

English 495TK: *The Lord of the Rings*

About the Course

J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* has had a bumpy ride through critical circles, so much so that its critical reception is almost as important as the work itself. When *The Lord of the Rings* was first published in the 1950s it was panned by most critics, whose taste was founded on high modernism (Yeats, Pound, Joyce, Beckett, and the like). *The Lord of the Rings* seemed to them profoundly different from those works which were canonised as the great novels of modern literature, that it was dismissed as puerile and irrelevant to the history of "the great tradition". Nothing could be further from the case. The critics failed to realise that their modernist tastes were themselves determined by a reaction against Victorian literary conventions, and that Tolkien's work, begun almost half a century earlier, owed much to these conventions. They also failed to account for the fact that Tolkien was an Oxford scholar of philology — medieval language and literature — and that the literary context against which *The Lord of the Rings* was composed was that of the Middle Ages, a period whose literature they had little time for. The lack of attentiveness to the literary qualities of Tolkien's writing manifested most obviously in the continual misspellings of the names of his characters, as well as of the author's own name.

But by the 1960s *The Lord of the Rings* had become a phenomenon, embraced by the Counter-Culture, especially in America. Sales sky-rocketed, and Tolkien fandom reached proportions which anticipated today's fans of Star Trek or Harry Potter. This, of course, merely added to the critics' dislike (and envy) of Tolkien. It made not a jot of difference that Tolkien himself disapproved of such extreme fandom, or that some critics began to defend *The Lord of the Rings* by arguing that it was also a product of modernism. Academics continued to spurn Tolkien and (probably aided by the length of the work) denied him a place in the university curriculum. Regardless, Tolkien's popularity continued to grow, and publishers began accepting manuscripts which were obviously derivative of *The Lord of the Rings* from other writers. By the 1970s an entire genre of 'fantasy' literature existed in bookshops. That a new genre should have grown out of the Tolkien phenomenon was surely an argument for the literary significance of *The Lord*

of the Rings, and new critical movements beginning in the last quarter of the 20th century began to make that possible.

Slowly academics began to look at *The Lord of the Rings* as something other than a modernist novel (failed or otherwise). During the 80s, academics were heavily influenced by works like Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth*, and they equated Tolkien's creation of his own world with the world of mythology. They began to examine Tolkien's writing as myth, subjecting it to Jungian interpretations or similar analyses which draw on the interplay between psychology and story-telling. This critical fashion began to fade in the late 1980s, and the last decades of the twentieth century saw critics focusing on Tolkien as a scholar, asking how Tolkien's interest in languages and medieval literature shed light on the art and meaning of *The Lord of the Rings*. Polls of readers in the 1990s consistently showed that the popular readership judges *The Lord of the Rings* to be the best book of the twentieth century, and the release of a film version in 2001, suggests that this strange work strikes a chord with the world of today. Perhaps that is why T.A. Shippey declares Tolkien to be the author of the twenty-first century.

But nothing in the fantasy genre has had the same impact on the popular imagination until, arguably, Harry Potter and *Game of Thrones*. Tolkien probably would have found both of these series distasteful, but their cultural impact and re-use of medieval source material for a modern audience make have made them a focus for study of "medievalism" (the revival of medieval aesthetics in modern times) and popular culture.

Reading *The Lord of the Rings* therefore prompts us to ask not only what the meaning of the work is, but also what it tells us about how we have read literature during the past century. *The Lord of the Rings* blends the ancient with the modern and the scholarly with the popular. It asks us to determine what kind of a work it actually is, and in doing so asks us to define what makes good literature and how our attitudes to literature have changed in the past hundred years.

Course Objectives

Students in this course will:

- Acquire a knowledge of *The Lord of the Rings* and the medieval literature which informs it.
- Acquire knowledge of the historical and cultural background which informs *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as a familiarity with the issues that have been discussed in Tolkien scholarship.
- Learn to read and discuss *The Lord of the Rings* for enjoyment and for its insight into the human condition.
- Demonstrate the skills associated with the professional practices of literary criticism, including writing and formatting conventions, research skills, and methods of analysis.
- Demonstrate the ability to synthesise their knowledge and skills as part of a culminating experience for the English major.

Course Information

- Days: Tuesday, Thursday
- Time: 12:30 PM - 1:45 PM (Course Number 20532)
- Location: Jerome Richfield 242
- Office Location: Sierra Tower 803
- Office Hours: Tuesday, 2:00-2:50; Thursday, 2:00-2:50
- Website: <http://scottkleinman.com/courses/495TK/F-2019>

Textbook

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; 50th Anniversary ed. edition (2012).

There will also be various online readings and handouts, available on the internet or through Canvas. Always print these out and bring them to relevant class sessions along with your textbook.

The reading schedule is on the website listed above.

Coursework and Grading

Coursework will consist of two essays (30% for the first, 40% for the second), a journal of annotated passages (15%), and participation (15%).

Essays: The essays will be approximately 2000-3000 words long (2500-3500 for graduate students).

Journal: You will keep a chapter-by-chapter record of significant passages with commentary on why you think they are significant. This journal will help in constructing theses and compiling evidence for your essays.

Participation: Enrolling in this class requires a commitment to participate in a community of learners in which you agree to contribute to and not to detract from the learning environment. In order to receive full credit for participation, you must do the readings in advance, bring your textbook to each class, be prepared to discuss the materials, and complete all assignments additional to the exams and research papers. You must also arrive to class on time, remember to turn off your cell phones completely (vibrate is not good enough), and remain in the classroom for the duration of the class period. For disruptive behaviour (e.g. cell phones, frequent exits from the classroom), I reserve the right to increase the proportion of your final grade allotted to participation as I feel appropriate. There is no automatic credit for attendance, and frequent absences will be noted and may be reflected in your final grade. For further information on factors that can influence your grade, see under **Class Policies** below.

All essays, including response papers, must be typed in polished standard English and formatted according to the standard conventions of literary criticism (see my essay advice for details). Late submissions and submissions containing distracting numbers of typos, spelling mistakes, or grammatical errors will drop as much as one full grade. There is no automatic credit for participation or attendance; however, I will take these factors into account at the end of the semester in the case of borderline grades. I regret that I am unable to handle extra-credit assignments.

Class Policies

By enrolling in this course you agree to be bound for the purposes of this class by the policies below, which serve as a formal legal agreement. You may reject these policies by dropping the class within the time allotted by the University.

Grading

Grades are A, B, C, D, or F and can receive a plus or minus. To receive a grade other than a WU, you must have completed more than half the coursework (no exceptions).

Since students in English courses are expected by society at large to be acquiring writing skills, I privilege grammar, spelling, and editing in my grading. Work containing distracting numbers of typos, spelling mistakes, or grammatical errors will be graded primarily on these criteria on a sliding scale which may supersede any percentages given in the **Coursework and Grading** section above. That is, the more distracting these factors are, the more they are worth (up to 100% of your grade). A rough guide to what is distracting is any sign that might give an employer pause when evaluating a job application.

Extra Credit

In some semesters opportunities may arise for non-required activities such as guest lectures, and I will offer extra credit for attendance at or participation in these activities. I will always offer this extra credit to the entire class.

Because my time commitments do not allow me grade extra assignments, I do not award extra credit to individual students for any reason. I keep to this policy very strictly.

Preparation and Participation

Enrolling in this class requires a commitment to participate in a community of learners in which you agree to contribute to and not to detract from the learning environment. In order to receive full credit for participation, you must do the readings in advance, bring assigned textbooks to each class, be prepared to discuss the materials, and complete all assignments. You must also arrive to class regularly, arrive on time, and remain in the class room for

the duration of the class period. For disruptive behaviour, I reserve the right to increase the proportion of your final grade allotted to participation, as I feel appropriate.

Inappropriate Use of Technology in Class

Ringling and/or vibrating cell phones in class disrupt my concentration and that of your fellow students, inevitably lowering the quality of the learning environment. If your cell phone goes off in class, I reserve the right to impose penalties to your grade or to ask you to leave the classroom, as I deem appropriate. If your cell phone disrupts my thought process as I am teaching, I may call a “class break” in order to recover from the distraction. It is in your interest to remember that you will have deprived your fellow classmates of this class time.

If you have a computer or smart phone in the classroom, it will be very tempting to check your e-mail, read Facebook, or generally surf the web for purposes unrelated to the class. Resist. If I catch you engaged in these activities, I reserve the right to impose penalties to your grade or ask you to leave the classroom, as I deem appropriate. Please be aware that this has the same effect on my teaching as cell phones and may also trigger the “class break” response.

Academic Honesty

It is extremely important that all aspects of your work are come by honourably. Efforts to gain an advantage not given to all students are dishonest and regarded as an extremely serious matter by the academic community. Consequences range from probation to expulsion. University policy stipulates that plagiarism, the submission of another person’s work as your own, is a violation of academic honesty, even if it arises out of ignorance or oversight, rather than deliberate cheating. Enrolling in this class means that you agree to abide by my decision regarding the appropriate action to take in cases of academic dishonesty. If you have any questions about plagiarism, paraphrasing, quoting, or collaboration, please consult me.

Inclusion

CSUN values an inclusive learning environment, where we respect the varied perspectives and experiences of a diverse community. Students and faculty each have responsibility for maintaining a respectful space to express their opinions. Professional courtesy and consideration for our classroom community are especially important with respect to topics dealing with differences in race, color, gender and gender identity/expression, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, disability, and age.

As a “responsible employee” at CSUN, I am required by federal and state laws to report incidences of harassment and discrimination to the campus Title IX Coordinator if they are disclosed to me. If you have experienced harassment or discrimination and do not want the Title IX Coordinator notified, instead of disclosing the experience to me, you can speak confidentially with CSUN’s Care Advocate by calling (818) 677-7492. For more information regarding your university rights and options, please visit the University’s Title IX website at <http://www.csun.edu/title-ix>.

Add/Drop Policy

Students should make sure that they follow the [university’s add/drop deadlines](#), outlined in the Schedule of Classes. According to university policy, drops are only allowed after the set date when “a) there is a serious and compelling reason—specifically the student’s emotional or physical health or financial condition is clearly in jeopardy, and b) there is no viable alternative—including repeating the class”. Students will need to provide documentation on official letterhead—a letter, on official stationery, from a doctor or an employer—to support their reasons. No adds will be allowed unless a student can provide documented proof—e.g., a clerical error—for the reason for the tardiness. Please make sure to meet the deadline!

Withdrawals and Incompletes

The standard grade if a student fails to complete the work for a class is a “WU”. This is the equivalent of an “F”, but the grade may be changed if you re-take the course at a future time. This grade is also assigned to students who have not attended after the first few classes of the semester but have not officially “withdrawn” from the course.

I may assign an Incomplete (“I”) if and only if you meet all of the following conditions:

- You have completed the vast bulk of the assigned work;
- You are passing the class;
- You fill out and bring to me a [Request for an Incomplete form](#) (also available from the English Department office), on which I detail exactly what is still needed for completion of the course.
- I can make no exceptions to this policy, even if it affects your financial aid.

Once you take an incomplete, you have a year from the date recorded on the form to complete the requirements of the course and have your grade changed; therefore, you should submit work early enough to allow me to grade your work and fill out the necessary forms to assign you a new grade.

Keep in mind that, after you take an Incomplete, any grading of your work becomes an added burden on my busy timetable during the following year. Therefore you should not expect the normal amount of comments on your work or any extra teaching beyond my normal office hours.