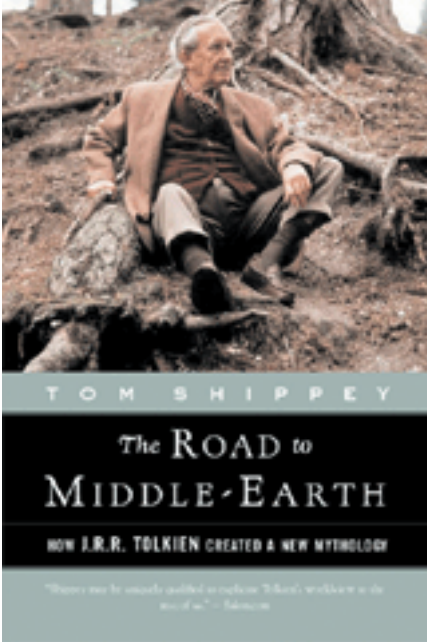


Press Release



The Road to Middle-earth

by Tom Shippey

- [How J.R.R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology](#)
- [A conversation with Tom Shippey](#)
- [Praise for J.R.R. TOLKIEN: AUTHOR OF THE CENTURY](#)

How J.R.R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology

Where did *The Lord of the Rings* come from? Tom Shippey's *The Road to Middle-earth*, considered one of the foundations of J.R.R. Tolkien scholarship, answers this intriguing question. Essential reading for any Tolkien fan, *The Road to Middle-earth* is the definitive study of the literary roots of Tolkien's fiction, and it is now available in paperback in the United States for the first time in a revised and expanded edition.

Insightful and engaging, Shippey's classic work explores Tolkien's creativity and the sources of his inspiration — from the Icelandic sagas and other Teutonic legends of the distant north to *Beowulf* and the lost literature of the Anglo-Saxons. Shippey shows in detail how Tolkien's professional background led him to write *The Hobbit* and how he created a timeless, charming story for millions of readers. Tolkien's tales of Middle-earth, rollicking adventure stories of the highest order, are first and foremost works of scholarship, extensions of his academic pursuits as a professor of philology and the chair of Anglo-Saxon studies at Oxford University. Remarkably, they were also, for Tolkien, a way of following a linguistic trail back to the legends of old.

Examining the foundation of Tolkien's most popular work, *The Lord of the Rings*, Shippey also discusses the contribution of *The Silmarillion* and *Unfinished Tales* to Tolkien's great myth cycle, showing how Tolkien's more "difficult" books can be fully appreciated. He goes on to consider the remarkable twelve-volume *History of Middle-earth*, written by Tolkien's son and literary heir Christopher Tolkien, which traces the creative and technical processes by which Middle-earth evolved. The core of the book concentrates on *The Lord of the Rings* as a rich linguistic and cultural map, as a twisted web of a story, and as a response to the inner meaning of myth and poetry.

Accessible enough for those who are new to literary criticism and comprehensive enough for

serious scholars, *The Road to Middle-earth* entertains, informs, and enhances our understanding of Tolkien's literature, providing for "a more thorough and appreciative reading" of the writer's work, according to Shippey.

Shippey is well qualified to offer analysis; he taught at Oxford, overlapping chronologically with Professor Tolkien and teaching the same syllabus, which gave him an intimate familiarity with the poems and languages that were a primary stimulus to Tolkien's imagination. He subsequently held the Chair of English Language and Medieval Literature at Leeds University, which Tolkien held early in his career, and he currently holds the Walter J. Ong Chair of Humanities at St. Louis University in Missouri. He is the author of the critically acclaimed *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*.

A conversation with Tom Shippey

Q) Why do you call Tolkien "author of the century"?

A) Two reasons. First, he has consistently won what you might call the popular vote, in readers' polls for their favorite book or the one they've found most influential. Second, although he seems on the face of it to be an antiquarian author writing about an imaginary far past, I am convinced that the reason he consistently wins the polls is that his work articulates some of the deepest and most specific concerns of the twentieth century — concerns such as industrialized warfare, the temptations of power, the origins of evil, the failure of good intentions and righteous causes.

Q) What made you want to write your study?

A) Although Tolkien has consistently won the popular vote, he has as consistently been rejected by what you might call the Electoral College, the community of professional literary critics, who have reacted to his work and to its popularity for the most part with horror and rage. I think this is a serious failing on the critics' part, and it fails not just themselves but also the wider community of nonprofessional readers. I wanted to say why he was popular, and why the popular feeling was intellectually respectable.

Q) What special qualifications do you have for explaining Tolkien? What makes you different from your colleagues?

A) Tolkien and I both did the same job for many years, with a pretty consistent fifty-year gap between us. We were both medieval specialists. I inherited his Chair of Medieval English Language at the University of Leeds, where I taught the syllabus he had set up. I also taught the Oxford syllabus that he had had a hand in. We have very similar views about the relationship between language and literature, and neither of us would want to be described as being or having been only "literary" critics: we think criticism without concern for language is only firing on two cylinders.

Q) Why do you think Tolkien has been so popular with readers?

A) He opened up a new imaginative space — he would have said it was an old imaginative space, which had been walled off, that of traditional legend and fairy tale, but I would say

that he did something new with it, which was to provide the world of dwarves and trolls and elves and wizards (and so on) with a map, with a consistent history and geography, which feels as if it is infinitely extendable. That's why there have been so many successors to Tolkien, writing fantasy trilogies or sequences of the same type, maps included.

The other and deeper reason is that he answers questions that have deeply preoccupied ordinary people but that have not been answered by the official (or self-elected) speakers for our culture — writers, politicians, philosophers. The most obvious one is, Why was the twentieth century so unremittingly evil? The nineteenth century was looking forward to moral progress and freedom from want. Where (in Tolkien's lifetime, and mine) did it all go wrong? I think his images of evil, like the Ringwraiths, are at the same time completely original, highly contemporary, and mythically timeless. What they say is that anyone can turn into a wraith, and you can't be sure when it will start. Nor can you deal with evil just by being a nice guy yourself. It may force itself upon you. Tolkien's images of the good are similarly mixed, complicated, and satisfying. His work has great emotional depth.

Q) So why has Tolkien been so unpopular with the critics?

A) They sense a challenge to the dominant literary orthodoxy of the past century, which has been ironic and self-doubting. I see this as a legacy of World War I, the Great War, which destroyed traditional certainties and traditional authorities. Tolkien was a combat veteran of that war, and I regard him as one of the rather large group of "traumatized authors" writing fantasy (Orwell, Golding, Vonnegut, etc.), but his experience made him want to restate traditional images rather than throw them away. In particular he wanted to find a new way to represent heroes and heroism. He knew the old ways very well, and he knew they wouldn't work anymore, but he did not want to abandon the effort. This essentially positive and optimistic view of humanity (and nonhumanity) has been dismissed as shallow and unthinking, but that is a bad mistake. Tolkien knew much more about irony than any of his critics, and about war.

Q) How do these affect one's view of Tolkien the man?

A) They bring out his inner anxieties. One should remember that Tolkien did not get his major work into print until he was sixty-two, and that for most of his working life the chances were that he was going to remain forever unpublished. He sometimes imagines his own work surviving into the future as a single manuscript, never read by anybody, with the name of the author lost — exactly like the poem *Beowulf*, in fact. Of course, his work has now sold hundreds of millions of copies and is set to do the same again in the next generation, and *Beowulf* in the end has had more books and articles written about it than *Hamlet*. That's ironic, but not all ironies have to be negative ones.

Q) What effect has Tolkien had on modern fantasy?

A) He created the genre — not quite single-handedly, but very nearly so. I discuss other fantasy traditions in my *Oxford Book of Fantasy Stories*, but the shelves in modern bookstores would look very different if Tolkien had not written, or if Stanley Unwin had decided not to publish him after all, back in the early 1950s. The eagerness with which he was followed suggests that there was a suppressed desire for the kind of thing he did, but nobody before him quite knew how to do it, or thought it was allowed. C. S. Lewis said

Tolkien was as hard to influence as a bandersnatch, and only somebody like that could have broken with literary convention and established wisdom in the way that he did.

Q) What remains unique in Tolkien's work?

A) Two things I'd pick out are the poetry and the sense of shape. There are a lot of poems in *The Lord of the Rings*, in many different styles and formats, and not many other fantasy writers have the confidence or the literary background to go inventing whole new poetic traditions (or reinventing old ones). But this gives Tolkien's work a mythic and imaginative dimension that has never been duplicated. As for the shape, *The Lord of the Rings* is very tightly controlled, with multiple plots integrated by a day-to-day chronology, which you really need to follow. What it does is make each of the characters feel lonely and isolated, while in the broader view you can see that everyone's story is a part of everyone else's: much more like reality than the plot of a conventional novel. It works laterally as well as linearly.

Praise for J.R.R. TOLKIEN: AUTHOR OF THE CENTURY

"Professor Shippey's commentary is the best so far in elucidating Tolkien's lovely myth." — *Harper's Magazine*

"Shippey's highly erudite celebration and exploration of Tolkien's works [is] enormous fun . . . [He] deepens your understanding of the work without making you forget your initial, purely instinctive response to Middle-earth and hobbits." — *Houston Chronicle*

"Authoritative and timely." — *Boston Globe*

"Wonderfully readable . . . Shippey makes an impressive case for why the creator of Middle-earth is deserving of acclaim." — *Publishers Weekly*

"Shippey presents a remarkably insightful account of the origins of Tolkien's use of language and myth." — *Chicago Tribune*

"Shippey is a rarity, a scholar well schooled in critical analysis whose writing is beautifully clear." — *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*

"A delightful exploration of the relationship between Tolkien's fiction and his scholarly work and of the mythical, linguistic, and philosophical history underlying both." — *Salon.com*

"Tolkien has an eloquent and scholarly advocate in Shippey . . . [Tolkien] deserves his full due, and Shippey's appreciative assessment of his unique achievement provides it in full and satisfying measure." — *Philadelphia Inquirer*

"An invaluable study which more than meets the primary criterion of a critical work: It illuminates the text and enables the reader to better appreciate the works under discussion. Readers interested in Tolkien will lay down Mr. Shippey's book with an elevated understanding of Tolkien's accomplishment as a philologist, storyteller, and a writer of imaginative parables that affirm what it is to be fully alive." — *Washington Times*

"One of the best, if not the best, pieces of . . . literary criticism I have ever read on Tolkien, or any other author for that matter." — *New York Review of Science Fiction*

"Full of things-we-hadn't-known . . . As scholarship, it's one of the more enjoyable works I've run across." — *San Diego Union-Tribune*

"What Shippey successfully presents is a compelling and easily accessible argument for Tolkien's continued popularity and deserved place in twentieth-century literary history." — *Rain Taxi*