

## **An Introduction to Tolkien's Theory of the Fairy-Tale**

Dr. Anthony G. Cirilla, Instructor

### **Course Description**

This course uses Tolkien's theory of the fairy-story to examine examples of the genre: one which he highly favored, two which he translated from Middle English, and five which he himself wrote. Unlike his larger works, these fairy-tales are less in the epic romance tradition of *Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*, and yet form a foundational set of readings for understanding Tolkien's corpus. We will give particular attention to Tolkien's view that fairy-stories should not be seen as merely for children, but that the careful reading of such stories edifies the adult mind. In Tolkien's view, the "eucatastrophe" of the fairy-tale's happy ending provides the adult Christian imagination with an essential discipleship for expectation of Christ's return and the good news of the Gospel: this theme will be investigated throughout the course.

### **Course Objectives**

Objectives for this course include: (1) understand Tolkien's criteria for what constitutes a fairy-story, (2) apply this criteria as an interpretive lens to the specific fairy-tales composed or admired by Tolkien, (3) articulate the philosophical and theological significance Tolkien sees in the fairy-story, and (4) find the manifestation of this philosophical and theological significance within the specific readings. All of this points to the objective (5) of being able to answer the question undergirding the course: Why should Christians carefully read and seriously think about fairy-tales?

### **Course Format**

The format of the course will be predominantly one of mini-lectures followed by guided discussion. The instructor will often be doing most of the talking, but generally to illuminate and draw out themes from the text for discussion, rather than in pure lectures. Thus, students will be expected to come having read and engaged with the text selection for the week, and with thoughts prepared to contribute.

Classes will meet via Zoom for one hour each week and will be recorded for later viewing by students who cannot participate. Additional student participation and instructor interaction can take place on our private Davenant Commons discussion board.

### **Course Requirements**

1. Weekly readings (due before our meeting each week).
2. Weekly interaction with fellow participants and the instructor in live class sessions.

**Additional Recommended Course Elements:**

1. Weekly submissions of reactions to/questions about the readings.
2. Participation on the course discussion board on Davenant Commons.

**Course Texts**

Tolkien, J.R.R. *Tales from the Perilous Realms*. HarperCollins, 2009. ISBN: 978-0007280599

Tolkien, J.R.R. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight; Pearl; Sir Orfeo*. Del Rey, 1988. ISBN: 978-0345277602

**Course Schedule**

<b>Week</b>	<b>Dates</b>	<b>Discussion Topics/Themes</b>	<b>Reading</b>
1	May 31-June 6	Fairy-stories & worldview	Introductions & "Mythopoeia"
2	June 7-13	What is a fairy-story?	<i>On Fairy-Stories</i>
3	June 14-20	A successful example	George MacDonald's "The Golden Key"
4	June 21-27	Consolation in Translation	<i>Pearl</i>
5	June 28-July 4	Eucatastrophe in Translation	<i>Sir Orfeo</i>
6	July 5-11	Are fairy-tales for children?	<i>Roverandom</i>
7	July 12-18	Fantasy & Sub-creation	<i>The Adventures of Tom Bombadil</i>
8	July 19-25	Recovery	<i>Smith of Wootton Major</i>
9	July 26-Aug 1	Escape	<i>Farmer Giles of Ham</i>
10	Aug 2-7	Consolation	<i>Leaf by Niggle</i>