

The Hobbit

J. R. R. Tolkien

J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973)

- ❖ Scholar and professor of English language and literature at Leeds and Oxford, studying the literature of medieval England and Scandinavia
- ❖ Served in France during the First World War
- ❖ Linguist who invented his own languages
- ❖ Created the fantasy Otherworld of Middle-earth to provide context for his new languages, writing myths and history belonging to this world starting as an undergraduate student

Writing *The Hobbit*

- ❖ In the early 1930s, Tolkien was marking School Certificate papers and wrote the words 'In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit' without knowing what they meant
- ❖ Completed the story by 1932, writing it for and telling it to his children as he went
- ❖ Influenced by Old Norse mythology, the Old English poem *Beowulf*, and George MacDonald's Christian fairy tale *The Princess and Goblin*
- ❖ Manuscript made its way to Stanley Unwin, whose ten-year-old son Rayner reviewed it favorably
- ❖ Published in 1937 and was an immediate success. When asked for a sequel, Tolkien began to write *The Lord of the Rings* and work *The Hobbit* into his Middle-earth mythology, leading him to write a revised version of the book published in 1951 changing the character of Gollum and the story of how Bilbo obtained his magic ring

What is a Hobbit?

- ❖ Tolkien invented hobbits, also called halflings, who are now a fantasy staple; also invented the word, *possibly* drawing on Sinclair Lewis' novel *Babbitt*
- ❖ In *The Lord of the Rings*, the invented origin of the word 'hobbit' is from the Old English words *hol-bytla*, 'hole-builder'
- ❖ Hobbits are short and humanoid, dress in brightly coloured breeches and waistcoats, have curly hair on their heads and toes, and enjoy creature comforts and simple countryside life
- ❖ The land they live in, called the Shire, is the English Midlands countryside of Tolkien's youth
- ❖ Tolkien's work uses hobbits to explore the ways in which ordinary people can discover hidden depths of heroism within themselves

Elves, Dwarves, and Wizards

- ❖ Tolkien's Wizards were eventually revealed to be angelic beings interfering in the affairs of Middle-earth. In *The Hobbit*, Gandalf's job is to provoke action and guide the protagonists.
- ❖ Gandalf's appearance, including his wide-brimmed hat, is similar to the Old Norse god Óðinn, who seeks wisdom. He can be compared to numerous other 'guide' figures in literature.
- ❖ Dwarves in Middle-earth are short, dwell in the mountains, are associated with mining, smithing, and metalwork, and are committed to old feuds.
- ❖ Tolkien drew on the few details we have from Old Norse texts about dwarves, taking the thirteen dwarf names in *The Hobbit* from the Old Norse poem *Völuspá* ('Prophecy of the Seeress').
- ❖ Elves in Middle-earth are beautiful and immortal beings engaged in a long history of war against darkness
- ❖ Tolkien draws from multiple sources to create them: medieval English romances that treat elves as woodland fairies; Old English and Old Norse texts that describe elves alternately as beautiful and dangerous
- ❖ The Middle English romance *Sir Orfeo* describes a woodland fairy king who imprisons humans, not dissimilar to the Woodland King in *The Hobbit*

Dragons

- ❖ Tolkien's depiction of Smaug has become the model for many dragons in high fantasy: fire-breathing, winged, obsessed with gold, cunning and silver-tongued, with a weak spot on his underbelly
- ❖ Tolkien took inspiration for Smaug from two medieval dragons: the unnamed dragon in the poem *Beowulf*, who razes the land after someone steals a cup from the gold-hoard he's been sitting on for years; and the Old Norse dragon Fáfnir, who also guards a hoard, speakings cunningly to the hero, and is killed by being stabbed in a soft spot on his underbelly.
- ❖ There are numerous other dragon traditions in the world, most very different from Fáfnir, and giant serpent stories go back to prehistory; Tolkien's background as a medieval scholar has shaped English-language fantasy in specific ways.
- ❖ Dragons represent bad values and poor leadership in Tolkien's works.
- ❖ Heroism in *The Hobbit* is about loyalty and generosity, and gold-hoarding is selfish. Bilbo saves everyone by forcing Thorin to share the hoard, while Smaug shares nothing.
- ❖ Smaug's greatest weapon against Bilbo isn't his fire-breathing; it's his cunning talk, and attempt to make him doubt his friends.
- ❖ Even this most dangerous and destructive creature has a weak spot, and can be brought down by a hero; fire-breath and golden armour are not invincible.

Themes and Ideas

- ❖ Ordinary heroes, and the heroism of the small: Bilbo is not a warrior, but he plays an important role in these major events.
- ❖ Community, loyalty, and fellowship as markers of goodness: evil results from selfishness and greed, and problems are solved by cooperation
- ❖ We are constantly reminded of the power of mercy, pity, and kindness, as well as basic forms of sharing like hospitality.
- ❖ 'If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world.'
- ❖ The Hero's Journey: *The Hobbit* is the story of Bilbo's self-discovery, his evolution from an ordinary stay-at-home to a hero, aided by a mentor (Gandalf) and facing down enemies.
- ❖ Homes and homely, safe spaces as places we need to leave and return to in order to value them
- ❖ Nature and natural spaces are both wonderful and dangerous, and they're certainly outside anyone's control.
- ❖ Past and present: Bilbo plays a part in this story, but it has a long history and connects with the stories of others: Thrain, Thorin, Girion and Dale, the Woodland King, even the birds of the Lonely Mountain.
- ❖ Fate, destiny, and luck: Gandalf suggests there's a higher power behind Bilbo's successes and all his good luck. These events take place in a just universe.