

THE THEOLOGY OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND C.S. LEWIS

TH 2XT3 / MS 2XT3
McMaster Divinity College
Summer School, 2014
May 12 – 16

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis are two of the most influential Christian writers of the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, their works have inspired movie adaptations and a great deal of secondary literature, reinforcing their appeal to Christian and secular audiences alike. These works of fiction function as contemporary parables, reframing themes and narratives to bypass prejudices and complacent familiarity alike. This course critically engages with the fictional worlds that Tolkien and Lewis created against the backdrop of biblical thought. Together, we will discuss their portrayal of the Christian themes of creation, fall, and redemption in these worlds and assess their value for contemporary theological reflection and ministry.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Knowing

- To understand the Christian themes of creation, fall, and redemption
- To locate and identify these themes in the works of Lewis and Tolkien
- To understand the arguments for the value of contemporary parables/myths

Being

- To engage in theological reflection on the central themes of Christian theology
- To gain a new appreciation for the beauty of the biblical narrative

Doing

- To judge the benefits and drawbacks of doing theology through creative fiction
- To identify the themes of creation, fall, and redemption in literature and media
- To critically evaluate the fictional worlds of Lewis and Tolkien from a biblical perspective

SPECIALIZATIONS

- Christian Thought and History
- Church and Culture
- Christian Worldview

class schedule

monday

Recommended reading:

- “On Fairy Stories” and “Mythopoeia” in *Tree and Leaf*

11:30am

- Introductions

12:00pm

- Community Lunch

1:00-4:00pm

- Introduction to Class
- Tolkien and Lewis on Myth
 - Biography – Lewis’s conversion
 - Tolkien’s “On Fairy Stories” (in *Tree and Leaf*)
 - Tolkien’s “Mythopoeia” (in *Tree and Leaf*)
 - Lewis’s “Myth Became Fact”

tuesday

*Before class reading:*¹

- Genesis 1–2
- *Voyage to Perelandra* (ch. 3–4)
- “Ainulindale” and “Valaquenta” (in *The Silmarillion*)

Recommended reading:

- *The Magician’s Nephew* (ch. 9)
- *Voyage to Perelandra* (ch. 1–2)

9:00am-12:00pm

- The Bible on Creation
- Lewis on Creation
 - *The Magician’s Nephew*
 - *Voyage to Perelandra*
- Neo-Platonism and Augustine on Creation

1:00-4:00pm

- Tolkien on Creation
 - *The Silmarillion*
 - Extracts from *The History of Middle Earth*
- Themes for Discussion
 - Creation, Music, and Participation
 - Creation and Gender

¹ A lot of reading is inevitable in this course; don’t be afraid of skimming.

Wednesday

Before class reading:

- Genesis 3
- *Voyage to Perelandra* (ch. 9)
- “Quenta Silmarillion” (ch. 1) (in *The Silmarillion*)

Recommended reading:

- *The Magician’s Nephew* (ch. 12–13)
- *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (ch. 3–4)

9:00-11:30am

- The Bible on the Fall
- Biography – Lewis and Tolkien in WWI
- Lewis on the Fall
 - *The Magician’s Nephew*
 - *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*
 - *Voyage to Perelandra*
 - *The Great Divorce*
- Neo-Platonism, Augustine, and the Nature of Evil

11:30am-12:00pm

- Community Chapel

1:00-4:00pm

- Tolkien on the Fall
 - *The Silmarillion*
 - Extracts from *The History of Middle Earth*
 - Extracts from *The Lord of the Rings*
- Themes for Discussion
 - The relationship between free will and evil
 - Manichean dualism
 - Are Tolkien and Lewis right about evil?

Thursday

Before class reading:

- “Leaf by Niggle” (in *Tree and Leaf*)

Recommended reading:

- *The Magician’s Nephew* (ch. 12)
- *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (ch. 3–4)

9:00am-12:00pm

- The Bible on Redemption
- Lewis on Redemption
 - *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

- *The Last Battle*
- Themes for Discussion
 - Theories of the atonement
 - The link between redemption and eschatology

1:00-4:00pm

- Tolkien on Redemption
 - *The Lord of the Rings*
 - *Leaf by Niggle*
 - *The Silmarillion*
 - Extracts from *The History of Middle Earth*
- Themes for discussion
 - Frodo's journey of sanctification
 - Biblical eschatology vs. the eschatology of Middle Earth

Friday

9:00am-12:00pm

- Is creative fiction a significant dialogue partner for theology? (lecture and discussion)
- How effectively do the works of Lewis and Tolkien convey Christian themes? (lecture and discussion)
- Closing Remarks

REQUIRED TEXTS

- C.S. Lewis. *Voyage to Perelandra* or just *Perelandra* (can also be purchased as part of the *Out of the Silent Planet* trilogy in one volume).
- J.R.R. Tolkien. *Tree and Leaf* (2001).
- J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Silmarillion*.

RECOMMENDED TEXTS

- C.S. Lewis. *The Chronicles of Narnia* (esp. *The Magician's Nephew*; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*; and *The Last Battle*)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Primary Texts

- C.S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity*.
- C.S. Lewis. *The Problem of Pain*.
- C.S. Lewis. *The Great Divorce*.
- J.R.R. Tolkien. *The History of Middle Earth*, Vol. 1–12.
- J.R.R. Tolkien. *Unfinished Tales*.
- J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Lord of the Rings*.
- J.R.R. Tolkien. *Letters*.

Secondary Texts

- Carpenter, Humphrey. *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*.
- Duriez, Colin. *Tolkien and C.S. Lewis: the Gift of Friendship*.
- Green, Roger L. *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*.
- Hart, Trevor and Ivan Khovacs (eds.). *Tree of Tales: Tolkien, Literature and Theology*.
- Kreeft, Peter. *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview Behind the Lord of the Rings*.
- Neuleib, Janice W. *The Concept of Evil in the Fiction of C.S. Lewis*.
- Rutledge, Fleming. *The battle for Middle-Earth: Tolkien's Divine Design in Lord of the Rings*
- Sammons, Martha C. *War of the Fantasy World: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien on Art and Imagination*
- Vaus, Will. *Mere theology: A Guide to the Thought of C.S. Lewis*

Podcasts

- CBC Ideas on C.S. Lewis: <http://www.cbc.ca/player/Radio/Ideas/ID/2411499215/>
- The Tolkien Professor: <https://itunes.apple.com/ca/podcast/the-tolkien-professor/id320513707>

ASSIGNMENTS

	% of grade	due date
• Book reflection on <i>Voyage to Perelandra</i>	25%	May 23
• Thesis paper	40%	June 11
• Personal reflection paper	15%	June 13
• Class participation / primary source readings	20%	(See below)

Book reflection (due May 23, 2014 by 11:59 pm)

- This reflection is 5 double-spaced pages in length (apart from a bibliography – a bibliography is only necessary if one chooses to interact with other sources). Use Times New Roman 12 point font, footnotes (if required), and keep the margins at 1¼ inches. Please abide by the MDC style guide (see below).
- This review will focus on interacting with the theological themes present in the narrative. This is not a plot summary; I am interested in what you discover in reading the book. Avoid merely asserting your opinions; back your observations up with references to the book and other sources.
- Be sure to organize your paper logically, with an introduction that maps out the areas you address and a conclusion that summarizes the salient points in your observations.

Thesis paper (due June 11, 2014 by 11:59 pm)

- Papers for all three specializations (see below) must be demonstrably related to the course content.
- All thesis papers are 15 to 17 double-spaced pages in length apart from the bibliography. They must use Times New Roman 12 point font, footnotes (not endnotes!) and have 1¼ inch margins. Footnotes are to be indented, single spaced, and use Times New Roman 10 point font. Please abide by the MDC style guide (see below). Students will only follow the poor example of mixing fonts found in this syllabus on the cover page of their paper if they are so inclined.

- All papers will make a clear thesis statement in their introduction and support this thesis in their bodies.
- Use headers to break up the body of the text and to keep your work organized.
- The successful paper will exhibit consistent argumentation, clear and direct prose, and engage with secondary as well as primary sources.
- **Christian Thought and History**
 - This specialization will engage directly with the theology found in the fictional works of J.R.R. Tolkien and/or C.S. Lewis.
 - The following are examples of possible topics:
 - Augustine, J.R.R. Tolkien, and the Problem of Evil
 - Redemption and Eschatology in *The Last Battle*
 - Music and Creation in Narnia and Middle Earth
 - Gender in Genesis 1-2 and *Ainulindale*
- **Church and Culture**
 - This specialization will connect the theology found in the fictional works of J.R.R. Tolkien and/or C.S. Lewis with a contemporary context.
 - The following are examples of possible topics:
 - The Portrayal of Evil in *The Lord of the Rings*: Do the Films Distort the Message of the Book?
 - Narnia versus *His Dark Materials*: How Good is Secular Humanism at Fantasy?
 - From Narnia and Middle Earth to Dungeons and Dragons: Have Christian Themes Continued in Contemporary Fantasy?
 - Ents and Ecology, Redemption and Eschatology: Caring for God's World in an Industrial Age
- **Christian Worldview**
 - This specialization may borrow freely from the above specializations. Students in this specialization may also choose other topics, provided they are demonstrably related to the course content.

Personal reflection paper (due June 13, 2014 by 11:59 pm)

- All reflection papers are 3 pages in length (apart from a bibliography – a bibliography is only necessary if one chooses to interact with other sources), double-spaced, and use Times New Roman 12 point font. Keep the margins at 1¼ inch margins and use footnotes (if required). Do not use headers.
- **Christian Thought and History**
 - This specialization will consider the theological value of fantasy written from a Christian perspective.
- **Church and Culture**
 - This specialization will evaluate the impact of fantasy written from a Christian perspective on a certain contemporary context. It is recommended that students pick a context with which they are familiar or one that they are willing to research.
- **Christian Worldview**
 - This specialization will summarize the student's opinion on the value of fantasy written from a Christian perspective.

