

# Nordic and Germanic Myths and Legends in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien

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**Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad**

**2014**

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:142:918084>

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*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2025-03-25**



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Preddiplomski studij engleskog i mađarskog jezika i književnosti

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**Nordic and Germanic Myths and Legends in the Work of J. R.R.**

**Tolkien**

Završni rad

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Osijek, 2014

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## Abstract

J. R. R. Tolkien was a highly creative person and a writer who was, using his knowledge and imagination, able to create a whole new world filled with moral lessons, interesting magical places and characters, and most importantly, constant battles between good and evil in which good always finds a way to win. Tolkien made up a very complex historical and mythological background for his novels, and that exactly gives his work a special value among his readers and critics. However, he did not invent every single detail in it, but was strongly influenced by old Germanic, Nordic, Greek, Finnish, and many other mythologies and, since he was a very religious person, Christianity. Some parts of his stories were also inspired by his own life. Tolkien spent almost twenty years of his life writing what later turned out to be his lifework – a novel *The Hobbit* which was later followed by *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Aside from his broad knowledge and fascination with old mythologies, he was also a university professor who knew a lot about the complexity of language. That is visible in the fact that Tolkien invented whole new languages for his imaginary world and its inhabitants. This paper explores Tolkien's novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, focusing on the details – races, concrete characters, and items like swords and rings – from old mythologies and languages that influenced Tolkien's writing, as well as all the Christian values like self-sacrifice, friendship, and mercy which he used to distinguish good from bad characters and forces. It will attempt to demonstrate that Tolkien's novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are a proof of his strong religious beliefs, his ability to create new interesting stories and locations, and to combine his knowledge and imagination into the perfect mixture that has intrigued readers all around the world.

Keywords: Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, Mythology, Language, Religion, Christianity

## Introduction

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was a versatile man from England. He was a poet, a writer, a philologist, and a university professor. However, he is best known as the author of the classic high fantasy works *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1937 – 1949). He was a renowned scholar of the English language, specializing in Old and Middle English, and he worked as the Professor of Anglo-Saxon (Old English) at the University of Oxford. Also, since he was a little boy, religion was a huge part of his life and growing up he formed a strong opinion about Christianity which along with a lot of different mythologies, influenced him as a writer. Other than simply making up fantasy stories, Tolkien was trying to touch his readers emotionally, teach them something new and to reflect the economic and industrial state of England at his time.

The first part of this paper discusses the influences of the *Volsunga Saga*, *Beowulf*, and other Nordic texts on Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. There are a lot of similarities between Tolkien's texts and those from the Nordic mythology. Yet, there are also many differences – elements Tolkien invented on his own, proving the amount of knowledge he possessed. The second chapter discusses the religious influences on Tolkien's work. It analyzes four Christian elements – pity, self-sacrifice, true friendship, and loyalty – as demonstrated by Tolkien's characters throughout the novels. The last chapter looks into some other mythologies – Finnish and Arthurian, as well as some other aspects such as Tolkien's personal life that left an impact on Tolkien's work.

## **1. The Volsunga Saga, Beowulf, and other Nordic influences**

Tolkien spent a lot of time translating old texts and observing everything there was to know about languages, which later on influenced his writing of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Since love for languages and love for mythology are usually connected, he soon fell in love with mythologies worldwide. During these studies, he “became aware of the fact that England itself had no own mythology. There was the Celtic, the Roman, the Norse and the Christian Mythology but none especially of England” (Wettstein 1). This made him write stories and poems about people who might have taken place in the Mythology of England. He was inspired by the Bible, Celtic Tales, and the pieces of William Shakespeare, but more than anything – by the Norse mythology. To be precise, he took a lot of details and ideas from *The Volsunga Saga* and the Old English epic of *Beowulf*.

The elements taken from *The Volsunga Saga* are visible in basic literary elements like the main setting of Tolkien’s novels – the Middle-earth. According to Martin Wettstein, Midgard from the Norse mythology was one of the three worlds that compose the Universe, and when compared with the Middle-earth, the similarities are pretty obvious. Midgard was a place where battles between good and evil took place, and so is Tolkien’s Middle-earth. The first record of the Norse “Midgard” being translated into Middle-earth was found in the Lay of Eärendel the Mariner. Two more places have been directly influenced by Norse mythology, and their names are Mirkwood and the Misty Mountains. Mirkwood is a magical forest full of all kinds of creepy creatures, including giant spiders, and just like Mirkwyd in one of the Nordic myths, it is a border wood (Wettstein 1, 4). Misty Mountains appear in the poetic *Edda*. In that story, a hero called Skirnir has to pass over them, and in the meanwhile he has to face Giants and Trolls who live in caves. A similar situation appears in Tolkien's

stories. The Misty Mountains are always between the main protagonists and their goal, and the last "Homely House" is placed at the foot of the mountain:

Frodo was now safe in the Last Homely House east of the Sea. That house was, as Bilbo had long ago reported, "a perfect house, whether you like food or sleep, or story-telling or singing, or just sitting and thinking best, or a pleasant mixture of them all." (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 144)

Apart from places, elements like Runes, riddles, swords and even the whole idea of the most important symbol in Tolkien's novels – the One Ring, were also borrowed from the Norse mythology.

As it was mentioned before, Tolkien was a huge fan of languages. He knew Latin, Greek, Welsh, Finnish, French, Anglo-Saxon, Gothic, old Scandinavian, Spanish, old French, old Icelandic, Russian, and Italian (Jonathan n.pag.). All of those languages helped him understand foreign mythologies and also gave him some basic knowledge on how to create a new language, which he did – twice. Tolkien used runes to write his invented languages and, similarly to the Nordic texts, they were also used as "signs of wisdom, skaldic poetry and magic" (Mertens 5). The origin of runes is Germanic and they had been used, under the name Futhark, by German tribes centuries before, until they were replaced by the Latin alphabet (Wettstein 6). The runes in *The Hobbit* can be found on a map, explaining how and where to find a secret way into the Lonely Mountain. Those are the so called Moon Runes. Elrond describes them in the following way:

"Moon-letters are rune-letters, but you cannot see them," said Elrond, "not when you look straight at them. They can only be seen when the moon shines behind them, and what is more, with the more cunning sort it must be a moon of the same shape and season as the day when they were written. The dwarves

invented them and wrote them with silver pens, as your friends could tell you."

*(The Hobbit 24)*

In *The Lord of the Rings* runes appear above the doors of the great mine called Moria. They too are very much like Nordic runes because they form a riddle whose answer is the password which opens the gate, and it makes them the sign of wisdom:

"The words are in the elven-tongue of the West of Middle-earth in the Elder Days," answered Gandalf... They say only: "The Doors of Durin, Lord of Moria. Speak, friend, and enter." "What does it mean by speak, friend, and enter?" asked Merry. "That is plain enough," said Gimli. "If you are a friend, speak the password, and the doors will open, and you can enter." *(The Fellowship of the Ring 196)*

Further, riddle contests can be found in the "Lay of Vafthrudnir" in the poetic *Edda*. In it, Odin asks the giant Vafthrudnir riddles in order to find out how smart he is. Their contest is very similar to the one between Bilbo and Gollum in *The Hobbit* (Wettstein 5).

Swords in Nordic mythology have names, which makes them more than just objects. Tolkien also applied that to the swords in his stories: "...and the bright blade of Andúril shone like a sudden flame as he swept it out. 'Elendil!' he cried. 'I am Aragorn, son of Arathorn...'" *(The Two Towers 16)*.

Magical rings were always a big part of Norse mythologies, and are also very important in the legends of the *Edda*. In both myths and Tolkien's novels, rings were used as a metaphor for power. This is why the character of the One Ring has to be mentioned. It is the source of most of the problems in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. It causes almost all wars in the stories, corrupts a lot of characters, and it is the most powerful weapon



no one except Sauron can control: “The very desire of it corrupts the heart. Consider Saruman. If any of the Wise should with this Ring overthrow the Lord of Mordor, using his own arts, he would then set himself on Sauron's throne, and yet another Dark Lord would appear” (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 172).

Tolkien's characters and races were strongly influenced by Norse myths as well. In *the Hobbit* the most important races from the Norse mythology are the Dwarves, Dragons and Giants, whereas the ones in *The Lord of the Rings* are Elves and Rohrim. There are also a lot of other races like Orcs, Trolls, Werewolves, and Eagles, important for both of these works.

There is a lot of evidence that the Dwarves were taken from the Norse mythology. For example, Norse Dwarves, as well as Tolkien's, lived in the mines, spending their days searching for gold and other valuables. Both Tolkien's dwarves and those from the Norse mythology forged weapons and were skilled smiths. Another similarity are their names. Tolkien took names like Dvalin, Bombur, Nori, Dori, Ori, Thrór, Thorin, and even Gandalf (who was also a dwarf in the Norse mythology) from the first Norse poem of the poetic *Edda*: “The dwarves did as *Durin* directed, Many man forms made from the earth... *Veignr* and *Gandalf*, *Vindalf*, *Thorin*, *Thrór* and *Thrain*...” (*Völuspá*, 3 - 4, 13 – 15).

The next type of creatures Tolkien borrowed are dragons and giants. Both Tolkien's and Norse dragons lived in caves, protecting their treasures, and they could only be killed by stabbing them in their stomach, for it was their weakest point. It is not clear, however, whether Tolkien was inspired by Norse or Celtic myths, since Celtic myths contain dragons, too (Wettstein 3). Giants were also a very important part of Norse mythology and Tolkien uses Melkor as the equivalent of biblical Lucifer. Other creatures appear in more than one mythology (Norse, Greek, Celtic...) so it is difficult to define their origin.

Tolkien needed a completely new race to speak the language he invented, and since the Elves from the Norse mythology were unlike any other race, he decided to use them for that purpose. He adopted both Light and Dark Elves, and later on, divided the Light ones into three groups (houses). Although he made up their history all by himself, their being magical and immortal makes them quite similar to the Norse elves.

Likewise, in *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien created the Rohrim people. They are the men of Rohan, blond and living in a flat land which is divided into marches. Swedish people pretty much fit the same description (Wettstein 3).

Some of the individual characters from *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* have to be mentioned, too. Not only was Gandalf's name taken from Norse mythology, but so were his appearance and behavior. Gandalf is, in Tolkien's novels, described as a gray wanderer and he is a God-like wizard. It is no surprise that a character exists in Nordic mythology who is described almost the same way. His name is Odin and he is one of the gods from the *Volsunga Saga* whose task is to bring order and peace to the world. They both are cloaked and have a staff. Gandalf's name even means "the elf with the long staff" (Mimir's well n.pag.). Another similarity is the fact that both Gandalf and Odin are leading people into the battles and helping them however they can. They are wise, can use magic, are always on the road and death is not unknown to them. Odin hanged himself on a tree and Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* dies in the Mines of Moria, while fighting the daemon from the shadows – Balrog. Not only do they both die, but they also return from the dead, wiser and more powerful. Gandalf's horse named Shadowfax is the king of all horses in Middle-earth and his ancestors were the horses from the west. Odin had a similar horse called Slepnir.

Further, there is Beorn who was not directly taken from any Norse mythology, but his name is an Old Germanic word for a "bear." In *The Hobbit*: "He is very strong, and he is a

skin-changer” (*The Hobbit* 48). Some of the warriors in Nordic myths started behaving like animals while in the battle and were called “berserks”, so Tolkien might have gotten his idea from them (Wettstein 4).

The last character is Aragorn who can very easily be compared to some of the characters from the *Volsunga Saga*. There is a description in the third chapter of the *Volsunga Saga* about a man who seems pretty much like Aragorn, at least when he was still one of the rangers called Strider: “A certain man came into the hall unknown of aspect to all men; and suchlike array he had, that over him was a spotted cloak, and he was bare-foot, and had linen-breeches knit tight even unto the bone, and he had a sword in his hand.” (*Volsunga Saga* chapter 3).

Tolkien was a scholar of medieval literature, and he once admitted that he let some parts of *Beowulf* influence his work because he was a huge fan (Ancalagon-V n.pag.). One of the most important details is the similarity between Tolkien’s creature Gollum and the villain Grendel from *Beowulf*. In *Beowulf* Grendel is described in the following way:

Grendel this monster grim was called,  
march-riever mighty, in moorland living,  
in fen and fastness; fief of the giants  
the hapless wight a while had kept  
since the Creator his exile doomed. (*Beowulf* 7)

Gollum is an important character in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In *The Hobbit* he is described as

small slimy creature. I don't know where he came from, nor who or what he was. He was Gollum - as dark as darkness, except for two big round pale eyes in his thin face. He had a little boat, and he rowed about quite quietly on the lake; for lake it was, wide and deep and deadly cold. He paddled it with large feet dangling over the side, but never a ripple did he make. (*The Hobbit* 31)

Both Grendel and Gollum are corrupted characters who are connected to the main protagonists in some way and have an important role that influences the plot. Also, they both became evil and were parted from their humanity gradually.

On the other hand, Grendel can also be compared with Grima "Wormtongue". While Grima was Saruman's servant who poisoned king Theoden's mind in the kingdom of Rohan in *The Two Towers* and allowed the Orcs to run freely, in *Beowulf* Grendel caused pain to the whole land ruled by king Hrothgar. Also, Gandalf gets rid of Grima and Saruman by challenging Saruman and winning, just as Beowulf did to Grendel.

Another thing connected to Rohan is the resemblance between the great halls. Both king Theoden's Golden Hall and king Hrothgar's Hall are described as large, golden halls glittering in the sunlight that are surrounded by the land:

...there stands aloft a great hall of Men. And it seems to my eyes that it is thatched with gold. The light of it shines far over the land. Golden, too, are the posts of its doors. There men in bright mail stand; but all else within the courts are yet asleep. (*The Two Towers* 69)

However, Tolkien's willingness to find a new name for elves, since his were not at all like the elves from any other mythology (small or weak), and the fact that he changed the

plural of dwarf – dwarfs into dwarves (Jonathan n.pag.) is a strong proof that he was not simply plagiarizing someone else's work, but that he used his own inventions instead.

He used the *Volsunga Saga*, *Beowulf* and many other old Norse texts as the base for his own stories, but ended up making much more complicated and detailed mythology than anyone could imagine. That is exactly what makes his novels so special.

## **2. Religious Influences**

It is well known that Tolkien's writing was under the influence of Christian values because religion was a big part of his life. His connection with Christ was very strong and he often went to church. He was even living under the guardianship of one of the priests after his mother died and she was the one who brought him closer to Christian religion, although it was not easy for her to become a Roman Catholic because "Until recently, England was the most virulently anti-Catholic country in Europe, thanks to the ancient animosity with Catholic France and Spain" (Wood 1). While *The Hobbit* describes the adventures of one main character called Bilbo Baggins and is not strongly influenced by Christianity, *The Lord of the Rings* is full of religious elements. It is a story about the fellowship connected with friendship, love, and one mission to destroy the evil in Middle-earth. Although in *The Hobbit* some of Christian elements are visible, they are much stronger in *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in which: "Frodo learns - and thus teaches - what for Tolkien is the deepest of all Christian truths: how to surrender one's life, how to lose one's treasure, how to die, and thus how truly to live" (Wood 1). Tolkien was careful not to make his novels overly Christian, so this novel, too, ended up somewhere in between - with a moral lesson and a clear sign of what is right and what is wrong, but without any obvious signs of religion such as churches or Gods. However, pity, true friendship, loyalty and self-sacrifice are four of the Christian elements Tolkien values a lot, so they have to be mentioned.

The first and maybe the strongest Christian element – pity, is visible in the situation from *The Hobbit* in which Bilbo has a chance to kill the creature Gollum, but does not. Bilbo finds the Ring of Power in Gollum's cave and takes it, but when Gollum finds out and asks him "What has it got in its pocketses?" (*The Hobbit* 36), Bilbo has to escape in order to survive. He puts the Ring on his finger and becomes invisible, which makes it easier for him

to avoid Gollum, but he does not kill him anyway when he has the chance because he feels pity for him: “It was pity that stayed his hand. Pity and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With pity” (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 41).

Another Christian element present is the true friendship, and there is no truer, more loyal friend in Tolkien’s narratives than Samwise Gamgee. From the beginning he is Frodo’s companion, who takes care of him and helps him with everything Frodo goes through. At the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when Frodo decides to go to Mordor all by himself to spare his friends the burden of the Ring of Power, Sam does everything to convince Frodo to let him come along, including going into deep water in spite of the fact that he cannot swim: "Frodo: 'Go back, Sam. I'm going to Mordor alone.'

Sam: 'Of course you are. And I'm coming with you'" (*The Fellowship of the ring* 258).

Furthermore, when Frodo is hurt by the huge spider Shelob in *The Return of the King* and Sam thinks that Frodo is dead, he takes the One Ring from him in order to complete the mission and destroy it, but when orcs come around, he finds out that Frodo is not at all dead, but benumbed by Shelob’s poison. The orcs take Frodo to their chambers and Sam once again proves his loyalty. He does not let Frodo die, despite the compelling power of the Ring, but follows the orcs and does everything to save his friend from suffering:

Faint as was the hope that his guess brought him, it was enough to rouse him. There might be just a chance. His love for Frodo rose above all other thoughts, and forgetting his peril he cried aloud: “I'm coming, Mr. Frodo!” He ran forward to the climbing path, and over it. At once the road turned left and

plunged steeply down. Sam had crossed into Mordor. (*The Return of the King* 101)

Tolkien proves his fascination with Christianity once again, by writing about self-sacrifice. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when Pipin and Merry get in trouble and almost get killed by the orcs, Boromir, the brave knight from Gondor, fights to protect them and does not give up even when there is a good chance for him to die, which unfortunately happens in the end. He sacrifices himself for the wellbeing of the Halflings. In the third part of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Pipin explains to Boromir's father Denethor why his son is dead:

Pippin flushed and forgot his fear. "The mightiest man may be slain by one arrow," he said, "and Boromir was pierced by many. When last I saw him he sank beside a tree and plucked a black-feathered shaft from his side. Then I swooned and was made captive. I saw him no more, and know no more. But I honour his memory, for he was very valiant. He died to save us, my kinsman Meriadoc and myself, waylaid in the woods by the soldiery of the Dark Lord; and though he fell and failed, my gratitude is none the less." (*The Return of the King* 8)

The last of the four components – loyalty, can also be connected to Boromir. He is from Gondor, the great kingdom of men, and is loyal to his father and their people. He knows that his father wants the One Ring for Gondor alone, as a helping weapon in the war, and even though he agrees that the Ring has to be destroyed, he tries to take it from Frodo and bring it to his father. Boromir cares a lot about his country and its faith and trusts Denetor a lot, which is why he cannot think straight and does what he did: "Boromir opened his eyes and strove to speak. At last slow words came. 'I tried to take the Ring from Frodo,' he said. 'I am sorry. I have paid'" (*The Two Towers* 2).



### **3. Other Mythologies, Influences and the Arthurian Legends**

Other than Norse mythology and Christianity, Tolkien was reading a lot of other foreign myths, legends and stories – Finnish, Celtic, and Arthurian. Also, some of the details from his novels were inspired by the places and events he experienced during his lifetime. For example, the industrialization of Isengard was inspired by the industrialization of England. While he was a young boy, Tolkien lived in the industrial region of Birmingham with his mother and brother. According to Wood, “they soon picked up the Warwickshire dialect, which included the word gamgee.” Mr. Gamgee was a Birmingham physician and his surname was probably the inspiration for a hobbit named Sawise Gamgee (Wood 1).

The most important Finnish influence on Tolkien's work is the national epic *Kalevala*. In it, the main character has a talisman of power, Sampo, with which he can gain even more power:

He possesses a priceless treasure in the Sampo, the talisman of success, which Louhi, the hostess of Pohyola, dragged into the sea in her efforts to regain it from the heroes of Kalevala. Ever eager for the treasures of others, and generally to return any that come into his possession.... (*Kalevala* 13)

This talisman and Tolkien's One Ring are, by the description, pretty much alike. Tolkien also made the Ring the center of his novels, especially *The Lord of the Rings*, and it also symbolizes the yearning to gain more and more treasures. Sauron, the great evil, wants to rule the whole Middle-earth and because of that he makes the Ring of Power: “One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them” (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 35).

Further, one of Tolkien's languages was also based on the Finnish language. As Tikka confirms, "Qenya was the name of Tolkien's Finnish-inspired Elven language from its conception until it was changed to Quenya by the end of the 30s" (11). A similarity between these two languages can be found in the number of cases. Whereas the old Qenya had only four cases like German, the new Quenya has ten, like the Finnish language (Tikka 12-13). Another similarity between the two languages are its adjectives: "In Finnish adjectives agree in case and number with their nouns. This was exactly the same in early Qenya. The agreement in case was later lost, as we can see here: *ondolisse morne* "on the black rocks" (Tikka 16).

The Arthurian legends are part of the cultural heritage appearing in Celtic and Welsh mythology. Although Tolkien denied being influenced by the Arthurian legends, some specialists have found similarities between names such as Broceliande and Broceliand and Avalon and Avallónë. What Tolkien, however, did admit was that the departure of Frodo and Bilbo to Tol Eressëa was an "Arthurian ending" (*Wikipedia*, Arthurian Legends n.pag.):

I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them. ... Then Elrond and Galadriel rode on; for the Third Age was over, and the Days of the Rings were passed, and an end was come of the story and song of those times. (*The Return of the King* 195-196)

The last but not least is the connection between Tolkien's Aragorn, Sigurd from the *Volsunga Saga*, and Arthur. They all grew up without their parents but among nobles, their fathers were killed and all of them were in love with someone who they had to fight for. Also, there is an equivalent between their swords. Aragorn was the only one who had the right to possess Elendil, and both Arthur's and Sigurds' swords had to be pulled out of stone to prove that one is a rightful king: "Whoso draweth this sword from this stock, shall have the

same as a gift from me, and shall find in good sooth that never bare he better sword in hand than is this” (*Volsunga Saga* chapter 3).

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