



Creating a Modern Myth: Mythopoeia in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

G.Divyasrri

PhD. Research Scholar, Annamalai University,
Chidambaram



Open Access

Manuscript ID:

BIJ-SPL3-Mar26-ES-020

Subject: English Studies

Received: 20.12.2025

Accepted: 09.01.2026

Published: 17.03.2026

DOI: 10.64938/bij.v10si3.26.Mar020

Copy Right:



This work is licensed under
a Creative Commons Attribution-
ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Abstract

J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings is often described as fantasy, it is far more than an imaginative escape from reality. At its core lies mythopoeia—the conscious act of creating myth. Tolkien believed that myth is one of the deepest ways human beings express truth, memory, and moral understanding. This article explores how The Lord of the Rings functions as a modern myth through Tolkien's "idea of sub-creation, his richly imagined history of Middle-earth, the presence of supernatural beings, and powerful symbols such as the One Ring. By reworking ancient mythic patterns for a modern audience, Tolkien creates a story that speaks to timeless human concern power, sacrifice, loss, hope, and responsibility making The Lord of the Rings a living myth rather than a mere fantasy narrative. In an age shaped by war, disillusionment, and rapid social change, J. R. R. Tolkien turned not to realism but to myth. The Lord of the Rings emerged from his belief that modern literature had lost something essential the ability to convey deep moral and emotional truths through mythic storytelling. Tolkien did not write simply to entertain he wrote to recover a way of seeing the world in which courage, humility, loyalty, and hope still mattered.

Keywords: myth, one ring, middle earth, tolkien, mythopoeia

Tolkien believed that myth was neither a deception nor an outmoded style of storytelling. Instead, it was a meaningful way of understanding reality. He believed that myths persisted because they spoke to common human experiences. This idea is shown in the novel *The Lord of the Rings*, which creates a whole mythical world that feels old, lived in, and emotionally real. This article explores Tolkien's use of mythopoeia in the novel *The Lord of the Rings*, exhibiting how the novel maintains wonder and moral depth through mythical customs to deal with

contemporary concerns while preserving awe and moral complexity.

During the twentieth century, when realism and modernism dominated literary discourse J. R. R. Tolkien stood out as a fantasy writer firmly committed to myth and fantasy. He believed that myth was not just an outmoded type of narrative, but rather a basic creation of human creativity and truth. Tolkien felt that modern literature had lost something important. The novel *The Lord of the Rings* arose from his concern that modern literature had lost something important. This thought gave him the



power to convey profound moral and emotional truths through legendary storytelling. Tolkien's artistic purpose went beyond creating isolated fantasy stories he wanted to create a convincing mythic world that could compete with the ancient mythology of Greece, Scandinavia, and the Anglo-Saxon tradition.

This creative force is best understood through the concept of mythopoeia, which means the creation of myth. His works constitute a modern re-engagement with myth, combining ancient story structures with a particular modern literary sense. The novel *The Lord of the Rings* was written during the most critical periods of the two World Wars. Tolkien's myth-making is strongly related to his concept of sub-creation. He maintained that humans, as creative beings, contribute to creation by crafting stories, languages, and worlds. They engage with reality more thoroughly rather than escaping it. Tolkien defined myth as a technique of communicating truth through the imagination. This is concretely expressed in Middle-earth in the novel *The Lord of the Rings*. The Middle-earth feels believable, not because it mirrors contemporary reality, but because it has its own internal logic, moral order, and history. Tolkien's sub-created world encourages entering a reality in which choices matter, and virtue and evil are lived experiences rather than abstract concepts.

One of the most remarkable aspects of *The Lord of the Rings* is its sense of antiquity. Walking through Middle-earth, you don't just see a world; you feel its age. It's a landscape shaped by a long and weary past—by wars that were lost, kingdoms that crumbled, and grandeur that's been quietly fading for centuries. The present moment is just a small island in a vast sea of history.

Using the concept of mythopoeia, Tolkien built his own mythological realm, Middle-earth, which is commonly referred to as Tolkien's sub-creation. Tolkien created a unique mythological realm through Middle-earth's enormous history, languages, and traditions. Tolkien's sub-creation theory is central to his understanding of mythopoeia. According to Tolkien, the human artist does not create from

scratch, but rather works inside the initial creation, changing given elements with imagination. Myth-making thus becomes an act of participation in divine creativity rather than a denial of reality. In this sense, myth is not a falsehood but a meaningful imaginative expression of truth.

Tolkien considered myths them as profound symbolic narratives that communicated moral, spiritual, and philosophical truths he rejected the idea that myths are only the common basic explanations for natural phenomena. Thus, Tolkien's mythopoeia emerges as both an artistic and philosophical attitude, challenging modern scepticism toward myth. One of Tolkien's mythopoeia's distinguishing features is the remarkable coherence of his secondary cosmos. Middle-earth is more than just a location for adventures it is a fully formed mythic realm, complete with its own creation story, historical epochs, lineages, and languages.

Middle-earth's tale, with its emphasis on harmony, fall, and discord, follows typical legendary themes seen in classical and Norse mythology. The slide from an era of greater beauty and strength to one of loss and disintegration echoes the legendary concept of a broken world. This structural coherence supports Tolkien's goal of creating a mythology rather than a single tale. The one ring evolves as the centre of the novel *The Lord of the Rings*. It is one of the most compelling symbols in modern literature. The ring symbolises desire to dominate others is a theme that runs deep in mythic cultures and is represented by the Ring. Unlike other heroic arms that bring glory, the Ring spreads pain and moral decay. It is the psychological power of the Ring that makes it so legendary. Even the best and worst characters from the book are its puppets. Its effect exposes human frailty and the dangers of an unrestrained lust for the ring. The psychological force of the Ring is what elevates it to mythic status. The one ring controls the most virtuous characters and also the evil characters of the novel. Its effect exposes human frailty and the risks of uncontrolled ambition towards the ring. In the novel *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien shows power as something that



must be resisted rather than owned, emphasising the moral importance of his myth-making.

“Having set myself a task, the arrogance of which I fully recognised and trembled at: being precisely to restore to the English an epic tradition and present them with a mythology of their own: it is a wonderful thing to be told that I have succeeded, at least with those who still have the undarkened heart and mind”. J. R. R. Tolkien, in a letter from 1956 (*Letters* 231).

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo Baggins is a unique mythic hero. He isn't naturally powerful, honourable, or adventurous. However, his willingness to carry the burden of the Ring elevates him to the moral centre of the plot. Tolkien asserts that true heroism consists not in victory but in endurance and self-sacrifice. Frodo's failure at the end of his quest does not reduce his significance; rather, it emphasises the limitations of human might and the need for mercy and grace. This genuinely human approach to heroism heightens the novel's mythological power. Frodo symbolizes sacrifice, while the character of Aragorn stands for restoration. His journey is patterned after the age, old myth of the concealed monarch who has to demonstrate his worth before taking over the kingdom. Nevertheless, Aragorn's rule is characterized by serving and mending, not by prevailing. Aragorn's ability to heal is a telling example of the idea that a real king is the one who brings back life instead of exerting control over it. Aragorn's power to heal exemplifies the notion that a true king restores rather than controls life. Tolkien redefines monarchy as a moral obligation rather than a symbol of power. Aragorn's character connects with an ancient mythic image of leadership based on humility and responsibility. The conclusion of the novel *The Lord of the Rings* is one of the most moving moments. The Elves leave, magic fades, and Middle-earth transitions to a more mundane, less enchanted future. This sense of ending is deeply mythic. Tolkien reminds us that even great victories are accompanied by loss. The world cannot remain forever in its mythic state. This acceptance of impermanence gives the novel its elegiac tone and distinguishes it from simple tales of triumph. In

Tolkien's vision, myth teaches not escape but acceptance and wisdom.

Tolkien himself has invented a lot of own languages. Language plays a quiet but powerful role in Tolkien's mythopoeia. Tolkien's mythical names, songs, and poems preserve memory and identity. They connect characters to their past and give meaning to their struggles. Through language, Tolkien shows that myth is closely tied to remembrance. To name something is to honour it, and to tell a story is to resist forgetting. In *The Lord of the Rings*, storytelling itself becomes an act of hope. The novel *The Lord of the Rings* is glorified as one of the greatest novels of modern myth-making. His novel draws on traditional myths while speaking directly about power, loss, courage, and hope.

Gandalf mentions that “I would use this Ring from a desire to do good—but through me it would wield a power too great and terrible to imagine.” (*The Lord of the Rings* 60). Tolkien restores myth to its original purpose to understand the surroundings. As a result, *The Lord of the Rings* is transformed from a fantasy tale to a modern-day myth. Tolkien's mythopoeia is filled with a diverse of supernatural beings, each of whom holds a distinct, specific position. The Valar and Maiar characters in the novel *The Lord of the Rings* resemble the gods and demigods of ancient myth, yet they are characterised by moral limitations and responsibilities rather than absolute power. Their involvement in the world is marked by restraint, underscoring Tolkien's emphasis on moral order and free will. In a letter to his son Christopher, Tolkien called Gandalf his “Odinic wanderer. (1981, 119).

Elves, Dwarves, and Hobbits are different races that represent diverse ideals and symbolic meanings. Dwarves represent craftsmanship and endurance, Elves represent memory, art, and eternity tinged with sorrow, hobbits, despite their apparent insignificance, show humility and moral resilience. Through these different kinds of races, Tolkien creates a legendary anthropology that investigates various forms of beings in the universe. Tolkien's mythopoeia relies heavily on mythological Swords, rings and artefacts. They are not only symbols, they are also more than



that; they represent fate, moral choice, and historical continuity. The One Ring serves as a prominent legendary symbol. Tolkien reshapes the conventional heroic journey by putting endurance, humility, and moral conflict ahead of physical prowess. It represents the corruptive nature of power and the dangers of dominance. Such symbolism emphasises the main idea of Tolkien's mythmaking endeavour. For instance, Frodo's journey is not a triumphant conquest, but rather a slow deterioration of strength that emphasises the cost of bearing a legendary burden. Tolkien's mythopoeia serves as a form of cultural memory. His mythology transforms inherited traditions more than just restoring the past materials of ancient myth. His mythopoeia conveys a sense of continuity, implying that myth can still provide meaning and coherence in an era of fragmentation and loss.

References

1. Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 3rd ed., Princeton UP, 2008.
2. Chance, Jane. *Tolkien's Art: A Mythology for England*. University Press of Kentucky, 2001.
3. Eliade, Mircea. *Myth and Reality*. Harper & Row, 1963.
4. Flieger, Verlyn. *A Question of Time: J. R. R. Tolkien's Road to Faërie*. Kent State UP, 1997.
5. *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World*. Kent State UP, 2002.
6. Shippey, Tom. *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. HarperCollins, 2000.
7. *The Road to Middle-earth*. HarperCollins, 2005.
8. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings*. HarperCollins, 2014.
9. "Mythopoeia." *Tree and Leaf*, HarperCollins, 2001, pp. 85–92.
10. "On Fairy-Stories." *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, edited by Christopher Tolkien, HarperCollins, 2006, pp. 109–161.