Summary Article: **Tolkien, J[ohn] R[onald] R[euel]**
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When Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (3 vols., 1954–55) headed a poll for the book of the century run by a British chain of bookstores, it was felt that the result had been rigged by obsessive fans, determined to see their favorite volume triumph. Whatever the truth of the story, it indicates two things: first that there is a dismissive attitude toward Tolkien and his readership, and that it is a work that cast a shadow over the century, being the benchmark for better or worse for how fantasy is judged.

Although Tolkien is best known for *The Lord of the Rings* and its precursor, *The Hobbit* (1937), he had actually been working on the materials that would eventually produce these works during the First World War. Tolkien was a philologist, and had worked on the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and his interest in languages led him to invent his own. But language does not exist meaningfully in the abstract: it needs to be part of a society with a series of myths underlying that society. The struggle was to find a means of telling a story to which his mythos could act as background. The posthumous early volumes of the "History of Middle-Earth," especially *The Book of Lost Tales I* (1983) and *II* (1984), edited by Tolkien's son Christopher, demonstrate a number of attempts at this, and different versions of the same story. In contrast the earlier, but still posthumously published, *The Silmarillion* (1977), in its editing together of the mythos as continuous text, shows how indigestible such an endeavor could be.

The Hobbit had been the breakthrough text, the narrative of a rather lazy, bourgeois hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, who is tricked by his old friend the wizard Gandalf into going on an adventure to kill a dragon and restore the kingdom to the dwarfs who had been driven out. As the characters undergo their quest, individual episodes allowed Tolkien to reveal the history of this world, both in terms of backstories for characters met en route and in the stories and songs the characters tell each other.

As *The Hobbit* was an unexpected success with both children and adults, there was a demand for a sequel. *The Lord of the Rings* was conceived on a vaster scale, and is a much richer text as a result. A ring of invisibility that Bilbo had found on his travels turns out to be a ring of rare power, on which the fate of the world depends. The power of the evil Sauron is rising in the east and he is seeking for the ring; the only chance of salvation is to destroy the ring in the furnace which had forged it. The quest is here to get rid of something rather than to find it, but is told against a political context: the relations between "dwarves" and elves, the battle over who will be king of men, and the reactions of various other kingdoms to the battle between good and evil. As the book was drafted during the Second World War, the temptation is to read a political allegory into the tale, although Tolkien himself denied it. What is clearly working on the level of allegory is the account of the destruction of the Shire, the realm of the hobbits, which echoes the industrialization of the English countryside.

The novel, split initially into three volumes with appendices, set the tone for much EPIC fantasy, as did Tolkien's friend and colleague Colm S. LEWIS in the Narnia books. Quests would be set for various male heroes (there are very few female characters in Tolkien) across a huge imagined landscape, with the narrative covering as much of the map of the invented world as possible.

Some critics have viewed the novel as being too conservative, too comfortable and middle class.

Others have delved for Jungian archetypes or Freudian symbolism.

Tolkien wrote a number of novellas located in other rural settings, such as *Farmer Giles of Ham* (1949) and *Smith of Wootton Major* (1967). His critical work is also of significance, from his groundbreaking work on the epic *BEOWULF*, "The Monsters and the Critics," to his essay defending the imagining of self-contained imagined worlds, "On Fairy Tales." He also worked with E. V. Gordon on a critical edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1925) and produced a translation into modern English of that and other poems by the so-called GAWAIN-POET.

However, from 1960s counterculture phenomenon to contemporary publishing industry, it is the works set in Middle Earth that dominate. With numerous editions of the novels, some with Tolkien's original illustrations, some with works by later artists, in print at any time, it is difficult for people to evaluate the work as literature rather than as a publishing category. Recent filmed versions, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) and *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002), only add to this sense.

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