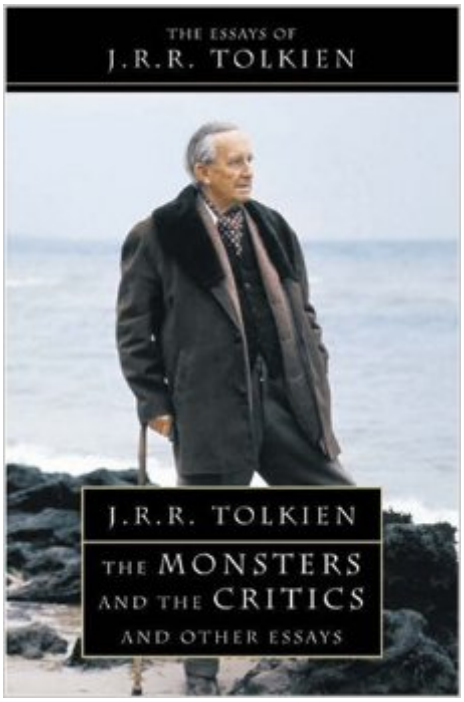
The Monsters And The Critics: And Other Essays. J.R.R. Tolkien



Synopsis

Complete collection of Tolkien’s essays, including two on Beowulf, which span three decades beginning six years before The Hobbit to five years after The Lord of the Rings. The seven ’essays’ by J.R.R. Tolkien assembled in this new paperback edition were with one exception delivered as general lectures on particular occasions; and while they mostly arose out of Tolkien’s work in medieval literature, they are accessible to all. Two of them are concerned with Beowulf, including the well-known lecture whose title is taken for this book, and one with Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, given in the University of Glasgow in 1953. Also included in this volume is the lecture English and Welsh; the Valedictory Address to the University of Oxford in 1959; and a paper on Invented Languages delivered in 1931, with exemplification from poems in the Elvish tongues. Most famous of all is On Fairy-Stories, a discussion of the nature of fairy-tales and fantasy, which gives insight into Tolkien’s approach to the whole genre. The pieces in this collection cover a period of nearly thirty years, beginning six years before the publication of The Hobbit, with a unique ’academic’ lecture on his invention (calling it A Secret Vice) and concluding with his farewell to professorship, five years after the publication of The Lord of the Rings.

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Customer Reviews

The contrast between the elegant prose of LotR and the meandering academic style in these essays is astonishing. It’s not hard to realize, after reading this, why Prof. Tolkien had a reputation as a dull lecturer (a reputation he cheerfully confesses to in his valedictory address). But if you can

penetrate the prose, these writings are full of gems.This collection will appeal to you if you are any kind of devotee of medieval English literature. Even if Tolkien had never written his great fantasy novels, he'd be revered for his work in Old English, especially as a champion of the poetic reputation of "Beowulf," a poem he almost single-handedly wrested from historians and philologists and set in its proper place at the root of English literature.He also makes an eloquent case for the essential connection between the study of language and that of literature. If you consider yourself a student of great writing, but have only read Anglo-Saxon poetry in someone's "translation," Prof. Tolkien will politely shame you out of complacency.In his valedictory address, speaking as a native of South Africa, he says, "I have the hatred of apartheid in my bones; and most of all I detest the segregation or separation of Language and Literature. I do not care which of them you think White."The book will also appeal to you if you have spent years immersed in the world of Middle Earth. Though there are scarcely any direct references to LotR in these essays, they illuminate the mind behind the masterpiece -- the quirky love of languages, the vision of fantasy as a godly act of creation, the deep Catholic faith.

This volume contains several essays/articles by Tolkien, most of which were originally delivered as lectures. The essays included are: "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics", "On Fairy Stories", "English and Welsh", "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", "On Translating Beowulf", "A Secret Vice" (about imaginary languages), and a Valedictory address given at Oxford upon his retirement. Most of these had been published before, of course. Some, like "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" and "On Fairy Stories" have been republished and reprinted many times, while others, like "English and Welsh" have only appeared a handful of times in obscure locations. Many of these others, however, appear in print here for the first time.Of these essays, the two most interesting are undoubtedly the two that have appeared most often in print-- the first Beowulf essay and "On Fairy Stories". "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics", of course, is the most important article on Beowulf of the 20th century. Incredible as it may now seem, prior to Tolkien, Beowulf had been seen primarily as a curious linguistic-literary artifact, useful as a source of information about the early Germanic past (customs, language, laws, toponymy, etc.). Tolkien was the first critic to draw attention to the poem *as* a poem and to point out that the central literary structure of the tale revolves around the hero's battles with them monsters, which previous critics had dismissed as mere fabulous emendations to a tale whose primary value was historical.

Finding out at the age of twelve from the back covers of "The Lord of the Rings" that there were

medievalists and that Tolkien was one, I vowed to study what he did. While unlike "Tollers" my doctorate did not lead me to a donnish tenure on an ivy-draped quad, I always admired the humanity and grace not only of his famed fiction but his patient letters and insistent essays. Re-reading his collected criticism twenty-five years after it first appeared, its engrossing paths through scholarly debates make occasional detours permissible and often worthwhile. As with Tolkien's "Secondary World" of Middle Earth, as a "sub-creator" not only of probably our greatest modern mythology but as a rigorous (if rambling in his donnish digressions) scholar, you find in "Monsters" much evidence that without his deep understanding of language, that he'd never have been able to convince you of the essential reality of his imagined realms.This knack, as T.A. Shippey, his successor in his position at Oxford, has argued in "The Road to Middle Earth," depends on "asterisk reality," or what JRRT calls here more delightfully "star-spangled grammar." (237) As his son and editor Christopher explains: "the reference is to enquiry into the forms of words before the earliest records; in those studies the conventional practice is to place an asterisk before hypothetical, deduced forms." (n. 3, 240) This may seem dry to non-academics or those lacking a fascination with philology. But for Tolkien and his audience, the invention of sustainable elements of his myth depended on the languages he concocted-- and vice versa.

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