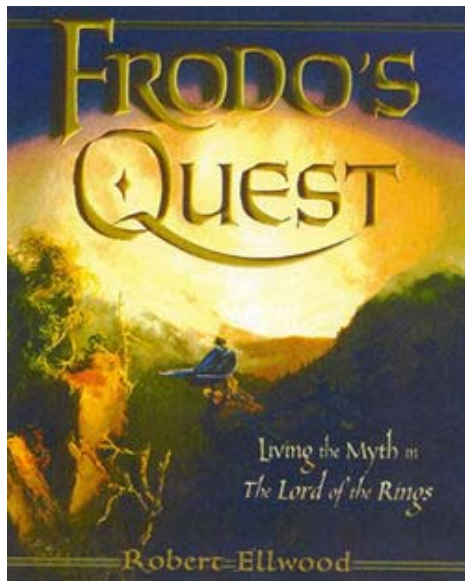


FRODO'S QUEST AND THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY



A Study Course by Robert Ellwood

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INTRODUCTION

This study course will consist of a series of twelve lessons on the spiritual journey. Each lesson (except the last) will reference a chapter or subsection of my book, *Frodo's Quest: Living the Myth in The Lord of the Rings*, which is based on living the myth found in J. R. R. Tolkien's two masterworks of modern fantasy, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien's story is, of course, also the subject of Peter Jackson's immensely popular and award-winning movie trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. Those taking this course should obtain a copy of *Frodo's Quest* (Quest Books, 2002). The book may be ordered online from the Theosophical Publishing House at <http://www.questbooks.net/title.cfm?bookid=265>.

The twelve lessons in this series (which include bibliography and study questions) will include additional reading assignments from *Frodo's Quest* (FQ). The sequence of lessons in this course are listed below along with their respective reading assignments:

1. Tolkien's Modern Myth (FQ ch. 9)
2. Life as a Pilgrimage (FQ ch. 1)
3. Starting Out (FQ ch. 2)
4. Finding the Guide (FQ ch. 3)
5. The Weight of the Past (FQ ch. 4)
6. The Physical Plane (FQ ch. 5, pp. 66-72)
7. The Astral Plane (FQ ch. 5, pp. 72-76)
8. The Mental Plane (FQ ch. 5, pp. 77-81)
9. Companions on the Way (FQ ch. 6)
10. The Great Initiation (FQ ch. 7)
11. To the Undying Lands (FQ ch. 8)
12. Looking Back on the Journey

I sincerely hope you enjoy this course.



— Robert Ellwood

Lesson 1

TOLKIEN'S MODERN MYTH

Assigned Reading: Chapter 9, "Tolkien's Quest" in *Frodo's Quest*.

Our study will be of the inner meaning of Frodo's journey to destroy the Ring of evil power. Frodo's task was different from other heroic quests (such as the quest for the Holy Grail) in that it was a venture not *to find* something but to *get rid of* something—something that held an irresistible attraction that, nonetheless, was a deadly burden both to its bearer and the world. But upon destroying it, the hero found himself in virtually a whole new world of wonder and abundance.

In other words, we are embarking on a journey with the potential for both loss and gain. In the course of this pilgrimage, Frodo—and we, as we travel with him in spirit—learns what it means TO LEAVE one's home; TO FIND a spiritual guide; TO RELATE one's own adventure to the wisdom of the past; TO CONFRONT the several levels of reality, such as those spoken of in theosophical literature as the physical, etheric, astral, mental, and buddhic planes; TO DISCOVER fellow pilgrims; TO UNDERGO the great initiations; TO RETURN home transformed by the Quest; and lastly, TO DEPART on the final voyage to the Undying Lands.

We have spoken of Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" as a modern myth. You may ask, "How does myth help initiate us into these momentous matters?" First, we must clarify what we mean by the term "myth." In our usage—as in that of such prominent students of mythology as Joseph Campbell, Carl Jung, or Mircea Eliade—"myth" does not mean simply a story or belief that is untrue or make-believe. Unfortunately, many people today interpret myth in that way. Instead, myth is a mode of revealing tremendously important truths about the world and our human lives through the medium of a story—regardless of whether that story was ever true in a literal or historical sense. Paradoxically, then, a myth is a story that may *never* be true and may *always* be true—both simultaneously. The stories behind the great religions, such as those of the Bible, the Puranas, the Mahabharata, or those depicting the life of the Buddha—as well as those of countless gods, goddesses, and heroes from around the world—may contain some historical material but they are essentially mythical in nature, especially from the view of Theosophy.

However, a myth does not have to be timeworn or embedded in antiquity, as are these narratives. Some modern novels have performed this role for their readers. Of these, Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" is in a class by itself. Among the top bestsellers of the twentieth century and still going strong in the twenty-first, it has afforded millions of readers entry into an alternative world—a realm of terror, wonder, and meaning that, for many, offsets the horrors and confusion of the "real" world. Through the power of Tolkien's myth, they could learn that reality is many-layered; that courage and loyalty count for much—even on the part of the weak; and that those who appear mighty on this earth, may be so only through the power of fear and illusion. Moreover, readers of "The Lord of the Rings" may come to realize that events of the present often have very deep roots in the mythic past, that there is a scattered fellowship of those who possess a deep understanding of the world's mysteries, and that there are companions waiting to be discovered who can join one in the long pilgrimage.

Let us join together in the spirit of fellowship, as companions in the greatest quest of all: the quest to destroy the evil that burdens us and find a new inner world of wonder, abundance, and wisdom.

BOOKS FOR FURTHER READING

There are several editions of Tolkien's work. The original was:

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit; or, There and Back Again*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1937.

_____. *The Lord of the Rings*. 3 parts: *The Fellowship of the Ring; The Two Towers; The Return of the King*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1954-5.

See also:

Carpenter, Humphrey. *Tolkien: A Biography*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.

Noel, Ruth S. *The Mythology of Middle-earth*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.

Shippey, T. A. J. R. R. *Tolkien: Author of the Century*. London: HarperCollins, 2000.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. How do you account for the extraordinary popularity of *The Lord of the Rings*?
2. What is your understanding of “myth”?
3. Do you think that myths or stories really interpret human life better than abstractions like those found in philosophy or psychology?
4. How would you compare a “modern myth” with an ancient one?
5. If you have read both the story and seen the movie version of *The Lord of the Rings*, how would you compare them, especially in their ability to convey mythic power and make it relevant to our lives today?