**Tolkien's Mythological Sources**

Tolkien wrote his trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* over a period of 16 years. However, his work was the product of a lifetime of reading and imaginative thinking. Tolkien was an avid reader of ancient Greek tragedies, Celtic tales, and Anglo-Saxon poetry, especially the epic *Beowulf*. Perhaps the most important influence on his fantasy fiction was world mythology. He was particularly interested in Norse sagas and the mythological works of Iceland and Finland. These works helped to shape his trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. He used such common mythological characteristics as

* The influence of Fate or destiny
* Heroic figures
* Code of honor
* Wizards or other beings with special powers
* Quests
* Magic and magical objects
* Good vs. evil
* Prophecies

To learn about three of the most important sources for Tolkien's fantasy fiction, complete the instructions under each of the following sections.

*The Kalevala*

This saga, the Finnish national epic, was a collection of folk poems compiled in 1835. The work includes gods, wizards, heroes, quests, and magical objects. The languages that Tolkien created for Middle Earth, the setting for *The Lord of the Rings*, is similar to the Finnish language.

1. At the web site The Kalevala's Contents, read the summaries of the poems that make up the Kalevala.
2. As you read, fill in the chart with examples of the mythological characteristics that might have influenced Tolkien. You will not necessarily find examples in this summary of all of the mythological characteristics.

*The Prose Edda*

These Icelandic collections of Norse epic poetry in prose form were written about 1200 by Snorri Sturlson, an Icelandic Skald (poet). Tolkien's name for the setting of his trilogy, Middle Earth, comes from this work, as do the name Gandalf and the names of all of the Dwarfs in *The Hobbit*.

1. Open the web site The Prose Edda. Scroll down and select Gylfaginning, the opening of this epic. Read the following sections: I-V, XIV, and XVII. Return to the opening screen of The Prose Edda. Scroll down and select the second part of the Edda, called Skáldskaparmal. Read the first five paragraphs (to the paragraph that ends, "...and made of them two stars."
2. As you read, fill in the chart with examples of the mythological characteristics that might influenced Tolkien. You will not necessarily find examples in these passages of all of the mythological characteristics.

*The Nibelungenlied*

The Germanic *Nibelungenlied* features the cursed ring of doom, which is likewise a central theme of Tolkiens' mythology.

1. At the web site The Nibelungelied, select Adventure II: Of Siegfried and read this chapter. Return to the opening screen and select Adventure IV: How He Fought with the Saxons.
2. As you read, fill in the chart with examples of the mythological characteristics that might have influenced Tolkien You will not necessarily find examples in these passages of all of the mythological characteristics.

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| **Characteristics of mythology** | **Examples from *The Kalevala*** | **Examples from *The Prose Edda*** | **Examples from *The Nibelungenlied*** |
| Influence of Fate or destiny |  |  |  |
| Heroic figures |  |  |  |
| Code of honor |  |  |  |
| Wizards or other beings with special powers |  |  |  |
| Quests |  |  |  |
| Magic and magical objects |  |  |  |
| Good vs. evil |  |  |  |
| Prophecies |  |  |  |