

J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*



John Ronald Reuel Tolkien: Early Life

- Born in 1892 in Bloemfontein, South Africa; grew up in Sarehole, outside Birmingham
- Raised by his mother Mabel, who gave him an abiding love of linguistics, calligraphy, painting, and botany; Mabel died when Tolkien was twelve
- John and brother Hilary moved between lodging houses, making up languages and fantasy worlds as means of escape; eventually, in lodging house run by Father Francis Morgan, John met another orphan named Edith Bratt and fell in love. John and Edith were separated because she was deemed to be distracting him from his Oxford entrance exams

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien: Early Life

- Read English Language and Literature at Exeter College, Oxford; started as a classicist but changed to English and concentrated on the medieval period
- Immediately upon turning twenty-one, he resumed contact with Edith and they were shortly engaged
- Enlisted in the Lancashire Fusilliers and saw action at the Battle of the Somme in 1916; invalided home with trench fever
- Returned to scholarship after the war, working for the Oxford English Dictionary, and was appointed professor of English language first at Leeds, then at Oxford

Writing *Silmarillion* Material

- Started writing myths and developing the Elven language Quenya while an undergraduate, including reading and writing responses to the Finnish *Kalevala*
- Continued work on multiple invented languages, including Quenya, Sindarin, and Khuzdul (Dwarvish), and to write short myths inspired by his scholarship on medieval England and Scandinavia throughout his career
- Shaped the resulting material into a history of his invented 'Middle-earth' and the dynasties of Elves, Men, and Dwarves who inhabited it; Middle-earth is both a fantastical otherworld and an imagined, mythical, ancient England/Europe
- Made the intentional decision to set *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* within the world and history of this *Silmarillion* material
- *Silmarillion* material never published in Tolkien's lifetime, though he tried multiple times to sell it to Allen & Unwin, publishers of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*
- Gathered together after his death in 1973 and edited by his son Christopher Tolkien, with the assistance of fantasy writer Guy Gavriel Kay, in 1977.

What Is *The Silmarillion*?

- In its resulting, edited form, *The Silmarillion* is a collection of stories collectively telling the history of Middle-earth
- A corpus rather than a text. Not a single narrative, but a sprawling history, and a gathering of disparate material into chronological order
- Begins with creation of the world by Ilúvatar (a stand-in for the Christian God) and his spiritual offspring the Valar and ends thousands of years later with the events of *The Lord of the Rings*
- Narrates the creation of Elves and Men, the fall from grace of the Elves and the bitter feuds and history of the Silmarils (jewels), and the perpetual enmity with the fallen Vala Morgoth (a Satan analogue) and his servant Sauron
- Stories range from narratives of particular, individual heroes to sweeping accounts of battles and divine interventions

The Legendarium and Sub-Creation

- Tolkien set a new standard for fantasy literature by creating a completely realized Otherworld, with its own languages, cultures, and history, in the Silmarillion material
- For this reason, his collected work is often referred to as a legendarium. Tolkien used this word, more often used for medieval collections of legends about saints, to refer to all of his work dealing with Middle-earth and its history
- Tolkien referred to this kind of world-building as **sub-creation**, treating the human author as a 'little maker' creating his own world within God's primary creation
- Tolkien invents not just a world in the Silmarillion material, but an entire mythology, with a creator god as well as a pantheon of lesser divine figures. Tolkien used the term **mythopoesis** to describe this literary endeavour

Literary Themes

- Transience and elegy: joy is tempered by grief. Rather than happy endings, something Tolkien calls the *eucatastrophe*: the sudden snatching of victory from the jaws of defeat, but not without loss.
- Heroism in the face of overwhelming odds; self-sacrifice as essential
- Good and evil: collaboration, trust, and fellowship vs. selfishness, love vs. power, healing vs. fighting, compassion vs. isolation
- Evil as both within and without, inside the self and manifested in the wider world
- Power of nature and the natural world
- Importance of language as vehicle for conveying identity, group belonging, and history