



“There and Back Again”: A Critical Reflection on Hobbits, Wizards, Middle Earth, and a Purposeful Life after Boston College

UNCP4602

© Prof. Brian J. Gareau

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Course Location/Time/Day

Stokes Hall 111S / 4:30PM-6:50PM/ Mondays

Office Hours

TBD: This time is set aside for you to visit me to ask questions, discuss course content, or other matters on your mind.

Course Description

This seminar-style capstone explores J.R.R. Tolkien’s transformative works, which have defined the modern fantasy genre and inspired generations to reflect on faith, purpose, and meaning.

Through Tolkien's narratives, students will engage in discussions on how their own journeys at Boston College mirror the themes of challenge, growth, and hope found in Middle-earth. As they prepare to graduate, they will reflect on how their experiences at BC resonate with Tolkien's idea of "There and Back Again," fostering a deeper understanding of their personal, and intellectual paths.

Course Focus

This seminar-style Fourth-Year Capstone course will center on several of the great works of J.R.R. Tolkien, whose various books on Middle Earth have sold hundreds of millions of copies, and led to the creation of several films (both in cartoon form and Peter Jackson's two blockbuster trilogies, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Hobbit*), many dramatized reenactments, and most recently the Amazon Prime series, *The Rings of Power*. It is no exaggeration to state that, without Tolkien, the epic fantasy genre (think *Harry Potter*, *Percy Jackson*, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, or *The Wheel of Time*) would likely never have entered the mainstream. Tolkien's world has inspired millions of people to pursue lives of meaning and purpose, including faculty and students at Boston College. Using these books as a basis for conversation, students will discuss themes brought to light by Tolkien's works and how their curricular experiences, trials, fears, accomplishments, and hopes for the future resonate with them.

Learning Goals

To use the great works of J.R.R. Tolkien, a devout Catholic (who famously played an influential role in the conversion of his close friend, C. S. Lewis, from atheism to Christianity), the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon and a Fellow of Pembroke College at the University of Oxford, and famed author of the epic fantasy works *The Hobbit*, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and *The Silmarillion*, as a basis upon which to:

1. Reflect on what it means to transition from the liberal arts education received on The Heights to other surroundings;
2. Use ethical and moral discernment to examine how themes in Tolkien's works spark conversation about the ethical dimensions of each student's own chosen field and their co-curricular engagements, apply moral discernment to complex societal issues, and develop a heightened sense of responsibility as individuals and professionals;
3. Integrate and synthesize knowledge and skills acquired through their major courses, core courses, and co-curricular experiences to develop a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of themselves and their field of study;
4. Through exploration of Tolkien's works and our class conversations, students will carefully consider and share reflections with classmates on what brought them to their current moment and how their distinctive experiences at BC will help them meet the future as moral citizens in pursuit of a life of flourishing, and;
5. Collaborate for the Common Good: Students will find joy and value in collaborating in interdisciplinary teams to address real-world challenges reflective of those raised in Tolkien's works to promote the common good.

Common phrases, questions, and perspectives pervasive at BC such as “Be Attentive, Be Reflective, Be Loving,” “Go set the world aflame,” and “What gives you joy? What are you good at? What does the world need of you?,” “Ever to Excel,” and “the common good” will be brought into conversation with heroes (some fantastical, others quite ordinary) and major social, environmental, political, and moral challenges of Tolkien’s world.

Required Books

J.R.R. Tolkien 4-Book Boxed Set: The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. Published by: Del Rey. ISBN-10: 0345538374; ISBN-13: 978-0345538376

Other book chapters (see below) will be provided, on Canvas.

Assessment and Evaluation

Students will be evaluated based upon 1) weekly participation in class discussion, 2) weekly “critical summaries” on the assigned reading and reflections about how it connects to their own experiences, as well as reflections of other students; 3) a final one-on-one oral interview with the instructor; and, 4) a creative, collaborative project on the Common Good, to be developed over the course of the semester (with my supervision).

Classroom Norms

We will discuss our phone and laptop policy as a group.

My primary goal is that this class acts as a safe space for everyone. If at any time anyone feels unsafe, however, it might be defined by YOU, please let me know via email or during office hours, and I will strive to repair this for you.

Grading

Assignments are graded using the assessment rubrics displayed below.

Students who “exceed expectations” will receive an A or A- on assignments, those “meeting expectations” will receive a B+ through a B, and those “Needing Improvement” will receive a grade from a B- through an F.

Table 1. Student Work & Percentage of Grade Earned

In-class Participation	25%
Weekly Critical Summaries	35%
Common Good Collaborations	20%
Final One-on-One Interview	20%

Participation

Open, honest, and engaging participation is critical for a course like this. Everyone is encouraged to work on articulating their ideas, opinions, and questions in transparent, respectful ways that foster connections between life experiences and course content, disciplinary discussions, concerns, and ideas with course discussions. Learning to discuss is a lifelong skill that will help in any number of settings.

Table 2. Grade Scale

Letter Grade	% Range
A	93-100
A-	90-93
B+	87-90
B	83-87
B-	80-83
C+	78-80
C	73-78
C-	70-73
D+	67-70
D	63-67
D-	60-63
F	<60

Weekly Participation Rubric

	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Needs Improvement
Listening to Others	Actively listens. Takes notes consistently on what is said to formulate good comments and questions. Acts empathically, and attentively.	Listens actively, demonstrating attentiveness. Takes notes on key points and is mainly attentive.	Shows minimal engagement in listening, often appearing distracted or disinterested. Rarely takes notes or contributes to the conversation in a meaningful way.
Responding to Comments	Engaging with comments, questions, and conversations in ways that <i>motivate</i> further engagement. Using your experiences and skillsets to contribute new knowledge to the conversation. Comment in ways that articulate your values and thoughts about the common good. Recognizes when they have spoken a great deal and leaves space for others to participate.	Engages with comments and questions, contributing relevant ideas and experiences. Shows an understanding of when to speak and when to allow others the opportunity to participate.	Responses to comments and questions are minimal or lacking in depth. Struggles to engage others or contribute new ideas. May dominate conversations without leaving room for others.
Asking Further Questions	Questions are asked in ways that encourage engagement with course content. Questions that ask others to bring their majors, their disciplines, and their prior experiences into the conversation. Ask questions about how this week connects to previous weeks.	Asks questions that are relevant to the course content and foster engagement. Usually makes connections between current and previous material, encouraging others to do the same.	Rarely asks questions, or asks questions that are not directly related to the course content. Does not make connections between course material, missing opportunities to deepen the discussion.

Critical Summary Guidelines

Students are asked to use a technique of reflection practiced by members of the Society of Jesus: The Examine. The Examen is a spiritual practice developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. It is a method of prayerful reflection on the events of the day to discern God's presence and direction in one's life. The Examen typically consists of five steps:

- 1) Gratitude: Begin by thanking God for the blessings of the day.
- 2) Petition: Ask for the grace to understand how God is acting in your life.
- 3) Review: Reflect on the events of the day, paying attention to your feelings and reactions.
- 4) Response: Consider how you responded to God's presence and what you could have done differently.
- 5) Resolution: Look ahead to tomorrow, asking for God's help in living more faithfully.

The practice is often done daily, usually in the evening, to help cultivate a habit of noticing God's work in everyday life.

Your critical summaries – 1-3 pages, single-spaced – will be written with a similar framework, yet you will concentrate on the course content:

In the quietness of your heart, look back at the experience of reading for this course, and the discussions that we shared in previous classes...

- 1) **Be Attentive:** Pay attention to what you read. Did anything in the readings bring you joy, or remind you of moments in your day, week, or life that gladdened you? Did other aspects of the readings sadden you? Why? When hearing from our guests, did anything about the experience resonate with your own experiences?
- 2) **Be Reflective:** Where does the content of the reading seem to be directing you today? To connect the experience of reading this material to our whole selves, we need to think about the causes and implications of events and weigh options in light of consequence (much as the characters in the Lord of the Rings must do- a correlation very much in Tolkien's mind). Identify with gratitude the gifts of the day (in our case, the time you took to read in peace) and the future they point towards. Where do the joys seem to be leading? What will you share with the class? Name prejudices, fears, and shortcomings that prevent you from that joy. Do characters in our readings help shed light on those fears, those shortcomings?
- 3) **Be Loving:** As you look toward tomorrow, how might the experience of reading and discussing with classmates help shape how you will act in order to be faithful to what you have learned about and what gives you life? How will you freely act in ways that are consistent with your true self, what you know and value? How does the course material help you do so? How will you lovingly share your gifts with the people who are part of your community?

Critical Summary Rubric

	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Needs Improvement
Be Attentive	Demonstrates a deep connection with the reading material by identifying specific moments (with page numbers and quotes) that brought joy or sadness and clearly articulates why. Makes meaningful connections between the readings and personal experiences, showing resonance with the content. Actively engages with student perspectives, drawing parallels between their experiences and personal life.	Shows an understanding of the reading material by recognizing moments that brought joy or sadness but provides a limited reflection on why (occasional absence of page numbers). Makes some connections between the readings and personal experiences, though not always deeply explored. Engages with other students but may not fully explore the connections to personal experiences.	Limited attention to the reading material, with minimal identification of joyful or saddening moments. Few or no connections are made between the readings and personal experiences. Limited or no engagement with other student perspectives, with little to no reflection on how their experiences relate to personal life.
Be Reflective	Thoughtfully connects the reading material to personal life and future actions, with deep reflection on causes, implications, and potential consequences. Identifies and expresses gratitude for specific gifts of the day and contemplates how they guide future actions.	Reflects on the reading material and connects it to personal life, though with less depth or exploration of implications. Identifies gifts of the day and acknowledges their role in shaping future actions, though reflection may be more surface-level. Acknowledges personal prejudices, fears, and shortcomings but may not	Minimal reflection on the reading material, with little connection to personal life or future actions. Few or no gifts of the day were identified, with limited consideration of their implications. Limited acknowledgment of personal prejudices, fears, and

	Courageously names personal prejudices, fears, and shortcomings, and connects them to the course material and characters in the readings in specific ways .	fully explore their connection to the readings.	shortcomings, with little connection to the readings.
Be Loving	Demonstrates a clear commitment to applying the lessons from the readings and discussions in future actions, showing alignment with personal values and true self. Thoughtfully considers how to share personal gifts with the community in a loving and intentional way, drawing directly from the course material. Exhibits a strong understanding of how the course material influences personal growth and relationships with others.	Shows an intention to apply lessons from the readings and discussions in future actions, though alignment with personal values may be less clear. Considers how to share personal gifts with the community, though the connection to the course material may be less explicit. Demonstrates an understanding of how the course material influences personal growth but may not fully explore its impact on relationships with others.	Limited or no consideration of how to apply lessons from the readings and discussions in future actions. Little thought given to sharing personal gifts with the community, with minimal connection to the course material. Minimal understanding of how the course material influences personal growth and relationships with others.

Common Good Collaboration Project Description

We will work in teams to discuss how what you are learning in class might be applied toward the common good, broadly understood (and you have the liberty to provide further detail on this understanding; see rubric below) as living a life of meaning, purpose, and care for all people and other forms of life, including Our Common Home, the (Middle) Earth. The teams will discuss how what is learned in this class applies to their other courses and extracurricular activities. At the end of the semester, those teams will present to the class what they have discussed and learned. The teams will be asked to be creative in how they present their discussions to the class in a brief presentation.

Common Good Collaboration Rubric

	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Needs Improvement
Real-world Problems Reflected in Tolkien's Works	The team provides rich detail on the real-world problems that they focus on and provides careful detail on how the problem is portrayed in Tolkien's work by certain characters, geography, moral dilemmas, etc. The team shows a clear connection to their disciplinary backgrounds, their major/minor, or other experiences.	The team identifies relevant real-world problems and provides an adequate explanation of how these issues are portrayed in Tolkien's work. They reference specific characters, geography, or moral dilemmas but may lack depth in the connections. The team's discussion shows a general connection to their disciplinary backgrounds, their major/minor, or other experiences.	The team struggles to identify or articulate clearly the real-world problems they are focusing on, with minimal or unclear connections to Tolkien's work. References to characters, geography, or moral dilemmas may be vague or superficial. The team's discussion lacks a clear connection to their disciplinary backgrounds, their major/minor, or other experiences.
Common Good Engagement	The team discusses carefully how addressing this problem works towards the common good as they carefully understand the concept. Students draw from certain courses or disciplinary perspectives to explain their	The team adequately discusses how addressing the identified problem contributes to the common good. They mention courses, talks, or readings that inform their understanding but may not fully elaborate on their	The team provides a limited or unclear discussion on how addressing the problem relates to the common good. References to courses, talks, or readings are sparse or missing, and the team does not effectively present data or

	approach to the common good. The team provides data or other information on how all people and Our Common Home would be allowed to flourish by addressing the problem.	relevance. The team presents basic data or information on how people and Our Common Home would benefit, but the connection to flourishing may not be deeply explored.	information on the benefits to people or Our Common Home. The concept of flourishing is not meaningfully explored.
Creativity in Delivery	The team provided an innovative, creative, out-of-the-box way to present their collaborative project. The team members take risks in providing insights into Tolkien and real-world problems that are personal and meaningful to them as a team, and individually. The team will use their imagination to link course content to our lives. Teams will integrate approaches learned in their respective disciplines. Teams creatively discuss how this form of collaboration can be taken into their future lives.	The team delivers their collaborative project in a standard and clear manner. The presentation demonstrates some creativity but stays within conventional approaches. The team shows a willingness to integrate different disciplinary perspectives but may not fully explore innovative or personal insights, and are somewhat imaginative. The connection to how this collaboration could be applied in future contexts is mentioned but not deeply developed.	The team's presentation is conventional and lacks creativity. The delivery does not demonstrate innovation or risk-taking and may fail to engage the audience. The integration of disciplinary perspectives is minimal, and the discussion of how this collaboration could be relevant in the future is either weak or absent.

Oral Final Exam

How do you feel you performed in this course? What motivated you to stay engaged until the end? What obstacles prevented your motivation? We will discuss what you learned, and what you plan to do with the knowledge and experiences that you have gained.

Class/University Policies

Mental Health and Wellness

If you find yourself struggling with your mental or physical health this semester, please feel free to approach me. I will try to be flexible and accommodating. You can also find free, confidential mental health services at University Counseling Services by calling (617) 552-3310. Wellness Coaching appointments are available through the Center for Student Wellness to help you create an actionable plan to reach your wellness goals. Visit [CSW's website](#) to schedule a meeting with a trained peer Wellness Coach, or to learn more about resources to help you prioritize your mind, body, and soul this semester.

Special Accommodations

If you are a student with a documented disability seeking reasonable accommodations in this course, please contact Kathy Duggan, (617) 552-8093, dugganka@bc.edu, at the Connors Family Learning Center regarding learning disabilities and ADHD, or Rory Stein, rory.stein@bc.edu, Assistant Dean for students with disabilities in the Disability Services Office regarding all other types of disabilities, including temporary disabilities. Advance notice and appropriate documentation are required for accommodations.

Academic Integrity

“The pursuit of knowledge can proceed only when scholars take responsibility and receive credit for their work. Recognition of individual contributions to knowledge and of the intellectual property of others builds trust within the University and encourages the sharing of ideas that is essential to scholarship. Similarly, the educational process requires that individuals present their own ideas and insights for evaluation, critique, and eventual reformulation. Presentation of others' work as one's own is not only intellectual dishonesty, but also undermines the educational process.” Excerpt from: <http://www.bc.edu/integrity>

It is your responsibility to know Boston College’s Academic Integrity Standards on cheating, plagiarism, and collusion at <http://www.bc.edu/integrity>

AI in this Course

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tool Usage: AI tools can generate text, images, and other media very quickly. Since a central goal of this course is to help you become independent and critical thinkers, you are discouraged from using AI tools to create text, video, audio, or images that end up in your work (assignments, activities, responses, etc.).

ONE EXCEPTION. If you’d like to look up the history of certain characters (e.g., “Where did Shelob come from?”; “Who were Beren and Luthien Tenuviel?”; What was Cirith Ungul originally used for?), learn more about the background of certain races (e.g., “How were orcs created?”; what is the difference between elves from Mirkwood and Lothlorien?), or investigate the languages (e.g., “What is the difference between Quenya and Silvan Elvish?”), feel free – just give ChatGPT the credit.

If any part of this is confusing or uncertain, please reach out to me for a conversation before submitting your work.

Class Recording Policy

Boston College seeks to protect the integrity of what transpires in the classroom among students and professors, any course materials prepared by the professor, and the privacy of students and faculty. With this in mind, you are prohibited from recording (audio or video) any lectures, seminars, or other classroom activities without the express permission of the instructor and peers, including transcriptions created with the help of Gen AI tools. Authorized recordings (including any made to accommodate ADA considerations) and all other course materials (including any materials posted on Canvas) may only be used for an individual’s (or group’s) study in the course, and may not be shared with any wider audience on or off campus unless the instructor has explicitly given such permission.

Attendance Policy

The only "excused" absences are those presented to me in writing (a) by a health care practitioner certifying that you had a sound medical reason to be absent from class (and note that the BC Infirmary does **not** give out such notes) or (b) by your Dean certifying that you had a serious personal reason to be absent from class. Job interviews do not count as a legitimate

absence, but rather are a conscious choice you make to miss class. Don't ask me for an exemption from this rule. *You may not turn in assignments for classes you did not attend.*

Schedule of Readings

Week 1 (Monday, Jan 13)

Introductions- Expectations for the course

Anything else you would like me to know...

Martin, George R.R. (2001) Introduction. In, (Karen Haber, Ed.) *Meditations on Middle Earth*. NY: St. Martin's Press.

Friesner, Esther M. (2001) If You Give a Girl a Hobbit. In, (Karen Haber, Ed.) *Meditations on Middle Earth*. NY: St. Martin's Press.

Chesterton, G.K. "The Ethics of Elfland," from *Orthodoxy*

Week 2 (Monday, Jan 27)

The Hobbit: Chapters 1-9

Christensen, Bonniejean (1975) Gollum's Character Transformation in *The Hobbit*. In, (Jared Lobdell, Ed.) *The Tolkien Compass*. Chicago: Open Court Press.

Week 3 (Monday, February 3)

The Hobbit: Chapters 1-19

Mathews, Dorothy (1975) The Psychological Journey of Bilbo Baggins. In, (Jared Lobdell, Ed.) *The Tolkien Compass*. Chicago: Open Court Press.

Week 4 (Monday, February 10)

The Fellowship of the Ring: Book 1, Chapters I-VI

Chapter 3: Hobbits and the Agrarian Society of the Shire. In, *Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Dickerson, Matthew and Jonathan Evans), 2006, Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press.

Week 5 (Monday, February 17)

The Fellowship of the Ring: Book 1, Chapters VII-XII

Le Guin, Ursula, *Rhythmic Patterns in The Lord of the Rings*, In, (Karen Haber, Ed.) *Meditations on Middle Earth*. NY: St. Martin's Press, 2001.

Week 6 (Monday, February 24)

The Fellowship of the Ring: Book 2, Chapters I-V

Chapter 4: Horticulture and the Aesthetics of the Elves. In, *Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Dickerson, Matthew and Jonathan Evans), 2006, Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press.

Spring Vacation (3-8 March)

Week 7 (Monday, March 10)

Common Good Collaboration discussion, group formation in-class

The Fellowship of the Ring: Book 2, Chapters VI-X

Chapter 6: Bronson, Eric, 'Farewell to Lorien': The Bounded Joy of Existentialists, In, (Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson, Eds.) *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy*. Chicago: Open Court Press, 2003.

Week 8 (Monday, March 17)

Common Good Collaboration check-in

The Two Towers: Book 3, Chapters I-V

Chapter 5: Woods, Wildness, and the Feraculture of the Ents, In, *Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Dickerson, Matthew and Jonathan Evans), 2006, Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press.

Week 9 (Monday, March 24)

Common Good Collaboration check-in

The Two Towers: Book 3, Chapters VI-XI

Week 10 (Monday, March 31)

Common Good Collaboration check-in

The Two Towers: Book 4, Chapters I-V

Week 11 (Monday, April 7)

Common Good Collaboration check-in

The Return of the King: Book 5, Chapters I-V

Week 12 (Monday, April 14)

Common Good Collaboration check-in

The Return of the King: Book 5, Chapters VI-X

Davis, Bill, Chapter 10: Choosing to Die: The Gift of Mortality in Middle-Earth, In, (Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson, Eds.) *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy*. Chicago: Open Court Press, 2003.

Week 13 (TUESDAY, April 22- due to Patriot's Day)

Common Good Collaboration check-in

The Return of the King: Book 6, Chapters I-V

Perkins, Agnes and Hellen Hill, Chapter 4: The Corruption of Power, In, (Jared Lobdell, Ed.) *The Tolkien Compass*. Chicago: Open Court Press.

Week 14 (Monday, April 28) – Final class

Common Good Project Presentations

The Return of the King: Book 6, Chapters VI-IX

Chapter 9: Rousing the Shire, In, *Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Dickerson, Matthew and Jonathan Evans), 2006, Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press.

Final oral exam to be scheduled with instructor during finals week



Namárië!