

Excerpt from Unit Study Three

Exploring Setting

A Guide to Middle Earth

“At the feet of the trees, and all about the green hill-sides the grass was studded with small golden flowers shaped like stars. Among them, nodding on slender stalks, were other flowers, white and palest green; they glimmered as a mist amid the rich hue of the grass. Over all the sky was blue, and the sun of afternoon glowed upon the hill and cast long green shadows beneath the trees (Lord of the Rings, page 341).”

Look at the above paragraph. Would you like to visit this place? Do you think that this is a safe place or a dangerous one? What kind of action do you expect to occur here? What kind of creatures will you expect to encounter? In this paragraph, the author is setting the stage for the next events in the story.

The setting of a work of literature is the place and time period in which the action of the work of literature occurs. Setting can also include indicators of the social, political, or religious factors that would provide a framework for the way a character behaves. A short story may have only one setting, but most longer works involve a general setting, such as the country or time period, and also include specific settings for individual scenes within the book.

A fantasy, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, often uses an imaginary time or place so that the author has greater freedom to introduce places and events that exist only in the realm of imagination. In this way, the author becomes more than just a writer: he becomes what Tolkien referred to as a “sub-creator.” Only God could create the Real World, explained Tolkien. But within that framework, man can “create” his own imaginary worlds (*The Letters of J.R.R Tolkien*, p. 188-189). More about fantasy as an art form will be discussed in another unit study.

Middle-earth is the setting for the entire epic adventure of *The Lord of the Rings*. The term Middle-earth was not invented by Tolkien. It comes from a term used to describe the earth in some of the earliest Old English poetry and described the part of the earth that was inhabited by men, as opposed to the heavens above or that which was below. An example of the use of this term is found in the poem “Caedmon’s Hymn” that was written about A.D. 657. This poem is the earliest known poem composed by an English author. According to the Venerable Bede, the earliest English historian, Caedmon was an illiterate cowherd who was miraculously gifted by God to write poems about sacred history. Caedmon’s Hymn was originally an oral poem that was translated and preserved by the historian Bede.

Now let me praise the keeper of Heaven's kingdom,
The might of the Creator, and his thought,
The work of the Father of glory, how each of wonders
The Eternal Lord established in the beginning.
He first created for the sons of men
Heaven as a roof, the holy Creator,
Then Middle-earth the keeper of mankind,
The Eternal Lord, afterwards made,
The earth for men, the Almighty Lord. (Toronto)

Tolkien clearly intended for Middle-Earth to represent the "real" world, particularly the area presently occupied by England and the Northwest portion of Europe (which provided source material for many of his own legends.) The fact that his maps look little like the present day map of Europe is easily explained by Gandalf's comment on page 260, "Seas and lands may change." Clearly, Gandalf was right!

In a letter to famed poet and critic W.H. Auden, Tolkien wrote: "The theatre of my tale is this earth, the one in which we now live, but the historical time period is imaginary. The essentials of that abiding place are all there (at any rate for the inhabitants of Northwest Europe), so naturally it feels familiar, even if glorified by the enchantment of distance." Letters 239).

THE FRAME TALE

Tolkien set his world in a time period some time in the distant pre-Christian era which has no recorded history, except, of course that which Tolkien provides. In order to create the illusion of historical accuracy, Tolkien puts his tale in a frame. In the Prologue on pages 13-15, Tolkien tells us that the information concerning the events of this book were gathered from The Red Book, The Thain's Book and other Records of the Shire that had "managed" to survive the distant ages of the world. Tolkien suggests, tongue in cheek, that he is merely the lucky historian who recovered these records produced by our distant relatives, the hobbits. The use of a frame is not an unusual concept. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the author employs a similar device: he is simply a government official who has uncovered the records of the events recorded in the story. Sometimes the frame tale is one in which several stories are unified by a central story line.

Unit Studies are interspersed between studying each of the six books of *The Lord of the Rings* and average 8-10 pages. Most include a study guide with questions and a list of related writing assignments or projects. Some of the unit studies are projects developing reference skills Unit Studies cover a wide range of literary topics as listed below.

Exploring Tolkien

Exploring Linguistics

Exploring Setting

Map Study of Middle Earth-- builds reference skills

Exploring Epics

Exploring Beowulf (2 units)

Exploring Fantasy

Exploring Poetry

Exploring the Arthurian Tales (2 units)

Research Project: Whatever happened to the rest of the Fellowship

Exploring Unifying Elements

Movies and the Classics (optional)

Exploring Religious Elements (optional)

Unit Study Ten

Exploring Arthurian Romances: The Story of King Arthur

Today, if you hear of someone reading a "romance," you generally think of a love story. However, the real meaning of the genre of Romance literature is literature that deals with heroism, adventure, and courtly love. Many of these "romances" were highly influenced by French medieval literature. In fact, the term "Romance" originally meant a story written in the language of one of the off-shoots of Rome: the Romance languages that you studied in the Linguistics Unit.

The most famous of the English romances is the cycle of Arthurian tales that has permeated English literature for many centuries. Before Tolkien invented his own "English mythology," the Arthurian romances were the closest thing that England had to a mythology of its own. The subject still has a tremendous influence on English culture and literature today. Tolkien, however, rejected the Arthurian tales as an English mythology because they were not as ancient as other mythologies and because of their strong French flavor, which he felt weakened the English heritage of the stories.

Though Tolkien did not regard the stories as true "English myth," he was strongly influenced by the style and ideals of the Arthurian romances. In fact, Tolkien once told a literary critic that *The Lord of the Rings* was not a novel at all, in the modern sense of the word. Instead, he said, it was a "heroic-romance' a much older and quite different variety of literature" (Letters 414). Tolkien was an expert on romance literature. Tolkien taught, and himself translated, one of the earliest English versions of the Arthurian tales, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Once he even attempted to write his own long Arthurian poem, called the "Fall of Arthur," in Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse.

Tolkien was not the only writer to be inspired by the Arthurian legend. Many English and French writers have written their own version of Arthurian legends for over 800 years. In America, writers adopted the legends as their own and have immortalized the stories in everything from novels to musicals to Disney animated features. In fact, the Arthurian legends have pervaded our literature to such an extent that students must have a basic understanding of the story in order to understand many common literary allusions in British and American literature....

Conclusion of Arthurian Unit Study

Despite the flaws in the story, the Arthurian legends have captured our imagination for many generations. The high ideals, courtly love, and legendary valor of Arthur's kingdom promise to remain a part of our culture for many years to come. Part of the attraction of *The Lord of the Rings* is that it portrays much of what is best about the beloved Arthurian legends in a more wholesome and positive way. If Merlin had been more like Gandalf, if Arthur had been more like Aragorn, if the other knights of Arthur's kingdom had demonstrated the moral fiber of the

many of Tolkien's true knights (of all races) then the story of Camelot might never have come to its tragic end.

Suggested unit study writing assignments

(Sample of writing assignments following the Arthurian study. Students choose one.)

- 1) Write a report on the life of Thomas Malory; Alfred, Lord Tennyson; or Sir Edmund Spenser. How do you think their lives affected the way they treated the Arthurian legends?
- 2) Write a report about the process of becoming a knight in the Arthurian times. You can find suggested resources on the website.
- 3) Read Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Write a book report about it with special emphasis on the way Twain treats the Arthurian legend. What do you think of Twain's perspective on the story?
- 4) Research the internet to compile a list of the movies (including animated ones) that have been made with an Arthurian theme. Write an essay on the reason you think that these stories have inspired so many films.
- 5) Write a poem about King Arthur or one of the Arthurian legends.
- 6) Write a story of your own about a knight of the Round Table.
- 7) Read one of the Malory's tales of Arthur (links to some of these stories are on the website). Rewrite the story in modern day English. You may want to try to illustrate your story.
- 8) Read Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (or a portion that your teacher assigns). Write your impression of the poem. What did you like the most? What did you like the least?