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Spring 2015, LITR 354, Section 1 (4 Credits)

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### **LITR 354: The Medieval and Modern in Tolkien's Middle-earth OED Paper**

The *Oxford English Dictionary*, or OED, is a unique resource that is of immense value for literary scholars, particularly those who work with older texts. This is because the OED gives the word history of every word used in English texts since around the year 1000. While Tolkien is a twentieth-century writer, he was immersed in older literature and drew on the vocabulary and syntax of older forms of the English language. In fact, Tolkien spent two years working at the OED (if you're looking in the W's, you could be reading entries that Prof. Tolkien wrote and/or researched).

**Assignment:** As you read Tolkien's fiction, keep a list of unusual words—words you do not recognize, or words that seem to be used in an unusual way. I am NOT talking about proper names (Gandalf, Frodo, Caradhras) or words in Tolkien's created languages (*lembas*, *mithril*, *mallorn*). I am talking about words that appear to be English, but not common modern English. From this running list, choose ten words to look up in the OED and give a brief explanation of their meaning with reference to the OED. Of these ten, choose five that merit deeper discussion.

**Example:** In chapter four of Book Two of *Fellowship of the Ring*, the company rests in a vast hall in the underground realm of Moria. "All about them as they lay hung the darkness, hollow and immense, and they were oppressed by the loneliness and vastness of the dolven halls and endlessly branching stairs and passages." (315). Chances are the word "dolven" is unfamiliar, so you might put it on your list. Entering "dolven" as your search term in the online OED takes you to "delve, v." as it is actually an obsolete past participle of the verb. Forms of the past tense and past participle are given, and you will discover that "dolven" was current from Middle English through the fifteenth century. You will also find eleven meanings given for the word—meaning 2.a. "To make (a hole, pit, ditch, etc.) by digging; to excavate. *arch.*" makes the most sense in context. You could stop there; however, if you were to choose "dolven" as one of your five words that merit fuller discussion you might consider how describing the ancient halls of Moria as "dolven" contributes to a sense of an archaic and obsolete world.

A few lines later in the same chapter Sam and Gimli use the term "darksome" in a brief exchange:

*'There must have been a mighty crowd of dwarves here at one time' said Sam; 'and every one of them busier than badgers for five hundred years to make all this, and most in hard rock too! What did they do it all for? They didn't live in these darksome holes surely?'*

*'These are not holes,' said Gimli. 'This is the great realm and city of the Dwarrowdelf. And of old it was not darksome, but full of light and splendour, as is still remembered in our songs.'*

According to the OED, there are three main meanings for "darksome" extending from the literal ("somewhat dark or gloomy") to the figurative ("characterized by obscurity of meaning"; "morally of dark character"). Clearly the literal meaning is primary here; the opposition Gimli gives ("not darksome, but full of light and splendour") tells you that, and again you could stop there. However, some of the other meanings may be showing through as well, particularly the idea of gloominess, as in 3.b. "Characterized by gloom, sadness, or cheerlessness." The word's poetic character and "vaguer connotation" are referenced as well. A larger commentary might talk about how Tolkien's use of the word "darksome" contributes to the overall sense of oppression created in the Moria chapter.

**Due Date:** Monday, 13 April. 4-6 pages minimum. It should be typed and your explanations written out as narrative. A thesis is expected. You may attach relevant print-outs and/or photocopies of OED entries for ease of reference.