

# The Lord of the Rings



*J. R. R. Tolkien*

# J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973)

- ❖ Scholar and professor of English language at Leeds and Oxford, studying the literature of medieval England and Scandinavia
- ❖ Served in France during the First World War
- ❖ Linguist who invented his own languages
- ❖ Created the fantasy Otherworld of Middle-earth to provide context for his new languages, writing myths and history belonging to this world starting as an undergraduate student



# Writing *The Lord of the Rings*

- ❖ After the success of *The Hobbit* in 1937, Tolkien's editor at Allen & Unwin wanted more material about hobbits. Tolkien initially protested that he had nothing more to say about hobbits, but eventually began writing another book, also beginning with a birthday party
- ❖ Had been writing Middle-earth material (now collected in *The Silmarillion*) for many years, and began to integrate it into the new work; plotting initially driven by instinct, famously noted that when he wrote the chapters in Bree, he had no idea who Strider was any more than the hobbits did!
- ❖ Narrative development coloured by the Second World War and his own experiences in the first
- ❖ Published in 1954 after years of revisions, to immediate acclaim

# History of Middle-earth

- ❖ Documented in Tolkien's posthumous work *The Silmarillion*
- ❖ Middle-earth created by Catholic God-figure Ilúvatar, shaped by divine creative beings called Valar and corrupted by Morgoth (a Vala), master of Sauron
- ❖ Tolkien wrote thousands of years of history for his invented world, including the creation of Elves and Men and numerous battles between the High Elves and Morgoth, the rise and fall of the human kingdom of Númenor, and the establishment of the kingdoms of Gondor and Arnor by the survivors
- ❖ Rings of Power forged originally by Elvish smiths for Elves, Men, and Dwarves; Sauron, a semi-divine being corrupted by Morgoth, secretly forged a master ring (the One Ring) to control them, and was only defeated by a martial alliance of Men and Elves when the human prince Isildur cut the Ring from his hand
- ❖ Sauron vanished, Isildur died, and the Ring was lost, only to resurface hundreds of years later at the start of *The Lord of the Rings*

# Peoples of Middle-earth

- ❖ **Elves:** the First Children of Ilúvatar, i.e. the first created beings to populate Middle-earth. Beautiful, immune to sickness and old age, with a history of thousands of years of war against Morgoth and Sauron. Speakers of Sindarin and Quenya. They include High Elves, who have seen the light of the divine realm of Valinor, and Moriquendi (Twilight Elves, including Wood-Elves) who never left the confines of Middle-earth. The Elves were exiled from Valinor when they pursued vengeance against Morgoth for stealing the Silmarils, jewels of immense beauty. By the start of *The Lord of the Rings*, following the defeat of Morgoth by the Valar, the Elves are allowed to return over the sea to Valinor, and are slowly departing Middle-earth.
- ❖ **Men:** the Second Children of Ilúvatar, created after the Elves. Mortal, with an unknown fate after death, known as the Gift of Ilúvatar. Men have nearly as long a history as Elves in Middle-earth, and while many fought against Morgoth and Sauron historically, others joined them. The blood of the kingly men of Númenor survives now in the Dúnedain Rangers in the north of Middle-earth and the Stewards of Gondor, who have ruled that country after the line of kings failed.
- ❖ **Wizards:** also known as the Istari, angelic beings interfering in the affairs of Middle Earth. Saruman the White is their leader. Gandalf the Grey, with his wide-brimmed hat, is similar to the Old Norse god Óðinn, who seeks wisdom. His resurrection as Gandalf the White, however, has distinct Christian overtones.

# Peoples of Middle-earth, Continued

- ❖ **Hobbits:** also called Halflings. They are short, humanoid beings who dress in brightly coloured breeches and waistcoats, have curly hair on their heads and toes, and enjoy creature comforts. Their land, the Shire, is essentially the English Midlands at the time of Queen Victoria's Silver Jubilee, and is in significant contrast to the rest of Middle-earth. Hobbits tend to baffle those who encounter them outside the Shire.
- ❖ **Dwarves:** created by the Vala Aulë out of earth. They are short and bearded, dwell in the mountains, are associated with mining, smithing, and metalwork, and are committed to old feuds. Tolkien drew on the few details we have from Old Norse texts about dwarves, taking the thirteen dwarf names in *The Hobbit* from the Old Norse poem *Völuspá* ('Prophecy of the Seeress'). There is historical animosity between Dwarves and Elves.
- ❖ **Ents:** Tree shepherds who guard forests. Created by the Vala Yavanna to counteract the tree-felling activities of the Dwarves. Taught to speak by the Elves. Female Ents, the Entwives, have disappeared for centuries.
- ❖ **Orcs:** evil beings who serve Morgoth and Sauron and make up the majority of Sauron's armies. In some of Tolkien's notes they were created by Morgoth; in others, they are the descendants of Elves whom Morgoth tortured and transformed.

# Themes and Ideas

- ❖ Transience, elegy, and loss – a world standing in the ruins of a past, greater age
- ❖ Joy tempered by grief – the *euclatrophe* (sudden joyous turn) of the ending does not negate the suffering it entails
- ❖ The quest and the anti-quest – Frodo leaves a safe place and returns to it changed, as in the Hero's Journey, but he also seeks to destroy rather than obtain a magic object, and his journey does not end with solace
- ❖ Heroism as sacrifice, in the face of overwhelming odds
- ❖ The nobility of the foot soldier (Sam) vs the nobility of the king (Aragorn)
- ❖ Protagonists struggle against evil without (Sauron, the 'Big Bad'; orcs; the treacherous Saruman) and evil within (Frodo's struggle with the Ring, Gollum/Sméagol's struggle with himself)

# Themes and Ideas, Continued

- ❖ Good in *The Lord of the Rings* is allied with collaboration, love, loyalty to others, the prioritization of healing over violence, the natural world over industrialization
- ❖ Evil, by contrast, is about selfishness, isolation, ‘working alone’, the hoarding of power and treasure for oneself
- ❖ Asks questions about redemption: when is it possible? How far can one fall before one becomes irredeemable?
- ❖ Persistent importance of fellowship, love between people allowing for triumph
- ❖ Sam’s refusal of the Ring’s offer of power in favour of the ability to till his own garden
- ❖ Importance of empathy, compassion, mercy – but democracy only to a certain extent. Tolkien is also interested in the supposed innateness of nobility