Introduction

It was the late 1920s, and J.R.R. Tolkien was immersed in the drudgery of correcting student papers when he came upon a page that a pupil had left blank. "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit," he wrote on the empty sheet, and so were born the unlikely heroes of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

While Tolkien's fantastic mythic universe has taken hold of the imagination of succeeding generations, many literary critics have stubbornly dismissed his work.
Tom Shippey sets the record straight, not only forcefully arguing Tolkien's literary merits but offering a unique and revealing reading of the books that introduced the imaginary world of Middle-earth.

Shippey, who taught at Oxford at the same time and later used the same syllabus as Tolkien, is perhaps the person best qualified to speak in Tolkien's defense. "Tolkien," he writes, "would have replied that he was satisfying a taste — the taste for fairy tale — which is natural to us, which goes back as far as we have written records of any sort, to the Old Testament and Homer's Odyssey, and which is found in all human societies. If our arbiters of taste insist that this taste should be suppressed, then it is they who are flying from reality."

Tolkien's Middle-earth books, 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 at Oxford. Remarkably, they were also, for Tolkien, a way of following a linguistic trail back to the legends of old. "However fanciful Tolkien's creation of Middle-earth was," writes Shippey, "he did not think that he was entirely making it up. He was 'reconstructing,' he was harmonizing contradictions in his source-texts . . . He was also reaching back to an imaginative world which he believed had once really existed, at least in a collective imagination."

One of the criticisms often leveled against Tolkien is that his books are antiquated, too concerned with the distant past to shed much light on modern times. Shippey points out, however, that "the dominant literary mode of the twentieth century has been the fantastic," citing as evidence such works as George Orwell's 1984 and Animal Farm; Kurt Vonnegut's Cat's Cradle and Slaughterhouse-Five; and works by Thomas Pynchon, Ursula Le Guin, and William Golding. Like Orwell, Vonnegut, and Golding, Tolkien was a combat veteran, and like many of his contemporaries he saw the fantastic as the best form for assessing the changing moral landscape brought on by the horrors of modern mechanized warfare.

Tolkien's influence has extended beyond literature and is evident in everything from the songs of Led Zeppelin to the popularity of the epic film trilogy directed by Peter Jackson. Although Tolkien is perhaps the most imitated author of our time, writers will be forever daunted by the complexity of Middle-earth, with its rich linguistic framework, detailed history and lineages, and precise structuring of narrative threads.

Shippey does more than offer due praise to a master novelist. He offers new insights into the man and his work. J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century is a meditation on the evolution of a modern myth that expanded our view of the ongoing struggle between good and evil.

About the Author

Professor Tom Shippey, the author of The Road to Middle-earth, taught at Oxford at the same
time as Professor Tolkien and later used 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 the University of Leeds, which Tolkien held early in his career, and he currently holds the Walter J. Ong Chair of Humanities at St. Louis University in Missouri.

An interview with Tom Shippey, author of *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*

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 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 on 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 himself a combat veteran of that war, and I would 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 his books 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
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-hadin'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