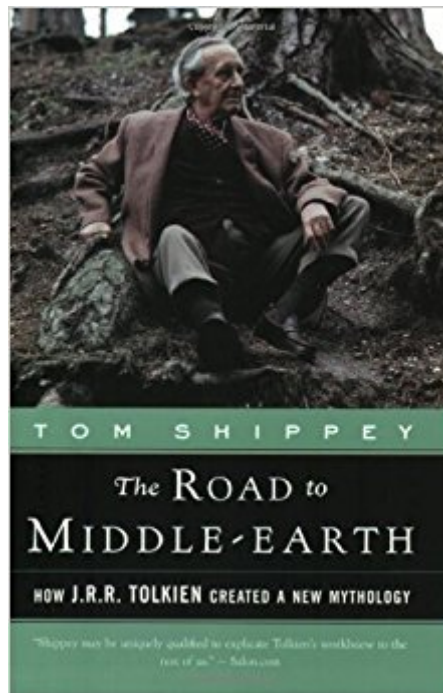




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The Road To Middle-Earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien Created A New Mythology



Synopsis

The Road to Middle-earth, Tom Shippey's classic work, now revised in paperback, explores J.R.R. Tolkien's creativity and the sources of his inspiration. Shippey shows in detail how Tolkien's professional background led him to write The Hobbit and how he created a timeless charm for millions of readers. Examining the foundation of Tolkien's most popular work, The Lord of the Rings, Shippey also discusses the contribution of The Silmarillion and Unfinished Tales to Tolkien's great myth cycle, showing how Tolkien's more "difficult" books can be fully appreciated. He goes on to examine the remarkable twelve-volume History of Middle-earth, written by Tolkien's son and literary heir Christopher Tolkien, which traces the creative and technical processes by which Middle-earth evolved.

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Customer Reviews

"Professor Shippey's commentary is the best so far in elucidating Tolkien's lovely myth." Harper's Magazine "Shippey is a rarity, a scholar well schooled in critical analysis whose writing is beautifully clear." Minneapolis Star-Tribune "[Tolkien] deserves his full do, and Shippey's appreciative assessment of his unique achievement provides it in full and satisfying measure." Philadelphia Inquirer

Tom Shippey taught at Oxford University at the same time as J.R.R. Tolkien and with the same

syllabus, which gives him an intimate familiarity with the works that fueled Tolkien's imagination. He subsequently held the chair of English language and medieval literature at Leeds University that Tolkien had previously held.

If you are looking for a Tolkien biography or the behind-the-scenes, dramatic story of how *The Lord of the Rings* got written, you won't find it here. If, however, an academic study of the influences, motivations, and themes that contributed to and permeated Tolkien's books appeals to you, you've come to the right place. *The Road to Middle Earth* and Prof. Shippey's other book, *JRR Tolkien, Author of the Century*, both cover the same material, but in slightly different ways. Each makes unique points, but overall, there is a lot of repetition. If you are only going to buy one of these books, I'd recommend *The Road to Middle Earth* for its fuller exploration of philology, underlying themes and concepts in Tolkien's works, defense against selected criticisms, and Tolkien's early drafts and later revisions. Both books start off with detailed explanation of philology. Dictionary definitions of the word fail to capture the scope and depth of the field that was Tolkien's passion and which influenced his books so enormously. Through Prof. Shippey's analysis, one glimpses a complexity to the novels that would otherwise go unnoticed. Tolkien was keenly intrigued by the origins and meanings of words. He saw in ancient texts, whether Old English, Old Norse, or Anglo-Saxon, hints of stories now forgotten, words that teased him with their obscure meanings. What were these lost legends? What did the unusual words mean and what did they imply about the world that gave rise to them? Tolkien wanted to create a mythology that could account for the concepts behind the words, a mythology that explained dwarves and elves, dragons and ents. Tolkien's stories were often patterned after existing texts and records of actual cultures, but also reflected modern experiences. A combat veteran of the first World War, Tolkien also witnessed the horrors brought by the second—extermination camps, genocide, bombing of civilian populations, weapons of mass destruction—things Prof. Shippey tells us were unthinkable to the Victorian culture Tolkien had grown up in. A sense that “something had gone horribly wrong with the world could not fail to seep into the writings of those who lived through those times. Thus, one theme of *The Lord of the Rings* was the nature of evil, and another that of sorrow. Even if the quest is achieved and Sauron defeated, the world cannot go back to what it was. Beautiful things of old will fade, some wounds will never heal. Prof. Shippey focuses mostly on the

Lord of the Rings, but also discusses Tolkien's other works. The Hobbit is presented as primarily the clash between two cultures, the modern world represented by Bilbo and the hobbits, undeniably English of Victorian or Edwardian times, and the archaic world of the dwarves, colored by heroic sagas like Beowulf. The Silmarillion, the work of Tolkien's heart and his lifelong project, is patterned after Genesis and the Fall; in this case, the Fall is that of the elves, whose sin is the desire to make things that reflect themselves. Tolkien's short stories are not forgotten, but examined for the insights they give to Tolkien's moods and perspectives. Prof. Shippey's ideas make for engaging reading. His responses to assorted Tolkien critics are icing on the cake. He makes a convincing case that many critical remarks are hypocritical, imperceptive, and elitist. He also suggests that Tolkien's "elementary sensibilities" over patriotism, over euphemism, and especially over sex and marriage were held against him and prevented a fair reading of his books. That Tolkien has appealed to a broad demographic range for decades shows clearly that people find his stories relevant even if they are fantasy and don't conform to critics' ideas of what constitutes "good literature." Tolkien came away from both "Author of the Century" and "Road to Middle Earth" with a greater appreciation for Tolkien's books and a better understanding of how they came to be written. Do give one or both a try.

Shippey's study of the composition, meaning, and multifaceted background of LOTR (also with attention to The Hobbit and other related texts) is a world class contribution to both literary studies and, more specifically, LOTR scholarship. Without going in to too much detail, let me instead list of some aspects of LOTR and Tolkien himself that Shippey's study enhanced:---Tolkien as Philologist: I had a casual understanding of Tolkien's love of language(s), but I had no idea that he was so capable in this field and incorporated so heavily insights from the entire history of Anglo-Saxon speech and writing (as well as other language-groups/families). Little words here and there will have entirely new depths and meaning for me :)---Tolkien's relationship with modernity: I did not understand the magnitude with which Tolkien was interacting with (and bucking against!) the guild as a whole. I now appreciate Tolkien's accomplishment even more after learning how the guild (and foolish critics!) pigeon-holed him as "escapist" and unrealistic.---Tolkien in light of the World Wars: Shippey highlights a bit of Tolkien's participation in WWI, the war that was supposed to "end all

wars," as well as the ironic fact that his own sons would participate in the next great, global conflict, WWII. I had never considered Tolkien in relation to Vonnegut, Orwell, and other writers affected by the great wars, but that is certainly an integral part of his historical context.---Anticipation of Christianity: Shippey convincingly demonstrates that LOTR is not exactly "Christian," but examines heroism and triumph in a pre-Christian world that shows some anticipation (perhaps expectation?) of the Christ event.---Intertextuality: I was previously aware of Tolkien's use of older themes and material, but I had no idea that LOTR is so full of textual and thematic recapitulations and reincarnations. If you want to understand the literary roots of Tolkien's program in LOTR and related material, Shippey's book really shines in this area from cover to cover. I could go on all day, but that doesn't seem the best course of action. Let me simply say that Shippey's masterpiece has both enhanced my reading of LOTR and informed me about the author of that great work. After reading Shippey's book, I love Tolkien and LOTR more than ever. I am so impressed with this volume that I now intend to read all Shippey's books on Tolkien. I'd like to thank him for such a vital contribution. This "fanboy" appreciates it dearly.

For those of us that have read all of Tolkien's Middle Earth related books and find ourselves hungry for more and disappointed that the party has to end at some point - we can find some solace in both of the books from Tom Shippey. At some point many of us have made the jump from reading the source material to reading about how the books were written just find some scrap of Tolkien's ideas or writing that we have not seen over and over again. I found the offerings by Tom Shippey to be incredibly insightful and full of "lore" about the creation of middle earth. I have read much Tolkien criticism and for me, nothing is as well done as Shippey's work. Fleiger's bookes are worthwhile and interesting but for me are a bit dry. Shippey, I think, is the most uniquely qualified (other than Christopher Tolkien of course) to comment on Tolkien's creations. If you love middle earth, these are both worthwhile reads. Sadly it just leaves me wanting more.....but perhaps that is the effect of any great work.

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