

Jrr tolkein's lord of the rings saga - research paper

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



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Your Professor's Name

The works of JRR Tolkien have found a loyal following among people from all walks of life, across continents and from a diverse age group. Yet, the author has been panned by literary critics as being unworthy of being included in the Modern Literary Canon. This paper will argue why the works of the author should in fact find a place in the canon and should be part of recommended readings at an academic level. The paper will evaluate the arguments of various critics and provide a debate in response. It will also take a brief look at the life of JRR Tolkien and how his experiences shaped and influenced his works.

JRR Tolkien – A Short Biography

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born on 3rd January 1892 in Orange Free State, South Africa. At the age of three, Tolkien moved to Birmingham, England along with his mother, Mabel, and younger brother, Hilary. Tolkien faced tragedy early in his life, when his father, Arthur Reuel Tolkien, died in

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1896, a year after the family had moved to England. Mabel Tolkien became a Catholic and introduced the faith to her sons as well. She began JRR's education herself by teaching him Latin, French and German along with handwriting, painting and drawing. Young Tolkien fared well enough to get a scholarship at the King Edwards VI School and began to learn Greek. He eventually mastered the language along with Gothic and Anglo-Saxon and learning Old Norse and Spanish as well. Mabel Tolkien died in 1904 when JRR was 11 years of age. The Tolkien brothers were placed with their aunt in 1904 and then moved to a boarding in 1908. A sixteen year old JRR fell in love with fellow boarder Edith Bratt, three years his senior and the woman who would be his wife. In 1911, JRR won a scholarship at Oxford to study classics but he chose philology instead. In 1914 he wrote his first work, *The Voyage of Eärendil the Evening Star*, based on a line from the *Cynewulfian Christ*. As World War I broke out, JRR joined the British Army in 1915 after winning First Class Honors in English Language at Oxford. He married Edith Bratt in 1916 and had to quit the army after contracting Trench Fever. In 1917, the first Tolkien son, John, was born and JRR began writing *The Silmarillion*. Between 1918 and 1929, JRR found work at both Oxford and Leeds University and was also blessed with two more sons, Michael in 1920 and Christopher in 1924 and a daughter, Priscilla in 1929. He delivered his famous 'Beowulf: The Monsters and The Critics' lecture in 1936. *The Hobbit* got published a year later and was sold out within 2 months and was translated into thirty one languages. Although the publisher asked JRR for more works, *The Silmarillion* faced rejection. Tolkien began writing *The Lord of the Rings* in December 1937. He eventually finished the final part of the

saga in 1943 but continued revising it till 1953. The Fellowship of the Ring and The Two Towers are finally published in 1956 and The Return of the King in 1957. Several of Tolkien's works, including his lectures and essays along with short books and poems like The Adventures of Tom Bombadil were published in the following years. Edith Tolkien died on 29 November 1971. In 1972, JRR Tolkien received an Honorary Doctorate of letters from Oxford, became resident Honorary Fellow at Merton College and was also made Commander of the British Empire. JRR Tolkien passed away on 2nd September 1973 and was buried next to his wife in Oxford. His youngest son, Christopher Tolkien enabled the publication of several of JRR's works posthumously, including The Silmarillion in 1977, Unfinished Tales in 1980, twelve volumes of The History of the Middle Earth published between 1983 and 1995 and, finally, The Children of Hurin in 2007 [CITATION Cha01 p " ix - xvii" | 1033]

The Debate on Including LOTR in the Modern Literary Canon

W. H. Auden sums up the entire debate revolving around the literary value of Tolkien's LOTR saga in his 1956 review in the New York Times:

" I rarely remember a book about which I have had such violent arguments. Nobody seems to have a moderate opinion: either, like myself, people find it a masterpiece of its genre or they cannot abide it, and among the hostile there are some, I must confess, for whose literary judgment I have great respect... In most cases, however, the objection must go far deeper. I can only suppose that some people object to Heroic Quests and Imaginary Worlds on principle; such, they feel, cannot be anything but light " escapist"

reading. That a man like Mr. Tolkien, the English philologist who teaches at Oxford, should lavish such incredible pains upon a genre which is, for them, trifling by definition, is, therefore, very shocking [CITATION Aud56 | 1033].” Those who admired Tolkien’s unlimited imagination hailed the books. C. S Lewis acclaimed it to be ‘ a work of genius’ (Lewis 1082), while Edmund Wilson called it ‘ Juvenile trash’ (Wilson 326). William Blissett called the works ‘ perhaps the last literary masterpiece of the Middle Ages’ (Blissett 449) while Michael Moorcock slammed it as ‘ Winnie the Pooh posing as epic’ (Moorcock 125). Those who have favored the inclusion of LOTR in the modern literary canon have cited the sheer expanse of the books’ ‘ world’. Tolkien did not just write a book, he created a whole new world, complete with mythology, history, genealogy and languages. Followers argue that a tale that could solicit a complete study within itself has to be considered an epic.

The critics of the LOTR saga, however, rightfully point out that Tolkien has taken most of his mythology from Germanic and Norse traditions. The names of Gandalf and almost all of the dwarves mentioned in *The Hobbit* are taken from the Icelandic work *Eddas*. Tolkien has been recognized by scholars as a master assimilator [CITATION Cha01 p 16 | 1033]. Not only are his characters derived from various western sources but so is the philosophy of his work. The novel is deeply governed by the philosophy of *Discordia Concors*, a concept from Medieval and Renaissance that says that everything in its place, emerging out of disorder. It is also argued that Tolkien’s work is not focused enough but is an erratic collection of thoughts, myths and beliefs that the author held dear to his heart. As such, there is no semblance of

order or purpose in the books. Finally, critics have noted that the language used by Tolkien throughout the work is highly inconsistent. This could stem from his passion for various languages and it is possible that he had too many influences to choose one for his writing.

In response to these arguments, the followers of LOTR claim that the primary reason why LOTR has been denied its place in the canon is because it has attained a cult status. Works that gain high popularity with modern generations are often looked down by the literary powers as being 'pop culture', something that appeals to the reader for the simple purpose of pleasure and is trivial with no real literary value to it. LOTR is a massive and intricate work of fiction, requiring hours and hours of careful reading unlike fantasy films, TV programs, or much of children's literature. No one need feel apologetic about Tolkien's monumental status in popular culture. More significantly, though, Tolkien's writings have strong, expansive and deep roots in the literary history of Western Culture. No enlightened reader should deny or disregard the complex and pervasive literary resonances in Tolkien's works [CITATION Cla00 I 1033]. The very fact that Tolkien has used Medieval and Renaissance influences so extensively, makes the books' an indirect study of various high points in the Western culture. Although critics may call the book 'unfocused', it clearly preaches a set of values that have a Christian base. A reader can decipher several virtues like loyalty, friendship, power, the loss of innocence and much more engrained in the book. Unlike 'pop culture' books, LOTR has far too many intricacies that require it to be studied and not just read, making it all the more sensible for it to be included in the canon.

How LOTR Fits Into the Modern Literary Canon

In order to understand why Tolkien's most read work should be included in the modern literary canon, one should first understand what the canon is and what is the criteria for books to get an inclusion. The Western Literary Canon is a list of books that academics believe that every well read, well education must know, if not read. There are currently over three thousand works listed in the canon, including Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, *Hamlet*, *War and Peace*, and also, *Beowulf*, whose inclusion Tolkien himself had fought for. The purpose of the Canon is to preserve and promote literature that has helped shape the Western culture. Hence, if one understand the 'canonized' books, they inadvertently understand the Western culture. The key points to note about works included in the canon are:

1. Cultural Influence – Certain works are the very basis of a culture. For instance, Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aenid* are key influencers of the Greek and Roman cultures respectively. Any book being included in the canon needs to have a similar cultural influence.
2. Educational Influence – The book should carry great educational value. Students in classrooms should be able to learn several concepts, philosophies and virtues by reading that single work. If the book can be taught in a classroom, it can hold a place in the canon.
3. Controversies – Some of the greatest works included in the canon, like James Joyce's *Ulysses*, stirred a lot of controversy on being published. This is mainly due to the fact that book preaches a thought that has the potential to change a culture and change is never brought about without facing stiff opposition.

The LOTR books contain all of these traits. Firstly, it is not just a story based entirely on fiction. Tolkien wrote the book during the time of World War II and this clearly reflects in showing the Sauron's return to power and an attempt to take over Middle Earth. This can be compared to the overthrow of Fascist powers in World War I and their rise again in World War II. The book is full of such similitude, making it a hidden account of world history's biggest wars. Secondly, there is a lot that students can learn from the book that is relevant to modern culture and will probably remain relevant in times to come. The age old story of Good vs. Evil is told in a manner that is easy to relate to and understand by the youth, making the work ideal to be taught at schools. Finally, as with other canonized works, LOTR too faced several controversies when it was published. Critics accused Tolkien of preaching his political views through his books and attempting to influence reader's minds. Whether this is true or not, it remains a fact that, for a work that was written off a 'juvenile', it definitely stirred a lot of controversy.

Conclusion

Since the time it was published, LOTR has met either stern criticism or lavish praise. In either case, it is not a work that can be ignored or read with indifference. The work has become a part of the Western culture and remains popular with the youth as well as adults even today. In fact, its influence has now reached across the Western borders and the books have gained unprecedented popularity across the globe. Having all the traits required for a book to be canonized, The Lord of the Rings by JRR Tolkien definitely deserves a place in the modern Western literary canon.

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