanu* in *The Other Wind*, possibly the most beautiful book in the *Earthsea* sequence. In this novel, Le Guin continues to examine the implications of having another sentient species, the dragons, who also use the powerful Old Speech (although for communication only, not for magic). Dragons and humans were originally one species in Earthsea, she determines, but they divided into two halves, one wild and free and still using the Old Speech, one bound to the land and the things they had made with their hands. But the humans violated the original agreement and gave themselves "true names" in the Old Speech so that they might live forever, and they kept the magic of the Old Speech in runes so that they did not have to forget it. Thus, instead of being reincarnated, humans were confined to a timeless realm, but the price they paid was to make that realm dark, dry, silent, and lifeless.

In *The Other Wind*, Le Guin finally managed to wrest Earthsea away from the European literary tradition and make it fit the Eastern philosophical focus (of Taoism, for example) that she has always claimed was the background to her books. At the end of the book, her characters bring about a return to the reincarnation system that had been originally lost. Humans are left with their making and their art and their technology, and the dragons leave the world forever to fly on the Other Wind.

Here Le Guin grapples with the problems of death and immortality that beset fantasy literature. From Tolkien's eternal elves to Arthur, asleep until he comes again, to Ged attempting to summon a spirit from the dead, fantasy deals with the boundaries of life and death and the problem of mortality more effectively than mainstream literature ever can—mainstream literature deals

with what is left behind, and with the process of death, and its influence; fantasy deals with death itself.

Robert Holdstock

Death—and mortal remains—are also important to the other author I class as one of Tolkien's worthy inheritors: Robert Holdstock. He has written many books, but I want to focus on his two best ones: *Mythago Wood* and *Lavondyss*.

Holdstock's major contribution is to find ways to incorporate the traditional, unwritten culture of the British Isles into his stories. The Morris Dances, the Green Man, shamanism, neolithic tribespeople, and pre-Roman Celtic traditions are all important in Holdstock's books. Thus Holdstock shows that it is possible to visit the wellsprings of English tradition without following Tolkien in focusing on the written culture of the Middle Ages.

Holdstock is not completely free of Tolkienian influence, however. Both *Mythago Wood* and *Lavondyss* are set in and around Ryhope Wood, a place of significant "mythopoeic power." "Mythopoeia," the creation of myth, is the title of a poem of Tolkien's that discusses the creation of "secondary worlds." Holdstock's wood has some magic that causes the characters and phenomena of myth to come to life in the world—thus people who enter the wood encounter people and creatures out of the mythical British past.

Le Guin's protagonists in her science-fiction novels are anthropologists; Holdstock's are also scientists, but they exhibit the kind of obsessive behavior and even insanity that perhaps shows a link to the earlier, pre-Tolkienian fantasy/horror world of writers like H. P. Lovecraft: there are references to lost ancient texts, continuing horrifying practices, and hidden lore.

Although I personally find the shamanistic aspects of Holdstock's work somewhat unappealing—there is a strong focus on magic involving pieces of dead bodies, for example—the overall aesthetic appeal of the work stems from the integrity of its secondary world. Although Ryhope Wood creates the same kind of primary world–secondary world interface as books like Donaldson's *Thomas Covenant* series or C.S. Lewis's *Narnia,* and although I think that approach is inferior to the fully realized secondary world that does not need to touch the primary world for justification, Holdstock's work has the complete integrity of vision that Tolkien and Le Guin have.

It will be interesting over the next decade to see how a new generation of fantasy writers, who grew up with Tolkien rather than encountering him in their early twenties, will react to the problems generated by the anxiety of influence. Derivative quest narratives will of course continue to be written and published as long as they are profitable, and the market for children's fantasy in particular continues to draw new writers. But perhaps enough time has passed that we can hope to see new writers come along who will open up entirely new realms of fantasy. Perhaps we will even see writers who can eclipse Tolkien himself.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Is an imitative work by its nature inferior to the work it imitates?
2. What is Robert Holdstock's major contribution to fantasy literature?

Suggested Reading

Holdstock, Robert. *Mythago Wood*. New York: Orb Books, 2003.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Earthsea Trilogy*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

Other Books of Interest

Cummins, Elizabeth. *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993.

Rochelle, Warren. *Communities of the Heart: The Rhetoric of Myth in the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin*. Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2001.

Lecture 12:
Children's Fantasy

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising.*

hildren's fantasy as a genre has a rich tradition that goes far back into the Victorian period and even into the eighteenth century. *Alice in Wonderland, The Princess and the Goblin*, *Peter Pan*, and *The Water Babies* are only a scattered few of the many, many fantasy works that were popular in the nineteenth century. In fact, until the 1950s or later, fantasy *was* children's fantasy—there weren't separate genres. But after *The Lord of the Rings* showed that fantasy could have mainstream appeal, a division between adult and children's fantasy developed. Whether this division arose spontaneously from something in the culture or if it was market driven is not easy to determine. T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, for example, changes from the obvious children's genre of "The Sword in the Stone" in 1939 to the very, very adult "Queen of Air and Darkness" and "The Candle in the Wind" sections, which were published several years later. But does this represent a change in the zeitgeist or merely White's own maturing during the course of his work? (We will discuss *The Once and Future King* in more detail in the chapter on Arthurian fantasy.)

Narnia

C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* was, of course, inspired by the success of the fantasy works of Lewis's close friend J.R.R. Tolkien. Narnia has remained widely popular, although most critics consider it to be inferior to *The Lord of the Rings*. Narnia is fundamentally different from Tolkien (and in the same category as Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* and Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood* and *Lavondyss*) in that there is a mediation, in the real time of the story itself, between the primary and secondary worlds. In Lewis's work, four children travel from our world through a magical wardrobe into Narnia, a land oppressed by the evil powers of the White Witch. Fortunately for the children, they fall under the protection of Aslan, the benevolent talking lion who, it turns out, is Lewis's allegorical representation of Jesus. In fact, the entire *Narnia* series is an allegory of various points of Christian doctrine; this has made *Narnia* very popular among some readers but has weakened its appeal in the eyes of others.

The order in which to read the *Narnia* books is another interesting puzzle. The books were published in the order of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*; *Prince Caspian*; *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*; *The Silver Chair*; *The Horse and His Boy*; *The Magician's Nephew*; and *The Last Battle*. But the chronological order of events is *The Magician's Nephew*; *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*; *The Horse and His Boy*; *Prince Caspian*; *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*; *The Silver Chair*; and *The Last Battle*. Lewis

himself never came down fully on either side, and the sequence has been published in both orders.

There are two great weaknesses in *Narnia.* There is not a consistency of subcreation within the secondary world: creatures from classical mythology are mixed with Germanic traditions with very little logic. Second, and more significantly, once a reader recognizes that Aslan equals Jesus, the whole story becomes very predictable. But there are also strengths in *Narnia* (and for many readers the Christian allegory is a strength): the scene when Aslan offers himself up as a sacrifice at the Stone Table in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is very powerful, as is the return of Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy to the ruins of Cair Paravel in *Prince Caspian* and the depiction of the gold-creating water at Goldwater/Deathwater Island in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Characters like Mr. Tumnus, the faun; Reepicheep, the extravagantly brave and gallant mouse; and Aslan the lion are memorable and original.

The success of Tolkien at making fantasy more serious, and of Lewis at making children's fantasy commercially successful, opened the door to what could be called the golden age of children's fantasy, which really runs from the late 1960s through the 1970s. During this time period, Ursula K. Le Guin, Susan Cooper, and Lloyd Alexander all produced major fantasy series that have remained popular and influential today.

Le Guin's *Earthsea* books have already been discussed. Reading them as children's literature does not change our interpretation very much except that we can foreground the themes of personal development and growth, particularly in the first three books, in which, respectively, Ged, Tenar, and Arren grow from children into adults. Part of Le Guin's artistry is that she uses the fantasy context to emphasize her themes of the interconnection of coming of age and death.

The Dark Is Rising

Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising* is the most Tolkienian of these works. Cooper's major protagonist, Will Stanton, is simultaneously an eleven-year-old boy growing up in Buckinghamshire and an "Old One," part of an order of eternal beings who belong to the Light, set in opposition to the Dark in a Manichean struggle for the fate of the world. Cooper's characters must collect a variety of numinous objects—a grail, "signs of light," a golden harp, and a crystal sword—as part of their quest to defeat the Dark. The books are somewhat darker and more frightening (and more well-crafted) than those by Lewis, and they engage with important problems of individual autonomy and freedom (the Light wants to win its battle to keep humans free—unlike the Dark, which wants to dominate all people—but in the course of that battle individual humans can be sacrificed). Possibly the most emotionally powerful book is *The Grey King*, in which Bran Davies, an albino boy growing up in Wales, loses his beloved dog Cafall and then learns about his magical parentage (he is the son of Arthur and Guinevere, sent forward in time and adopted by Owen Davies after his mother returned back in time). *The Grey King* places problems of alienation at the center of fantasy.

The Chronicles of Prydain

Lloyd Alexander's *The Chronicles of Prydain* is much more lighthearted, traditional, and humorous than Cooper or Le Guin. The sequence, we eventually learn, is the story of "how an Assistant Pig-Keeper became High King of Prydain." Taran, the protagonist, is a foundling adopted by the great enchanter, Dalben. Taran stumbles into various adventures with the help of a quasi-human companion, Gurgi, the bubbly Princess Eilonwy, Fflewddur Fflam, a truth-challenged bard, and other friends. The side of good is engaged in a battle against Arawn, the evil dark lord. Along the way they struggled with problems of selfishness, sacrifice, and social rank—Taran is only an Assistant Pig-Keeper, but he longs to be a hero, and his non-noble birth is of course a major obstacle in his growing love for Eilonwy.

The most original and interesting of the books, *Taran Wanderer* depicts Taran's growth to adulthood as he travels through Prydain trying to find his parents and his place in society. Taran's innate kindness and decency develop as he engages with the workers and craftsmen of Prydain, trying his hand at being a shepherd, a weaver, a blacksmith, and a potter. The loving depiction of the crafts, and the equations that Alexander makes between a job performed with integrity and the attributes of noble blood, makes this section of the epic particularly powerful and unusual in a genre almost always focused on those who fight, rule, and perform magic.

Harry Potter and Philip Pullman

The "golden age" of children's fantasy did not continue through the 1980s, and some critics believed that video games, Dungeons and Dragons, and other media had shifted creative energy from books into other pursuits. Fantasy was thought to have migrated into visual media. But in the late 1990s, children's fantasy suddenly took a quantum leap in popularity with the unprecedented success of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books.

It is too early to know whether Rowling will succeed artistically with her series as a whole, but her writing has certainly developed throughout the first six books, and if she can manage a solid ending, *Harry Potter* will take its place at least in the second rank of children's fantasy, not perhaps up to the level of Le Guin or Cooper, but in the company of Lloyd Alexander and C.S. Lewis. Rowling's genius is her ability to use humor while at the same time maintaining the moral seriousness of her vision. Puns, bad Latin, and Dickensian names all generate laughs, but the inner lives of her characters and the high-stakes material creates a set of books that are both gripping and fun.

Humor is not a strength of Philip Pullman, the other major children's fantasist to come out of the late 1990s. The *His Dark Materials* series is a retelling of Milton's *Paradise Lost* in the fantasy genre from the Devil's point of view (or, rather, from the point of view that the Devil is morally right and his adversary is wrong). Pullman lacks Rowling's light touch, and he is far more didactic than Le Guin, but he continues well in the tradition of moral seriousness that characterizes fantasy and, in particular, children's fantasy, also demonstrating that moral seriousness can exist in fantasy even in the absence of Christian belief (implicit or explicit).

Although the works discussed above are supposedly written for children, and although there are some market effects based on what children actually enjoy, there is also a great deal of cross-influence by parents, librarians, and teachers who shape the literature into what they think children should read. Thus, the literature is not only shaped by children and their desires, but by the ideas adults have about what the desires of children are and should be. To see children's fantasy, or any children's literature, as naïve or simplistic is almost certainly wrong: Le Guin's discussions of death, Rowling's and Cooper's treatments of inherited responsibility, Pullman's criticisms of religion, or T. H. White's agonizing over war and peace are as sophisticated and nuanced as anything in adult, mainstream fiction. If there is a constant in children's fantasy, it is not simplicity, but moral seriousness. Le Guin's philosophy is Eastern, and Pullman is anti-Christian, but they, no less than the traditional moralist Lewis or the anti-war White, make strong moral and ethical claims in their books. Protagonists may struggle to live up to a moral code, but such a code does exist: the authors and the characters know that there is a right and a wrong, even if they must struggle to make their way in a world in which the right is not always obvious. This seriousness and confidence—and in particular, fantasy's ability to engage with problems of death and immortality—is in direct contradiction to much mainstream adult literature over the past century, in which relativism, lack of confidence, and confusion has reigned (for the most part) in matters moral and ethical.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How far back does the tradition of children's fantasy extend?
2. How did the success of Tolkien and Lewis open the door to the golden age of children's fantasy?

Suggested Reading

Cooper, Susan. *The Dark Is Rising*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry Publishers, 1973.

Lewis, C.S. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

Other Books of Interest

Alexander, Lloyd. *The Book of Three: Prydain Chronicles*. New York: Random House, 1964.

Bice, Deborah. *Elsewhere: Selected Essays from the "20th Century Fantasy Literature: From Beatrix to Harry," International Literary Conference*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003.

Cooper, Susan. *The Dark Is Rising Sequence*. Box set. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993.

Lewis, C.S. *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Box set. New York: HarperCollins, 2002.

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter Series*. Box Set. New York: Scholastic, 2004.

Sandner, David. *The Fantastic Sublime: Romanticism and Transcendence in Nineteenth-Century Children's Fantasy Literature*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1996.

Lecture 13:
Arthurian Fantasy

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*.

We have held off on discussing Arthurian fantasy until now because it does not quite fit into the fantasy literature paradigm the same way the other texts we have discussed do. For one thing, Arthurian literature did not develop in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but instead is part of a very long, nearly continuous tradition extending back into the Middle Ages.

A Reticulated Genealogy

Arthurian literature is so varied and popular that it is almost impossible to trace influences: they form what a biologist would call a "reticulated genealogy" with a great deal of cross-influence. So for the purposes of this discussion, I am going to take a grossly simplified picture of the tradition as it evolved, glancing very quickly over the medieval roots of the Arthur mythos and confining myself to three major twentieth-century authors, the aforementioned T.H. White and then Mary Stewart and Marion Zimmer Bradley.

Theoretically, Arthurian material goes back to some "historical" British king, and our first mentions of Arthur appear in Latin historians such as Gildas, Nennius, and Geoffrey of Monmouth (who added his own stories). The "historical" Arthur—even if he never existed—then becomes the center of a great web of traditional stories. These stories are stitched together in works like Layamon's *Brut*, a gigantic Middle English epic (about ten times as long as *Beowulf*) in alliterating lines. The Arthur stories then cross the English channel and are made massively popular by French writers Chrétien de Troyes (1135–1183) and Marie de France (who may have lived in England in the middle of the twelfth century, but who wrote in French). In the later Middle Ages in England, Arthurian tales were incredibly popular, as shown by Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and any number of anonymous Middle English romances. Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (written between 1450 and 1470) collects together a huge number of Arthurian stories and gives them a coherent outline: they are all put to the service of one long epic. Nearly all subsequent writers who deal with Arthurian material rely upon Malory—he is as big a figure in Arthurian literature as Tolkien is in later fantasy.

Even if we limit ourselves to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Arthurian literature is separate from other fantasy. There is, for example, high-culture Arthurian literature in Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem cycle, *The Idylls of the King*. And even when we come to twentieth-century fantasy, the Arthurian material is separate from Tolkien, although Tolkien began and abandoned an Arthurian poem.

T.H. White

The most important adaptation of the twentieth century, T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, was written before *The Lord of the Rings* was published (pieces of the book were published as early as 1938). *The Once and Future King* is so influential not only because the first section, "The Sword in the Stone," was made into a popular Disney film and the book as a whole was a source for the musical *Camelot*, but also because so many subsequent authors have been shaped by White's political understanding of Arthur.

White's novel is divided into four separate books, "The Sword in the Stone," "The Queen of Air and Darkness," "The Ill-Made Knight," and "The Candle in the Wind." "The Sword in the Stone," the most appealing of the four, tells the story of Arthur's childhood in the castle of Sir Ector of the Forest Sauvage. White reenvisions Arthur as a decent but not very bright young man who, through his education—focused around the natural world—by Merlin, is able to leverage the power of his extraordinary birth into an ethical and moral success (though this is sadly temporary).

White's Merlin is gifted with prophesy because he (like the White Queen in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*) lives backwards, constantly getting younger rather than older. Thus he knows what *will* happen, but has not yet experienced what *has* happened.

Arthur recognizes a disjunction between "might" and "right" and, through his creation of the Round Table, attempts to harness the competitive and violent instincts of his knights for the purpose of good.

"The Queen of Air and Darkness" follows the lives of the sons of King Lot of Orkney and Morgause, the sister of Arthur. The abusive upbringing of Gawain, Agravaine, Gaheris, Gareth, and Mordred (who is the product of incest between Arthur and Morgause) in the north is one of the seeds that gives rise to the eventual destruction of Arthur.

"The Ill-Made Knight" follows Sir Lancelot and replaces the traditional portrait of a great knight with a more modern, self-doubting character. Lancelot is extremely physically ugly, pious, self-loathing, and eternally conflicted. His love affair with Guenevere is not a seduction, but a tragedy and slow-motion train wreck that tears apart the foundations of Arthur's accomplishment.

"The Candle in the Wind" details the destruction of almost all of what Arthur had built. It is so difficult to read, and so tragic, because of how beautifully White constructed the images of Arthur's happy childhood and youthful idealism.

White is a master stylist who knew the Middle Ages well enough to know when he was transgressing historical possibility—and not to care. He puts Thomas Malory himself into the story, thus setting the Arthurian legend in a historically impossible but aesthetically correct location in the late fourteenth century.

Mary Stewart

Mary Stewart's *The Crystal Cave*, *The Hollow Hills*, *The Last Enchantment*, and *The Wicked Day* go the opposite direction, making Arthurian literature more "realistic" by finding a way to insert the Arthurian story into a genuine gap in historical knowledge, and then by replacing nearly all of Merlin's

"magic" with a combination of mystical visions and superior scientific and engineering knowledge. Stewart thus straddles the generic boundaries of Arthurian literature, fantasy, and "historical fiction."

Stewart places Arthur in the confused historical period between the collapse of Roman Britain and the rise of the historical Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Arthur is an heir of Rome but is also connected to native British tradition. He brings about a brief respite for the Romano-British before the eventual tide of Germanic invaders. The immense success of Stewart spawned many imitators who argued for different historical specifics but nearly always put Arthur in the same time frame and cultural milieu.

Marion Zimmer Bradley

Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* follows Stewart in locating Arthur in the confusion of the Roman collapse, though Bradley brings in the Christian conversion of England, which was not widespread until the historically documented period of the early seventh century (St. Augustine of Canterbury arrived in England in 597 and Sussex, the last pagan kingdom, was converted in the 660s—there is no room for an Arthur in these historical periods, as we have records of kings and chieftains).

The Mists of Avalon is simultaneously one of the most popular and influential Arthurian retellings in the twentieth century and one of the greatest aesthetic failures. Bradley came up with the absolutely brilliant idea of telling the Arthurian story from the women's point of view. This was not only in tune with emerging feminism, but also gave fresh insight to the entire mythos. The protagonist of the book is Morgaine, the sister of Arthur and a priestess of Avalon, an outpost of the pre-Christian religion of England. Goddess- and nature-worship, shamanistic magic, and the Druids are all brought together and set in opposition to the closed-minded, destructive Christians who eventually gain Arthur's ear and cause him to reject Avalon and his pagan heritage.

Again, Bradley's conception is brilliant, but her execution less so. Christians are intolerant and narrow-minded, pagans in touch with nature and willing to compromise. Women want to preserve; men want to conquer. It is all too predictable. And yet despite all its flaws (not the least its length of 900 pages), *The Mists of Avalon* has been one of the most important fantasy works in the post-Tolkien period. It was a precursor to the explosion of female interest in fantasy literature that has been the most important thing to happen to fantasy in the last fifteen years. Even though many of the greatest fantasy authors since the 1950s have been women, fantasy, until recently, was seen as a "boy's genre." No longer. The success of Bradley's putting the women at the center of a story as traditional as the Arthur mythos led to a revitalization of the genre that became visible with the enormous involvement of female readers and fans in the phenomena of the immensely popular *Lord of the Rings* movies and the *Harry Potter* franchise.

Arthurian literature has some significant differences from the more obviously generic fantasy, not the least of which is that it has enjoyed some measure of respect in literary-critical circles. But it also shows that the generic boundaries of fantasy and Arthurian literature are difficult to define and that authors can carve out new territory and provide new takes on old themes, redefining traditions even as they take part in them.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How is Arthurian literature different from the fantasy literature discussed in the previous lectures?
2. Why is Thomas Malory such a big figure in Arthurian fantasy?

Suggested Reading

White, T.H. *The Once and Future King*. New York: Ace, 1965.

Other Books of Interest

Bradley, Marion Zimmer. *The Mists of Avalon*. New York: Del Rey, 1982.

Robbins, Kittye Delle. *Fantasy, Humor, and Transcendence in the Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1975.

Roberts, Adam. *Silk and Potatoes: Contemporary Arthurian Fantasy*. Amsterdam, NL: Rodopi, 1998.

Stewart, Mary. *Merlin Trilogy*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1970.

Thompson, Raymond H. *The Return from Avalon: A Study of the Arthurian Legend in Modern Fiction*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1985.

Lecture 14:
Magical Realism and Conclusions

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Lois Parkinson Zamora's and Wendy B. Faris's (editors) *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community.*

olkien-influenced fantasy has not been considered to be a significant part of the high-cultural tradition of modernism (and its various offshoots, often labeled post-modernism). But there is a sub-tradition in the mainstream that has some of the same characteristics as genre fantasy: magic and impossible events, the uncanny, the bizarre. The writers in this tradition have been and continue to be among the most celebrated authors of the twentieth century, and yet their subject matter has an essential kinship with more common fantasy. The tradition is for the most part made up of Latin American writers who work in Spanish, but there are English-speaking and Italian writers as well.

The Way Magical Realism Works

Why is magical realism worthy of mainstream accolades and serious academic study while genre fantasy has been rather consistently ignored by the literary and academic establishments?

An entire course could be devoted to magical realism (and, in fact, to any of its major authors as individuals), but I want to focus on a few short stories that are emblematic of the tradition. Understand these stories, and you understand how magical realism works and, perhaps, why it gets mainstream respect while fantasy does not.

The Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) is the oldest of the writers in the magical realism genre and wields the most influence. Borges worked almost entirely in the short story form (very different from the massive novels characteristic of genre fantasy). He was also, like Tolkien, interested in using academic forms in his writing: footnotes and references to authorities (mixed interchangeably between real and imagined authors and texts).

The first Borges story I want to examine is "The Library of Babel," which describes an enormous (though not, as too many critics have said, infinite) library in which librarians can wander for lifetimes and only rarely come across a book with a meaningful sentence. Borges describes this impossible library as if it is the most natural thing in the world, footnoting comments about the manuscript that he is supposedly editing, making himself merely a conduit for the otherworldly material: it is a conceit similar to Tolkien's *The Red Book of Westmarch*.

"Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis, Tertius" is another one of Borges's stories about a nonexistent book, in this case a volume of *The Anglo-American Encyclopedia* that contains at its very end an entry on the region of Uqbar. The narrator and a friend search through libraries trying to discover more about Uqbar,

eventually learning that it is part of the invention of a secret society of "astronomers, biologists, engineers, metaphysicians, poets, chemists, algebraists, moralists, painters, geometers . . . directed by an obscure man of genius" who has been writing the encyclopedia of a planet, Tlön, and its civilization, neither of which exist.

But the very writing of this encyclopedia has begun to create the things that did not exist; when people believe that there is something to find, Borges writes, they end up somehow creating that thing, and finding it. The fantasy creates the reality, and Borges writes as if both are equally real, inhabiting, as they do, the minds of his readers.

Borges's magical realism is cerebral, mathematical, and detached. He, like Tolkien, uses the techniques of the scholar to provide a false documentary trail, a pseudo-authority for his fantasy.

Gabriel García-Márquez

The Colombian writer Gabriel García-Márquez (b. 1928) generates authority in a very different way, through the techniques of realistic fiction that have been honed—and have become conventions—over the past two centuries. In his story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" (1955), García-Márquez begins with the kind of straightforward, not particularly poetic description that characterizes serious, realist fiction: "On the third day of rain they had killed so many crabs inside the house that Pelayo had to cross his drenched courtyard and throw them into the sea, because the newborn child had a temperature all night and they thought it was due to the stench."

Pelayo finds in his yard a very old man with enormous, mangy buzzard wings, dressed like a ragpicker. He locks the man—or angel, as a neighbor woman suggests—in a chicken coop. The man is "too human"; he smells bad and his wings are filled with parasites, and he soon becomes an attraction, as people travel to see him. The old man may have performed some miracles, but they are not what the people expect: a leper grows sunflowers out of his sores, a blind man grows three new teeth. But with the money brought in by all the visitors, Pelayo is able to build a nice house. The old man seems as if he is going to die during the winter, but in the spring he grows new feathers and eventually flies away.

García-Márquez handles all the details of the story as if he is merely reporting them. He never allows a hint of excitement to enter into the narrator's tone when he describes the man and his wings. And it is the inclusion of the dirt and the stench, the petty indignities and the treatment of the old man with enormous wings as if he is just another natural phenomenon—no different than the crabs that are driven into the house by the rain—that characterizes the realism of the story (the magical part is obviously that the very old man has enormous wings).

"A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" shows that more than anything else, what separates fantasy from magical realism is style. Magical realism, as an offshoot of modernism, is focused on style at the sentence level. It follows the modernist project in being ironic, detached, accepting the convention (or, if you prefer, meta-convention) that no conventions of language (clichés, formulae, traditions) must be followed.

Magical Realism vs. Fantasy

The mainstream respect given to magical realism suggests that it is not the subject matter of fantasy that is the only problem for its inclusion in the literary canon. It may perhaps be, as the most vocal critics of fantasy say, that the problem with fantasy is that it is poorly written. But it may also be that fantasy attempts to follow an aesthetic different from the modernist tradition, and therefore critics of fantasy, who have spent their lives working in that tradition and understanding its subtleties and micro-structures, are unable to understand or judge fantasy, which is trying to do something entirely different.

Tolkien wrote that fantasy can generate escape and that escape, for a person in prison, say, is not a bad thing. Magical realism does the opposite: by using realistic conventions of language about fantastical situations or things, it turns readers' thoughts back to the language itself, showing how the language can create reality. If we want to view this negatively, we can say that magical realism, rather than providing escape, tries to show that there is no escape: that even if we talk of impossible things, we cannot escape the "prison-house of language" and the constraints of the real world. I think this stance, which does not come through in every writer of magical realism (Helprin and Eco are certainly exceptions) is one of the reasons that magical realism can be profoundly depressing to read even as one recognizes the beauty and intellectual accomplishments of the writers. It is literature drawn back to tragedy rather than risking the happy ending.

Tolkien, Le Guin, and others would have no problem with language creating reality, but they want that reality to be better, more beautiful, more powerful, and more awe-inspiring than the reality of the present world. They want to examine what it means to be human by removing the surface structures of the present and seeing how humans—in all their variety—might behave in the different world.

Magical realism, for all its remarkable style and insight into human psychology is, in the end, another form of modernism. Fantasy, on the other hand, attempts to break free from the modernist, realist requirement to focus on the world as it is and instead attempts to create the world, not so much as it might be, but as human minds can imagine it to be.

By forcing us to grapple with the impossible, by creating impossible worlds so real and beautiful that we enter into them, fantasy takes us outside of ourselves (just as all great literature takes us outside ourselves), but it takes us further and deeper and higher, so that when we return, our perspective is changed. We can see the old world in a new way.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is the relation between magical realism and fantasy?
2. Why is magical realism considered more serious than fantasy literature?

Suggested Reading

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