Tolkien
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Fall 2008
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Graduate Special Topics Online Course: English 597 and History 597
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SELECTED DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Week One: Chronological Layers
The audio lecture for this week proposed the concept of chronological layers as a method for analyzing Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. What do you think of this proposed method? Is it similar or different from previous interpretive approaches you have taken to works of fiction in the past? In particular, what do you think of the choice of considering The Lord of the Rings not as a "timeless" or "universal" story, but as a primary source for the historical period in which it was created?

Week Two: The Silmarillion
Tolkien originally hoped to have the mythology that is now contained in *The Silmarillion* published in the same book as the story of *The Lord of the Rings*. Unable to convince his publishers, Tolkien settled for the compromise of having the mythological material included in the appendices of The Lord of the Rings in a much condensed form. Now that you know something of *The Silmarillion*, do you think Tolkien's publishers were right or wrong? Why? (In your response, please tell us, if you have read *The Lord of the Rings* before, if that reading included the appendices.)

Week Four: War and Post-Modernism
This week you finished Garth's book on Tolkien and WWI as well as listened to a lecture in which Dr. Reid and Dr. Ford argue that The Lord of the Rings is a post-modern novel. The lecture uses Tolkien's presentation in the novel of war being as glorious as in medieval epic fiction and as terrible as in the trenches of WWI, as well as his presentation of Aragon, a warrior, and Frodo, who is anything but a warrior, as equally heroic, as evidence of the post-modern character of the text. There are those who might object, claiming that Tolkien tended to look back into the past rather than forward. A possible response might be that the medieval and the post-modern have more in common with each other than either do with modernism, and that an author does not have to think of himself as a post-modernist in order to produce a post-modern work. Please respond to the arguments of the lecture. Do you agree or disagree with the characterization of Tolkien's novel as post-modern? Do you agree or disagree that Jackson's fidelity to Tolkien's text should not be the principle criterion for evaluating the success of the adaptation?

Week Five: Linguistics and Philology
This week, the assigned reading concerned Tolkien's life after World War I when he worked on the Oxford English Dictionary and began his career as an academic philologist. Tolkien's "philological erudition," to borrow a phrase from p. 45, allows us to consider different ways of evaluating the literary merit of *The Lord of the Rings*. In the lecture, Robin explains that modernist literary criticism insists that a consistent style is necessary for a work to be considered "good literature." By that standard, Tolkien's fiction is not "good literature" because it varies from modern to archaic style. Gilliver, Marshall, and Weiner contrast the way some authors, such as Morris, use archaic language consistently (if inaccurately) to Tolkien's more occasional use of archaic language in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. They justify Tolkien's inconsistent style by explaining that he "matches the style of diction to the content" (p. 75), in other words, he employs an archaic style only when dealing with archaic subject matter. The discussion question is two-fold, and does not require any knowledge of LOTR. First, tell us if you agree or disagree with Gilliver, Marshall, and Weiner's claim that a style choice can be justified by matching it to the content--as a general principle, not in Tolkien's work in particular. Please provide an example of a mismatched style-and -content pair, and evaluate its success. Second, consider the knowledge-level necessary to evaluate accuracy in archaic language. Can most readers distinguish between archaic-sounding vocabulary that is genuinely rooted in Old English from that made up whole cloth? Should critics regard fiction that has embedded in it a deep level of philological expertise as having more literary merit than a work with surface-level archaic elements? Explain why or why not.

Week Six: Canons & Processes
This week you began reading critical responses to Tolkien's fiction. We have previously mentioned the hostility expressed towards Tolkien's work by Modernist critics. The discussion this week concerns the ways in which literary work becomes canonized, that is, comes to be considered "good" literature that students ought to study. As Robin's lecture explained, literary canons are often expressed through anthologies, such as Norton's anthologies (just as historical events can be canonized in history textbooks). Robin's lecture also explained that these canons are the result of socio-historical processes in which publishers produce anthologies based on a perceived demand manifested through academic scholarship and university courses. Canons thus change over time, albeit slowly, in response to what academics and academic institutions decide is worth researching and teaching. The current literary canon was shaped first by Modernists, thus it (among other qualities) emphasizes realism and excludes fantasy. The current canon has been altered, recently and incompletely, to include not only texts by "dead white men" but also works by other groups, such as women and minorities. This change resulted from the social and civil rights movements of the mid-twentieth century that opened the academy to membership by women and minority scholars. If it were not for the civil right movement, the composition of academia would not have changed, and thus the literary canon would very likely have not changed. Do you anticipate a change in the literary canon, or the creation of an additional canon, to feature speculative fiction (fantasy and science fiction)? If so, how soon? Do you see how Shippey's book and this course constitute attempts to shape the canon? Do you see any operative motive for advocating speculative fiction analogous to

women scholars being open to the literary merit of women authors (or the historical importance of actions by women in history, etc. in other fields)? Please explain.

Week Seven: Fellowship: Book One
This week the assigned reading finally included some of Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. Yay! Hopefully you enjoyed returning to the book or discovering it for the first time. There were a number of audio lectures this week. Robin's discussed some of the structural approaches to analyzing a fictional text, especially through plot structure, but also setting and point of view. One can analyze a text not only by considering the order in which events are presented, but also the manner in which they are revealed. Judy's lecture on "Mad Baggins" provided an example of such an analysis, considering the points at which events and beings considered fictional by the characters are revealed to be true, and the implications that either belief or cynicism had for the characters involved. Specifically, Tolkien presents the idea of Ents in such a way that not only is the reader introduced to the notion of walking, sentient trees, but also given valuable information regarding the characters of the speakers, Sam and Ted. Judy's other lecture discussed an element of medieval culture that Tolkien adapted for the novel, namely relics.

In this week's discussion, you are to analyze the sections of Book One involving Tom Bombadil using as many methods as you can. Who is Tom Bombadil, and what evidence is there to answer that question? Consider his appearance, his dress, and his diction. Compare what is said about his history in The Lord of the Rings to what was written about the creation of Middle Earth in The Silmarillion. Consider how the interlude in his house fits in with the larger narrative of the hobbits' journey--why do you think the author inserted the Bombadil episode where he did? Consider point of view--who tells us about Bombadil? through whose eyes does the reader see him? What can be said about Bombadil based on his reaction to the ring? Do you think that Bombadil represents an adaptation of an element or elements from medieval or modern culture?

Week Nine: The Two Towers Book Three
This week the assigned reading was Book Three of *The Lord of the Rings*, comprising the first half of *The Lord of the Rings*. There were three audio lectures this week. Judy's discussed the genre of medieval epic and some of the ways in which Tolkien adapted that genre for his novel. (By the way, the terms "Anglo-Saxon" and "Old English" mean exactly the same thing.) Robin's first lectures concerned the plot; her second provided an introduction to gender analysis and a discussion of the portrayal of women in *The Lord of the Rings*. Gender analysis, of course, considers not only the ways in which femininity is constructed but also the ways in which masculinity is constructed. In this week's discussion, you are to analyze masculinity in Book Three.   In your analysis, employ the methodologies Robin discussed in her lecture, such as agency, vocabulary choice (remember the example of "light"), behavior considered as virtuous or depraved for the gender, and the descriptions of bodies. Consider also the influence of heroic ideas from medieval epic on Tolkien's constructions of masculinities in Book Three. Does it color the portrayal of masculinity for Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli? What about Treebeard? What about the masculinity of the Hobbits? You don't need to write about the masculinity of

every male character in the book considered from every method of collecting evidence (there isn't time!), but try to talk about patterns you observe, and use specific evidence from at least a few different characters, from at least two different races in Middle-earth.

Week Eleven: Return of the King Book Five
This week the assigned reading was Book Five of *The Lord of the Rings*, comprising the first half of The Return of the King. Robin's lecture concerned the plot, focusing on chronology and interlace. For the discussion this week, we would like you to consider Tolkien's presentation of kingship through the characters Denethor (actually, a steward functioning as a king), Aragorn, and Théoden. Tolkien's fictional world upholds kingship as a good model of government, true to its medieval cultural influences. In other words, it is a given in Middle-earth that kingship is a good form of government (no Thomas Paines in this text). The models, then , are not "kingship" as opposed to "democracy" but rather different models of kingship. Based on the actions of Denethor, Aragorn, and Théoden, and the consequences of those actions, what qualities make a good king? What qualities are undesirable in a king? Does the legitimacy of his rule have any influence, or is his birth outweighed by his character? We will follow up on the idea of Tolkien's presentation of the nature of kingship next week in a lecture about Aragorn.

Week Thirteen: Film and Novel
For this week, you have watched Jackson's film and listened to two lectures by Robin, on "Adaptation" and "Into the West." For the discussion, we would like each of you to pick one of your favorite characters and scenes (for example: Boromir at the Council of Elrond) and analyze how it was adapted from the novel into the film. Remember, focus on HOW the character/scene was adapted, WHAT was changed, and WHY the adaptation was made. Remember, we are not interested in external explanations of adaptations (such as the speculation that something, for example, was less expensive to film), but in internal explanations, that is, how a specific adaptation shaped the narrative, theme, characterization, or some characteristic of the story. There are two restrictions to what character and scene you may pick: (1) it cannot an adaptation that has been covered in class already; and (2) it cannot be one already discussed by one of your classmates.

Week 15: Film and Novel
Tom Shippey has used the phrase "two roads to Middle-earth" to describe the existence of both Tolkien's novel and Jackson's film version of The Lord of the Rings. The implication, of course, is that there are two ways to get to the same place. In a way, that conceit raises Tolkien's creation of Middle-earth beyond the level of a novel to that of a common cultural property, such as Santa Claus, for example, that may be employed by any number of story-tellers in a great number of variations. What does it take to make a fictional character, location, or narrative a common cultural property? Are the qualities more intrinsic to the work, or are they the result of external circumstances, such as distribution? Do you agree that Tolkien's Middle-earth has reached that status? Why or why not?