



John Ronald Reuel Tolkien

(1892-1973)

Life and works

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in South Africa of English parents in 1892. At the age of four he was taken to England by his mother, where he spent a happy childhood in the Sarehole countryside, on the south-eastern edge of Birmingham, and his sensibility to the rural landscape can clearly be seen both in his writings and in his pictures.

During his university years he began to develop **his passion for an imaginary world peopled by strange creatures**, elves, dwarves, wizards, warriors and ancient knights, enchanted swords, terrible monsters, bewitched mountains and magic forests linked to the world of folklore and legends of Northern Europe.

After the war, he began to write the mythological and legendary cycle which he originally called 'The Book of Lost Tales' but which eventually became known as *The Silmarillion*.

In 1920 Tolkien was appointed as reader in English Language at the University of Leeds, a post that was converted to a professorship four years later. He distinguished himself by his **lively and imaginative teaching** and in 1925 he was elected professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, where he worked with great skill and enthusiasm for many years.

For his children he wrote and illustrated *The Father Christmas Letters* (1976) and told them the story of *The Hobbit*, published some years later in 1937. This book was followed by the three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55). This huge story took twelve years to complete

and its extraordinary popularity took the writer by surprise.

Tolkien died in 1973, leaving his great mythological and legendary cycle *The Silmarillion* to be edited for publication by his son (1977).

Themes

Tolkien argued that his contemporaries had forgotten how **the mythological imagination could deal** in a profoundly revealing way **with serious moral and spiritual issues**. He himself had learned, through the creation of Middle-earth, something very new and yet very old: **a living mythology can deepen rather than cloud man's vision of reality**.

Eventually he found that he had to set about **the task of schooling an entire generation to a renewed perception of ancient values and truths by the creation of fairy stories**.

He said that **fantasy has three values: 'Recovery, Escape and Consolation'**. The first had to do directly with the health of human imagination. Like all Romantic artists, Tolkien was strongly convinced of the **priority of imagination over perception**; precisely what enabled men to see the real meaning of the world was mythological imagination. 'Escape', which was one of the main functions of fairy tales, consisted of a desire compounded by what might well be described as the peculiarly modern emotions, 'Disgust, Anger, Condemnation and Revolt' against the 'Robot Age'. The third function, 'Consolation', was the arrival of a sudden and miraculous grace in the happy ending of the fairy story.

<i>Key idea</i>	Tolkien was an explorer of imaginary worlds, like the 'middangeard' ('Middle-earth') of Beowulf (→ 1.11), and all of them worked their power over his own imagination, causing him to create a new magic world, Middle-earth. He produced maps and internal laws for this realm, he	wrote the history of the hobbits, the people who lived there, together with other peoples, and described the adventures of its heroes. The hobbits belonged to a strange race of 'halflings': they had feet covered with hair, smoked pipes, held feasts together and often seemed childish in their behaviour.
Middle-earth		

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ the text about Tolkien's life and works and complete the table below with the missing details.

1892	
	He was taken back to England by his mother
During his university years	
After the war	
1920	
1937	
1954-55	
1973	
	<i>The Silmarillion</i>

**2 READ** the other texts about John Ronald Reuel Tolkien and answer the following questions.

- 1 What could the mythological imagination deal with, according to Tolkien?
- 2 What was his task as a writer?
- 3 Which are the values of fantasy for Tolkien?
- 4 What did Tolkien create?
- 5 Who inhabited his world?

The Lord of the Rings

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien
(1954-55)

PLOT AND SETTING

The story of Tolkien's world begins with the novel *The Hobbit*, which tells the adventures of a hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, who, travelling towards the Lonely Mountain to reclaim it for the dwarves, finds a ring lost by a strange creature, Gollum. This ring is magic, since it was made by the terrible Dark Lord, **Sauron**, during the first days of the world and can transform the character of the person who possesses it, turning him to evil.

This ring is inherited by Bilbo's nephew, **Frodo Baggins**. At this point the narrative is taken over by *The Lord of the Rings*. Sauron declares war on the free lands of elves, dwarves, men and hobbits, and the only way of defeating him is by destroying the ring. Frodo, the bearer of the ring, **has to travel through bewitched forests and face evil in many forms before reaching the Mount Doom, where the ring was created and must be destroyed**. The ring is finally destroyed and Sauron defeated. The end, however, is a complicated one since Frodo has been infected by the ring and the hobbits' home, the Shire, has been destroyed. Peace is regained with the help of the powers for good, the Shire restored, and Frodo and Bilbo leave on their final journey to live with the Elves.

THE MYTH OF THE QUEST

Both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are built upon **the ancient structure of the quest**, with which a most non-heroic hobbit achieves heroic stature; both extend

the quest through the cycle of one year, but they differ in one respect: *The Hobbit* is a quest to gain something, *The Lord of the Rings* a quest to renounce something.

THE THEMES

The ring symbolises the fact that 20th-century man has, like Frodo, suddenly found himself, without wanting it, in possession of a power over nature so immense that even the desire to use it will inevitably corrupt his soul. Like Frodo, he would rather throw the whole thing away giving up the desire to control and thereby pervert nature, but he knows he cannot.

STYLE

Tolkien's style was extremely **simple and quite similar to the one of the old romance**, which did not aim at drawing attention to the way it was written. Tolkien, in fact, was far more concerned with the matter of his narrative than its manner and he only exercised his **undoubted gift for language in inventing names**, which is exactly in the tradition of a romance, just like the use of poems which are mingled in the narration of *The Lord of the Rings*.

ITS POPULARITY

The Lord of the Rings became a bestseller in the mid-Sixties, when was read by the dissident, young, educated middle class, who wanted to avoid the artificiality of modern industrial society.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ about *The Lord of the Rings* and find out

- who inherited the magic ring;
- who Sauron is and what he decides to do;
- what happens at the end of the novel;
- what *The Lord of the Rings* is built upon;
- what the ring symbolises;
- the main features of Tolkien's style;
- when *The Lord of the Rings* became a bestseller.



Gandalf and Frodo

The first part of this excerpt is a poem taken from the front page of The Lord of the Rings; the second passage describes the power of 'One Ring'.

John Ronald Reuel
Tolkien
The Lord of the Rings
(1954-55)

Book 1, Part 1, Chapter 1

Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men doomed¹ to die,
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne
5 In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.
One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all, and in the darkness bind them,
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.

'[...] I wish he had never found it, and that I had not got it! Why did you let me keep it?
10 Why didn't you make me throw it away, or, or destroy it?'

'Let you? Make you?' said the wizard². 'Haven't you been listening to all that I have said? You are not thinking of what you are saying. But as for throwing it away, that was obviously wrong. These Rings have a way of being found. In evil hands it might have done great evil. Worst of all, it might have fallen into the hands of the Enemy. Indeed it
15 certainly would; for this is the One, and he³ is exerting all his power to find it or draw⁴ it to himself.

'Of course, my dear Frodo, it was dangerous for you; and that has troubled me deeply. But there was so much at stake⁵ that I had to take some risk – though even when I was far away there has never been a day when the Shire⁶ has not been guarded
20 by watchful eyes. As long as you never used it, I did not think that the Ring would have any lasting effect on you, not for evil, not at any rate⁷ for a very long time. And you must remember that nine years ago, when I last saw you, I still knew little for certain.'

'But why not destroy it, as you say should have been done long ago?' cried Frodo again. 'If you had warned me, or even sent me a message, I would have done away with it.'

25 'Would you? How would you do that? Have you ever tried?'

'No. But I suppose one could hammer⁸ it or melt⁹ it.'

'Try!' said Gandalf. 'Try now!'

Frodo drew the Ring out of his pocket again and looked at it. It now appeared plain and smooth, without mark or device that he could see. The gold looked very fair and
30 pure, and Frodo thought how rich and beautiful was its colour, how perfect was its roundness. It was an admirable thing and altogether precious. When he took it out he had intended to fling¹⁰ it from him into the very hottest part of the fire. But he found now that he could not do so, not without a great struggle. He weighed¹¹ the Ring in his hand, hesitating, and forcing himself to remember all that Gandalf had told him; and
35 then with an effort of will he made a movement, as if to cast it away¹² – but he found that he had put it back in his pocket.

Gandalf laughed grimly¹³. 'You see? Already you too, Frodo, cannot easily let it go, nor will to damage it. And I could not 'make' you – except by force, which would break your mind. But as for breaking the Ring, force is useless. Even if you took it and struck
40 it with a heavy sledge-hammer, it would make no dint¹⁴ in it. It cannot be unmade by your hands, or by mine.

'Your small fire, of course, would not melt even ordinary gold. This Ring has already passed through it unscathed¹⁵, and even unheated¹⁶. But there is no smith's forge in this Shire that could change it at all. Not even the anvils¹⁷ and furnaces of the Dwarves
45 could do that. It has been said that dragon-fire could melt and consume the Rings of Power, but there is not now any dragon left on earth in which the old fire is hot enough: nor was there ever any dragon, not even Ancalagon the Black, who could have harmed

- 1 **doomed**. Destinati.
- 2 **wizard**. Mago.
- 3 **he**. Sauron, il Signore del Male.
- 4 **draw**. Attirare.
- 5 **at stake**. In gioco.
- 6 **Shire**. La Contea, il territorio degli *hobbits*.
- 7 **at any rate**. Comunque.
- 8 **hammer**. *Lett.*: martellare; *qui*: ridurlo in pezzi.
- 9 **melt**. Fondere.
- 10 **fling**. Lanciare.
- 11 **He weighed**. Soppesò.
- 12 **to cast it away**. Per buttarlo via.
- 13 **grimly**. In modo severo.
- 14 **dint**. Ammacatura.
- 15 **unscathed**. Illeso, senza danno.
- 16 **unheated**. Senza riscaldarsi.
- 17 **anvils**. Incudini.



the One Ring, the Ruling Ring, for that was made by Sauron himself.

50 'There is only one way: to find the Cracks of Doom in the depths of Orodruin, the Fire-mountain, and **cast** the Ring in there, if you really wish to destroy it, to put it beyond the grasp of the Enemy for ever.'

'I do really wish to destroy it!' cried Frodo. 'Or, well, to have it destroyed. I am not made for perilous quests. I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?'

55 'Such questions cannot be answered,' said Gandalf. 'You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess: not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits¹⁸ as you have.'

60 'But I have so little of any of these things! You are wise and powerful. Will you not take the Ring?'

'No!' cried Gandalf, springing¹⁹ to his feet. 'With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly.' His eyes flashed and his face was lit as by a fire within. 'Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself. Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good. Do not tempt me! 65 I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield²⁰ it would be too great for my strength. I shall have such need of it. Great perils lie before me.'

He went to the window and drew aside the curtains and the shutters. Sunlight **streamed back** again into the room. Sam passed along the path outside whistling. 'And 70 now,' the wizard, turning back to Frodo, 'the decision lies with you. But I will always help you.' He laid his hand on Frodo's shoulder. 'I will help you bear this burden²¹, as long as it is yours to bear. But we must do something, soon. The Enemy is moving.'

18 wits. Facoltà mentali.

19 springing. Balzando.

20 wield. Lett.: maneggiare; qui: usare.

21 bear this burden. Portare questo fardello.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 **READ** the text and match the highlighted words and phrases with their Italian translation.

- | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 attenti | 7 mazza, martello |
| 2 liscio, levigato | 8 legare |
| 3 l'avrei distrutto | 9 duraturo |
| 4 si riversò | 10 fabbro |
| 5 lanciare | 11 nano |
| 6 ha preoccupato | |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 **READ** the poem at the beginning of the text.

1 Complete the table below about the characters mentioned and the rings given to them.

Characters	Number of rings received as a gift	Living place

2 Say which ring is the most powerful.

**3 READ** the passage again in order to find out

- the characters involved;
- what Frodo would like to destroy;
- the place where the ring can be destroyed;
- why the good wizard, Gandalf, refuses to take the ring.

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT**4 CONSIDER** the poem and answer the following questions.

- Tell what you notice in
 - the structure;
 - the length of the lines;
 - the use of rhyme and alliteration;
 - the rhythm.
- What effect is achieved?
- Underline all the repeated words and comment on the effect of this repetition.

5 FOCUS on the narrative passage and find out

- the narrator;
- the point of view adopted;
- the dominant narrative mode.

6 CONCENTRATE on the world presented in this passage. How would you define it?

- Choose from the list below and support your answer/s by quoting from the text.

nightmarish

magic

realistic

tragic

surreal

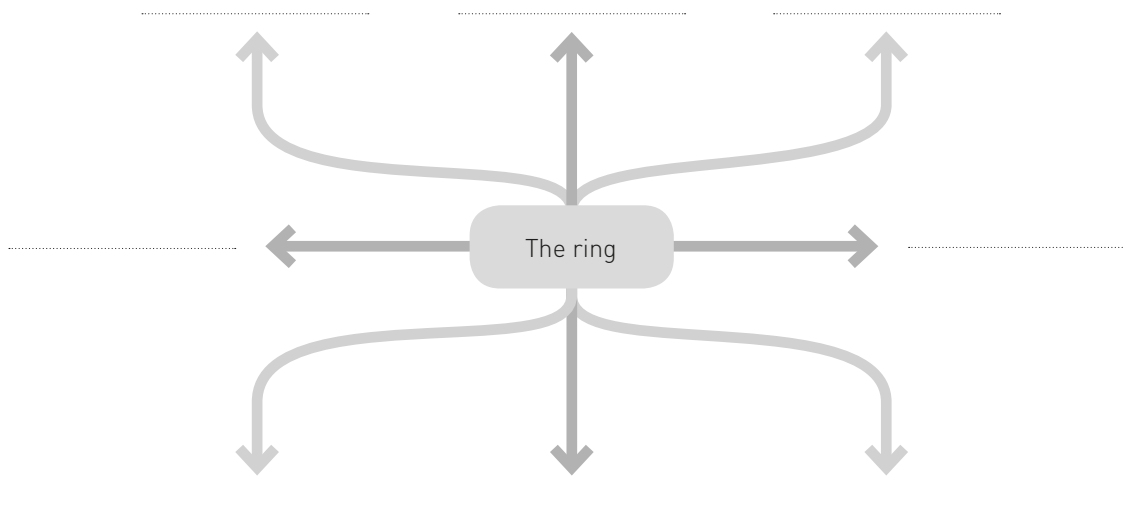
mysterious

- Complete the table below about the differences between this world and the one you are living in.

	The world of <i>The Lord of the Rings</i>	The real world
Environment		
Internal laws		
Inhabitants		

7 LOOK at the words and the expressions used by Frodo and Gandalf in the text. How do their personalities differ? How do their features determine the way they react to each other?**8 DEFINE** the language used in this passage. Tick as appropriate.

- | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Descriptive. | <input type="checkbox"/> Realistic. | <input type="checkbox"/> Colloquial. | <input type="checkbox"/> Pompous. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tragic. | <input type="checkbox"/> Comic. | <input type="checkbox"/> Imaginative. | <input type="checkbox"/> Abstract. |

9 COMPLETE the diagram with all the ideas you associate with the ring.

**> COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS****10 DISCUSS** what influences of English literature you can detect in Tolkien's novel.**11 LIST** similarities and differences between Tolkien's utopian world and that described by Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* (→ 3.11 and T38-40).

	Similarities	Differences
The kind of story		
The characters		
The style		
The writer's aim		

> COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**12 ANSWER** the questions in the diagram below.