Fantasy and Philosophy

Course packet

Instructor: John Davenport
July 2013

Phil 3942: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday 1 - 4 PM
Contents of Course Packet

0 Tolkien Maps and Pictures
1. Map of all Arda (whole Earth) from the Tolkien Bestiary
2. Map of Beleriand (Elven-lands in western Middle-Earth) in Silmarillion
3. The Fall of Gondolin, from Tolkien Bestiary
4. Map of Gondor, Rohan, and Morder – from Return of the King in some editions
5. The Cosmos of the Norse Myths

I. Handouts
1. Comparisons between Tolkien and the Norse/Germanic Nibelung Sagas
2. Structural Parallels between Books in the Lord of the Rings
3. Metaphysics and Moral Psychology of Evil in Tolkien
5. Encyclopedia of Arda selections – Genealogies of Main High-Elven Families in Silmarillion

II. Tolkien’s Historical and Literary Background
1. “Briar Rose” from the Brothers Grimm fairy tales.
2. “The Black Bull of Norroway” from Andrew Lang’s Blue Fairy Book (Dover, 1965)
5. David Wright, “Introduction,” from Beowulf: A Prose Translation
6. Brian Bates, The Real Middle Earth, ch.6 on Dragons, ch.15 on Web of Destiny
7. Selections from William Shakespeare’s King Richard II and MacBeth
9. Stephen Donaldson, Afterword to The Real Story (summary of Wagner’s Ring cycle /Sigurd)

III. Tolkien’s Own Papers
1. A selection of letters, from The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien
2. “The Disaster of the Gladden Fields,” from Tolkien’s Unfinished Tales
4. Sample of Tolkien’s poems from The Adventures of Tom Bombadil
5. “On Fairy Stories,” from Tolkien, The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays (Oxford)

IV. Other Articles on Philosophical and Literary Themes in Tolkien & Donaldson
1. “The One Ring,” by Adam Roberts, in Reading the Lord of the Rings, ed. Eaglestone
3. David Miller, “Narrative Pattern in the Fellowship of the Ring,” in A Tolkien Compass
5. Randel Helms, “The Structure and Aesthetic of the LOTR,” from Tolkien’s World
7. Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” from Poetry, Language, Thought
8. Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, “Preamble from the Heart” (the preliminary sections).

V. Papers on Donaldson
1. Donaldson’s Senior Symposium Address (= “Fantasy in the Modern Age” cited by others).
Office Hours: After class 4-5 PM. Before class I’m usually busy (since a lot of material must be ready) but can try to make appointments if absolutely necessary.

Précis of the Seminar: This course will focus on ethical, psychological, and religious themes in two of the best works of epic fantasy in twentieth-century literature, J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and Stephen Donaldson’s *First Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*. The goal is to use the complex portrayal of good and evil, love and hate, and despair and hope in Tolkien and Donaldson as a basis for a searching discussion of the human heart. We begin by briefly reconstructing the worldview in mythological sources on which Tolkien drew, and look at arguments that his work is not “swords and sorcery” escapism or “dungeons and dragons’ adventure but rather serious literature in the tradition of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Mallory’s *King Arthur* tales, Virgil’s *Aenead*, the old English epic *Beowulf*, the *Nibelungenleid* and the Norse Eddas. We’ll also see in due course how Donaldson draws on symbols and paradigms from the same mythological and literary sources. Like these older epics, Tolkien and Donaldson’s fiction offers original answers to some of the most basic questions of human existence, such as:

--what matters? what gives life meaning? what is the purpose of human life?
--is the desire for power and control over others inherent in our nature?
--how do good persons go wrong in life, and how can they recover?
--is evil inherently weak, deficient or self-destructive? or can it be strong and creative?
--why is trying to escape from or deny our past crimes ultimately self-defeating?
--how do hatred and the desire for revenge distort the human spirit?
--is love weaker than hatred, or can love conquer all?
--what is the human will, and how does it form and stick to its commitments?
--what kind of freedom do we have to shape our own character and choose our destiny?
--does some core of goodness remain that can be reached in the most corrupt persons?
--how do we acquire virtues of character? how do we acquire vices?
--what is our relation to the world of nature? are we destroying or disfiguring this world?
--how do we relate to the divine, and can the relations to nature and God be expressed in ‘magic’?

The main focus of our discussion will be on the novels themselves, and whether their themes, figures, and descriptions offer insight on these perennial questions – whether, in short, a work of fantasy can disclose truth applying to our real lives, and speak to our experience. But we will also use secondary essays on (a) related philosophical themes and (b) on critical analysis of the two authors to provide background and aid our discussions. As an example of (a), at two points, we will consider *short* works by existential philosophers – Heidegger and Kierkegaard – that shed light on themes in Tolkien and Donaldson respectively. We will also consider familiar themes in Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine in reading some of the secondary essays on the novels.
One way to approach a work of literature is to focus on the philosophical implications of its text, taking the worldview it offers and evaluating its adequacy. But in order to help clarify and illuminate the Tolkien’s view of human life and our moral struggle, we will also consider some more specifically literary questions, such as:

- The genre of “epic fantasy” begun by the *Lord of the Rings*, and its relation to the genres of epic and fairy tale as Tolkien understood them, and how Donaldson develops this relation.
- The difference between transition-fantasies (in which the hero travels between our world and the fantasy world), as in *Narnia* and Donaldson’s *Chronicles*, and self-contained fantasies (in which there is no such travel between world) such as *The Lord of the Rings* and LeGuin’s *Earthsea*.
- The difference between myth, fairy tale, hero legend or saga, and epic as distinct literary genres.
- Literary influences and sources for the *Lord of the Rings* and Tolkien’s other works; how Tolkien and Donaldson both use symbols from the ‘Nibelung’ saga in different ways.
- The structure of the novels’ plots; their descriptive style; and development of their characters.
- The way major symbols in the novels work, and their difference from allegorical symbols.

Our secondary articles will help with these philosophical and literary questions for class discussion, but much of the discussion will also focus on the primary texts from Tolkien and Donaldson.

This is an interdisciplinary course, so I encourage students to bring into our discussions ideas they have learned from their core courses on art and literature, philosophy and theology, and psychology and history. Masterpieces epic fantasy like Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and Donaldson’s *Chronicles* challenges familiar views coming from all these fields, e.g. utilitarianism and pacifism in moral philosophy, behaviorism in psychology, economic materialism in theories of history, realism in literary theory and allegorical interpretations of symbolism in art history, and various theological takes on myth and fairy tale. In particular, I will emphasize on the following ideas:

1. Tolkien’s generally Aristotelian/Thomistic understanding of our moral character and development, the relation of individuals to the communities that give them meaning, and the connection between the bodily, sensitive, imaginative, and intellectual aspects of personhood.
   - in Donaldson’s work, nature also defines a person’s telos, but there is a less Aristotelian conception of that telos as happiness or flourishing; the emphasis is more on *personal meaning* through service to what is noble, wondrous, or awe-inspiring.

2. Tolkien’s more early Augustianian/existential conception of personal freedom and authenticity.
   - this is more directly paralleled and intensified in Donaldson’s self-reflective form of fantasy, in which the hero begins with the sense that preserving his integrity and identity require *refusing* the demands of the fantasy world.

3. What I take to be Tolkien’s more ‘Nordic’ conception of the will as a positive determination of spirit or striving, and its virtues of courage, loyalty, and devotion to the good at all costs.
   - This is a theme is developed further by Donaldson in his portrayal of the Earthpower.

4. His mediation between Judeo-Christian and Nordic conceptions of the divine: between mercy and eschatological grace on the one hand, and a world in which chaos and order remain in constant battle, all governed by the law of fate (or *Wierd / Wyrd*) on the other.
   - whereas divinity is more remote in Donaldson’s world, and he offers a different answer to the problem of evil (a ‘divine risktaker’ theodicy, without total divine governance over history).
In many ways, we will see how Tolkien counterposes his vision to intellectual currents he sees as threatening the value of human life. We will also discuss the historical context of Tolkien’s work, in particular its relationship to the European crises of World War I and World War II. By contrast, Donaldson’s work responds to the horrors of war experienced by Americans in the Vietnam era, but deepens the environmental concerns introduced in Tolkien’s work (in a more multicultural fashion).

**Grading System**

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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Class participation</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>Attendance, preparation, and active contribution is vital!</td>
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<tr>
<td>One short reaction paper:</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>Short response to a secondary essay early in the term.</td>
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<tr>
<td>One oral report</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>Report to class on an assigned reading (with 3-page typed version to hand in) to get class discussion going.</td>
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<tr>
<td>One take-home test:</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>Short-answer and multiple choice questions to assess your grasp of the primary and secondary readings. (due before last week)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Term paper topic / outline</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>One page on your topic for the final paper, listing sources.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thematic paper (9 pages):</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>In-depth analysis of particular topic or issue that interested you in the course of our readings – <em>topic with my approval</em>.</td>
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This final paper will probably use some critical essays, and perhaps some primary works or literature or film beyond our course readings, depending on themes. But you have wide choice of topics here.

**General Policies**

In the short summer session, *each class is like 2/3 of a week* during the regular semester; each week is *like a month* in the regular semester. Thus you should not take this course if you need to miss more than one day of class. Any absences beyond one will count against your participation grade, and any beyond three are grounds for failing completely.

**Attendance and typical excuses.** Given the short summer session, these policies are esp. important

- No absence is excused for medical reasons without a real doctor’s note.
- No absence is excused for work reasons (you must work out your class schedule with employers)
- Absence is excused for weddings and funerals only with some kind of proof after the fact.
- No absence is excused because of family vacations or airline tickets booked at wrong times.

**Honesty and Citation:** I take this very seriously; cheating is the one unforgivable sin (almost every year I have had to fail seniors who did not graduate as a result). All your work for this class must be original, must be your own, must be done new for this class (use of past work requires my permission) and you must cite your sources, both when you quote text, and when you paraphrase.

Examples of cheating:

1. Handing in work you did for another class without clearing it with me.
2. Copying another student’s work on a test or paper.
3. Handing in an essay wholly or partially downloaded from the internet, copied without citation from a website, or pieced together from an encyclopedia, book, or article without citation is plagiarism. This holds true even if the wording has been significantly changed.
4. Most of the content in your essays should be your own. Not more than 25% should consist of ideas quoted or paraphrased from other sources, even if you cite them. For example, even if
you acknowledge an internet site, for example, you can’t just lift large sections of its text wholesale: only take short quotations, clearly indicated as such in your paper.

If I judge that a student has cheated in any of these ways, or in any comparably serious fashion, that student will fail the entire course and it will go on his/her permanent record here (and believe me, I’ve done it). If there are any prior offenses on record, suspension is possible. A very minor infraction results in an F for the entire assignment, usually dropping your final grade by a letter.

When appropriate (as directed in the assignment instructions) you may bring in ideas and quotes from secondary sources, but you must cite them either by footnotes or parenthetical references referring to a bibliography at the end of the paper.

—This includes paraphrases: even if you reword what the author said, cite the page number.
—It also includes websites: give the full URL of the page you cite. Note that webpages should never be the only source you cite in college essays.

Required Texts:

   - The Fellowship of the Ring, The Two Towers, The Return of the King.
7. A Course Packet including a famous essay by Tolkien and selected essays on Tolkien from the various recommended works below. The packet used to come from Duplicating and be purchased with a check to Fordham but now I have to make the packet myself and sell it to you directly.

You have to buy the all the assigned books. I will check to see that you have the books with you on the day we are discussing readings from them. Not having your books will affect your grade.

Schedule for Readings and Discussion Topics

We begin with the mythological background to Tolkien’s stories, which helps explain both his portrayal of the divine and his conception of ethical values in relation to human freedom. Next we look at the creations stories in the *Silmarillion* to provide the larger frame within which Tolkien meant the story in *The Lord of the Rings* to be understood. At this point, it is possible to compare Tolkien’s portrayal of good and evil with similar depictions in fantasy literature and film. Then we begin sequential discussion of the majors episodes and themes in the trilogy, starting with an overview of the dramatic structure. Between discussing *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*, however, we will pause to return to four central narratives of the *Silmarillion* that are closely related (both in similarity and significant contrast) to the later portions of the trilogy. We then contrast the tragic mood of the *Silmarillion* with the end of the *Lord of the Rings* and discuss religious hope.
The course concludes with some comparisons between Tolkien’s epic and other fantasy works, principally Stephen Donaldson’s *First Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* (an epic fantasy trilogy) though we may bring in other famous fantasy works for comparison as well during the last week.

As we work through *The Lord of the Rings* and then Donaldson’s first *Chronicles*, I must assume that students have read the key chapters (and thus I will allude to events and passages later in the text when they are relevant for the section we are studying in a given day). Along with major portions of the text we will consider secondary essays on moral themes in the trilogy that are not necessarily limited in focus to that portion of the text. The goal is a cumulative development in which themes studied with the help of the secondary essays, which are introduced in the *roughly* following order:

1. Those looking at the structure of good and evil, personal character, and free will in the trilogy.
2. Those looking at the overall nature of epic fantasy as a genre, Tolkien’s notion of fate and “dwelling,” and the structure of Tolkien’s plot.
3. Those looking at the proper human relationship with nature, and the dangers of power.
4. Those considering the religious in Tolkien’s work, and our relationship with the divine.
5. How Donaldson’s form of fantasy makes the genre self-reflective, and what it means to start with an anti-hero who resists the fantasy (a representative of contemporary despair who has to learn what fantasy can teach, what Tolkien called the changed perspective or gestalt-shift).
7. Good, evil, and the human will in Donaldson, in comparison with Tolkien: more direct focus on how to overcome the contemporary predicament of despair in a disenchanted world.

**Tentative Schedule**

**7/2: Introduction to the Class, Fantasy Literature, and Mythology**
1. Introduction to course themes.
2. What is “fantasy” as a genre? What is “epic”?! (in class handout and discussion)
3. The relation of fantasy literature to older genres (sagas, myths, fairy tales); magic and quests.
4. “Briar Rose” (Sleeping Beauty) as an example of a fairy tale. Other examples of “fantasy” story.
5. The worldview in northern European mythology (Celtic, Norse, Icelandic): structure of cosmos.
10. Starting to put the basic elements together: wierd, divine order, freedom (?), chaos, and tragedy.

**7/3: The Northern Mythological Worldview: Tolkien’s sources in Norse & British myth & epic**
1. Stephen Donaldson’s summary of Wagner’s *Ring of the Nibelungs* (course packet).
2. The *Völsunga* saga and Norse myths from which the Sigurd tale was constructed – handout.
3. The *Nibelungleid*, a Germanic heroic epic version of the same episodes – handout.
4. Dragon-symbolism: from divine ownership to misappropriation and avarice (class discussion).
5. *Recommended*: Tolkien’s “The Monsters and the Critics” essay on *Beowulf* (eres only)
6. The “Matter of Britain” and the Arthurian legends – structure, key motifs (handout, discussion).
7/8: Christianity and Norse Myth: Tolkien’s Creation Stories in the Silmarillion
1. Tolkien’s *Silmarillion*, “Ainulindalë” (the Music of the Ainur)
2. Tolkien’s *Silmarillion*, “Of Aule and Yavanna” (creation of Ents and Dwarves)
3. Tolkien’s *Silmarillion*, “Of the Coming of the Elves and the Captivity of Melkor” (the Silmarils and the nature of evil as misappropriation)
5. Tolkien’s *Silmarillion*, “Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age” (the forging of the One Ring)

7/9: Two Kinds of Evil in the Fantasy Genre: Tolkien and others on misappropriation
1. Scott Davison, “Tolkien and the Nature of Evil” (in *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy*)
5. Evil in fantasy literature and film: comparing Tolkien with other fantasy works:
   – *Star Wars, Harry Potter, Narnia,* and *The Wizard of Earthsea* (film clips and discussion)

7/10: The Fellowship of the Ring and Narrative Structure
-- Re-read Book I of the *Lord of the Rings*: beginning to arrival crossing the ford into Rivendell.
1. Evil in Tolkien continued (any readings not yet discussed from prior class).
2. The quest structure: structure of *The Hobbit* by Tolkien (class discussion)
3. Tolkien’s portrayal of the Old Forest, the haunted ruins of Arnor, and the wild lands (discussion)
4. The development of major heroic characters in Book I (class discussion)
5. W.H. Auden, “The Quest Hero” (in Zimbardo and Isaacs, *Understanding the LOTR*)
6. David Miller, “Narrative Pattern in the Fellowship of the Ring” in *A Tolkien Compass* (packet)

7/11: Fellowship of the Ring, Book II: Ethics, Power, and Free Will
1. Douglas Blount, “Überhobbits: Tolkien, Nietzsche, and the Will to Power” (in *LOTR & Philos.*).
2. Key episodes: Moria, greed, courage; temptations of Galadriel & Boromir (class discussion)
3. Frodo’s choice at the breaking of the fellowship (class discussion).
4. Patricia Spacks, “Power and Meaning in the LOTR” (in Zimbardo & Isaacs, *Understanding the Lord of the Rings...*)
6. Short reaction paper: three-page critical response to one of the secondary essays read so far.

7/15: Nature and Dwellings in Tolkien and Heidegger: Fellowship & Two Towers
1. Pastoral episodes in LOTR, e.g. Shire, Bombadil, Rivendell, Lórien, Fangorn (discussion)
2. Tolkien’s portrayal of other realms and dwellings, vs the wasteland of Mordor (discussion)
3. Andrew Light, “Tolkien’s Green Time” (in *Lord of the Rings and Philosophy*)
4. Martin Heidegger’s “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” (course packet): powerpoint presentation.
   – Discussion: how do building design and living spaces shape one’s ethos or way of life?
7/16: Platonic and Aristotelian Themes in The Two Towers, and Narrative Structure again
1. Key Episodes: Ents, Gandalf, Recovery of Theoden, Helm’s Deep, Frodo & Sam meet Gollum;
2. Verlyn Flieger, “Frodo and Aragorn: The Concept of the Hero” (in Zimbardo and Isaacs)
3. Jorge J.E. Gracia “The Quests of Sam and Sméagol for the Happy Life” (in LOTR and Philos.)
4. Key Episodes: Faramir’s choice, Gollum’s choice, Shelob and Sam’s courage.
5. Parallels in plot structure throughout the Lord of the Rings as a whole (class discussion)
6. Recommended: Randel Helms, “Tolkien’s World: The Structure and Aesthetics of the LOTR” (eres only)

7/17: The Silmarillion: Tolkien’s Tragic Epic
1. Silmarillion, chs.19-21: Beren & Lúthien, the Fifth Battle, Túrin Turambar (Children of Húrin)
2. Class discussion: the central love story and the hopeless war.
3. Why is the Silmarillion so incredibly tragic compared to the Lord of the Rings? (class discussion)
4. Recommended: Randel Helms, Tolkien and the Silmarils, chs. 1-2 (only on eres; not in packet)

7/18: The Return of the King and the structure of Faerie Stories
1. Key episodes: the victory at Minas Tirith (class discussion)
2. Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy Stories” (course packet & “Tree and Leaf” section in Tolkien Reader)
3. Patrick Reilly, “Tolkien and the Fairy Story” (in Zimbardo and Isaacs, Understanding LOTR)
4. Recommended: Thomas Hibbs, “Providence and the Dramatic Unity of Lord of the Rings” (in Lord of the Rings and Philosophy)

7/22: The Return of the King Book V, chs. 6-10
1. Gunnar Urang, “Fantasy and the Phenomenology of Hope” (course packet)
2. John Davenport, “Happy Endings and Religious Hope” (in LOTR and Philosophy)
3. Why does Frodo succumb to the Ring? (class discussion)
4. “Into the West:” the poignant ending of the trilogy.

7/23: Transition to Stephen Donaldson’s Chronicles of Thomas Covenant
-- Read as much as possible of Lord Foul’s Bane, and at least to ch.15.
1. Themes in Lord Foul’s Bane: the nature of fantasy and dreams; Earthpower (compare magic in Earthsea, contrast magic in Potter).
2. Key episodes and motifs: leprosy, Kevin’s desecration, the rape, the white gold, refusals to help, moving ahead/don’t look back, etc.

7/24: Donaldson’s Lord Foul’s Bane: how to we resist despair, futility, and suffering?
-- Complete Lord Foul’s Bane.
1. Symbols of the will: the Lords, the Bloodguard, the Ranyhyn
2. The problems of violence and war; the service of life and the Earth; remorse and bargains.
3. Donaldson’s deistic cosmogony: the creation myths of Foamfollower & Tamarantha.
4. W.A. Senior: Stephen Donaldson’s Chronicles, ch.2: “Leper as Hero”

7/25: Begin Donaldson’s The Illearth War
-- Read as much as possible of The Illearth War, e.g. up to War Council.
1. Key episodes and motifs: calls; the power and peril in Elena; Troy’s will to serve the land (Troy
vs Covenant); bargains; Trell’s despair and Kevin’s.

2. Take-home test due.

7/29: Donaldson continued: *The Illearth War & Kierkegaard*

-- Finish *The Illearth War*

1. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* selections: “Preamble from the Heart’ (course packet)
2. Kierkegaardian themes: despair, infinite resignation, and faith in Troy, the Giants, and the Lords.
3. Individual consultations on final papers.

7/30: Begin Donaldson’s *The Power that Preserves*

-- Read as much as possible of *The Power that Preserves* and at least up through ch.10.

1. Complete discussion of *The Illearth War* if necessary.
3. Mhoram’s Kantian choice: autonomy and the right vs utility (discussion).
4. Lena, Triock, and Foamfollower in *Power that Preserves* – love and loyalty vs despair.

7/31: Donaldson’s *The Power that Preserves* continued.

-- Read as much as possible of *The Power that Preserves* and at least through ch.10.

1. W.A. Senior: *Stephen Donaldson’s Chronicles*, ch.4: “Myth”
   – The mythic structure of Donaldson’s land (discussion). Comparison to *Narnia* Chronicles?
2. Main themes: Mhoram’s choices, the Bloodguard, the Healer, Covenant’s new commitment.
3. Individual consultations on final papers.

8/1: Class conclusion

-- Finish the *The Power that Preserves*

1. Mhoram’s Victory: the nature of will, power, and faith – or, how to resist despair (discussion).
2. The result of the rape and Covenant’s responsibility: is this “eucatastrophe”? (class discussion)
3. Overall structure of the *First Chronicles* compared to *The Lord of the Rings*.
4. Any remaining oral reports on readings, or other fantasy works.

8/4: Class conclusion: final meeting in lieu of final exam.

1. Final paper due.

Other essays on eres

Paul Kocher, “Middle-earth: An Imaginary Narrative?” in *Master of Middle Earth*
Richard Purtil, “Good and Evil in Tolkien,” in *Lord of the Elves and Eldils*
Jane Chance, “The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien’s Epic”
Patrick Curry, “Middle-Earth: Nature and Ecology,” in *Defending Middle Earth*
Robert Plank, “The Scouring of the Shire: Tolkien’s View of Fascism,” in *A Tolkien Compass*
Roger King, “Recovery, Escape, Consolation,” in *J.R.R. Tolkien: This Far Land*
Diana Jones, “The Shape of the Narrative in the LOTR,” in *J.R.R. Tolkien: This Far Land*
Various recommended sources on Tolkien [most of which are available through the Quinn library]

2. Kurt Bruner and Jim Ware, Finding God in the Lord of the Rings (Tyndale House Publishers, 2001)
11. Neil Issacs and Rose Zimbardo, Tolkien and the Critics (University of Notre Dame Press, 1968)
15. Jared Lobdell, ed. A Tolkien Compass (Chicago: Open Court, 1975)
19. Anne Petty, One Ring to Bind Them All: Tolkien’s Mythology (University of Alabama Press, 1979)
27. Mark Smith, Tolkien’s Ordinary Virtues (Intervarsity Press, 2002)
28. Robert Eagleton, Reading The Lord of the Rings (Continuum, 2005)