

Classifying the hobbit  
versus the lord of the  
rings: questions of  
genre, tone, an...



The genre classifications of J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy anthology have always been an interesting discussion topic for both scholars and casual readers alike. Not many compendiums can claim they range in style from children's book, to modern fiction, to poetry collections, and (for all intents and purposes) history textbooks over the course of the series. Most notable and well-known in Tolkien's legendarium are the novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Although they are installments in the same series and the latter is directly sequential to the former, it is clear that the two books can be distinguishable with respect to their genres—mainly through differing use of narration and character themes.

The most significant differentiator between the two novels is arguably the style of narration. While the two both use a third-person omniscient narrator, *The Lord of the Rings* is told in a much more informational and didactic manner—the thoughts and views of the characters are portrayed, but opinions on the plot are seldom (if ever) offered. *The Hobbit's* narrator, on the other hand, is what's called an obtrusive narrator—one that can almost be considered a character his/herself. This style uses direct address—speaking directly to the audience—in a manner that is reminiscent of old fairy or folk tales that were carried down the generations auditorily. It is often used as a method, it seems, of both keeping the child audience's attention and ensuring them that a good ending is happening; on more than one occasion (usually at the end of a paragraph) Tolkien will narrate the thought of one of the leading characters, only to right away ensure the audience that the thought is not valid.

One example can be found in the Wood-elf king's reaction to the escape of the prisoners: " He at any rate did not believe in dwarves fighting and killing dragons like Smaug, and he strongly suspected attempted burglary or something like it—which shows he was a wise elf and wiser than the men of the town, though not quite right, as we shall see in the end" (Tolkien 198-199). Rather than allow the audience to make their own judgements about the king's opinions, the narrator overtly reveals the truth of the character's error in judgement. This style of narration continues throughout the novel and substantiates the theory that the narrator of *The Hobbit* is a fallible person (as opposed to the all-knowing narrator of *The Lord of the Rings*).

For a further example, it is beneficial to compare some of the similar characters in the two books—specifically the warrior-dwarves and the hobbits. The portrayal and description of the dwarves in the children's novel is that of a rather bumbling, clumsy, and almost incompetent group desperately in need of a leader—whose shoes are often filled by either Gandalf or Bilbo. The encounter with the trolls is laughably short and none of the other battles are depicted as particularly glorious. Thorin Oakenshield, the famed warrior and rightful King Under the Mountain is bested almost every time he takes up arms, and is not treated with the " importance" (despite Tolkien's overuse of the word) as you'd expect. *The Hobbit*, in essence, is a fairy tale, with Thorin's company being very similar in characterization to the seven dwarves of the Snow White story. Contrast that with the depiction of Gimli's combat abilities (and battles in general), which are significantly darker, more serious, and violent in *TLotR*—more " adult-themed," if you will. If memory serves, at one point in " *The Two Towers*,"

during the battle at Helm's Deep, Gimli is able to cleave the heads of three orc swordsmen in gruesome and glorious detail. Those descriptions would not be found in *The Hobbit*.

It would also be remiss not to mention the thematic symbolism of the two main characters, as well. In her essay *Tolkien and the Rhetoric of Childhood*, Lois Kuznets points out that Bilbo and Frodo Baggins both represent different literary goals. Despite being the same age at the start of their quests, Bilbo in *The Hobbit* begins as much more youthful and inexperienced (more childlike) sets out on his journey to find himself. Frodo in *TLotR*, on the other hand, is more mature and attempts to lose himself and sacrifice himself to the task (Kuznet 158). It is not difficult to guess which is more suitable for a child audience. It is through these narrative and characterization techniques that indicate the distinct separation in genre between Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.