

The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien Study Guide

The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien by J. R. R. Tolkien

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Plot Summary

This book is a nonfiction collection of letters by one of the most popular genre fiction novelists of the 20th century. This collection of letters covers a large portion of his adult life. Included are those years that he spent writing his most famous fiction books: The Lord of the Rings series and The Simarillion. The work has been compiled and edited by Humphrey Carpenter with the help of Christopher Tolkien who is a descendant. Christopher is the younger of JRR's two sons. The book was published in 1981.

During the Introduction, the assistant explains that he has made a number of omissions. He also explains why. In the case of the letters to the woman who was the focus of his love life, Christopher Tolkien explains that he is not willing to expose such personal information of JRR Tolkien. The presumption is that the main target audience of the book is a fan of the author's fiction. For this reason, Christopher comments on how this quality was used to select the most suitable letters. He provides a clear delineation of the system used to refer to these: He uses 4 dots "...." to indicate that he has omitted information. Whenever the traditional 3 dots "..." appear, readers can be certain that JRR Tolkien did that himself within the original letter. This reveals a helpful conscientiousness on the part of the editor.

He has used omission for discretion in this case, although he clarifies that in general, the author was not secretive. The letters cover quite a variety of the aspects and areas of his life. These naturally include others, often as parts of anecdotes. While any individual one does not provide a full account of the situation, the composite set of letters allows readers to develop a relatively full and rich picture of what his life is really like. The recipients of the letters also indicates who was prominent at the time, and also which relationships were. One is a relative and close friend, whereas the other is a representative of one of publishing houses with whom the author gets actual contracts. While for readers these are impressive, for writers they represent often hard won victories and may well be worth crying over. In total, the book covers decades of the author's life. While much remains unknown the essence of this man is shared. He was passionate and gifted when it came to languages. He worked extensively with real ones and for fun he invented others. He was an excellent teacher and he brought to life a wonderful Fairy-tale designed for the British Isles.



Chapter 1, Edith Bratt

Chapter 1, Edith Bratt Summary and Analysis

The book begins with a brief and very clear introduction about how the letters were selected and edited. Humphrey Carpenter provided the main order whilst Christopher Tolkien gave input, feedback and gave some advice. Following this the letters begin. These have been neatly numbered. The book has no chapters. As a consequence, the summary will be ordered around the letters. Which ones are covered by the summary chapter will be clearly indicated.

The remainder of this summary chapter covers the first letter. The author is quite a young man, at 21 years of age and he is finishing up his undergraduate work at the prestigious Oxford University. The earliest letters are excerpts from letters to his girlfriend. This is in 1914. The woman in question is Edith Bratt. JRR Tolkien admits that he loves her. What happened is explained shortly thereafter during letters in the later teens. He loves her and then is subjected to an arduous three year long separation from her during which time it only grows clearer that as far as he is concerned, she is the woman for him. In a later letter he writes that during his absence he did not even write to her and just hoped to God that she didn't marry anyone else while he was away as he still had her very much in both mind and heart. This shows that JRR Tolkien, unlike some, had a very romantic love and was lucky enough for it to be mutual. However, that it did not mean there were no difficulties involved.

The letters carry on, moving rather rapidly through history. There are 55 letters covered by this summary chapter. Samples will be taken in order to give readers enough detail to feel that they have made real contact with the contents of the text. Letter #6 is to Mrs. E.M. Wright. He writes in gratitude. The emphasis here is on the fact that he is studying Middle English, and when he writes of a colleague unentbehrlich, he seems to imply that this was actually viewed as the English rather than the German language at some point. Later, letter # 27 begins, "I am afraid, if you will need drawings of hobbits in various attitudes, I must leave it in the hands of someone who can draw," (p. 35). For those who are writers, in part because they are more adept in this medium, this comment by JRR Tolkien reiterates something so self-explanatory as to be almost maddening.



Chapter 2, From a Letter to Christopher Tolkien

Chapter 2, From a Letter to Christopher Tolkien Summary and Analysis

3 April 1944, to Christopher Tolkien: JRR writes about real life, some of which includes remarks about his writing. He writes of genuine painful difficulties relating to writing part of *The Hobbit*. He then recounts a lovely rapport he establishes on a train with a couple of other men. One is an RAF man, whereas the other is an American. The Brits often call Americans in general Yanks, but in this case, it is especially true because the American man is from New England. "After I told him that 'accent' sounded to me like English after being wiped over with a dirty sponge," (p.69) shows that JRR's ability to write well shines through in these letters.

In letter #66, JRR is writing again to Christopher. This time, readers can tell that Christopher is somehow in on the story and as such, there is a bit more about the story included. Real life and the orchestration of an imaginary realm go hand in hand during this letter. JRR even shows how in his own creative excitement, he has developed some details that have to be moved and tucked back into the book's appendix or somewhere else as they don't efficiently fit into the storyline. Letter #69 is yet another example revealing two main factors. First, is that JRR Tolkien is devoted to Christopher Tolkien as shown by the frequency of his writing to this other. Next, is that the author shares information about real life. The role of fiction in real life is especial but in a rather bizarre way. In this case, JRR Tolkien writes about how he has found inconsistencies in the manuscript of his novel. As a consequence, he has had to go back and unravel the trouble spot; in addition, he has the need to preserve the consistency of the story and to figure out where the Moon has in fictive-fact risen and set. This is editing. Writers will know it immediately, and readers who are not writers get a realistic sense for at least part of the process this way.

At this point, it becomes clear that CS Lewis the Christian thinker and writer of children's fiction novels is one of JRR Tolkien's friends. By page 80 of this 461 page long book, the two have met multiple times for the sake of giving each other literary criticism. It is also clear that Christopher is JRR's beloved son. This at least, means that there is some method of communication and therefore at least some level of intimacy is possible.



Chapter 3, Allen & Unwin

Chapter 3, Allen & Unwin Summary and Analysis

Allen & Unwin are representatives of a publishing house. They have granted JRR Tolkien a contract for *Farmer Giles of Ham*, which he asserts is not a children's book. He then admits that there are children who will like the story. Mainly he admits to having made numerous improvements to the manuscript and claims that he has designed it so that it can be read aloud. Each of these representatives is an actual person. The editors have included small, meaningful notes as part of the book. These are used to simply clarify what the letter that follows is about. "[Allen & Unwin expressed enthusiasm for *Farmer Giles of Ham*, but asked if Tolkien could provide other stories to make up a sufficiently large volume.]...I am shortly moving to a small house...and so hoping to solve the intolerable domestic problems which thieve so much of the little time that is left over," (p. 119).

Letter #114 is JRR Tolkien responding to a letter from a schoolboy who had read *The Hobbit* and was psychologically hungry for more. The author explains that the *Silmarillion* is the greatest resource for a full history of the Elvenkind from prehistory up to the era of *The Hobbit*. He also refers to the books of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, but in rather vague and conspiratorial terms. In this case he goes so far as to tell the boy that he, Tolkien will let him have early copies of the documents if the lad is really that interested in the story. Letter #115 is by this same university professor, only this time he is writing to a lady. He is denigrating himself before her, claiming that only CS Lewis and his son are interested in reading his literary works. He declares that no one - meaning no real publishing house willing and able to spend a respectable sum on the author in an advance and a percentage of royalties, will publish these other works. In this case, he offers the woman those handwritten versions that are likely to be even legible to her.

More than once, JRR Tolkien mentions the power of the pen. It almost has a life of its own. Also noteworthy up to this point is that he has mentioned that characters can appear in the stories of which he had no conscious foreknowledge. This shows just how unpredictable the creative process can be. The author's writing is wonderfully clear while also being vibrant, energetic and expressive. He flashes the power of an extensive vocabulary at times: this is a hard won gem for many educated people while relying upon simple and clear language much of the time.



Chapter 4, To Unwin about The Hobbit

Chapter 4, To Unwin about The Hobbit Summary and Analysis

The letters selected for this compilation have been very intentionally chosen because they directly refer to the literary works for which the author is most famous. As such, they are more relevant to the readers. Also, they leave out extraneous materials and anything that might even vaguely resemble infringements upon personal privacy. In Letter #128 the author writes that he has been considering whether or not to make a specific alteration to chapter 5 of a book. He explains that if he does so, the book will be better designed for him to write a sequel of it. In the following Letter #129, he begins by asserting that he has made this change and as a result this is rather final.

Letter#130 reveals the very underpinnings and essence of this literary professor. He graciously thanks the recipient, Milton Waldman, for the opportunity to discuss the imaginary realms he has been working with for decades. He admits that he really discovered that he was like this, or actively became this way while he was a child. The difference here is that he has not stopped this behavior, but instead has cultivated it with his adult skills and abilities. As a consequence he has carefully hand crafted artificial languages, never even used in real life, to clearly show the historical development and linguistic differentiation over those same histories; in short, he has treated his imaginary world with the same skill and respect with which he has treated his real life, including the study of old languages. Here we find the dual natured quality of this learned sage and flaky old man with a zealous imagination.

He also reveals in these pages that "Elves" as a term, is misleading. Just to make the actual Anglo-Saxon professor seem even more eccentric, he tells critics that it is because there is no English translation for the proper word found in so-called Elven languages. Due to this, he has resorted to using the words Elf and Elven.



Chapter 5, Middle Earth as Fairy-Tale

Chapter 5, Middle Earth as Fairy-Tale Summary and Analysis

Letter #131 to Milton Waldman is relatively long and full of matters of interest to a certain sort of person. He explains that he has created these stories due to the real need he felt the English have for "their own myths and fairy tales". The Enemy, led by the Necromancer Sauron is actually motivated by good intentions - the desire to benefit and to improve the world. He also has a strong drive for Power. The result is the set of activities and actions of an industrialized, disciplined work force known in the vernacular as "the Machine". Those who participate in this are mortals. The Elves, he explains are immortals. Their interest and fantastic abilities are Art. Their culture suffers from preoccupations caused by the fact that they won't die, and that they don't die whereas the humans are coping with the fact that they do die. This gives rightfully different emphases and psychological phenomenon.

He writes briefly about 'magic'. He explains that both "the Machine" and the Art of the Elves are magic. He also admits that he never precisely clarifies matters on this topic. This shortcoming shows in the story as the confusion of the hobbits when they handle Elven magic. The "bad guys" are out for Domination whereas the "good guys" are not.

During this letter, the author also reveals the extent to which "Art is art for its own sake". Not being philosophy or science, there are often unnatural limits regarding interpretation. Some of these flow with some aspects of real life. "It looked good that way," becomes a motive as does, "I felt like it, so I did." While in the first paragraph readers learn that some events have a deeper meaning, others really do not. In the latter case, the real answer is "it is Art; this made the story work...It seemed like a good idea at the time." Letter #131 includes an astonishingly complex world-view of this pretend location. He explains that Elves are followers even though they have arrived long before humanity. Of the hominids - the upright walking "races" or species, The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings take place during the rise of mankind. Mainly due to this there are humans in the story without them being the dominant figures. Regardless, the Elves never die even though they give way to the humans in time. JRR Tolkien writes that he believes that the myths of humanity are based upon truths that were somehow only able to be conveyed through the use of story. The majority of this letter is about the mythological history of Elvenkind and how this has been presented in the Simarillion.



Chapter 6, After the Fall of the Elves

Chapter 6, After the Fall of the Elves Summary and Analysis

The depth of the author's writing about the fictional world he has created intensifies at this point of the book. As such, there are a small number of letters that will receive greater attention as they best represent the true nature of JRR Tolkien and the nature of his most famous creative works - other than the real lives of his children that is. Deep into Letter #131, the author reiterates that one of the most important things about the Simarillion is that it is not anthropocentric - Elves are the focal point of the story and the vast majority of it takes place prior to the arrival on the scene of the "real - imaginary world" of humans. It is worth noting that Elves and Dwarves only once had an enduring friendship and this resulted in a drastic improvement in the smithing art and craft known to this once again "pretend world". This took place at the Misty Mountains, a fictive location where the edge of the terrain controlled by Sauron the Necromancer began.

Possibly the greatest explanation of the One Ring of Power outside of the stories in which it appears is given here. The One Ring, the dominant one over a group of nine, gives the wearer mind powers. The ability to read the thoughts of others and to control their actions through the use of mind control are the One Ring's powers. JRR Tolkien explains that Sauron has united himself with the Ring; much of his dominion is a direct result of wearing and making full use of this item. Tolkien writes that Sauron has given his own real power to the Ring. There is essentially no way to destroy this Ring. There is one exception to this. There is a special type of fire from which the Ring was originally formed that could engulf it.

The other main topic on the part of the Elves in the Simarillion during Letter #131 is that of the Stages of History and their natural progression in these fiction stories. He writes proudly about the Second Stage and how this is when there are Elves and Dwarves, prior to the rise of humans in Middle Earth. "The Third Age is concerned mainly with the Ring," (p. 157). The Evil land is an abandoned yet still quite ominous territory. Slaves of the Ring still lurk like shadows, and while the might of the Evil One has been broken, remnants of what he has wrought remain. During the high peak of the Enemy's power they had been forced to take refuge and now, in this new stage their beginning is in these quiet sanctuaries. Hobbits first come into being in this Third Age. There is some Dark Power over a terrain known as Mirkwood and there is known to be a sorcerer, or Necromancer behind it.

Chapter 7, Publisher Drama

Chapter 7, Publisher Drama Summary and Analysis

The editors have included an incredibly important and relevant note about the relationship between JRR Tolkien and the publishers Collins, Allen & Unwin. In 1952, Tolkien was disturbed by how long it was taking Collins to publish *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *The Simarillion*. Unfortunately, when he pushed the issue, they declined rather than moving ahead and publishing them. Around the same time, and quite fortunately for him, Rayner Unwin - another publishing company representative wrote asking Tolkien about one of his poems. The same fellow also made a rather casual inquiry about the novels. The author shows great gratitude regarding the interest shown in the poem. He goes on about its surprisingly lengthy history a bit and then reports of how he created a metre especially for this poem. Following this is a confession that he has only been able to use his own invention the once - 'Errantry' is this one instance.

The author also includes a brief discussion about a woman who was sent to him. Her presence brought up another awareness regarding the oral tradition in literature - meaning the spoken, rather than the written. There are times when the written and the oral are both used. *Farmer Giles of Ham* is one example, as JRR Tolkien has explained that he wrote this story for the specific purpose of having it read aloud. In other words, here is a case where writing has been used to serve the oral tradition. Contemporary writing is very often not used this way: speech writing is one of the most prominent cases in the contemporary world of writers working for the oral.

As has now been foreshadowed, the author got lucky, very lucky indeed. Allen & Unwin took his manuscripts for *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Simarillion* and agreed to serve as JRR Tolkien's publisher. When he insisted that they be published by 1953, his idea was respected. They followed this up by asking him to give them a 100-word summary of the novels to be used for publicity purposes. For readers who haven't been doing the math, this means they want him to describe a 450,000-word set of stories in 100.



Chapter 8, The Professor

Chapter 8, The Professor Summary and Analysis

The author gives a number of details about his other working life during these letters. His day job as a professor grows in its presence within the letters. He has had a situation, which he deemed terrible wherein he was forced to Chair an English department under especial and limited conditions. He was able to work through this matter with his colleagues so that, without losing his job, he was still able to free himself from those responsibilities directly associated with the Chair.

The letters are now dated 1952 and it was not until 1953 that *The Lord of the Rings* made their way to publication. Those manuscripts continued to have a major role as a semi-manifest fantasy life but whenever they made no progress with publishers the author was given the certain message: pay attention to your real life, you imaginative man, and keep on your toes with your real job - that of professor. He was granted some role as a writer for at least one academic article, which is referred to during these letters. He writes vigorously of the need to grade students' papers and remarks that he suspects one student's thesis on Fairy Tales is actually going to be boring to read. He admits to both giving examinations and then of reviewing the results. In these ways, readers see that beyond that incredible fantasy world there is also the normal day-to-day life of this man.

The next main change is what takes place once the publisher has said yes to the books. It turns out there is a great deal more to what happens than them printing it off and making posters for the book shops that market it. First off, they make "galleys". These are copies that give a more accurate presentation of what the book will be like in print and then the publisher forces further revisions. Essentially, he writes a bit about changes that he has to make. Noteworthy is how humbled he has felt once he has been given this opportunity to look upon his work at this stage in its development. Once he sees it this way, he realizes how much more room for improvement there really is. Maps are the other topic. These have come up now and then in the letters of many years. In the beginning, this is a matter that he wrote about to his son Christopher. He told his son, that it would be great to have the younger Tolkien make maps for *The Lord of the Rings* imaginary world. However, 100 pages and over a decade later, this same issue about drawing maps for the imaginary terrain has become a matter between himself and a respectable publisher.



Chapter 9, Now the Books Themselves

Chapter 9, Now the Books Themselves Summary and Analysis

Letters #146, 147, 148 are located near to the center of the book in its published form. These letters are dated from June and July of 1954. They are actually about getting the books into their publishable forms. Tolkien writes a letter to Allen & Unwin in which he admits to suffering from discontent regarding the proposed book cover images they have sent to him. He goes on to confess that he doesn't think they are really going to take his views into account but are only asking in order to be polite. Here, readers find this creative genius and highly experienced father and professor sulking like a boy, doubtful about whether or not to even dare hope of getting his way. In reality, the publishers do take into account his comments and deliver modified forms of the same items. Tolkien is very open about his gratitude towards the publishers. He is happier now than he was before. He has viewed this as having been very helpful.

In a letter to Rayner Unwin the publisher, dated 9 September 2009 the first topic is the reviews that have appeared as commentary on the book's emergence into the open market. He makes at least one note about the reputation of CS Lewis. This man is a friend of JRR Tolkien's. Apparently he had warned JRR of the consequences of his support. Tolkien writes to this publisher that at the time he did not take it seriously, but admits that there are those who vociferously oppose the work of C.S. Lewis. This is probably simply because he has mingled Christian theology with juvenile fantasy, which, while incredibly popular by some, is viewed as somehow inherently offensive by others. Letter #150 is marked by a cheerful reassertion that the author still really does want his son Christopher to create at least one of the maps of the fantasy terrain involved with the set of novels.

Here is an apt time to point something out. This brings us back to the fact that JRR Tolkien is someone's father. He has two sons, actually. Well, part of his paternal responsibilities led him to create stories to entertain his children. This type of behavior further fueled his ability to create this entire fictional reality. As the boys grew up he spent his life with the steadying forces of his same dear Edith for his wife and the work with philology, Anglo-Saxon and English as a university professor. Ultimately there are some fruits from this creative spirit that reach beyond the family hearth.



Chapter 10, The Lord of the Rings Are Published

Chapter 10, The Lord of the Rings Are Published Summary and Analysis

"I had great difficulty (it took several years) to get my story published, and it is not easy to say who is most surprised at the result: myself or the publishers!" (p. 209). This is the first comment in Letter #159 from a letter to Dora Marshall 3 march 1955. This debunks the myth of the overnight success. The Hobbit was first published in 1937, and then was re-issued when The Lord of the Rings were published in the early 1950s.

Also in 1955, the author writes to D. Auden. He makes numerous comments. They include miraculous connections that may have appeared to be flukes. He thinks that his publisher did this good deed for him because: when this man was still a boy, the not-yet-publisher had been introduced to the story and liked it. When he grew up to be a publisher he was in a position to help the author make it a real success. He also cites both a nun and a former student of his as having greatly advanced the reach of his fiction into the known world.

Further, during this section of letters, the author explains that by this time, he felt the whole story of The Lord of the Rings was known to him. There is a different, possibly strange feeling associated with it. The years of bringing it into being have long past and yet, despite their publication having begun and the story being even older than that, during these letters it is explained that JRR Tolkien is actually finishing up the draft of his manuscript for the final story in the trilogy in preparation for its actual Earthly publication.

The Belgians granted this man an Honorary Doctorate as a consequence of the popularity of the French or German versions of The Hobbit. He states in Letter # 165 that they described him as [translation] "The creator of Mr. Bilbo Baggins" indicating just how adored this hobbit had become. He ends this same letter by providing his full name for the first time: John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, and has explained that he is a blend of Western Midlands English and good old German import. The writing throughout the letters is clear and vivacious. He has two small literary topics. He has a bit of a distaste for "allegory" and he highly values fairy tales and believes that these are actually for adults rather than being exclusively for children.



Chapter 11, To Anne Barrett of Houghton Mifflin Co.

Chapter 11, To Anne Barrett of Houghton Mifflin Co. Summary and Analysis

The first letter of this batch is only dated by the year 1956, and is numbered 182. It occurs on page 237 of the text. This is as it appears to be: this woman works for the publishing company referred to during the time that she received this letter. The letter is brief and shows that he has matured a great deal. He reports that he is now the Senior Professor in the department of the university where he works. He shows that he thinks it might be better met with now because he is more famous as an author. He is still functional as a professor and as a father and husband. The next letter is to WH Auden. It is written in response to a review of *The Return of the King*. Earlier, the same man wrote a letter to the same person but before the author had completed *The Return of the King*. During this letter he shares another intimate detail about his nature. He goes into some length about the reality of his work as a professor and how this has stemmed from his actual interests.

The author waxes truly philosophic: he reveals a theory about human character and conduct. He believes that while humans have a nature, individuals are not driven exclusively by circumstances towards certain behaviors. Further, there are tendencies within an individual that the person has the free choice of whether to cultivate or to leave undeveloped. This permits people to have a direct hand in shaping his or her own behavior even though, and as well as, being subjected to circumstances for whatever reasons. As such, there are innate tendencies within a person and then there is what the individual does with those. This is followed up by an examination of another aspect of the fictional story. The author explains that one of the problems is that Sauron, the evil one, has decided to insist on being worshiped as a god as well as being recognized as a King. His opponents view this as a problem, but his servants do this as per his request.

"185 From a Letter to Christopher and Faith Tolkien 19 March 1956..."Also A. & Unwin send extremely good news or prophecies of probable financial results to come later," (p.245). The author cites a great mystery regarding creative writing. Novels, while they do not emerge without the handiwork of an author, nevertheless seem to be born rather of their very own volition. In this manner, JRR Tolkien is able to express how true it is that even though he is the author of a novel, it has events of the plot and even characters whom he never predicted or expected until they just showed up in the story - again, apparently of their own volition despite the seeming reality that can't happen when a fiction tale is in the making. This improvisational quality to the work is delved into during Letter # 199.



Chapter 12, Later Years

Chapter 12, Later Years Summary and Analysis

The letters have begun to be dated the 1960s. Some of the recipients of the letters have remained the same. One of the examples of these is Christopher Tolkien. Another is Rayner Unwin. Others are rather new additions into his life: Professor Forster and Mrs. Drijver being examples. Letter #227 explains that the name Numenor is to have been a logical but subjective translation of one language to another. He concludes this same letter by admitting his delight that his friend CS Lewis has invented a name Numenor and has used this in his stories as an intentional reference to Tolkien's. While continuing to be rather thick with fiction, the results are still somehow strangely accurate - really, these two men are friends and as a consequence it makes sense that they might be seen together. Letter # 236 begins, "I wish well-meaning folk who think they know could be restrained!" Really, he is complaining for the second time so far in this collection of letters that editorial staff have changed his spellings. He is sure their intentions were good but their efforts were largely misguided. In this case, he has made another deal with Puffin publishing for a paperback version of his novel *The Hobbit*. Letter #238 to Jane Neave 18 July 1962 is runs from 315 -317. This letter is longer than many of the others. Over all, during the course of the book, the briefest letters are about 500 words long, covering one or two paragraphs whereas the longest make short essays of a few thousand words each.

The tone of the work continues to be a somewhat natural integration of the realities of the author's daily life and the amazing world of the author's own creation. The order and orchestration of the imaginary, particularly when so intentionally used makes it somewhat fascinating. Anyone who has been cheerfully engrossed in something irresistibly interesting or intensely pleasurable will understand how readily readers can shift from learning about the professor's life to loving finding out more about how the whole world of *The Lord of the Rings* was made. An editor's note contrasts the artwork of the old professor with his academic writing. This is not even mentioned in a letter but is supplied as an editorial note. It was simply a lecture entitled 'English and Welsh' which was respectably published within an academic journal: "in the volume *Angles and Britons: O'Donnell Lectures*," (p. 319). In a final, revealing cultural note within Tolkien's fictive realm, only Elves could even 'sail West'.



Chapter 13, Letters of the 1960s

Chapter 13, Letters of the 1960s Summary and Analysis

This includes a projection of what would occur if Gandalf wore the Ring. JRR Tolkien assures the reader that he would be worse than Sauron, not better. This occurs during a continuation of Letter#246 dated September 1963. The whole thing is a reply to a Mrs. Eileen Elgar. The editor has included a brief note that this woman is nearly the only person to have read the novels and to bring up the fact that Frodo the Hobbit 'failed' to give up the Ring at the Cracks of Doom. Tolkien began by observing how right she is that this was significant then launches into a far more complex analysis of the whole matter of the Ring's power, and of hobbits in general and then of the relationship between Frodo and Gollum. He reports that the dynamic between the two has great importance in the way that events played out. Tolkien takes things further when he surmises about how things could have been different even within the context of this fictional realm. This is somehow both amazing and amusing. It is as part of this exploration that Tolkien writes about 'what it might be like if Gandalf were to take the Ring of Power. He has determined that he feels that three Elves together might be able to manage it but they declined to do so. Even so, the author is quite clear: Gandalf is fantastic, and very powerful in these stories. Unlike Sauron, he never succumbs to the Enemy. Still, however powerful Sauron is, it is a strange remark to assert that this dear Gandalf would be "worse" than Sauron if he were to have the Ring of Power.

JRR Tolkien explains the reality of Frodo's situation. He was not truly heroic: he had tested at the Cracks of Doom and had failed to destroy the Ring. For this very reason, he was no hero. However, the author then goes on to show that in truth, Frodo had entered into the entire quest as a "nonhero". He was a supporting character. He went because he loved one of his friends so dearly and was such a loyal companion that he trekked out through this incredible journey. His other motive was that he loved the Shire and could not shrink back from defending it. Tolkien then addresses the hobbit's "breakdown" at the Cracks of Doom. He writes it must be understood that he had been subjected to the evil influences extensively, directly from the intensely powerful Ring and indirectly. He tolerated months of torment, the author explained and was simply driven past his own limits. The author explains to Mrs. Elgar that in his own view, this is not a moral failure. He writes that a moral failure can only occur when an individual is not taken past his or her limits and fails anyways. Any failure that happens because of a person's attempting something beyond their own limits - is not a moral one. Frodo, according to the author, has his dignity and is the same wonderfully humble hobbit who began the journey...Even though he is no hero.



Chapter 14, JRR Tolkien as The Old Man

Chapter 14, JRR Tolkien as The Old Man Summary and Analysis

Letter#253 is from 1964. The author is becoming an Old Man. He is in his 70s during this time. In this letter he alerts his publisher friend Rayner Unwin that he felt the loss of C.S. Lewis to come as a blow. In letter #257 JRR Tolkien informs Christopher Bretherton that he is a scientific philologist. He explains that this has been the case his entire life. He also explains that it is also true that he likes stories, and that this has also been true ever since his childhood. This makes it clear that there is a direct and strong connection between the Old Man and the boy, with all the ages in between sharing in the same connection. The author continues to show his adeptness with prose. His tone is engaging and bright; the ideas flow smoothly, one into another. His letters are highly readable and it is easy to understand why it would be a joy to receive them. He is providing one version of a brief history of his life. This includes an anecdote not previously mentioned. Here, the author writes of how he was actually on staff of the great Dictionary project at Oxford. While this was doubtless very humbling in his actual experience, it is at the same time quite a prestigious opportunity. It was only after this that the author wrote his first story - the one he is willing to admit to being "in earnest".

Fatherhood helped, he assures Christopher Bretherton: as his children were little he invented stories for their amusement. Some of these he even took the trouble to write down. One of these turned out to be *The Hobbit*. When it began it wasn't the same as what it grew into. For those who have children and always looked forward to this stage of life, this type of joy will come as no surprise. For others, who are still fearful or reluctant to become parents, this is helpful information. It is the kind of thing that can come along with parenthood. Rather than fearing it as the destruction of the parents' well being, children can be some of their parents' strongest supporters and helpmeets.

This letter is one of the longer ones and is exceptional in its clarity. The author covers both nonfiction and fiction with respect to the progress of his work over the years. How these tales grew proved to be worthy of discussion in its own right. Throughout the diversity of letters readers acquire a better sense of how the author works. He often delves into one particular theme or strand of the body of his fiction works. These tend to actually be rather brief, but they are so rich that one can feel as if they are long - in a good way.



Chapter 15, Letters of the 1960s Cont.

Chapter 15, Letters of the 1960s Cont. Summary and Analysis

The first of these is Letter #256 from Colin Bailey. He writes that he has crafted a new story: this one takes place about 100 years after Mordor has collapsed as a political organization. His main complaint about humans at this point is that Men seem too easily "satiated" by the good. He writes that something well worth constant rejoicing over proves to be a source of restlessness and discontent and that the boy children often play games of being the evil ones and running around being destructive. This letter is only one paragraph long. By July of 1964 JRR Tolkien has taken to typewriting because of how easily his handwriting turns illegible. He explains to the recipient that the relative formality of this should not be taken as an offense.

Letter#257 is far longer than the one before it. Here, he goes on for a few pages. The final note reiterates how much he valued his friendship with C.S. Lewis. At the time of writing the letter, his friend has died. He writes that C.S. Lewis was his best friend from 1927 to 1940, when C.S. Lewis died. This occurs on pages 344 through 349. On page 349, the letter only occurs at the top of the page. He refers briefly to a man named Charles Williams who was also best friends with C.S. Lewis. He harbored no particular dislike for the man, but at the same time he felt that the real and polar difference in their mentalities made it challenging or impossible to carry on with the amiability of intimate friends. In Letter#261 there is a bit more information about C.S. Lewis: he was an Irishman from Ulster. He also worked as a professor at Cambridge. He had a Chair position, but it was not easy to get him to do it; in fact a great deal of diplomacy was used in order to achieve this.

At this point in the book there are multiple publishers who are receiving letters from him. One is Allen & Unwin. Another is Houghton Mifflin and the other is Pantheon Books. Now, this late in his life, he has grown accustomed to being well established. It is also clear that for him, his fame as a literary figure does not stem from his being prolific as has been true in the case of a man such as Issac Asimov or a woman such as Ann McAffrey. In his case, it really is *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. It is worth noting that one of his experimental poems 'Errantry' in which he carefully crafted a form of poetic metre and then used it actually brought him respect at Allen & Unwin, which led directly to his fame. In his case, this direct route including some winding rather than straight roads, such as a shift from one publisher to another and success shortly after intense doubt has been experienced.

Chapter 16, The Final Letters

Chapter 16, The Final Letters Summary and Analysis

During these last 80 pages of text, it is noticeable that most of the letters JRR Tolkien wrote that have been included are to relatives. He wrote to both his son and to his grandson. In one of the letters to his grandson he writes about 'his fame' and how now and then he receives some marvelous boost to his ego. Even in 1965, the receipt of a piece of actual fan mail boosted his spirits.

Later in the same year, 1965, a woman bought a used book and grew suspicious. She was suspicious that the previous owner of the book might have been JRR Tolkien. This was evidenced by a section of peculiar handwritten scripts on the book. The woman bravely wrote to the author in an effort to differentiate between the facts and her fantasies. She learned that her suspicions had actually been correct. JRR Tolkien kindly and cheerfully writes a reply assuring her of just how right she has been. He goes on about how he had scrawled into the book in Gothic letters and words and delves into how his flagrant love of languages led him to playfully behave this way. What is exceptionally charming about this is simply that the Old Man has remained playful as well as serious throughout his life; his greatest work and what he does for fun are intimately connected.

JRR Tolkien writes about how to keep readers moving without distracting them with explanatory digressions that would actually be quite helpful. He goes on about his efforts to assemble just some of the massive amount of material available and remaining from his efforts so far. WH Auden recognizes that that little thing JRR Tolkien did with the poem in the special meter, and a couple of other poems he did in imitation of ancient Scandinavian forms was actually incredible. This was a great act of perpetuating the genuine poetic tradition of the European peoples. The final letter of the book is written just four days prior to his death at the age of 81 years.



Characters

JRR Tolkien

This is the author of the letters. He is a 20th century man. This shows in a variety of ways. While these are obvious within that timeframe, if anything it will only be even more obvious given a few centuries of perspective. The man is English, and in the first letter he is finishing his undergraduate work in England. Shortly thereafter, he receives his first appointment, which is of a rank below that of professor, called Reader. After that, he is able to get a Professor's position.

While this book is not an autobiography it does tell people of some of the most important features of the author. Essential qualities and interests of his life are shared. He has a special interest in and gift with languages. He indulges in this both with respect to real languages and with merely fictive ones that he creates in his own mind. His work as a university professor is backed up by, and was led by, this interest. He has been this way since childhood.

Edith Bratt

This is the author's girlfriend at the very beginning of the assembled letters. Shortly thereafter since she is willing, she becomes the author's fiancée and then further on down the road she become his wife. After that she becomes the mother of his children. Although she is very much a background figure in this story, her importance should not be underrated. The impression the author makes is that he is a contentedly devoted husband, even granted that he does not believe that adult human men are by nature monogamous. People do not by nature use toilets and bathrooms or read either, but these things can be trained in to the depth of second-nature and therefore readers are reasonable to assume that he was also a faithful husband rather than the kind to have extramarital affairs.

Christopher Tolkien

This is the author's son. He is listed as having assisted in the arrangement of the selected letters that comprise this book. He shows up mainly as a recipient of letters throughout the course of the book. There are a variety of types of letters written to Christopher. There are regular letters. There are also airgraphs. He even wires his son. The impression is that they found one method of closeness by maintaining quite a lengthy correspondence with one another. This may have been symptomatic of a shortage, or a sign of just how perfect or wonderful a father the author really was. Really, it depends upon his son's nature and temperament. Certainly this was a token of affection: for a boy receives plenty of love in ways that work for him, this would have been a fantastic additional means. For another child, it may have eased a painful and difficult absence or tendency on the part of his father towards absence rather than



presence. Regardless, in the context of this book it is clear that Christopher is a star in his father's life. He is the recipient of the majority of letters used. As the man's son, everyone is benefiting from Christopher's sentimentality - which caused him to hang on to all the letters his Daddy sent to him.

Hugh Brogan

Recipient of letters from JRR Tolkien that have luckily been saved. These begin to appear during the 1950s. In one example of these, Letter #151 in 1954, the author shows that Hugh Brogan had a preference for goblins over orcs as a type of monster. Tolkien thanks Hugh Brogan for "remembering the aging professor" (p. 186). To this extent, it is safe to call Hugh a kind man. There is another excerpt from a letter to this man: it is extremely brief. There is an editor's note: Hugh had apologized for rude criticism. Also, Hugh Brogan admitted to suffering from nightmares.

There are not many letters to him included.

Raynard Unwin

This is a publishing partner. This man is the recipient of a large portion of letters found in the book. These began earlier in the book. This man is part of Allen & Unwin. This publisher plays a gigantic and crucial role in the author's financial and career success. The letters between them include some personal information but focus mainly on their business relationship. However, since business is to some degree always personal, the letters reveal and share genuine information.

As Tolkien rather than Raynard is the focus of the book, the majority of letters are about the author and about the fiction novels themselves.

John Tolkien

This is one of JRR Tolkien's two boys. Of the two, this one is the eldest. He grew up nicely and played sports including rugby football. Once he was a grown man he became a Roman Catholic priest. It is not clarified how much or little drama was involved in this episode. He is not a major recipient of letters used in this collection. This boy then man is included as a muted background figure throughout the majority of the book. In the very first letters he has not yet been born, whereas by the end is a middle aged man with children of his own.

Pauline Gasch

This woman was able to get the contract to illustrate the author's book *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*. The letter addressed to her is #240 and is found on page 318 of the book. She has asked him about a detail, which becomes extremely important to



produce a detailed artist's portrait of this fictive character. He answers her, with acknowledgment of what, to readers, is really quite a process. Ultimately, there are two feathers that might appear in Tom's cap, and after a certain point it has to be the blue swan-feather and that's it.

This is followed by a somewhat surprising excursion into another aspect of the whole story. This time it was about Frodo. Now, Frodo had ended up as the unlikely hero but was shown to suffer from something. Really, it was residual affects of his adventures. There were times when he grew gloomy and he suffered apparently from a wound inflicted by a blade a long time ago. There is another, rather strange point. Although he had proven to be heroic, nevertheless he remained a no one, just a little hobbit. Also, Tolkien made him to have been somewhat adversely affected by the power of the very ring he had managed to help destroy. This was viewed simply as a bit a bizarre, somewhat sad affect. There is then some discussion of how - by sending Frodo together with Bilbo off to Elven terrain there was still some hope that he might fully recover from the unwanted and bad affects of his experiences throughout The Lord of the Rings. The author has given the whole story a kind of hardened realism in this regard, with Frodo enduring the rest of life like some kind of war veteran who, while quite able to survive for a long time afterwards seems to be under the influence of a recurrent shadow-of-the-soul.

Christopher Bretherton

This gentleman had letters used for the book from the author's later years. This is primarily Letter#257. Little is explained about the recipient. There are only a very few letters sent to this man that have been included in this book. The letter used is sent to this man in 1964 and is one of the lengthier ones. JRR Tolkien actually shares a great deal about himself with Christopher during this long epistle, including how his peculiar interest in philology actually got him into trouble as an undergraduate.

Katherine Farrer

This woman is noted as having shown an interest in Tolkien's manuscripts. He explains to her that he has assembled something for her and that he is truly grateful for her interest. He explains to her how only his friend C.S. Lewis and his son Christopher even care at all about the story - until she has shown interest in it. He writes to her that the stories will never be published, but grants that since she has asked, she will be able to read a bit of it for herself. This letter occurs in 1948.

Jane Neave

This woman has received a letter dated 1962 by which time circumstances have changed. The charming couple have become members of the elderly. She appears to have some personal relation to JRR Tolkien as she has been sent a cheque but by an aunt or someone related on that level. She receives two letters that have been included

late in the book. She is described as self-sacrificing, or fearful about accepting monetary gifts. This was one of Tolkien's Aunts. A letter from 1962 includes her nephew, old JRR Tolkien, going on about Wales the Welsh and related issues. She was residing in Wales when she received the letters.



Objects/Places

Oxford University

This is the university where JRR Tolkien did his undergraduate work. It was and still is one of the most highly respected universities in all of England. In fact, it continues to be revered internationally as one of the world's greatest universities of the English-speaking world. It located in Southern England. In fact, it is named after the town in which it is located - Oxford, England. He lived and worked and taught at Oxford later in his life, after Leeds. Rather far into the book he points out to the recipient of one of his letters that there are plenty of local people who have no idea of who he is at all. As such he is able to experience literary fame alongside invisibility and he is mainly known locally as one of the university professors and married men - this is quite true.

Leeds

This is another city in England. Leeds is North of Oxford. It is the home of another university. Leeds is the university where JRR Tolkien attained his first professional position; he was hired to be what they call "a Reader" there. Later, he was promoted to Professor.. Leeds continues to harbor a well known and respected university. It is referred to in more than one letter.

England

This is the author's home nation. As such, it is taken as the presumed backdrop for the events that unfold. England is the largest nation of the three nations found on the larger of the two main British Isles. There are a few smaller islands such as Orkney. The main island has England, bounded on the West by Wales - proudly "free from Roman rule" even during the Roman Empire's heyday, and Scotland to the North. To the near Northwest is the next largest island - Ireland. The next nearest nation is France; from there much of Continental Europe is directly accessible for trade, military and other cultural purposes.

Mordor

This is a fictional location. This is the name for the Evil Sauron's powerbase. Mordor is Sauron's political jurisdiction. It is mentioned in a number of the letters interspersed throughout the book. There are not a large number of details provided regarding Mordor, mainly that it is ominous and is a symbol of two things. The closer the good characters get to it, the worse and more frightening their situation becomes. Secondly, this means they are on the right track, as they have to go there in order to destroy the Ring. In this respect, the more dangerous the conditions, the more they would have to overcome their natural aversions to proceed.



Cracks of Doom

This is a location on Mount Doom. It is a fictional place, modeled in many ways on a real location - a mountain that has a volcano or other place where the fiery magma meets the surface world. It is here that there is the possibility of returning the Ring to its place of origin and thereby destroying it. The only way to do this is to return it to these primal conditions from which it was derived. Such fires, though natural, have a supernatural 'je ne sais qua' about them. In other words - they seem supernatural although they are not.

Numenor

This is the land of the Elves. It is fictional. Within the context of the fictional world of which it is a part, it is actual. It is tied in with the actual history of the Elves. JRR Tolkien has endeavored to explain how it is that Elves, unlike humans, are immortal even though they are not 'eternal'. They are artistic; they do not suffer from the will to dominate others and this truth is reflected in their culture. This location is mentioned more than once. It is most frequently discussed with respect to The Simarillion, which is largely about the incredibly historical fiction of the Elves making it one of the world's greatest and most ornate fantasies.

Pen

The author wrote by hand a great deal. He did this more when he was a younger man. As he matured, his relationship to this practice changed. His first works were written for the entertainment of his own children. Only later in his life did he switch to using typewriters even in his informal writing. He refers to his use of a pen here and there throughout the work. The book cover used to create the summary has a printing of one of his brief letters written by hand. He has very attractive handwriting that is decipherable but not the most clear. For writers the main challenge is to keep the patience needed to write clearly and neatly what was more rapidly thought and felt than written.

Typewriter

This is a machine that was not prominent in the beginning of the book, when the letters were from the 1930s but that by the end of the book, with letters in the 1960s were common. The widespread use of the typewriter foreshadowed the use of the typing keyboard for laptop usage. The typewriter is mentioned on a few occasions during the book. It is brought up in one letter in particular. In this case, the author assures the recipient to not misunderstand the fact that he has typed this letter. His intention is that of a friendly personal letter; he goes on to explain how the older he gets the more he has converted over to using a typewriter.



Letters

This book is full of letters. In this sense meaning the entire messages, packaged for delivery from one person to another. Those selected for this book fall into a few categories. They give the impression of JRR Tolkien of having been quite friendly. He uses more than type of letter in the book: regular mail and airgraph. He writes personal letters and business letters. Most of the business letters included to the publishers reveal that some kind of successful personal rapport has been established.

Hobbits

While not objects in the usual sense these are one of the multiple forms of humanoids involved in the fairy-tales of JRR Tolkien. Hobbits are "shirefolk". They are relatively serene sentient humanoids. They are small and do not tend towards adventurousness. There are three hobbits that star in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Bilbo Baggins, Frodo Baggins, and Sam Gamgee. Hobbits are used by "Team Good" in these tales, because their humility and smallness enables them to slip past the radar of those that Sauron might more naturally suspect to be used by his enemies to thwart his efforts. They are smaller than humans, earthy and have a well-ordered society but do not do well against predators.

Elves

While also not objects in the usual sense these are another alternate form of sentient humanoid found in the fictional realm in which *The Lord of the Rings* takes place. They are immortals. They have an extensive history that is most thoroughly shared through *The Silmarillion*. Fans of Elves who want in depth knowledge about their language, culture and history are sure to be thrilled by *The Silmarillion*. Elves had 3 of the rings that caused so much trouble during *The Lord of the Rings*. They are very artistic creatures and extremely natural. They are not prone to domination as a general tendency. They fare well against predators when well organized but are not apt to seek trouble. The author makes it clear through his letters that he has had fun with Elves and their languages and history and that there is so much about them he created that this led to *The Silmarillion* because he wanted to share some of the wealth of knowledge that came to him about the subject.

Dwarves

These are another form of sentient humanoid that walks the fictive realms in which *The Lord of the Rings* takes place. Tolkien does not share a great many details about the dwarves during the letters selected. He does point out that the proper spelling really is dwarves, not dwarfs and that he felt disturbed when the publishers sought to "correct" him on this point. He also explains that there was only one time during which dwarves and elves were on extremely friendly terms and during this time period, the fictive

world's greatest smithing ever known resulted. These events of fraternization took place near the mountains bordering Mordor.

Humans

These are one type of sentient humanoid found in the fictive world that JRR Tolkien writes about. For the most obvious reason possible readers will tend to perceive these as being the standard of normal. They are not the center of the stories *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*, but like the other sentient humanoids they have their rightful place. They have a greater tendency towards domination of others when compared with the Elves and they are absolutely mortal. They can be just and great, mediocre or no good. Humans are not discussed in much detail, but there have also been rings made for them. It is never specified which of these types of humanoid Sauron is. He may be a human, or may have started out as one, just like both Gandalf and Saruman. Tolkien insists on a peculiar state of affairs: Sauron is surely terrible in the role he has in these stories. Saruman fell over to the evil side out of what seemed to be a lack of dedication...almost like what evil can happen when the good take no action instead of providing opposition to the evil. Gandalf was very good, and yet the author tells those who read his letters that this excellent good wizard would have been worse than Sauron should he be put into the same type of position. This is a bizarre situation, which may well hinge on the very human nature of these characters.



Themes

Languages

Languages are one of the themes of the author's life. This showed throughout his life. To understand him, one must understand this. When he was a boy he played around with languages for fun. Once he grew up and went to university he discovered that he could do new things with this same love. As a consequence he pursued studies that caused him to be a philologist. Perhaps it is worth noting that linguistics was just being born, and so those who would have done this, might have become philologists instead.

This ability shows in a number of ways. This led to JRR Tolkien becoming a professor of philology, of English, of Anglo-Saxon and of "Middle English" first at the University of Leeds and then later the University of Oxford. Another way this showed is that the author played around with creating languages, especially forms of Elven. The author created both words and scripts. His work in this area was similar to the art of calligraphy. He went so far as to detail a fictional historical account of the development and changes to Elven, which were only strengthened by his work with real life in which he learned and surmised about the history of the English language in like manner.

JRR Tolkien's tendency to work with language this way, whether he was being entirely serious or playful led to a certain amount of fame and recognition. In fact, due to this, a woman also living in England found a used book and could tell that he had had it. The reason for this was that Tolkien had playfully written script in a mysterious language somewhere in the book. The woman knew the author's work well enough to wonder, "Was that you, JRR Tolkien?" and then she went so far as to check. It turned out that it was his handiwork, which he cordially explained to her in a well-written, kind reply. In that case, the language was Gothic.

The author's literary and professional work were tied to language. He loved this, which is the best of all possible reasons for how he lived his life. In that regard, his literary work and his professional work and his private self were delightfully whole. This is a form of success that every sane person hopes for.

Elves

These creatures aren't even real. However, they embody or symbolize some aspects of life. JRR Tolkien created them partly in an effort to create a contrast between humanity - women included, and elvenkind. He writes that the way that he characterizes the difference in fiction is to emphasize certain traits found within the scope of humanity as a whole. The elven people refer to a few elements of life: elves are immortal - they are not limited by time. They are intricately happily connected with the world. Their spiritual outlook does not involve any disconnect from the natural world. They tend towards the attitude that the world is a perfect and beautiful place to be appreciated and enjoyed.



Elves are also artists. Tolkien somehow writes that he sees the purposes of art and machine making to be very different. They are alike in that both are characterized by organization and by creativity. Both intend to somehow improve life. For elves, art is to improve life only in the same way that drinking cool, clean water on a hot Summer day is an improvement of one's life. This is very different from machine building that is often largely based upon dissatisfaction with something about life. Often, machine making is done with the purpose of making a correction, or to solving a problem. There is normally some specific goal related activity involved with it. In this regard it is quite different from the creation of art. It is possible for machines and other devices to be invented with the same attitude towards the world as that used in the creation of art. However, especially when machines go beyond being connected with human beings, and are linked to Sauron, this type of activity is set against the elves as a counterpoint or contrast. The reason is simple: even though the behavior is intended to improve circumstances, the building and use of the machines proves to be incredibly destructive, equally or more destructive than the conditions that were criticized in the first place.

Elves are not the main focal point of *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*. Like the other kinds of sentient humanoids, the elves have their rightful place in the story. Where the elves do prevail, is in *The Simarillion*. Within this book, to which the author refers a number of times during the course of the letters, he has packed a tremendous amount of fantastic knowledge and information about the Elves including their fascinating albeit fictive history.

Fairy-tale

JRR Tolkien explains through his letters his beliefs about fairy-tales. The majority of letters dealing with this matter come earlier in the book. The fairy-tale is a much beloved genre of literature in the British Isles. The author makes it clear that he takes fairy-tales very seriously as such - as a literary genre. He goes on to share with people that one of the shortcomings of the British Isles is that there is a lack of native fairy-tales and mythologies. Ireland and Germany and Denmark seem to have "gotten the better of the English" when it comes to these types of stories. So, the author has taken on a task that may or may not seem awe-inspiring. He has aspired to write a specifically English, British fairy-tale. *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are meant to express what exactly the author means by "British Fairy-Tale" and any left over questions are allowed to go to *The Simarillion* or *Farmer Giles of Ham*.

The author believes that the fairy-tale is an adult literary form. He admits that children can often enjoy this genre. At the same time, he denies that this literary form was invented purely to serve the children. Tolkien states this although he has created stories for his own children. In fact, his greatest literary fairy-tales did begin as short stories to entertain his own offspring. However, this is one of those cases where the artist was able to share one of his greater gifts with his own kids. Also, it is well known that many parents will feel less inhibited about song writing or dancing or story telling to their own little children than they might well feel before professional editors.



JRR Tolkien hopes to have shown what a great genre the fairy-tale is. He had endeavored to honor this literary form and tradition for the English through the creation of these stories. In this respect, his literary efforts have been for the sake of the entire culture and for posterity as well as for "acting in the moment".

Style

Perspective

JRR Tolkien was a 20th century English man. He died in September of 1973 at the age of 81 years. There are a few ways in which his perspective did not change during the course of his life. He was male, English, 20th century and living in a predominantly Christian English speaking country his whole life. Then there were a number of factors that changed his perspective. One of these was the most natural of all: his age. As he grew, his own body and life experience grew along with him.

The first letters begin with a young man in love having just headed off into the world of grown men. He is quite luckily in that there is a girl - a young woman his own age actually, whom he loves so much that when subjected to a three-year long separation instead of either simply going off with another, neither does. For some reason, these two are really meant for one another, or something indistinguishable from that. The collegiate with a touch of military experience carries on.

It turns out that his love of language, his abilities and disposition are enough to land him his first professional post as a "Reader" which later turns into an actual professor's job. Meanwhile, his life seems to be being left out of work - no mention is ever made of her having a career as a money earner. What is mentioned, is that she is now a wife and has become the mother of two little Tolkiens. Well, obviously someone has to do something. JRR went out to get them more money. There is the silent implication that he helped ensure that she could safely stay with their children. The letters do not discuss the relationship between JRR and his wife. Apparently, they never have more than the two children - both sons. Again, there are no explanations given, only that this is the case.

JRR Tolkien was smart enough to be a university professor. This doesn't require that anyone be a genius, but it does take some real intelligence and a good memory. Also, it is one of those jobs where it often can work, if someone is actually a genius, which is not such a good fit in some of the other professions. Tolkien was also highly creative. In this regard he was closer to the elves, for all appearances than he was to the rocket scientists and engineers. For such endeavors he shows virtually no interest. He does not disparage science, but simply seems to have more of that literary and artistic "bent". His mind is analytical enough for him to delve into relationships between individual characters within a story and to get into real and artificial histories including historical analysis.

Tone

The tone of the work seems to have a natural consistency to it. The author has a personality and a "personal voice" that shine through the work. Given that this is a



collection of letters that he has written this may come as little surprise. That depends in part upon the individual's expectations. The letters actually span decades of the author's life. Through them, the progress of his life is shared.

There are a few interests and attitudes that come through the most. This is partly artificial in that the editor made selections for this collection. The interests, goals and personality of this figure come through rather clearly. Letters to his son, which are frequent, show how real his interests are. Here this means the tone is simply honest and that the same main ideas are shared with the most intimate of friends, nearest dearest relatives and professional contacts.

The author writes in a way that is really quite friendly. He does not hide his affection for his son, as far as can be interpreted. At the same time, in truth his letters come across such that he is just as friendly to his publisher as he is to his own son. While this does not cover all aspects of his life, his letters give this message. However, at this point, it is worth noting that the editor did explain that no intensely personal letters were used as they refused to violate the author's private life for the sake of creating this book of letters.

JRR Tolkien is wonderful in the sense that his tone is highly informative, almost that of a confidante. It is also true that he is free from condescension. For those who have felt wrongly condescended to, this can come as quite a relief. Effectively, regardless of whom he is writing to, he is engaging, respectful, friendly and informative. He shares with honesty and integrity and enthusiasm.

Structure

The book has a clear structure. It is extremely simple. There is an Introduction, then the letters. These are followed by a set of notes and an index. The letters themselves have been arranged by their dates. This way, they make a straightforward linear progression. They begin when the author is a young, just full-grown man. They do not end until just 4 days prior to his death at the age of 81 years of age. As such, the author's life is put into a context that constitute a kind of clear view through a temporal rear-view mirror.

At the beginning of the selection of letters, the author has not been published. Early on, he has begun to work with some story lines and at some point he mentions that he tells his young sons stories. Later on, these same seed ideas grow with as much vigor as both his children and his career. What the main stories are and why they are fairy-tales is explained.

The secret link between his publisher and his complex poetry is shown through these letters. This is a connection that would have been very easy to overlook or to miss entirely. Had it not been included there would be no real way to understand why Allen & Unwin published *The Hobbit*, and later on, *The Lord of the Rings*. The real reason was the combined effect of their rapport and a poem called *Errantry*.

The letters have all been neatly numbered. For this reason it is easy enough to reference them for scholarly purposes or simply to aid in the ease of giving direction. During their course readers can see how some of the themes of the literary works were developed. They can also see how the publishing deals came together - only partial information is given, but what there is helpful. Along with the author's general life themes and flow, the first generation of the stories is shared. The author seems to have passed a way as a reasonably happy old married man. His final letter is written to his granddaughter. Rewarding as his fame and work were to him, he was normal in that the emotional ties of having a family were integral to his sense of fulfillment and contentment in his life.



Quotes

"I am afraid, if you will need drawings of hobbits in various attitudes, I must leave it in the hands of someone who can draw," (p. 35).

"After that I told him that 'accent' sounded to me like English after being wiped over with a dirty sponge," (p.69).

"[Allen & Unwin expressed enthusiasm for Farmer Giles of Ham, but asked if Tolkien could provide other stories to make up a sufficiently large volume.]...I am shortly moving to a small house...and so hoping to solve the intolerable domestic problems which thieve so much of the little time that is left over," (p. 119).

"The Third Age is concerned mainly with the Ring," (p. 157).

"I had great difficulty (it took several years) to get my story published, and it is not easy to say who is most surprised at the result: myself or the publishers!" (p. 209).

"185 From a Letter to Christopher and Faith Tolkien 19 March 1956..."Also A. & Unwin send extremely good news or prophecies of probable financial results to come later," (p.245).

"I wish well-meaning folk who think they know could be restrained!," (p. 312).

"in the volume *Angles and Britons: O'Donnell Lectures*," (p. 319). [Regarding the location of a lecture 'On English & Welsh' written and performed live by the author]

[Regarding women] "They have, of course, still to be more careful in sexual relations, for all the contraceptives. Mistakes are damaging physically and socially (and matrimonially). But they are instinctively, when uncorrupt, monogamous. Men are not....No good pretending," (p. 51).

[In a letter to a man named Jack] I lunched at the air Squadron to-day & got a brief whiff of an atmosphere now all too familiar to you," (p. 59).

"My dearest, I wrote you an airgraph on Thursday last at night; but unfortunately it was not sent off on Friday, and on Saturday I went off early and in a rush to Brum. So it has only gone today," (p.69) [3 April 1944 - the letter is to his son]

"Dear Unwin, Thank you for your letter of March 6th. I see in it your good will; but also, I fear, your opinion that this mass of stuff is not really a publisher's affair at all, but requires an endowment. I am not surprised," (p. 138).

"The Maps. I am stumped. Indeed in a panic. They are essential; and urgent; but i just cannot get them done. I have spent an enormous amount of time on them without profitable result. Lack of skill combined with being harried," (p. 171). [He does mean maps of the world in which *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* takes place]



"In this mythological world the Elves and Men are in their incarnate forms kindred, but in the relation of their 'spirits' to the world in time represent 'experiments', each of which has its own natural trend, and weakness," (p. 236).

"As 'research students' always discover, however long they are allowed, and careful their work and notes, there is always a rush at the end, when the last date suddenly approaches on which their thesis must be presented. So it was with this book, and the maps," (p. 247).

"May I say that this is all 'mythical', and not any kind of new religion or vision. As far as I know it is merely an imaginative invention, to express, in the only way I can, some of my (dim) apprehensions of the world," (p. 283).

"I suppose I should be grateful that Cox and Wyman have not inflicted the change from elven to elfin and further to farther on me which the Jarrolds attempted, but Jarrolds were at least dealing with a MS. that had a good many casual errors in it," (p. 313).



Topics for Discussion

Do you have a favorite recipient of letters? Please describe why, if you can.

Which years are the majority of letters in the book from?

Who is Raynard Unwin and why is he so important?

Describe how you feel about the reality that JRR Tolkien was very talkative as well as being able to write a great deal.

Agree or disagree with the statement: JRR Tolkien was a wizard in real life. You may describe the accuracy or inaccuracy of this statement in a matter of degree.

What is the relevance of death to Elves and Humans. Please use contrast in your explanation.

Which do you think is more important: a) the author's work with real languages including Anglo-Saxon, and Middle English, and Gothic, b) his work with pretend languages including Elven or c) both are equally significant but not necessarily for the exact same reason? Give 1-3 sentences detailing why you have chosen the answer that you have.

Do you think that this selection of letters could double as an autobiography? Why or why not?