Fantasy and IR

Professor Eric Grynaviski
Office: 421 Monroe Hall
Office Hours: 10-12 Tuesdays.
Class: Funger 223, Tuesdays 12:45-3:15

Description: The Lord of the Rings is perhaps the most famous fantasy epic in world history. The story of the war of the rings, which culminated in a clash of great powers in Middle Earth, was written while great powers clashed on earth in World War II. The seeds formed in Tolkien’s imagination during World War I. The first elements of his mythology, captured in “The Fall of Gondolin,” were written from his hospital bed while on leave from the war. The book drew on famous stories describing the clash of arms, including Beowulf and the Song of Roland, among others. This class examines the politics of Middle Earth on three levels. In the first two parts of the course, we will take Middle Earth as a serious, historical subject, asking about the political constitutions of communities that live within it, the causes of war and alliance formation, and the problems of racism and nationalism. The third part of the course examines the impact of war on culture by examining Tolkien’s early writings, identifying how his experiences in the First World War shaped his mythology, and also by examining how his understanding of World War II affected the composition of his epic. The fourth part of the course examines Tolkien’s sources. By comparing, for example, the Song of Roland to Boromir’s death and the relationship between Smaug and Beowulf, we will examine the continuity of languages of glory and manliness across literary time periods, asking about its significance for modern international politics and political culture. As such, this course searches for a way to better understand our own political culture and its relationship to war by thinking through how we understand and depict war in fantasy.

Books
Lord of the Rings, in one Volume. 50th Anniversary Edition. [Note: Hardcopy, not electronic. I put the cheapest in the bookstore that I could find. But, I strongly recommend one volume, and the 50th Anniversary Edition (with corrected text) is important. Do not bring one with pictures of the movie on the front, I will cry.]

Other texts distributed in class or on Blackboard.

Assignments
- Attendance and Participation 15%
- Causes of War Assignment 5%
- Character Criticism 5%
• Sources Assignment 5%
• Impact of the War Assignment 5%
• Final Paper 40%, of which
  o Rough Draft 20%
  o Workshop (required) 20%
  o Final Draft 60%
• Final Exam 25%

Note: To earn credit for your paper, you must submit a proposal by the end of February and meet with me by the March 10.

On the Reading Schedule

This class assumes that you have read the Lord of the Rings recently. We are not reading it in class, but it is the basis for our work. All of us, therefore, need to re-read it quite quickly. It is not assigned, but the class will not work unless you know the story well. Therefore, the first three weeks have a recommended rate of reading in order to keep up with the class material.

Reading Schedule

Part One: Setup and Getting Oriented

In the first part of the course, we will be getting up to speed on the main themes and storylines within the novels. Note that by January 31, everyone needs to have read the books because there are two shorts assignments that will require you to know the material.

January 17: Introduction

• Recommended: The Hobbit (any edition, not the movies)

This week we will review two short essays about the relationship between Tolkien and politics based on the substance of his writing. Moorcock’s Epic Pooh is a critique of Tolkien. Tally’s “Places where the stars are strange” is not quite a direct response, but assesses the ability of Tolkien to help us crystallize important political issues. We return to these themes in the final week of class.

January 24: Understandings Characters

• Ford and Reid. “Councils and Kings” (Aragorn)
• Hooker. “Frodo’s Batman.” (Sam)
• Selections from Ruane and James. The International Relations of Middle-Earth.
• Tally. “Let Us Now Praise Famous Orcs.”
• Recommended: The Fellowship of the Ring (Books 1 and 2)
This week we are reading several short pieces that assess the characters in Tolkien. Ruane and James describes the characters from the perspective of political science, identifying different characters with different theories in IR scholarship. Hooker looks to the historical influences for Samwise Gamgee, finding it in Tolkien’s experiences in the First World War. Ford and Reid explore Aragorn’s character, using a comparison between the film and book to identify how the ways in which Aragorn is portrayed in both mediums affects our understanding of the monarchy in Middle Earth. Tally explores the characters of orcs, reaching some surprising conclusions.

The assignment due next week is a one or two page (single-spaced) analysis of any character within the book. The James volume provides a good list of potential characters. Using any of the three approaches described in class, select a character and provide an analysis of that character that concentrates one political theme. It might treat that character as representative of a tradition, the historical influences for that character, or problems in representing that character’s political views. The three examples in class may serve as models.

January 31: Understanding the War

- Assignment Due: Character Analysis
- Recommended: The Two Towers (Books 3 and 4)

The primary purpose of this class is to discuss the main plots in the story line about the war over the ring. Come equipped with any questions, quips or quarrels with Tolkien. To frame the discussion, we will talk about the causes of war identified by political scientists, using these to assess the causes of the war in Middle Earth.

The assignment due the following week is a one or two page (single spaced) argument about the causes of war. Select one theory of the causes of war, making the case that the war over the ring is an instance of a broader concept. As an aid, you may want to turn to Stephen Van Evera’s *Causes of War* which provides an overview of many causes for wars’ outbreak. Selections on Blackboard.

February 7: Understanding the Story in Depth

- Assignment Due: Causes of war.
- Letter 131 (Summary of the Silmarillion)
- Recommended: The Return of the King (Books 5 and 6). If interested in mythology, read *Silmarillion*.

One element of interest in Tolkien concerns the “story in depth.” Throughout *Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien presents references to people and traditions that are never developed. For example, when Frodo is on Weathertop, besieged by the Black Riders, he cries “O Elbereth Gilthoniel” with no assessment of who Elbereth is or why Frodo would cry out for her aid. One critic discovered more than 600 unexplained references. For some fans,
this is a tantalizing clue to depths of the story only described in other work. For some critics, it is terrible writing. This week, we will read Letter 131 which summarizes the mythology behind *Lord of the Rings*, and elaborated on in the *Silmarillion* and other unpublished works. We will also read about the techniques of creating the impression of depth, and assess its importance for political myths.

**Part Two: The Politics of Middle Earth**

V  February 14 (Happy Valentine’s Day): The Shire, Race and Place

- Selections from *Tolkien, Race, and Cultural History*.
- Brackmann. “Dwarves are not Heroes.”
- Selections from Novik. *Her Majesty’s Dragon*.

Recommend: Vink “Tolkien and Anti-Semitic Stereotyping.”

One of the enduring debates in Tolkien Studies concerns whether the story is racist. There are three views. The first view is that Tolkien was clearly racist, as evidenced by stories of black orcs fighting against white men. The second view is that Tolkien was not particularly racist, but a product of his times. In this light, his fiction echoes racist themes popular in Britain during the period, but do not advance those themes in any meaningful way. The third view is that Tolkien’s fiction was progressive on issues of race and nationalism. His free peoples of Middle Earth unite despite difference to stand against an enemy who tries to insert race as a wedge between peoples.

A further question may run as follows. Even if Tolkien was not racist, he had the opportunity to more fully explore racial questions but chose not to do so. This is telling in a book about a “race” war. Therefore, we are going to consider selections from a novel by Naomi Novik, where these themes are more consistently explored to show a contrast with Tolkien.

February 21: Fascism and Lord of the Rings

- Plank, “The Scouring of the Shire: Tolkien’s Views on Facism.”
- Duncan, “Senator Bilbo”

At the end of the *Lord of the Rings*, the hobbits return home to the Shire to find that it is rules by Saruman, who is behaving as an autocratic leader. The hobbits rise up to fight against him, restoring good government and common sense to Shire politics. Many scholars have noted the connection between the politics of the Shire and the uprising of the hobbits to fascism. Plank discusses the rise of the hobbits as a story of resistance to
February 28: The Ents as Radical Ecologists

- Selections from Dickerson and Evans, “Ents, Elves and Eriador.”
- Recommended: Reread Tom Bombadil passages from *Fellowship* and the discussion of the Ents of Fangorn in *Two Towers*.

One of the criticisms of Tolkien is that he celebrates a pre-industrial, feudal past. In this light, Tolkien is anti-modern, preventing his work from saying much that is meaningful about politics because it represents a useless kind of conservative politics that celebrates kingships and monarchies. The readings for this week turn this argument around, exploring whether Tolkien was an early advocate for radical visions of ecology. Tolkien opposed the destruction of nature caused by industrialization. He describes in his correspondence changes to the landscape that occurred he witnessed during his lifetime. In *Lord of the Rings*, rapid ecological change is described in the contrast between places, such as Fangorn and Mordor, as well as the contrast between people, such as Treebeard or Tom Bombadil and Sauraman or Sauron. This week we try to understand Tolkien’s views of ecology and how they figure in his fiction.

Assignment: Proposal for Paper Due.

**Part Three: Tolkien and War**

March 7: The Historical Tolkien

- Selections from Garth’s *Tolkien and the Great War* (On Blackboard)
- Selections from Loconte’s *A Hobbit, A Wardrobe, and a Great War* (On Blackboard)

In this class, we are reading about Tolkien’s experience during the world wars. In the First World War, Tolkien served in the British military, losing many of his close friends. In World War II, Tolkien’s sons served in the military. As he is writing *Lord of the Rings*, he corresponds with his sons, talking about plots and politics. These two books represent different approaches. Garth emphasizes the direct link between Tolkien’s military experience and *Lord of the Rings*, concentrating on how fighting shaped his imagination and the imagery used in the books. The second book by Joseph Loconte shifts to two other issues. First, religion. Tolkien was a Catholic, and his faith mattered to him. The first selection we read discusses the interaction of faith, war, and fiction. Second, fellowship. One of the core themes in *Lord of the Rings* is the close affection of a group of heroes. Loconte assesses whether this has a political significance for Tolkien, writing as he was in the midst of two great wars. At the end of this class, I will set up the background to the short story we are reading the following week.
Assignment: By the end of the week, meet about proposal.

March 21: The War in Tolkien

- “Fall of Gondolin” (On Blackboard)

The Fall of Gondolin was the part of the background to Middle Earth that Tolkien began to draft during the First World War. This story was later amended by his son, who stripped it of some of the imagery that too closely echoed the First World War. We will read the earlier version, searching for influences from Tolkien’s military experience on the story.

Part Four: Tolkien’s Influences

March 28:

- Watch Beowulf movie in class

Recommended: Read Beowulf. Recommended Translation by Heaney on Blackboard.

Tolkien was a professor as well as a fiction writer. His professional interests were older European languages (e.g., Old English). In addition to writing Lord of the Rings, his other best known piece (for academics) is a lecture called “Beowulf: The Monster and the Critics” which we read next week. To understand that essay, as well as do next week’s assignment, we will watch Beowulf (2007) in class. I recommend reading the original. It looks much much longer than it is. Usually it is condensed to about 20 pages. The Heaney translation is much easier to read than Tolkien’s own.

April 4: Sources and Politics

- Tolkien. Beowulf: The Monster and the Critics

Sources Assignment: Select one of the following and write a two page, single-spaced essay.

(a) Read “The Wanderer” and compare to Aragorn’s song/poem at the beginning of Two Towers, Chapter 6.
(b) Read the Völuspá and compare to discussion of dwarves throughout the Lord of the Rings.
(c) Read Song of Roland and compare it to the death of Boromir
(d) Additional topics available upon consultation

Tolkien claimed that he wanted to write a mythology for England. In doing so, he turned to classic sources, including Old Norse, Old English, and Old French poems. A careful inspection of his sources show many influences, from the names of the dwarves in the
Hobbit to sounding of the horn when Boromir died. For this assignment, you must select one source and explain its influence in two pages. Be prepared to present and discuss.

To put this in context, we are reading an essay by Tolkien called Beowulf: The Monster and its Critics. If you do not know the story of Beowulf, you may want to watch the 2007 film or read the poem. The translations by Tolkien and

April 11:

- **Assignment Two: Rough Draft Workshop**

**Part Five: Tolkien as Critical Theories**

April 18: World Building and Our World

Tolkien On Fairy Stories (129-154)


This week, we wrap up the course by talking about what we can learn from reading a work like *Lord of the Rings*. To do so, we turn to Tolkien’s reflections on what fantasy books are good for by reading selections from his “On Fairy Stories.” In this essay, Tolkien discusses why reading books of fantasy are useful for understanding the world in which we live. We also read James Trilling’s “The Price of Victory.” One of the arguments against reading politics into the fantasy genre is that it provides a form of escapism. Trilling meets this argument head-on. He argues that the downsides of the story for the main characters—for Frodo and Sam, the elves, and for Gandalf—show that Tolkien’s fiction does not have a naïve ending.

April 25:

Final Papers Due, Final Exam Distributed
Learning outcomes that state descriptions of behaviors or skills that students will be able to demonstrate at the end of the class or unit:

As a result of completing this course, students will be able to:
1. Think intelligently about the relationship between fiction and politics;
2. and imagine the future and past in new ways.

University policies:

University policy on observance of religious holidays

In accordance with University policy, students should notify faculty during the first week of the semester of their intention to be absent from class on their day(s) of religious observance. For details and policy, see: students.gwu.edu/accommodations-religious-holidays.

Academic integrity code

Academic dishonesty is defined as cheating of any kind, including misrepresenting one's own work, taking credit for the work of others without crediting them and without appropriate authorization, and the fabrication of information. For details and complete code, see: studentconduct.gwu.edu/code-academic-integrity

Safety and security

In the case of an emergency, if at all possible, the class should shelter in place. If the building that the class is in is affected, follow the evacuation procedures for the building. After evacuation, seek shelter at a predetermined rendezvous location.

Disability Support Services (DSS)

Any student who may need an accommodation based on the potential impact of a disability should contact the Disability Support Services office at 202-994-8250 in the Rome Hall, Suite 102, to establish eligibility and to coordinate reasonable accommodations. For additional information see: disabilitysupport.gwu.edu/

Mental Health Services 202-994-5300

The University's Mental Health Services offers 24/7 assistance and referral to address students'
personal, social, career, and study skills problems. Services for students include: crisis and emergency mental health consultations confidential assessment, counseling services (individual and small group), and referrals. For additional information see: counselingcenter.gwu.edu/

**Anticipated Work**

Over 15 weeks, students will spend 2 hours (100 minutes) per week in class. Required reading for the seminar meetings and written response papers or projects are expected to take up, on average, 7 hours (350 minutes) per week. Over the course of the semester, students will spend 25 hours in instructional time and 87.5 hours preparing for class.