

ENGL 210A Medieval Literature: Tolkien and Literary History**Dr. David Currell****F 3:00-5:30 Nicely 323****Office Hours: MR 4:30-5:30 and by appointment, Fisk 203****Email: dc13@aub.edu.lb****Ext: 4092****Overview**

One writes such a story not out of the leaves or trees still to be observed, nor by means of botany and soil-science; but it grows like a seed in the dark out of the leaf-mould of the mind: out of all that has been seen or thought or read, that has long ago been forgotten, descending into the deeps.

J.R.R. Tolkien's writing career was balanced between two forms of authorship. On the one hand, he wrote scholarly translations and critical analyses of key works of literature produced during the medieval period in northern Europe. On the other hand, he wrote the most widely read and influential works of fantasy literature, probably in any language, time, or place. We will study both, and use each form of writing as a way into the other, exploring the creative side of scholarship and the contribution of disciplined knowledges to artistic world-building.

Tolkien was influential in establishing the English curriculum at Oxford in the middle of the twentieth century, giving prominent space to the texts and languages of the Middle Ages. We will follow some of this curriculum in a specially Tolkienian fashion by using his posthumously prepared translations of *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in conjunction with an introduction to Icelandic saga literature in the form of *The Volsungasaga* and Tolkien's imitation, *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun*. The other body of texts with which Tolkien's name is conventionally associated is children's literature; we will begin the course by studying *The Hobbit* and end with the "adult" continuation of what Tolkien called the Middle-earth "story," paying especially close attention to the narrative of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the concluding chapters of *The Return of the King*, and the several appendices devoted to topics such as language and genealogy.

Thinking about Tolkien in the context of literary history will open interesting questions at the heart of contemporary literary studies about the relationships between past and present, literary criticism and literary creativity, academic scholarship and popular culture, and the sociology of texts and audiences.

Student Learning Outcomes

After completing this course, students will be able to:

- Recall and articulate information about text, language, and narrative in major works of medieval literature and in Tolkien's fiction
- Analyze and historicize the creative reception of medieval literature in medievalist fantasy literature
- Understand and emulate basic practices of philological and literary scholarship
- Analyze Tolkien's fiction both synchronically and diachronically through the discourses of world-building, narratology, topoanalysis, race, gender, and class
- Perform elementary analysis of translated medieval verse in comparison to its Middle English original
- Analyze the form and function of verse passages in a large prose narrative

Outcomes achieved in this course will also be broadly applicable within literary studies and beyond.

Texts

The following texts will be available for purchase at the AUB bookstore. These specific editions are strongly preferred although alternatives are acceptable in the cases of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

- Jesse L. Byock, ed. and trans., *The Saga of the Volsungs* (London: Penguin, 2000).
- William Langland, *Piers Plowman with Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, etc.*, trans Terence Tiller and J.R.R. Tolkien (London: Everyman's Library, 2001).
- J.R.R. Tolkien, trans. *Beowulf*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (New York: Mariner, 2015).
- J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York: Mariner, 2012).
- J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun* (New York: Mariner, 2010).
- J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Mariner, 2005).

Three critical essays will be distributed electronically:

- Ishay Landa, "Slaves of the Ring: Tolkien's Political Unconscious," *Historical Materialism* 10 (2002): 113-33.
- J.R.R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).
- Niels Werber, "Geo- and Biopolitics of Middle-earth: A German Reading of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," *New Literary History* 36 (2005): 227-46.

The Work of the Seminar

This course is slightly unusual in having a weekly seminar format. Such a format requires two things above all: studious preparation of all assigned readings in advance of the seminar, and attentive participation during the meeting time. A significant proportion of the final grade will rest on these two elements (preparation and participation) as demonstrated across the entire semester. Participants are responsible for all material assigned for a given session, although of course as a practical matter not everything can be discussed in a finite session.

Appropriate Academic Conduct

1. As we are following in the footsteps of a scholar, we must respect the highest standards of scholarship. Document all sources consulted and citations made with proper care; if you have any uncertainty about how to avoid plagiarism consult the student handbook, instructor, or Writing Center, as this and other forms of academic dishonesty will be reported to the Office of the Dean.
2. Mobile telephones and other electronic devices must be switched off before entering the seminar room. On the first lapse, a student will be required to leave the session; on the second, a student will be dropped from the course.
3. Attendance will be taken; unexcused absence from more than two class meetings during the first ten weeks of the semester will result in a student being automatically dropped from the course (see Catalogue, 143).
4. Pipe-weed to be smoked on campus only in designated areas (indicated by gold-colored seating).

Assignments

During the first session, a sign-up sheet will be distributed listing topics for individual presentations on specific dates. Presentations will be at most 5-10 minutes in length, usually be delivered at the beginning or mid-point of the session, and should be delivered informally, not read (except for quotations).

Written work done outside of class will consist of two small assignments and one final paper. At the conclusion of the 30/10 seminar, each student will be given a Middle English version of a stanza of the poem

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight for philological analysis and comparison to Tolkien's translation, to be submitted at the beginning of the 6/11 seminar. At the beginning of the 27/11 seminar, each student will submit an analysis of one of Tolkien's verse compositions from *The Hobbit* or *The Fellowship of the Ring*. More details on these exercises will be provided in class.

The final writing assignment should be an analytical paper of approximately 6-7 pages in length treating one of Tolkien's creative or scholarly texts and reflecting one or more methods pursued during the course.

Prepare all written work according to the following format:

- name at top of first page
- numbered pages
- 12-point, Times New Roman font
- one inch (approx.) left and right margins
- double-spaced

Grading

| | |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Class presentation | 15% |
| <i>Gawain</i> stanza analysis | 15% |
| <i>Hobbit</i> or <i>Fellowship</i> poetry analysis | 15% |
| Final paper | 30% |
| Seminar preparation and participation | 25% |

Class Schedule and Reading Assignments (Provisional)

Assigned readings to be completed in advance of the scheduled class.

| | |
|---------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| F 4/9 | Introduction |
| F 11/9 | Tolkien, <i>The Hobbit</i> , 1-129 |
| F 18/9 | Tolkien, <i>The Hobbit</i> , 130-276 |
| F 25/9 | [Al-Adha, no seminar] |
| F 2/10 | Tolkien, trans., <i>Beowulf</i> , lines 1-1851 and relevant Commentary (130-350) |
| F 9/10 | Tolkien, trans., <i>Beowulf</i> , lines 1852-2669 Tolkien, <i>Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics</i> |
| F 16/10 | Byock, ed. and trans., <i>The Saga of the Volsungs</i> |
| F 23/10 | Tolkien, <i>The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun</i> |
| F 30/10 | Tolkien, trans., <i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i> , 317-87 |
| F 6/11 | Tolkien, <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> , 1-111 (to "A Conspiracy Unmasked") submit <i>Gawain</i> stanza analysis assignment (pre-class) |
| F 13/11 | Tolkien, <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> , 112-288 (to "The Ring Goes South") |
| F 20/11 | Tolkien, <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> , 289-427 (to <i>The Two Towers</i>) |

- F 27/11 Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 969-1069
Landa, "Slaves of the Ring," 113-33
submit *Hobbit* or *Fellowship* poetry analysis assignment (pre-class)
- F 4/12 Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1070-1172
Werber, "Geo- and Biopolitics of Middle-earth," 227-46.
- F 11/12 **submit final paper: BOTH print copy to Fisk 203 AND email to dc13@aub.edu.lb**