

PHIL 207J Philosophy and J.R.R. Tolkien

# THE LORD OF THE RINGS



**St. Jerome's University in the University of Waterloo**  
**Department of Philosophy**  
**Winter 2019**  
**4:00-5:20 MW, SJ2 2007**

## Instructor Information

Instructor: Bruno Tremblay

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N.B. I answer email fairly promptly during week days, but I try to stay away from it in evenings and on weekends.

### Short Calendar Course Description

An introduction to the implicit philosophical content of Tolkien's works, with a special emphasis on Lord of the Rings. Problems such as the existence of God, fate, free will, evil, death, and technology will be explored. Tolkien's views will be examined in relation to philosophical works.

### General Course Description

As with any of the fine arts, literature can be considered and examined in many different ways. One may be interested in a novel, for instance, in as much as it reveals the individual nature and the life of the person who wrote it, in as much as it is a product of certain stylistic and esthetic techniques, or in as much as it belongs to a general artistic school. Thus, biographers, literary critiques, art historians, and many other people can each have some interest in literature, each of them with their own perspective. Because it rests on the use of words and because words are our main instruments for thinking and for manifesting our thoughts about things, more than other arts literature can also be studied as a concrete, pleasant, and therefore powerful expression of the way we understand and conceive reality. In this sense, most literary works somehow embody, through a particular story and with precise characters, their author's views on things such as human nature, good and evil, love and hate, happiness, Nature, fate, or God. It is first and foremost in this respect — in as much as they incarnate and express conscious or unconscious answers to the questions which philosophy concerns itself with — that one will talk about “philosophy in literature” in this class.

Long before it was turned into a series of blockbuster movies by Peter Jackson, The Lord of the Rings was already a literary jewel that had secured its place as the most popular piece of literature of the twentieth century. Millions of readers have experienced with great awe the gifts of Professor Tolkien as an artist and story teller, but part of the attraction lies in the worldview that he, unconsciously at first and then consciously in his revisions, conveyed through his fiction. In the metaphysical, epistemological and ethical background of Middle-earth, one finds answers to some of the most important questions that philosophy asks about our world, such as : Does God exist? Are we free or mere puppets of fate? What is evil and why does it exist? What is death and what attitude should we have toward it? Why is technology not the solution to our problems? What are the keys to happiness?

### Course Goals and Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, students should be able to:

- A. more generally, recognize and appreciate the philosophical dimension of literature
  - identify some philosophical problems raised and tackled in a given piece of literature
  - identify and discuss the answers to such philosophical problems provided by a given piece of literature
- B. more specifically, recognize and appreciate the philosophical dimension of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings
  - understand why and in what sense there is philosophy in the Lord of the Rings, through a better grasp of Tolkien's philosophy of art
  - understand better the place of the Lord of the Rings within Tolkien's legendarium, in particular in its dependence on the metaphysical basis of the whole Secondary World in which this cycle of myths and stories takes place
  - identify and understand Tolkien's conceptions of the divine (its nature, its relationship to the world, etc.), of fate and free will, of evil, of death, of technology, etc., which underlie The Lord of the Rings

## Course Content

Introduction: scope and methodology of the course; overview of Tolkien's life and works

I. Preliminary: Is there philosophy in *The Lord of the Rings*? How Tolkien understood art and literature

II. Philosophy in *The Lord of the Rings*

- a. The greater context
  - a. Cosmogony or creation myth: the metaphysical background of *The Lord of the Rings*
    - i. Uncreated and created being
    - ii. God (Eru, Ilúvatar) as efficient and exemplary causes
    - iii. The presence of Eru in the world and pantheism
    - iv. Creation as freely chosen
    - v. Creation and otherness
    - vi. Could the world be otherwise than it is? The problem of divine omnipotence
    - vii. Creation and sub-creation
    - viii. Is Tolkien's cosmogony neoplatonic?
  - b. Brief overview of the First, Second and Third Ages: the historical background of *The Lord of the Rings*
- b. Fate and free will
  - a. Prophecies, dreams, visions and fate
  - b. Divine foreknowledge
  - c. The nature of free will
  - d. Can we be free if what we will do can be foreknown?
  - e. Glimpses of a solution
- c. Evil
  - a. The nature of evil
  - b. Is Middle-earth Manichean?
  - c. Some forms of evil
  - d. God and evil
    - i. Who causes evil to be, we or God?
    - ii. Why does God tolerate evil to be?
  - e. The case of the Orcs and a possible inconsistent feature of Middle-earth
- d. Death
  - a. The evil of Fall and its consequences
    - i. Estrangement from Nature and God
    - ii. Human nature : dual or not? mortal or not?
  - b. Faith and reason: limits to human knowledge of death
  - c. Death as a gift
  - d. The right attitude to have toward death
  - e. The immortality of the Elves, source of another inconsistent feature of Middle-earth?
- e. Technology and our relationship to the natural world
  - a. Technology as power and negation of otherness
  - b. Superior ways of relating to the natural world
    - i. Elvish enchantment or pure art
    - ii. Bombadilian contemplation or pure science

## Required/Recommended Texts

- Ideally, the story and characters of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings should be already known to students and the whole book should have been read at least once — be it during the Christmas break or at some point in the previous few years — before the beginning of the semester. While assuming a previous first reading of the book, what we will do during the term is read again and focus on very specific sections and passages. Given also that each student must write an individual term paper on LOTR, everyone is therefore expected to have their own copy of the work, wherever it comes from (personal hard copy, library loan, electronic copy, etc.). I will refer in class to the page numbering of the 50th-anniversary edition (HarperCollins), which is available in most bookstores. If for financial or other reasons you'd rather use another edition, this is entirely fine, as long as you accept to deal with the (not very big) problem of having different page numbering.
- A certain number of additional readings, for the most part excerpts from Tolkien's Silmarillion, Letters, academic papers, and manuscripts, as well as from works written by professional philosophers, will be made available on LEARN throughout the semester.
- As an additional, optional resource, a certain number of books have been put on reserve at the St.Jerome's library. They are:
  - 1) an older edition of LOTR in 3 volumes (Fellowship of the Ring / Two Towers / Return of the King);
  - 2) the Silmarillion;
  - 3) the History of Middle-earth in 10 volumes, which chronicles the development of Tolkien's legendarium (Book of Lost Tales, vol. 1 and 2 / Lays of Beleriand / Shaping of Middle-earth / Lost Road and Other Writings / Return of the Shadow / Treason of Isengard / War of the Ring / Sauron Defeated / Morgoth's Ring / War of the Jewels / Peoples of Middle-earth);
  - 4) the Unfinished Tales;
  - 5) Tolkien's selected Letters;
  - 6) LOTR: A Reader's Companion.

## Course Requirements and Assessment

There will be one midterm (25%), one 2,500-word term paper (30%), one comprehensive final exam (25%), and 10 pop quizzes (10 X 2%). All must be written without aid.

The quizzes will be given throughout the semester (at a pace of approximately one a week, always at the very beginning of a class, for a duration of about 5-10 minutes each time) and without warning. Their aim is to evaluate the students' completion of the readings assigned at the end of the previous class, and to encourage regular and continuous work on their part. (There will actually be 12 such quizzes, but only the best 10 marks will count. This also allows for any quiz missed due to illness or any other valid reason, for which there will therefore be no make-up quizzes. Should a student miss more than 2 quizzes for a legitimate and properly documented reason, however, some making-up will be arranged.)

For the midterm test and final exam, students will be given one or a few short-essay questions and will have the whole period to answer it or them in an orderly and fully-developed manner.

Guidelines concerning the term paper will be provided by the middle of the semester.

Assessment	Date of Evaluation (if known)	Weighting
12 Pop quizzes (only 10 counting)	Approximately 1 a week	20%

Assessment	Date of Evaluation (if known)	Weighting
Midterm Test	February 13th	25%
Term Paper	April 5th	30%
Final Exam	Examination Period	25%
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Total		100%

## Miscellenea

**UW policy regarding illness and missed tests:** The University of Waterloo Examination Regulations ([Academic Regulations Related to Assignments, Tests, and Final Exams](#)) state that:

- A medical certificate presented in support of an official petition for relief from normal academic requirements must provide all of the information requested on the “University of Waterloo Verification of Illness” form or it will not be accepted. This form can be obtained from Health Services or on [the website of the Medical Clinic](#).
- If a student has a test/examination deferred due to acceptable medical evidence, he/she normally will write the test/examination at a mutually convenient time, to be determined by the course instructor.
- The University acknowledges that, due to the pluralistic nature of the University community, some students may on religious grounds require alternative times to write tests and examinations.
- Elective arrangements (such as travel plans) are not considered acceptable grounds for granting an alternative examination time.

**Academic Integrity:** To maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo and its Affiliated and Federated Institutions of Waterloo (AFIW) are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. See the [UWaterloo Academic Integrity](#) webpage for more information.

**Professor’s policy on late assignments/essays, make-up tests, and plagiarism:**

Handing in late term papers: unless arrangements are made with the professor beforehand or an official doctor’s note is provided, 10% of the total will be deducted per day.

Make-up tests: there will be no make-up tests for quizzes, tests, and exams missed for non-valid and non-documented reasons. Travel, excessive workload, defective alarm clocks, minor colds, a late bus, etc., are not considered to be valid reasons. (Concerning make-up quizzes, see also additional note in Course Requirements and Assessment.)

Plagiarism: students who are caught plagiarizing will automatically fail the evaluation in question and may fail the course. (Plagiarism, according to Webster’s: the use or close imitation of the language and/or thoughts of another author and the representation of them as one’s own original work.)

**Discipline:** A student is expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing academic offences, and to take responsibility for their actions. A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (e.g., plagiarism,

cheating) or about “rules” for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course professor, academic advisor, or the Associate Dean. When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties will be imposed under the [St. Jerome’s University Policy on Student Discipline](#). For information on categories of offenses and types of penalties, students should refer to [University of Waterloo Policy 71 - Student Discipline](#). For typical penalties check [Guidelines for the Assessment of Penalties](#).

**Grievance:** A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of their university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. Read the [St. Jerome’s University Policy on Student Petitions and Grievances](#).

**Appeals:** A decision made or penalty imposed under the St. Jerome’s University Policy on Student Petitions and Grievances (other than a petition) or the St. Jerome’s University Policy on Student Discipline may be appealed if there is a ground. A student who believes they have a ground for an appeal should refer to the [St. Jerome's University Policy on Student Appeals](#).

**Note for Students with Disabilities:** The [AccessAbility Services](#) office, located on the first floor of the Needles Hall extension (1401), collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with the AS office at the beginning of each academic term.