

Chapter 1

The Worlds of Middle-earth

In This Chapter

- ▶ The location and origin of Middle-earth
- ▶ Tolkien's idea of fantasy
- ▶ The underlying mythology of Middle-earth
- ▶ Tolkien's strange and wonderful beings
- ▶ The historical framework of Middle-earth
- ▶ Middle-earth's diverse languages

In its broadest sense, geography is the study of the physical features of the world as well as its biological and cultural characteristics. When attempting to deal with the “geography” of a fantasy world like Middle-earth, as envisioned by J.R.R. Tolkien, you're almost compelled to use this wider definition, even if your only goal is to get an overview of its many features. For Tolkien's Middle-earth is never just one of physical geography filled with strange lands, weird creatures, and unfamiliar cultures. As Tolkien conceived it over the better part of his life, Middle-earth is also a world rich in its own mythology, history, and languages.

This chapter gives an overview of the various worlds that await you in your journey to Tolkien's Middle-earth, while at the same time familiarizing you with how these realms are covered in the rest of the book. It opens by exploring the questions of where exactly Middle-earth is located and why Tolkien chose the name Middle-earth for his fantasy world. The chapter then looks at Middle-earth as a fantasy realm in light of Tolkien's ideas on the importance of fairy-tale in our lives. The chapter concludes with an overview of the creatures, history, and languages with which Tolkien filled his world of Middle-earth.

Where in the World Is Middle-earth?

You may well wonder why it's important at all to locate Middle-earth. Does it really matter whether Middle-earth is a future world in another galaxy or a Europe long gone? Would it really detract from your enjoyment of Bilbo's

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journey to the Lonely Mountain or Frodo's quest from the Shire to Mount Doom if you found out that Middle-earth were nowhere on this earth?

I happen to feel that Tolkien drew Middle-earth so well in *The Hobbit* and told the story of *The Lord of the Rings* so tightly that it wouldn't matter a whit if he had started off either story with the now famous declaration from George Lucas' *Star Wars* saga, "Long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away . . ." On the other hand, coming to know how much Middle-earth owes to past European sagas, legends, and languages can only enhance appreciation of his works and deepen understanding of their many lessons.

Associating Middle-earth with our world and not some alien planet or invisible dimension was very important to Tolkien. When pressed for the location of Middle-earth (as fans and critics continually did), Tolkien often replied that Middle-earth most definitely refers to lands of this world. In his letter commenting on a review of *The Lord of the Rings* by W. H. Auden, he wrote, "Middle-earth is not an imaginary world." He then declared that his Middle-earth is "the objectively real world" as opposed to an imaginary world such as Fairyland or invisible ones such as Heaven or Hell.

In another letter responding to a draft of a *Daily Telegraph* article for which he was interviewed, Tolkien said that the stories in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* take place in the "north-west of 'Middle-earth,' equivalent to the coastlands of Europe and the north shores of the Mediterranean." He then went on to fix some of the primary locations in his books by stating that if you placed Hobbiton and Rivendell at the latitude of Oxford (which was his intention), then Minas Tirith, some 600 miles south in Gondor, would be at approximately the same latitude as Florence, Italy. This puts the Mouths of the river Anduin and the ancient Gondorian city of Pelagir at about the same latitude as the fabled city of Troy (made famous in Homer's heroic epic poem the *Iliad* and located on the west coast of modern-day Turkey).

To get an idea of these spatial relationships, see Figure 1-1, which shows the western coastline of Middle-earth and points out the specific parallel locations that Tolkien pinpointed in his letter. From this map, you'd be hard pressed to match any of Middle-earth's physical features with those of modern-day Europe. Tolkien would have explained this obvious discrepancy as the result of changes in coastal geography during the time that has elapsed since his epic adventures took place. To me, it's sort of like the difference between Earth's Jurassic age and the Middle Ages — not too much looks the same, but it's the same old Earth.



Figure 1-1:
Middle-earth's
coastline
super-
imposed on
Western
Europe.

The Meaning of Middle-earth

In the letter commenting on a *New York Times* book review, Tolkien stated that the name *Middle-earth* is a “just a use of Middle English *midden-erd* (or *erthe*), altered from Old English *Middangeard*, the name for the inhabited lands of Men ‘between the seas’ . . .”

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The origin of the term “Middle-earth”

Midden-erde (or *erthe*), however, is good old Middle English for “middle-earth.” As Tolkien pointed out, it hails from an earlier form, *middangeard*, which literally means the “middle yard” in Old English or Anglo-Saxon, the language Tolkien taught at Oxford University. *Middangeard* was taken to mean, like *oikumenos*, the “inhabited world.” It is rumored that Tolkien first happened upon this term as an undergraduate student when he read the following lines in *Crist* (*Christ*), an Old English poem attributed to a bard named Cynewulf:

∞ala ∞arendel engla beorhtast ofer middangeard monnum sende

In my translation, this reads, “Hail, Earendel, the brightest of angels sent to the world of men!” In this early form, Middle-earth was not only the inhabited lands in the midst of the encircling seas, but also the middle ground between Heaven above and Hell below. This vertical dimension of the early European Christian Middle-earth is entirely missing from Tolkien’s — even though you’d be hard pressed to find a more devout Catholic Christian.

“Stuck in the middle again . . . ”

At the time when *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* take place, the inhabited lands of Middle-earth are surrounded on three sides by wastelands and on the west by open sea. To the north lies the Ice Bay of Forochel, and beyond that is the frozen Northern Waste; to the east is Rhûn, populated by the barbaric Easterlings. To the south you find the vast deserts of Harad, populated by dark-skinned peoples called the Haradrim (“Southerns”). In *The Lord of the Rings*, both Easterlings and Southrons often make war on the free peoples of Middle-earth and are allied with Sauron, Dark Lord of the eastern realm of Mordor, who is the greatest threat to freedom in Middle-earth.

On the west, many of the lands of Middle-earth, just like many lands of Europe, have borders that adjoin the sea. According to Tolkien’s thinking, at the time of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, you could sail west and not find any other land masses (you certainly wouldn’t discover the Americas). In earlier ages, though, sailing directly west would bring you to the island of Númenor, the ancient homeland of the people who end up settling the northern and southern coasts of Middle-earth. And west of Númenor lay the continent of Aman — the so-called Blessed Realm or Undying Lands (see Chapter 2). Aman is where two types of immortal beings, the Valar and Elves, dwell together. By the Third Age, the one in which *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* take place, the island of Númenor has sunk beneath the sea, and Aman, removed from the physical plane of the world, is accessible only by the magic White Ships of the Elves (see Chapter 12).

Viewed from this perspective, you can start to understand how the peoples of Tolkien's Middle-earth perceive their lands as being encircled by limiting forces, some of which are hostile. This viewpoint is perhaps not so unlike the Anglo-Saxons before they came to Britain, when they still dwelt along the northwestern coast of Europe in the lands now known as Denmark and northwest Germany. At that time, they were surrounded on three sides by potentially hostile tribes and the open sea on the other. The situation didn't change much when they got to England, except that the sea was mostly at their back with the hostile Celts in front and on either side of them. I think that much of the orientation of Middle-earth's geography is rooted in the perspective of Tolkien's Anglo-Saxon ancestors, whose language he knew so well.

Middle-earth as a Fantasy World

Fantasy is an attempt to create a complete, imaginary world with its own creatures, cultures, and lands that are governed by their own set of physical laws and guided by their own morals and principles. For Tolkien, fantasy was definitely akin to the world of the fairies. *Fairy* comes from the Middle English *faerie*, perhaps related to Old English *faeger*, meaning "beautiful," "lovely," and "fair." Tolkien's fairy world, although certainly containing its share of Elves and Dwarves, diverges greatly from the modern view of fairies as diminutive folk — the "little people" of many fairytales. In Tolkien's Middle-earth, you find no brownies, pixies, Tinkerbell-like fairies, or Snow White-type Dwarves. Moreover, his trolls don't charge to cross their bridges, although his dragons do breathe fire and his wizards have magic staffs.

In place of pointy-shoed Elves dressed in green like bonnie leprechauns and Dwarves in floppy stocking caps shouldering pickaxes and singing "Heigh-Ho, Heigh-Ho," Tolkien presents tall, shining Elves with a complex, not altogether beautiful history side by side with serious Dwarves who not only delve into caves but create magnificent underground cities

Interestingly enough, Tolkien's mythology may well explain the modern, Disneyesque view of Elves and Dwarves as the natural outgrowth of the great stresses to which his fairy world had been subjected. For the Middle-earth of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* is in the throes of a great upheaval, a battle between good and evil that threatens to foist the race of Men (Tolkien's term, not mine) onto center stage as the dominant culture at the expense of the other beings of Middle-earth.

As a result of this transition, the fairy or magic aspect of Middle-earth in the Third Age — especially as embodied in the Elves — is in danger of disappearing and being replaced by an age of almost total reliance on science and technology, a world as rich in know-how as it is poor in spirit. This is, of course, an age we can all readily recognize, for it is the one we live in.

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On the nature of the fairytale

Tolkien had definite ideas about the essential nature of fairytales, which he set forth in a 1939 lecture at St. Andrew's University entitled "On Fairy-Stories." In this lecture, he argues against the demotion of the fairytale to an insignificant tale fit only for children (or very childish adults). Doing so, he argues, is neither fair to the stories nor the children.

According to Tolkien's lecture, a good or successful fairytale exhibits three important structural characteristics:

- ✓ **Recovery** of the appreciation of the simple and humble things in our world
- ✓ **Escape** from one's narrow and distorted view of the world
- ✓ **Consolation** that leads to a kind of joy even in the face of continuing evil in the world

In Tolkien's three features of a good fairytale, I see also the essential qualities of religion. This should come as no surprise — Tolkien was a devout Catholic all his life. Anyone who has read Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or seen Peter Jackson's astounding films inspired by the book will instantly recognize the themes of recovery, escape, and consolation in them.

To many readers, including me, *The Lord of the Rings* is a fantasy or fairytale of the highest order simply because it so successfully and completely fulfills the tasks of recovery, escape, and consolation described by Tolkien. Through its heroic tales, we recover a deep appreciation of life's simple pleasures, especially the power of the love and fidelity inherent in fellowship. In this deepened appreciation, we temporarily escape the fetters of our self-centered desires that so constrict our idea of the world and distort our place in it. As a result of this escape, however brief, we find consolation in our broader outlook on the world, one that puts evil in a place where it is neither understated nor exaggerated. From that vantage point, we have the chance to experience a type of joy that transcends the cares of the world by celebrating life's simple pleasures. See Part V for my thoughts on the particular themes in Tolkien's works that employ these elements and bring them to life.

Many criticize Tolkien's works as escapist, unrealistic fantasies that promote the avoidance of responsibility in the real world. I think that these critics confuse the escape the works are intended to provide with a more general *escapism*. In my opinion, a work such as *The Lord of the Rings* primarily provides an escape from the distorted viewpoint of utter hopelessness and pessimism that so often threatens to overtake us in this postmodern age. But it is a far cry from a call to escape our responsibilities in the world — *The Lord of the Rings* is rather a work that enables us to see that each of us can and does make a difference in the world.

The fairytale as “sub-creation”

In the same “On Fairy-Stories” lecture, Tolkien describes the good fairytale as a product of “sub-creation,” where the author successfully creates a secondary world that has its own “inner consistency of reality.” As a Christian, Tolkien saw the primary world (what we so often refer to as the “real world”) as the creation of God. Because man specifically was created in the image of God, he inherited the ability to create imaginary or secondary worlds such as Middle-earth. The key to this sub-creation is the power of human language, which, of course, as a linguist, was Tolkien’s specialty.

Tolkien argues that “sub-creation” stems from two basic human needs:

- ✓ **To survey** the depths of space and time
- ✓ **To heal** the separation of mankind from nature

It’s no wonder, then, that Tolkien’s Middle-earth is rich in languages and detailed geography and history — all of which enable us to explore the depths of both space and time. Mankind’s need to heal our alienation from nature is often expressed in Western culture as the need to return to the Garden of Eden (as in Joni Mitchell’s song “Woodstock”: “. . . we’ve got to get ourselves back to the Garden”).

Middle-earth as a Mythic World

Myths are a culture’s attempt to express in story form the ideas that are most important to it. Most myths deal with cosmic subjects such as the creation and ultimate destruction of the world system. They also deal with universal themes like heroism and love (see Part V).

Because myths are often just as concerned with meaning as with plot line, they rely heavily on symbolism and poetic language to convey their meanings. The myths of many cultures appear as epic poems or songs (sometimes referred to as *lays*) that were sung by troubadours and wandering minstrels long before they were ever committed to paper.

Unfortunately, today when you refer to something as a myth, you normally mean that it’s some sort of illusion or fiction — some kind of “tall tale.” When some people refer to something as a myth, they usually mean a naive story that our “primitive” forebears told to explain some phenomenon that they couldn’t otherwise explain (because they weren’t yet equipped with logic). Myth in this sense is a childish explanation of a phenomenon that is ultimately to be replaced by a more learned and accurate account.

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For Tolkien, a myth was no more an illogical fable than the fairytale was an escapist fantasy. For him, myths were the best way to convey certain truths — especially those of a religious nature — that would otherwise be inexpressible. Myths, of course, use very different language than logical discourse does. They tend, especially the older ones, to be couched in poetic language coming as they often do in lyric poems (odes) or ballads (lays).

Poetry, unlike most prose, is rich in symbol and relies heavily on metaphor (a figure of speech implying a similarity between two unlike things, as in “drowning in sorrow”) and simile (a figure of speech using “like” or “as” to compare two unlike things, as in “life is like a bowl of cherries”).

For example, say I were writing an autobiography and wanted to start it off by expressing the opinion that my life had been no bed of roses (note the metaphor). I could do this through either of the following sentences:

- ✓ In my life, I’ve had many dragons to slay.
- ✓ In my life, I’ve had many obstacles to overcome.

The first sentence is more poetic because “dragons to slay” conjures up the image of a knight in shining armor displaying extraordinary bravery and strength in valiantly battling a huge reptilian monster. The second sentence expresses the same thought, but much, much more abstractly and less evocatively. Yet both statements make essentially the same point and are readily understood even though none of us (or, at least, just a very few) believes in the existence of dragons.

“Fortunate” calamities in myth and legend

Tolkien coined the term *eucaastrophe* to describe the unforeseen twists and turns that often take place at the end of our favorite fairytales and legends. For example, the villain’s evil becomes an instrument in his own downfall (what I call, “when bad things go good”). This sort of “fortunate” calamity (*eu* is a Greek prefix that means “sweet” or “good”) is a favored element in many of Tolkien’s myths and legends.

The Lord of the Rings, for example, delivers its fair share of “fortunate” calamities — Sauron’s forging of the One Ring, for example (see Chapter 21). Placing so much of his power in this external object gives the heroes a chance to do away with him once and for all simply by destroying his Ring.

Another important “fortunate” calamity occurs in the story of Gollum, who, it turns out, becomes instrumental in the Ring’s destruction (and therefore Sauron’s as well). This act, which ends up saving all of Middle-earth, is the culmination of Gollum’s betrayal of Frodo at Cirith Ungol and his later attack

on him at Mount Doom — despicable acts all stemming from Gollum’s uncontrollable need to have the Ring for himself.

Background myths of “The Lord of the Rings”

Most of Tolkien’s great mythological content, however, occurs in the so-called “back story” told in *The Silmarillion*, a book that was published posthumously by his son Christopher. In fact, the story of the War of the Ring chronicled in *The Lord of the Rings* is but a small part of the history of Middle-earth recorded in *The Silmarillion*.

The Silmarillion is essentially a compilation of many of Tolkien’s writings (some of them very early) about the ancient history of Middle-earth, to which is appended the myth of the downfall of Númenor in the Second Age and the War of the Ring in the Third Age (detailed in *The Lord of the Rings*).

The Silmarillion is a very important book for understanding Middle-earth; but many find it not nearly as easy to read as *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* — a number of its tales read more like fleshed-out outlines than actual stories. It begins with Tolkien’s beautiful creation myth (see Chapter 11) in a book called the *Ainulindalë*, and then accounts for the coming of the immortal beings the Valar into Middle-earth in a book entitled *Valaquenta*.

The bulk of *The Silmarillion*, however, is taken up by the next book, *Quenta Silmarillion*, which tells of the creation of the most beautiful jewels ever made by Man or Elf: the Silmarils. It recounts their subsequent theft and the war waged for their recovery. Many of the tales in this particular book deal with traditional mythic elements such as heroism, true love, and tragic fate, but with what I’ve come to call the “Tolkien twist,” where Tolkien preserves some of the basic mythic storyline but reverses key elements, perhaps because he felt that the original myth somehow got it wrong or that his telling improved upon its moral (see Part V for multiple examples).

The great battle that ended this long and involved war over the Silmarils also drastically altered the geography of Middle-earth. Almost all of the western land mass called Beleriand was submerged in a great cataclysm that created Middle-earth’s western coastline. In fact, all that’s left of Beleriand by the time of *The Lord of the Rings* is a small strip of land west of Ered Luin (“Blue Mountains”). This means the geography that you take so much for granted in *The Lord of the Rings* is in fact, according to *The Silmarillion*, rather recent.

On the heels of the *Quenta Silmarillion* comes Tolkien’s version of another persistent myth in Western civilization: that of Atlantis and its sinking beneath the sea. What’s so fascinating about Tolkien’s version, entitled the *Akallebêth*, or

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the Downfall of Númenor, is that Númenor's destruction is tied directly into the storyline of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Instead of just another interesting version of the Atlantis myth, Tolkien wove his account directly into the story of Sauron's attempt to subjugate Middle-earth, which is what *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are all about.

Underscoring this connection is the fact that the last book of *The Silmarillion* is entitled *Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age*, which is basically a 19-page outline of the events told in much fuller story form in *The Hobbit* (300-plus pages) and *The Lord of the Rings* (more than 1,000 pages).

Middle-earth as a World of Diverse Beings

Much of the appeal of Tolkien's Middle-earth comes from the charm of the diverse beings and races in it. As you discover in Part II, which is devoted to the main types of Middle-earth beings, Tolkien's creatures literally run the gamut from angels (the Ainur, or "Holy Ones," discussed in Chapter 3) to devils (Sauron and his Orc hordes, dealt with in Chapter 10).

In between these two extremes are the more fascinating and endearing creatures of Middle-earth: Elves, Dwarves, hobbits, Ents, and, oh yes, Men. What some readers find most appealing about *The Lord of the Rings* (I know I'm in this crowd) is the way Tolkien combines the action of the story with a sort of hobbit travelogue. The four hobbit compatriots — Frodo, Sam, Pippin, and Merry (see Chapter 7) — make first contact with all types of beings, many of whom they've heard about only through legend and who have likewise heard of hobbits only in their wildest myths. Tolkien surely had fun, for example, having the hobbits Merry and Pippin explain the nature of their kind (and the etymology of the term *hobbit*) to such different creatures as the tree-like Ents (see Chapter 9) and the Horse Lords of Rohan (see Chapter 5).

This approach enables readers to experience many of the unfamiliar creatures of Middle-earth just as the hobbits do. Readers get to become more intimate with the hobbits and their ways while simultaneously seeing how the hobbits' contacts with wondrous and frightening creatures enlarge the scope of their world beyond the safe and narrow confines of the Shire. At the same time, Tolkien enlarges our worldview well beyond its normal boundaries. In this way, he provides an effective avenue for us to experience first the discovery and escape aspects of the story and ultimately the consolation aspect as well — all of which he considered so important to a successful fantasy tale (see the section "On the nature of the fairytale" earlier in this chapter).

Middle-earth as a Historical World

History attempts to answer the essential questions of who, what, when, and where. So to make his world as realistic as possible and, perhaps, more palatable to contemporary readers schooled in the rudiments of historical analysis, Tolkien endowed Middle-earth with a very rich history in addition to its abundant mythology (see Part III for timelines of the most important events in Tolkien's various historical ages).

Tolkien establishes Middle-earth as a historical world through a convenient fiction in which all the stories of Middle-earth and its various ages come from a single written source: the Red Book of Westmarch (so called because it was bound in red leather). It's in this book that Bilbo recorded his adventures with the Dwarves on the quest to recover their treasure at the Lonely Mountain, a tale he gave many titles to, including *My Diary*, *My Unexpected Adventure*, and *There and Back Again*, but which we all know best as *The Hobbit*.

Frodo, Bilbo's heir, takes over the Red Book and upon his return to the Shire after his adventures fills most of its remaining pages with his story and that of his compatriots Sam, Pippin, and Merry. Frodo entitles this part of the Red Book "The Downfall of the Lord of the Rings and the Return of the King." Once Frodo finishes chronicling the War of the Ring and the better part of the Third Age, he turns the book over to his faithful servant and friend Sam, the last Ring-bearer. Sam records his own part of the story and the first part of the history of the Fourth Age that is now dawning.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, when Sam finally leaves Middle-earth to sail west to Aman (see Chapter 2), following Bilbo and Frodo, he leaves the Red Book in the care of the wardens of the Shire. In the prologue to *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien underscores the historical nature of the Red Book by telling us about other versions of the book, which contain different and even conflicting stories that were supposedly prepared by Pippin's descendents and from other sources provided by Merry.

It's difficult to adequately evaluate the value of this historical veneer that Tolkien created. For many readers, it just adds a superfluous layer to an already complicated subject. For others, it provides yet another example of the almost unbelievable amount of thinking and detail that Tolkien put into this fantasy world.

For me, the historical evolution of Middle-earth — starting with the almost pre-historical "days of yore" of the Valarian Ages and progressing to the daily and even hourly historical recording of the Third Age and the War of the Ring — is in harmony with the underlying story. It mirrors Tolkien's story of transition

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from the fairy realm of the Elves to the historical dominion of Men, when the accurate record-keeping of science and technology ultimately submerges and reigns supreme over myth and epic poetry.

Middle-earth as a World of Language

When contemplating the many worlds that Middle-earth contains, you'd be wise to never overlook the fact that whatever else Middle-earth is, it is first and foremost a world of language. This is something that anyone who starts reading *The Lord of the Rings* discovers almost immediately. In fact, for many a reader, the cascade of foreign names and places, often made more confusing by Tolkien's insistence on giving each character and land several names, is a very tall stumbling block.

Diverse terminology is, of course, only one example of the magnitude of language in Tolkien's Middle-earth. In addition, you actually encounter bits and pieces of languages that he invented for the various beings (see Chapter 14). It's not at all unusual in *The Lord of the Rings* to be reading along only to have one of the hobbits or Aragorn suddenly spout off in Elvish — only some of which Tolkien bothers to translate into English. I've always presumed that Tolkien didn't translate those remarks where understanding them had no bearing on the story — that they just add to the realism of the situation, because so few of us speak good Elvish anymore.

As a linguist who was accomplished in many languages, Tolkien found his true passion in languages. Indeed, his curiosity over the etymology of particular terms itself is no doubt the real origin of Tolkien's Middle-earth. (Etymology is the study of the history and roots of a word.) His delight in such origins motivated and enabled him to devise complex stories to explain particular names and words. He was an "etymological mythmaker," if you will. We probably owe all of Middle-earth's wondrous beings, inspiring myths, and fascinating histories to Tolkien's passion for language and his need to explain why things are named as they are.