

**English 300: Merlin**  
**Topics for Papers and Discussion**  
**J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) and "On Fairy-Stories" (1939)**

1. In the 1936 Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" delivered before the British Academy, J. R. R. Tolkien states: "It is the strength of the northern mythological imagination that . . . put the monsters in the centre, gave them victory but no honour, and found a potent, but terrible solution in naked will and courage. . . So potent is it, that while the older southern imagination has faded for ever into literary ornament, the northern has power, as it were, to revive its spirit even in our own times." The critic Thomas J. Gasque opines that Tolkien almost surely had *The Hobbit* in mind when he penned this "curious and not fully elaborated statement." Does your reading of *The Hobbit* support Gasque?
2. J. R. R. Tolkien writes in a preamble to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings* (London, 1966) that the trilogy was "primarily linguistic in inspiration." In remarks quoted by Edmund Wilson in his 1956 review of *LOTR*, Tolkien writes further that "The invention of language is the foundation. The 'stories' were made rather to provide a world for the language than the reverse." What, if anything, does this account explain about *The Hobbit*? Do Tolkien's statements illuminate the essay "On Fairy-Stories"?
3. The critic and Old English scholar T. A. Shippey contends that the speech of the hobbits sets up a "standard of naturalness" against which other ethnicities in Middle-earth are compared. Do you support this opinion?
4. A difficult but central problem in comprehending either J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasies or his essay "On Fairy-Stories" is the relationship of these works to Christianity, which the author deeply believed. In a 1972 monograph on Tolkien, Robley Evans argues that Tolkien's texts were underwritten by a "religious vision of reality." Considering Tolkien's considerable restraint about directly mentioning Christian dogma in *The Hobbit*, could you comment on Evans's thesis? Contrast the overt program of Christian ideology in the essay with whatever you discover about *The Hobbit*?
5. J. R. R. Tolkien was an influential scholar of Old and Middle English, who wrote and lectured widely on medieval English literature. Deeply steeped in this tradition of heroic literature, he offers in his fantasies a critique of heroism with much persuasive power. Explaining Tolkien's appeal in this un- or anti-heroic age, T. A. Shippey writes that ". . . we are reluctant to believe that [heroism] exists or that it is not by nature vicious. Tolkien salves modern embarrassment to some extent by presenting events largely through the modernistic and un-ambitious eyes of the Hobbits." Do you support Shippey's position?
6. *The Hobbit* introduces a "problem" -- how the One Ring is to be destroyed -- that the extended narration of the *LOTR* completes as an "Age of the World" in J. R. R. Tolkien's cosmos closes. How is the theme of the "end of the world" expressed in *The Hobbit*? Do you read "On Fairy-Stories" too as commenting on the decline and end of an age?

7. J. R. R. Tolkien's expertise in lexicography is part of his scholarly record and is amplified by several anecdotes in which he took the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* to task for wrong-headed entries. The arguments Tolkien puts forward in "On Fairy-Stories" are marked strongly by the etymologies and fields of meaning of several key terms. What is at stake for Tolkien in defining, for example, "fantasy," "imagination," and "fairy"?

8. Natural rhythms and phenomena foster a sensitivity to "The Other" in the positive characters of *The Hobbit*, from the hopes and steadfastness deeply renewed by the rising sun in the Company to the ordinary, but no less sustaining, pleasure that a hobbit takes in his own green grass. J. R. R. Tolkien's praises the rural and agrarian, the simple life lived close to Nature, quite explicitly in "On Fairy-Stories." Do you agree with his position, either fully or partly?

9. Edmund Wilson's wickedly witty review of *LOTR*, "Oo, Those Awful Orcs!," deprecates *The Hobbit* and the trilogy following it (which he calls "the hyperstrophic sequel" to *The Hobbit*) as a "children's book which has somehow gotten out of hand." "One is puzzled to know," says the acid Wilson, "why the author should have supposed he was writing for adults." Part of the agenda in Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-Stories" is the redemption of the fairy tale from the category of mere books for children. Whom do you support?

10. "On Fairy-Stories" slams the "real life" of factories and traffic in favor of a "real life" quite differently defined. Would you defend J. R. R. Tolkien's point of view or that of the clerk of Oxenford (p. 8)? What qualities and values does Tolkien assert as real? What groups or classes does his pastoral not address?

11. In "On Fairy-Stories," J. R. R. Tolkien finds little, if anything, in this age of "improved means to deteriorated ends" that is worthwhile, and much that is both ugly and evil (p. 9). Can you query any of the arguments or the figures he uses to illustrate these arguments (for example, his discussion of "primary colours," pp. 5-6) that might cast doubt on his conclusions?

12. Having read at least one of J. R. R. Tolkien's narratives about the "realm of Faërie" — *The Hobbit* — , would you say that you have experienced some or all of the recovery, escape, and consolation that Tolkien claims for the genre of fairy-story?

13. Remember that *The Hobbit* and the essay "On Fairy-Stories" were published during Adolf Hitler's rise to power in Germany. The essay, in fact, testily alludes to current European politics on p. 7, and the position of the hobbits in both *The Hobbit* and *LOTR* suggests that they would prefer political isolation in their own comfortable Hobbit-towns than involvement in the Quest. Can the ideals expressed by the hobbits and in the essay, the attraction of this fantastic pastoral, be seen to accede to, or perhaps even collude with, some of the last attractive forms of nationalism?

[Nota bene: on 6 October, we'll polish off the Welsh poetry unit, briefly discuss Peter Goodrich's aims in setting up the Merlin anthology, and then move into Tolkien. Please remember to finish your composition exercises Monday.]

