

What made J. R. R. Tolkien tick and why was he called 'Reuel'? The importance of Tolkien biography

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Tolkien, like his friend C. S. Lewis, was strongly against the tendency of his time to see works of literature as somehow revealing, or being about, their creators. Lewis dubbed this “the personal heresy”. Tolkien famously discouraged W. H. Auden from writing a study of his work that would have involved biography. Yet it is self-evident that knowledge of the author illuminates his or her work. The biographical fact that Tolkien was a professional philologist who had been “inside language” (*Times* obituary, 3 September 1973) is a master key for unlocking his fiction. And why was he called ‘Reuel’? Is this significant to his work? This essay explores what the value of Tolkien biography might be.

In one of a number of biographies that exist of J. R. R. Tolkien, Neil Heims recounts the story of a reporter asking J. R. R. Tolkien what “made him tick”. Tolkien retorted that he did not tick — he was not a machine.

Tolkien was a complex character, a gift and a challenge to the biographer. He is a gift because of his depth and colour as an individual. He vividly lives. Whether the focus is on Tolkien the young child, the boy, the young man thrust into the death-pits of World War One and the Battle of the Somme, the aspiring scholar or the learned professor at Oxford, Tolkien is recognizable. He is himself and no other. But he is also a challenge to the biographer, as so much of his life (in terms of what is interesting and memorable for others to read about) resides in his mind and imagination. He is not a man of action. Outwardly, his life (at least to his official biographer Humphrey Carpenter) often seems routine and even monotonous.

A biography needs to embrace both the gift and the challenge of Tolkien, presenting an accessible portrait of the man and a reliable and useful insight for the general reader into the inner workings of his complex mind, to the extent that this is available from what remains on record, including the memories of friends and family. There is, of course, also place for academic biography that focuses on the development of his thought and writings. The intended readerships of a general and a specialist kind would dramatically shape and distinguish the two types of biography. One is less likely than the other to go deeply into the significance of the two main variants of Elvish to the narrative structure of *The Silmarillion*, for instance. The other is less likely to explore the

emotional impact of losing a father and a mother, and then exposure to the trenches of the Somme, in early life. Yet for each level of biography, such exploration can provide appropriate and helpful context to understanding Tolkien’s fiction and poetry.

Like his close friend C. S. Lewis, Tolkien intensely disliked the critical trend (the “personal heresy”) that focused on the psychology of the author to the detriment of the subject’s work. (No doubt much of what is written about him today Tolkien would have regarded as, to use his word, “impertinence”.) Accounts of Tolkien’s life are likely to have the purpose of illuminating the main fictional works, particularly *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. It is because of the global popularity of these works, particularly *The Lord of the Rings*, that a large number of people have become interested in the man, who became a celebrity only towards the end of his life, much to his bemusement and sometimes annoyance (as when he got phone calls from enthusiastic American readers, unaware of the time difference, in the early hours of the morning). On one occasion, on the basis of his academic position at Oxford, Tolkien attended a public lecture by the writer Robert Graves, which was also attended by the film star Ava Gardner. As the three — Graves, Tolkien and Gardner — left the building, the flash bulbs of the press attended to the actress, ignoring the man who, as far as the media then was concerned, did not exist.

It is one of the deepest ironies of literary history that Tolkien, known only to specialists in early English language and literature, took up a fantasy genre considered then only to be suitable for children — the fairy story, or elvish tale. Almost single-handedly he recreated an adult readership for it. But not quite. It was C. S. Lewis who enlisted his help in such a project. Lewis deliberately turned to a type of science fiction, belonging to the same family of ‘romance’ as fantasy. Stories of ‘romance’ provide tantalizing glimpses of other worlds, and make a direct appeal to the imagination in their wonder and strangeness. Without Tolkien’s part in the project there would be no fantasy sections in today’s bookstores, perhaps no visible sign of Ursula Le Guin or Terry Pratchett or Orson Scott Card. Certainly, New Zealand would not have become Middle-earth (much of Tolkien’s original *The Shire* having been lost for ever in the creeping urban spread



of Birmingham in the English Midlands). Vast audiences around the planet would have been deprived of Peter Jackson's brilliant film rendition of *The Lord of the Rings*, and we wouldn't have his two-part *The Hobbit* movie to anticipate.

Tolkien objected to the reporter's question about what made him tick. This was because he was extremely sensitive to the modern issue of the machine, which dominates *The Lord of the Rings*. Indeed, in a way, the ring itself is the culmination of the machine, exerting remorseless control over human life and being itself uncontrollable. Lewis called our present time the "Age of the Machine", a view Tolkien implicitly endorsed in his work. In older times, Lewis believed, the human issue was how to relate to nature, the non-human world. Today's issue is how we relate to the machine that we ourselves have spawned.

Because of his preoccupation with the machine, and for many other reasons, Tolkien is a contemporary writer, rather than a nostalgic sentimentalist. As Tom Shippey points out, he belongs with George Orwell, William Golding and other post-war writers in his endeavour to come to terms with modern global warfare and manifest evil. Even in this endeavour, however, Tolkien avoids the mechanical archetype of the newer being the better (what Lewis called our "chronological snobbery"). He addresses the unprecedented situation of warfare dominated by the new magicians, as he saw them, the scientific technocrats with weapons beyond the reach of the human mind and destructive of humanity (and as real in the trenches of the Somme in World War One as it was in the bombing of Nagasaki). But, even more, Tolkien was concerned with the perennial battle to live virtuously, with honour, sacrifice and courage, seeking fellowship and loving beauty in a world he saw, with a deep Christian faith, as radically fallen and broken. In this world, malice against the weak and helpless is dreadfully real. Nothing marks the wider and more ancient context of Tolkien's writing than his momentous reversal of the quest, which in literature is usually for something that represents what is desirable to the human heart. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the quest is to destroy something that corrupts almost anyone that touches it, offering unfettered power over others. In Tolkien's tale, it is the meek who inherit Middle-earth.

The value of biography

The antipathy of Tolkien and Lewis to the "personal heresy" needs to be considered. Is biography unnecessary in illuminating Tolkien's fiction? It should be borne in mind that the two also considered study of any English literature after 1830 unnecessary. This was the basis of the Oxford English syllabus moulded by Tolkien, with Lewis's help. Lewis put this succinctly and perhaps a little brutally in an essay in his book *Rehabilitations*, a book that reflected in 1939 many of the concerns of the two friends. He speaks as an Oxford tutor in the Honours English School:

We naturally wish to help the students in studying those parts of the subject where we have most help to give and they need help

most. On recent and contemporary literature their need is least and our help least. They ought to understand it better than we.

(*Rehabilitations* p. 91).

Cutting off 100 years or so from the modern end was part of limiting the terrain of the subject studied. Lewis mentions other limitations, on the grounds that a wide sweep would impose an artificial selection on the student, denying the firsthand encounter of learning for its own sake. My deduction is that Tolkien and Lewis regarded biographical study of authors as part of this over-generalizing of knowledge.

The clearest statement of this view is given in Lewis's *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy*, which was jointly authored with E. M. W. Tillyard, a Cambridge literary critic, giving an opposing point of view. What they both say about poetry and the poet applies equally to fiction. Lewis argues against the view that poetry provides biographical information about the poet, and that it is necessary to know about the poet to understand the poem. He focuses on the intrinsic character of a work of literature, rather than extrinsic factors. In reading a poem we look with the poet, rather than at him or her. We see with his or her eyes. We can only see if we do not dwell on the particulars of his or her consciousness. Rather, we indwell them as we attend to a new level of meaning. The poet's consciousness is a condition of our knowledge, not the knowledge itself. This passage from *The Personal Heresy* is characteristic:

Let it be granted that I do approach the poet; at least I do it by sharing his consciousness, not by studying it. I look with his eyes, not at him. . . . To see things as the poet sees them I must share his consciousness and not attend to it; I must look where he looks and not turn round to face him; I must make of him not a spectacle but a pair of spectacles: in fine, as Professor Alexander would say, I must enjoy him and not contemplate him.

Lewis has made a very strong point about sharing a writer's consciousness as we read, rather than focusing our attention upon it. However, if a student is not reducing the meaning of a work of literature to its maker's psychology, biography falls into the same category as any knowledge of context, as when Tolkien lectured on the history of the English language or Lewis provided an introduction to the medieval world in his popular lectures, which long after became his book *The Discarded Image*. It makes a great difference to understanding *The Lord of the Rings* if we know the author is twentieth not nineteenth century. To take this to absurdity, imagine how odd it would be if a fourteenth-century manuscript was discovered somewhere deep within the Bodleian Library that proved to be the original of *The Lord of the Rings*, and that Tolkien had only discovered it. The ancient writer somehow would have anticipated literary and linguistic style, characteristics of the fiction genre, and features of a world many hundreds of years in the future, such as fish and chips!

Against the view that the modern reader does not need the kind of help a teacher such as Tolkien or Lewis could give, there is much in Tolkien's fiction that does need explanation;



or rather, explanation can help us share Tolkien's consciousness, allowing us better to see with his eyes. As just one example, the origin of Tolkien's mythology in his invented languages, and their roots in living languages, opens up one of the important secrets of Tolkien's imaginative and poetic power. The events and settings of Tolkien's life, his profession as a philologist and his devout Christian worldview, also illuminate his fiction. His friendships, first with the TCBS, and later with C. S. Lewis and the Inklings, including the creative collaboration of fellow writers involved, are part of the conditions that made Tolkien's consciousness possible, although, as Lewis pointed out about the man himself as known to biography, they were not the consciousness itself. If I may adapt a parable from Tolkien, those conditions were a tower that allowed Tolkien to glimpse the distant sea.

Tolkien once remarked that he could best do a true biography of himself as a writer and maker. He best knew his interior life. His words to a student requesting such information for a thesis on his fiction were: "I do not feel inclined to go into biographical detail. I doubt its relevance to criticism. Certainly in any form less than a complete biography, interior and exterior, which I alone could write, and which I do not intend to write" (*Letters* p. 257).

Let us suppose Tolkien had written a "complete biography". It would have been autobiography or memoir, or a mixture of both. Let us take as a parallel Lewis's *Surprised By Joy*, which covers the first half of his life. It is dominated by his chosen theme of how he passed from atheism to belief in a personal God and to Christian belief, in particular. It is necessarily selective. The book throws very helpful light onto Lewis's fiction and non-fiction writing, but there is still plenty of scope for the biographer (Walter Hooper and

Roger Lancelyn Green, George Sayer, A. N. Wilson, Alan Jacobs and others). Unfortunately we don't have a biography from Tolkien, and, if we had, it would not have obviated the need for biography, both for the general reader and for the academic student of Tolkien. As it happened (and happened often) Tolkien was not consistent, and did provide "incomplete biography", or rather autobiographical fiction, in the form of *Leaf by Niggle* and *Smith of Wootton Major*. His inconsistent friend, C. S. Lewis, ventured into autobiography to explain how he came to write theological fiction and popular theology, and also portrayed a Tolkien-like figure as his hero in the first two books in his science-fiction trilogy, Dr Elwin ('Elf-friend') Ransom. In addition he, almost certainly, wrote *The Times* obituary of his friend, even though he predeceased him by ten years! With Tom Shippey's entry in *The Dictionary of National Biography*, these are the most brilliant short biographical pieces on Tolkien.

But why was Tolkien called 'Reuel' as one of his first names? Presumably he might have become known as 'Reuel' Tolkien to family and some friends instead of 'John', 'John Ronald' or 'Ronald', as he was known. (He was also known to some friends as 'Tollers'.) Do we need the information a biographer might give us about his being called Reuel? Humphrey Carpenter informs us that Tolkien's father is "Arthur Reuel Tolkien" and the family tradition is kept up by Ronald and Edith in their children's names John Reuel, Michael Reuel, Christopher Reuel and even Priscilla Reuel. Although *The Road to Middle-earth* is not a biography, Tom Shippey is enlightening about Reuel in his account of the fictional debate *The Notion Club Papers*, which has a number of allusions to Tolkien:

All the characters who speak [in tongues] are, rather evidently, reflections of Tolkien himself. Ramer is a professor of philology; Lowdham a lecturer on English language; Rashbold's last name is a 'calque' of Tolkien's (from German toll-kühn = 'crazy-bold'), while his middle name, 'Jethro' is linked with Tolkien's third name, 'Reuel', in the Old Testament; and ... it seems plausible that 'ramer' is in fact meant to be the dialect word 'raver, babbler', and so to fit Tolkien's repeated self-image as one who sees visions and dreams and is accordingly stigmatised by others as a 'looney' (*The Notion Club Papers* revised and expanded edn, pp. 297–8)

Interestingly, (here's my own biographical comment) Reuel in ancient Hebrew means 'Friend of God', which goes even deeper than Lewis's 'Elwin' (elf-friend) in *Out of the Silent Planet*. In naming his children thus, Tolkien was placing a blessing rather than merely keeping up a family tradition, just as his devout parents had blessed him by giving him the name Reuel. ✎

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