

Getting Beyond *The Lord of the Rings*

How to parlay an obsession with The Lord of the Rings into an interest in English literature.

by Martin Cothran

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We all know them. They fight imaginary sword battles. They draw pictures of orcs and dwarves. Sometimes they even try to learn the elvish language. They seem, in fact, to dwell entirely in Middle Earth. They are children obsessed with J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Your student may not be quite this delusional, but many parents and teachers are familiar with at least a few of these symptoms—in their own child or someone else's. They are not a danger to themselves or others (unless in the course of a swordfight they knock a valuable Royal Doulton from the mantle piece or something, in which case you might want to send them to their room).

In fact, the best thing to do is play along, and if you are creative enough, you might just be pleased with the results.

As a teacher, you often find yourself in need of illustrations. There was a day (may it soon return) when you could appeal to a character or event in literature to explain the idea you were trying to get across, and you could be fairly confident all your students would know what you were talking about. This was

in the days, mind you, before the invention of video games.

Not only was there a time when students were well read, but they tended to read the same books. They shared common cultural reference points and could communicate better because of it. They were also easier to communicate with.

Today, when a teacher needs an illustration, he can't quote Shakespeare or Robert Frost—or Eliot. Appealing to lines out of Hemingway, Steinbeck, or Faulkner will do him no good, since no one would know what he was talking about. Instead, when a word picture is needed, the teacher is forced to reach for something out of a movie or

Rings—that, and possibly C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. It is admittedly a small canon, but it is a start. And let's face it: it could be far worse.

Why these books? What is it about *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* that have the power to tear students away from the latest version of (and I may date myself here and forever relegate myself to the ranks of the uncool, but here goes) Mario?

Other books have been written, also in the fantasy genre, that appeal to the imagination. Although many Christians do not like the images of witchcraft in them, the Harry Potter books have

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a television program. It is the only thing he can be certain they will all understand.

Outside the Bible (and even there it is a little dicey), there is only one exception to this rule: *The Lord of the*

been extremely popular and probably play a similar, somewhat lesser, role among secular students. J. K. Rowling's writing can be inventive and compelling. Her characters

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are almost Dickensian, and the interplay between fairly clear examples of good and evil renders her plots understandable and exciting in a literary world which now favors stories that take place in an ambiguous moral universe.

No other book approaches *The Lord of the Rings* in terms of reader loyalty. I think there are several reasons for this. There are three chief characteristics that set Tolkein's great work apart. The first is authenticity, the second is reality, and the third is familiarity. Let me explain.

I say the books are authentic because the reader grasps quickly that he has entered a world that appears to have been there long before he ever entered it. There are civilizations that have come and gone, languages that have been lost, and races of men (or something close to men) who once spoke them but who are now long dead—or are they?

Tolkein knew the power of words and spent his whole life immersed in the languages of the West: Latin, Greek, German, Old Norse—and even

(just for fun) Icelandic. He was, among other things, a professor of Anglo-Saxon. The languages of Middle Earth were his own creation and were written even before the stories that now grace the books.

In the beginning was the Word.

The reality—and the familiarity—of the stories comes from the fact that they speak to universal themes we all know, even if few of us could articulate them to ourselves. There is something about Frodo that is like us all, and we can laugh at and pity him for it. And there is something about Aragorn that we would like to become, although we know we never could. Gandalf

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is like our grandfather, old and wise, at once a familiar figure we could approach with a casual familiarity—and also a wizard who could strike us dead with a stare. Then there

is Sam: the real hero of the story. These are fantastic characters, and yet it seems like we have met them all before.

The symbols in the story distinguish it from other books as well. What more universal symbol is there than the Ring of Power? And what exactly does it represent? Is it meant to represent power and its corrupting influence only? Or can we apply it to more particular things, like weapons of mass destruction and other afflictions of modern society, like drugs? And is there any better symbol of the blessings and curses of the Internet than the Palantiri: the Seeing Stones of Numenor?

Lewis' stories have their own appeal, as evidenced by the fact that children have cherished them for decades. My own boys (I have three) have worn out several sets of *The Chronicles of Narnia* through repeated readings. The symbolism of the Narnia books is not as deep as

that found in the stories of Middle Earth; their meaning lies closer to the surface. Their appeal is different, but, particularly for readers

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in the early years, their appeal can be just as strong.

The Lord of the Rings—and to a lesser extent Lewis' Narnia books and Space Trilogy—offer an opportunity to introduce students to the wider world of English literature. An interest in a book naturally lends itself to an interest in the author. What was he like? What books did he read and how did they affect his own stories? Asking these questions (and answering them) is a wonderful way of parlaying an interest in one book into a wider interest in the world of books.

Tolkein, Lewis, and other members of the "Inklings" (the group of writers and Oxford professors who met at The Eagle and Child tavern to read their books to each other) came to their work with a formidable background in the literature of Western Europe. Works such as *Beowulf*, of which the first readable translation in English was penned by Tolkein, is a good place to start. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is another, also translated by Tolkein. Other writings from the Norse, such as the Volsung Saga played an important part in Tolkein's literary development. Students will be edified as they see in the similar themes

parallels between these works and the *Ring* stories.

Other influences included the writings of George MacDonald, particularly *The Princess and the Goblin*, Chesterton's *Everlasting Man*—all of these could be made a part of a course in English. There are also many modern Christian writers who were influenced by the Inklings, who would be worth putting on your students' reading lists.

A student could also take note of the ways in which Tolkein's writing differs from other English writers, such as Shakespeare, whose writing, Tolkein once said (probably because he considered him too modern), he "cordially" disliked.

For me, it was the writings of G. K. Chesterton that served as my gateway into the world of English literature. I could be said to have been as obsessed with Chesterton as some of my students are now obsessed with Tolkein. But my interest in reading such great works as *Orthodoxy*, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, and *The Everlasting Man* transformed itself into an interest in the writers Chesterton quoted and criticized. I call this "following the links"—and our computer savvy generation of students certainly knows how to do that.

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