

# J.R.R. Tolkien: Language and Literature

## Course Description:

J.R.R. Tolkien is an unlikely figure of controversy – as one of his biographers bemoans, “He remained all his life a committed Christian and Catholic [...] No extra-marital affairs, no sexual oddities, no scandals, strange accusations, or political involvements.” Yet today he remains somewhat divisive – often cherished by readers, having sold over ninety million volumes of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* during sixty years of continuous printings, on the one hand, but still often dismissed as light or childish reading by some “serious” scholars, critics, and academics, on the other.

J.R.R. Tolkien is best known for his *Lord of the Rings*, but his career encompasses much more. To a student of English, perhaps no other author so perfectly captures three of the most essential elements to the study of English: language, creativity, and scholarship. As an Oxford professor, Tolkien studied and taught languages, including Latin and Anglo-Saxon. As a creative force, he invented the languages and stories of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, among others. And as a scholar, he wrote important criticism, including an essay on *Beowulf* that is still widely read today, three quarters of a century after he wrote it.

Students in this course will not only *study*, but be asked to *produce* in these three areas. Like Tolkien, they will translate Old English. Also like Tolkien, they will read and produce critical essays about works of literature. And finally, like Tolkien, they will create language and story by writing their own fantasy story.

This course will challenge students to understand the study of English and three of its primary points of emphasis – language, literature, and scholarship – through examining the works of J.R.R. Tolkien.

## INSTRUCTOR:

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## Text(s) / Materials:

You will be expected to bring your current reading packets (critical essays, short stories, and novellas), whether in paper or .pdf form, to class, and your copies of our core texts as we read and discuss them:

*Beowulf* (trans. by Seamus Heaney)

“*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*”

“On Fairy-Stories” from *The Monsters and the Critics*

*The Hobbit*

*The Fellowship of the Ring*

*The Two Towers*

*The Return of the King*

From *The Wanderer* (Old English poem)

From *The Collected Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* by Humphrey Carpenter

From *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* by Thomas Shippey

From *The Languages of Tolkien's Middle-Earth* by Ruth S. Noel

Computers will be used regularly, as this class strives to be paper-free (as much as can be done practically), so be sure to bring it and your power supply regularly. Also, a copy of whatever our current reading is (when available in print) and a writing utensil for marking that reading are crucially important.

### **Essential Content:**

[Taken from English Learning Standards at <https://www3.imsa.edu/learning/standards/english.php>]

This course will focus on a range of concepts central to the English team learning standards, but most particularly:

G. Students studying English at IMSA will use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g. for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information) by: [NCTE-12]

G.7 writing in both expressive and transactional modes. [SSL-I.A, IV.B]

### **Instructional Design and Approach:**

This course challenges students to engage three critical elements of the study of English— creativity, analysis, and language – through the writings and studies of J.R.R. Tolkien. The course will help foster a greater understanding and appreciation of language through looking at some of the languages that Tolkien studied and invented. By looking at critical essays and lectures by Tolkien and others, we will see the insights that the careful study and analysis of literature can produce. And students will be able to make creative choices in producing a fairy-story or part of their own language by the end of the semester. Student classroom participation is imperative in this course, with an emphasis on group- and class-discussions. Assignments, however, will primarily focus on individual work, and will include exercises in analytical writing, translation, and creative writing.

### **Student Expectations:**

To succeed in this class, you must: arrive on time, be prepared by having read AND prepared to discuss or ask questions about the assigned materials (not just online summaries), be active in small group **and** classroom discussion, and demonstrate originality, thorough research, and comprehensive thought on papers and assignments. Being funny doesn't hurt, either.

### **Revision**

You may revise up to three papers this semester, including one required revision. To do so, you must complete a “Plan for Revision” document (available on Moodle) and attach it to your original and revised drafts. The revised paper must be turned in no more than two weeks after your graded original is returned to you.

### **Late Papers**

I will accept, with penalty, late papers up to two weeks after the due date. In the first week, late papers receive a letter grade deduction. In the second week, late papers receive a two-letter grade deduction. **After two weeks, you will receive no credit on your paper;** you may still turn it in for feedback.

### **Reading**

The reading load in this course is consistent with that in other English classes at IMSA, and I've carefully divided it up to challenge – but not to burden - you. Because the storyline is continuous, though, it is essential that you not fall behind. If you find you are struggling with keeping up, here are some strategies:

- Complete all readings. Don't save part of a reading for "next time" – that's how work snowballs and can start to look insurmountable.
- Find a quiet place to read; tell other people not to bother you. Interruptions add to reading time, and interfere with your comprehension.
- Unplug from phones, computers, and other distractions. Turn them off or have them out of sight and reach. Interruptions – even small ones like answering text or instant messages – will add a lot of time to your reading.
- Allot a block of time, 30-60 minutes, every night for reading. Make it a habit.
- Pace yourself – a consistent, steady schedule, in which you read 30 minutes a night for a week, is always preferable to a binge where you read 2.5 hours in one night.
- If you have extra time, read ahead. Use this syllabus as a guide.
- See me if you need additional help or fall behind.

### Participation

My expectation is that, at least once per class, you voluntarily respond to a question or comment from your teacher or another student. I want this class to be based on your questions and discussions about them. As to why participation in class is important beyond your grade, consider these statements from some of today's business leaders:

*"We are routinely surprised at the difficulty some young people have in communicating: verbal skills, written skills, presentation skills. They have difficulty being clear and concise; it's hard for them to create focus, energy, and passion around the points they want to make."*

-- Mike Summers, VP for Global Talent Management at Dell

*"I want people who can engage in good discussion—who can look me in the eye and have a give and take. All of our work is done in teams. You have to know how to work well with others. But you also have to know how to engage customers—to find out what their needs are. If you can't engage others, then you won't learn what you need to know."*

-- Clay Parker, engineer and president of the Chemical Management Division of BOC Edwards

*"People who've learned to ask great questions and have learned to be inquisitive are the ones who move the fastest in our environment because they solve the biggest problems in ways that have the most impact on innovation."*

-- Mike Summers, VP for Global Talent Management at Dell

*All quotations taken from "Rigor Redefined" (2008) by Tony Wagner of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.*

### Notes...

I expect you to take notes in this class. If I think a topic is important enough to put on the board, or to have groups research and present, it's probably important enough to be on an assessment and something I expect you to know. It would also be wise to take notes as you read.

### ...and Laptops

**The default position for your laptop in this class is closed.** This means, from the moment class starts, unless I ask you to use it, I don't expect to see it open. We will use the laptops frequently for in-class work and research and even for online readings, but to the greatest extent possible, this will be a laptop-free class. Here's why:

Researchers have repeatedly found that students who use laptops in class learn less than their "disconnected" peers (see Cornell's 2003 study "The Laptop and the Lecture"). Studies at Princeton and

the University of California have found students who take notes on laptops performed worse on evaluations such as quizzes than those who took notes by hand “even when laptops are used solely to take notes, they may still be impairing learning because their use results in shallower processing” (“The Pen is Mightier than the Keyboard,” 2014).

But laptop use in class harms more than just the user – it also negatively impacts students seated nearby. Sana, Weston, et al (2013) found that:

participants who multitasked on a laptop during a lecture scored lower on a test compared to those who did not multitask, and participants who were in direct view of a multitasking peer scored lower on a test compared to those who were not. The results demonstrate that multitasking on a laptop poses a significant distraction to both users and fellow students and can be detrimental to comprehension of lecture content.

Therefore, I require that you please keep your laptop closed during class unless you have been specifically asked to use it, and I would encourage you to keep it closed in other classes, as well.

If you have a special need that requires accommodation in this area, please see me.

### **Technology Excuses:**

Hard drives crash. Printers go down. These facts should come as a surprise to no one who has lived in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. You live on a campus inundated with technology, and your IMSA Google Drive account lets you back up your work automatically. If you aren’t working in Google Docs or another program that automatically saves your work, use Google Backup & Sync to make sure you always have a current backup of your work.

It is your responsibility to ensure that your papers in this class are backed up and that you have allowed adequate time for printing. To that end, technological failures (crashing or failing printers, computers, hard drives, etc.) will *not* excuse late or missing work.

### **Course Work / Assessment:**

<i>In-Class Activities and Quizzes</i>	10%
<i>Map Assignment</i>	5%
<i>Translation and Language</i>	
<i>Assignments</i>	15%
<i>Short Story</i>	10%
<i>Three Analytical Papers</i>	30%
1. <i>A topic in The Hobbit</i>	
2. <i>A topic in The Fellowship of the Ring</i>	
3. <i>Issues of adaptation in Jackson’s The Two Towers</i>	
<i>Participation</i>	10%
<i>Year-End Project</i>	20%
<i>(a longer research project, fiction piece, or invented language)</i>	

## A-B-D Class

### Sequence of Topics and Activities

Reading Due on date indicated by // (usually A/B/D)

### Young Adult Literature or Author of the Century?

Week One (short A,B): First Day / *The Hobbit* I / II-IV

Week Two: *The Hobbit* V-VI / VII / VIII-IX

#### **Due: Map Assignment**

Week Three (no I): *The Hobbit* X-XIII / XIV-XV / XVI-XIX

### Professor Tolkien: Old English, Texts and Translation; A Deepening Mythology

Week Four: *Beowulf* (selected passages) / “The Monster and the Critics”

#### **Due: Hobbit Paper**

Week Five: “On Fairy-Stories” (selections) / “Letter 131: To Milton Waldman”

#### **Due: Language (a)**

### The Forming of a Fellowship

Week Six: *The Fellowship of the Ring* Book One: I-II / III / IV-VI

Week Seven: *The Fellowship of the Ring* Book One: VII-X / XI

#### **Due: Language (b)**

Week Eight (short C, no D): XII – Book Two: I / *The Fellowship of the Ring* Book Two: II-III / IV

### War in Middle-Earth

Week Nine (DIAD: *The Fellowship of the Ring* Book Two: VIII-IX / X, *The Two Towers* Book Three: II / III

Week Ten: *The Two Towers* Book Three: IV-VI / VII / VIII-X

#### **Due: Fellowship Paper**

Week Eleven: *The Two Towers* XI - Book Four: II / III / IV-VI

Week Twelve: *The Two Towers* Book Four: VII-X (end) / in class: *The Two Towers* (Peter Jackson, 2002) / (Fantasy Story Due)

#### **Due: High Fantasy Story**

### Issues in Adaptation

Week Thirteen: *The Two Towers* (Peter Jackson, 2002) [self-paced: RotK I-IV]

Week Fourteen *The Two Towers* (Peter Jackson, 2002) [self-paced: RotK I-IV]

### The End of the Third Age

Week Fifteen (A, short D): *The Return of the King* Book Five: V-VIII / IX / TBA

#### **Due: Adaptation Paper**

Week Sixteen: *The Return of the King* Book Five X-*The Return of the King* Book Six: II / III / IV-VI

Week Seventeen: *The Return of the King* Book Six VII-X / Course Wrap-Up: (Optional Reading Appendix B: “Later Events

Concerning the Members of the Fellowship of the Ring”)

Week Eighteen: FINALS WEEK / **Due: Final Project**