

There and Back Again: An Author's Tale

Try, for a moment, to imagine a world without J.R.R. Tolkien. There would be no Frodo, no Shire, no Gandalf. But what else would disappear without this author? By my thinking, if Tolkien goes, so goes Pratchett, Pullman, and...Rowling. Sure there were other fantasy authors during Tolkien's time (the Inklings wouldn't have been much of a club with only one person, after all). But Tolkien was a revolutionary when it came to this sort of thing. And a world without dragons, wizards, and Platform 9 ¾ is most definitely not a world I want to live in.

On January 3rd, 1892, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in Bloemfontein in a part of South Africa to Arthur Reuel Tolkien and Mabel Suffield Tolkien. When Tolkien was only three, his father died rheumatic fever. Just nine years later, his mother died of acute diabetes.

Despite his difficulties, Tolkien was still able to attend Exeter College in Oxford, where he studied English Language and Literature. Afterwards, Tolkien held jobs such as Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Rawlinson and Boworth. In addition, Tolkien made many literary contributions. He produced *A Middle English Vocabulary*. He translated "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," "Pearl," and "Sir Orfeo." And, of course, he wrote *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, its prequel. But I think one of Tolkien's most important works is probably his lecture "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics."

Okay. So, I've read a lot of books written during the Regency era (I know it may seem like I'm getting off topic here, but just give me a second). And one thing I've noticed in a few of them is a disregard—more than a disregard, a disrespect—for novels. Whenever someone actually admits to—gasp—reading novels, the reaction they receive is usually something like this: "Hold the phone. You actually READ that trash?"

Before Tolkien wrote "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," the fantasy literature was to the 1950s as a novel was to 1800s. Though Beowulf is viewed today as this literary masterpiece, back then it was just a bit of history. People of the time completely ignored the fantasy aspects of the piece, considering it childish for dealing with non-existent monsters instead of real enemies. But Tolkien argued against this take. He believed that such things as the dragon and Grendel were actually key points, that critics should take a closer look at these characters. He saw that these characters were more than fictional creatures that scared the bejesus out of people. They had *meaning*. Without this revolutionary standpoint, high school students would almost surely be wondering "Beo-what?" and The Boy Who Lived might be The Boy Who Was Never Created.