

## Summary of lectures on *The Hobbit*

KEYWORDS: FANTASY; REGISTER (TONE, STYLE); CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

In the first lecture, I told you about Tolkien's life – his war service, his academic career, his personal and religious convictions – and showed how they might connect him to the war poets we have studied. I quoted Tom Shippey, an academic who is an expert in Tolkien:

His life's work can be seen on the one hand as an attempt to express or exorcise the trauma that overtook him and his society, like other great works of modernist literature such as TS Eliot's *The Waste Land*. On the other, it is an attempt to reassert the traditional values which for many seemed discredited by the Somme and Passchendaele - the heroic values that Tolkien found in ancient epics such as *Beowulf* but also in his own experiences as a soldier. Unlike his contemporary, Robert Graves, Tolkien refused to say goodbye to all that. He felt a powerful continuity between 20th-century Britain and the mythical world of fairy tale. He refused to make the characteristic modern retreat into irony, the mode of Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Oh, What A Lovely War!*

We discussed Tolkien's later assessment of what he saw as flaws in the style of *The Hobbit*; he attributed these to his desire to write a children's story, and what he saw as a misguided imitation of what were, at the time, common stylistic tricks of that genre. We looked at such elements as the chatty, occasionally intrusive narrator; the use of words from a "low" register; the occasionally arch, "cutesy" tone. But we also considered Tolkien's assertion that *The Hobbit* allowed him to explore what happened when a character from a recognizable, domestic realm goes out into a world informed by myth and saga

I mentioned Tolkien's famous essay *On Fairy Stories*, and his assertion there that fairy stories were serious, and required that they be presented as "true," with nothing to take away from the reality of the fantasy realm in which they exist

We discussed aspects of the story which would eventually change, once the full narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* was worked out: Elrond and the elves appear less awe-inspiring in *The Hobbit* than they will later, and the Ring is largely a useful magical trinket (though with some potentially negative aspects)

I picked out various hero-tale elements in the narrative that could be traced back to Tolkien's professional knowledge of medieval literature. We discussed the Scandinavian origins of the shape-shifter Beorn and his Heorot-like hall, the Anglo-Saxon riddling tradition, the named swords, the role of eagles in medieval

Welsh literature, and the connection between the story of Sigurd and the dragon Fafnir, and Bilbo's conversation with Smaug. I pointed to elements which domesticated some of these conventions to Bilbo's world: Beorn's treasure is in food, not gold; Bilbo's own sword is called Sting, a less grand name than Glamdring or Orcrist

I connected what Tolkien has to say about goblin inventions (p. 83) with Tolkien's dislike of machinery, as well as with his war experiences. I noted that a distrust of machinery and "progress" is a characteristic of much post-war fantasy, including that written by Tolkien's friend C.S. Lewis

I compared Bard, the sort of hero who could have stepped from Beowulf's world, with the Master, who is clearly a politician. We also discussed the shift in tone in the novel around this time, as the Battle of the Five Armies approaches. As Tolkien deals with more conventionally "heroic" and mythic elements, he shifts to the register of high fantasy. Yet Bilbo remains in the middle of all this, and it is his good sense and immunity to the greed that seizes Thorin that helps to salvage the situation

Thorin's death is his redemption: he is a better warrior than a king. I suggested that if there is nostalgia here for strong heroes/ rulers, there is also a recognition that power can corrupt—we connected this observation to some of the characteristics we have been noted in more contemporary depictions of heroism

In a previous version of this course, I used the changes that Peter Jackson made to Aragorn in his films of *The Lord of the Rings* to conclude with some thoughts about the contemporary hero: Tolkien's Aragorn may not be sure of his ultimate victory, but he is very sure of who he is, and he accepts his destiny. He is almost super-human (Tolkien's highest style appears in such passages as the description of his coronation). Jackson's Aragorn has to struggle with a sense of his own weakness, and with a reluctance to embrace his destiny

We talked about Peter Jackson too, looking at some of the changes he is clearly making to the novel as he makes his films of *The Hobbit*. It seems as though he has a desire to trend towards high, epic heroism, but we closed by noting the importance of Bilbo's domestic, ordinary qualities