

## The history of the study of J.R.R. Tolkien works in Russia

**Ellina Viktorovna Shustova**<sup>a</sup> Teacher

Institute of International Relations, History and Oriental Studies  
Kazan Federal University, Kazan, Russia

E-mail: [leite@mail.ru](mailto:leite@mail.ru)

Contact: + 79046645434

**Diana Vladimirovna Tyabina**<sup>b</sup> Senior teacher

Institute of International Relations, History and Oriental Studies  
Kazan Federal University, Kazan, Russia

E-mail: [tbdia@mail.ru](mailto:tbdia@mail.ru)

Contact: + 79061104932

### Abstract

*The relevance of the research is caused by the need to generate and systematize the study of J.R.R. Tolkien's works in Russia. This involves its consideration of both synchronic and diachronic aspects. The objective of the article is to examine the academic evolution of J.R.R. Tolkien's works within the Russian-language cultural and literary space. The leading approach to consider this issue is the historical and typological approach. The main result is generalization and systematization of the body of the research of J.R.R. Tolkien's writings in Russia. The article identifies the basic time stages of formation of Russian Tolkien research. It analyzes the key aspects of Tolkien's texts studies. The content of the articles might be useful when reading the general and special courses on Russian and foreign literature and literary criticism at universities. The article is of interest to teachers of literary specialties at high schools, postgraduate students, students and anyone interested in the work of J.R.R. Tolkien.*

**Keywords:** J.R.R.Tolkien, Russian Tolkien studies, literary critique, literary contemporary mythmaking, education, students.

## INTRODUCTION

The interest in Tolkien's books in Russia led to numerous investigations and researches. Considering them it is easier to understand the overwhelming functioning of Tolkien's texts among the Russian readers.

The emergence of national research of Tolkien's writings chronologically ensued the translations of his works into the Russian language. The first officially published abridged text of the first volume of "The Lord of the Rings" was in 1982 translated by V.S. Muravyov and A.A. Kistyakovskiy. However, owing to the adverse political climate the full translation of the trilogy was officially published only in the late 80s and early 90s (1988, 1990, 1992).

Following the official publication of the "Lord of the Rings" there was quite mass ardour to Tolkien's works in our country, emergence of Tolkien fandom – Tolkienists, as well as formation of the national Tolkien studies - a branch of knowledge about J.R.R. Tolkien and his works. The well-known Tolkienist I.A. Khazanov gave the definition of Tolkien studies: "...it is an area of academic knowledge that studies Tolkien's creative writings through modern scientific methods of linguistics, literary criticism, and others". [Khazanov, 2009]. The objective of this dynamically developing research sphere is to receive versatile understanding of Tolkien's phenomenon in the Russian-language cultural and literary space.

Tolkienist D. O. Vinohodov noted that Russian Tolkien studies became a sufficient amount of information only at the beginning of the XX century [Vinohodov, 2002]. It was due to the fact that Tolkien's works became accessible to the wide audience only in the 1970-80s ("The Hobbit", "The Lord of the Rings", "The Silmarillion", letters, small prose, etc.) along with the articles devoted to the writer's works. For example, in 1976 V.S. Muravyov wrote the article "Tolkien and the critics. Overview", containing a review of three foreign works. At the end of the article the author stated: "The latest books about Tolkien indicate that he has firmly riveted the attention of researchers. ...It is also worth paying attention by Soviet criticism, which, unfortunately, bypassed it. It is clear now that the "The Lord of the Rings" - a remarkable and original artistic experiment, still resisting both avant-garde and popular fiction, a significant ... achievement of English literature of the twentieth century" [Muravyov, 1976]. We can say that this article started the history of Soviet Tolkien studies.

In the USSR the first (known) report on Tolkien theme was read in 1982. It was called "Trilogy "The Lord of the Rings" by J.R.R. Tolkien" reported by E.M. Apenko. She stated high appreciation of Tolkien's works by Western European and American critics, noting the lack of studies of the writer in the Soviet literary criticism [Apenko, 1982].

In the late 1980s - early 1990s the number of articles devoted to Tolkien increased. The authors of many articles are translators of Tolkien's works (A. Nemirova, M.V. Kamenkovich V.S. Muravyov and others). E.M. Apenko described the overall picture of the development of Tolkien studies in that period: "... in our study of literature forewords and articles in literary encyclopedias prevailed - such works are written mostly by necessity using more or less a popular style." [Apenko, 2007]. Today J.R.R. Tolkien's works are extensively studied from different perspectives.

## METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK:

In this article the Russian-language studies of Tolkien's works are considered as a form of perception and analysis of his work in the Russian-language cultural and literary circles. In view of the typological variety of objects to study it is reasonable to use historical and typological approach to the analysis of critical and scientific publications about J.R.R. Tolkien. It allows to organize the corpus of such texts examining their appearance and systematizing the process according to typological and thematic terms.

**RESULTS:**

The diversity of the texts that comprise the body of the Russian-language view on Tolkien's writings is largely determined by the performing aspects of Tolkien's works and their perception in society. These aspects relate to synchronous analysis plan. They also represent a promising object of study within literary science. The research of national texts on Tolkien's works for every aspect of the development is a diachronic analysis plan and allows to trace the evolution of the study of the writer's works.

**Literary critical aspect of modern national Tolkien studies**

A critical aspect of national Tolkien studies is associated with the comprehension of the place of Tolkien's works in Russian literature of the late XX century along with an analysis of the reasons for their popularity.

Early critical reviews of Tolkien's texts held promotional character due to the fact that in the 70ties the name of J.R.R. Tolkien was unfamiliar to most Soviet readers. For example, D. Yakovlev in his review of 1976 "The Adventures of Mr. Baggins" presented Tolkien's book "The Hobbit" as entertaining and witty one, giving the complication of the plot to prove it [Yakovlev, 1976]. This work was small in volume and did not contain a detailed analysis of the book.

Further literary and critical acquaintance with the writer's works continued after the publication of the novel "The Lord of the Rings". The authors of critical reviews on the trilogy contemplated the genre nature of the work, its philosophical issues and aspired to determine the place of work in the historical and literary context.

V.A. Skorodenko in the review "Discovery of the World" (1983) determined the place of J.R.R. Tolkien in the world literary process and put "The Lord of the Rings" on a par with such works as "Robinson Crusoe", "Don Quixote", etc., included in "the classics of both "adult" and "adolescent" reading" [Skorodenko, 1983]. Stressing the completeness and accuracy of the fictional world created by Tolkien the author writes about the one-sided interpretation of "The Lord of the Rings" as an allegory along with "adventurous plot basis" [Skorodenko, 1983] and Tolkien's historical and philosophical concept.

According to the researchers the causes of Tolkien "boom" in our country can be attributed to the creation in his works of a unique picture of the world which has such quality that the author himself in his essay "On Fairy Stories" called "the inner consistency of reality" [Tolkien, 2002]. Thus, the researcher under the penname Kot Kamishovij ("Reed cat") in his article "On ethics and criticism" (1999) characterized the world created by the writer as "...so alive and real that you can literally enter in and settle there [Kot Kamoshovij, 1999].

A new stage of critical thinking indicated in the 90ties of the XX century, was to identify the shortcomings of the writer's works. For example, E. Ivanitskaya in the article "Orcs whipping" (1994) indicates that "The Lord of the Rings" is characterized by poor character elaboration and the absence of realistic perception of the important parts [Ivanickaja, 1994]. The plot of the trilogy is described as illogical and inconsistent.

In the late 90s - early 2000s the attempts to identify shortcomings in Tolkien's works were accompanied by negative interpretation of his popularity in Russia. Tolkien's writings were evaluated in terms of the isolation from the pressing problems. Russian literature turned to reflect problems of current situation of those days. D. Bykov wrote about escapism, which is inherent in his opinion in the writer's fandom [Bykov, 1994]. Also, A. Cvetkov talked about escapism and called "The Lord of the Rings" a prosthesis of real morals, temptation, which distracted people from the catastrophe befallen the country [Cvetkov, 2001].

### Features and stages of research of J.R.R. Tolkien's works in Russian literary criticism

In comparison with the West the literary understanding of Tolkien started quite late in Russia. Initially, therefore, consideration of his work went through the prism of prevailing global literary perspectives.

In the article "Tolkien and the critics. Review" [Muravyov, 1976] V.S. Muravyov determined the directions of the interpretation of Tolkien's books in foreign literary criticism. The critic noted the two extremes that are typical to foreign researchers: the allegorical reinterpretation and mythological savoring. The researcher considered that the key to the analysis of the works was to reveal the specifics of the artistic method aimed to install the integrity of the world created by the author, aided by folklore and mythological basis.

Reference to the foreign literary criticism voiced in the report "J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy "Lord of the Rings" by E.M. Apenko (1982). The researcher focused on the question of Tolkien's method, in particular, on the issue to connect fantasy and reality.

The relationship between the real and the fantastic was also placed in S.L. Koshelev's master's thesis "Philosophical fiction in modern English literature (novels of J.R.R. Tolkien, William Golding, K. Wilson in 50-60ties.)" (1983). It was the first master's thesis in our country which had the objects of study including works by Tolkien. [Koshelev, 1981].

One of the central issues that initially caused national literary interest was the question of the complexity of the academic understanding of Tolkien's works. Moreover S.L. Koshelev in his article "Genre of J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings" (1981) wrote that the writer's work "can hardly be precisely attributed to either particular literary tradition" [Koshelev, 1985].

R.I. Kabakov saw the reason for the difficulties encountered in the analysis in the fact that "The Lord of the Rings" "...violates too clearly the laws of modern prose" [Kabakov, 1989].

Another key challenge in understanding the writer's work in native literature became the problem of genre of his works, "The Lord of the Rings" in particular. S.L. Koshelev defined it as "a fantastic philosophical novel with elements of fairy tale and heroic epic" [Koshelev, 1985], R.I. Kabakov - as "a mythological epic" [Kabakov, 1988], E.N. Kovtun - as "a literary fairy tale", "novel-myth" [Kovtun, 2010]. Thus, the researchers admitted the synthetic nature of the genre of the work.

The desire to understand the phenomenon of Tolkien's creativity in Russia was also expressed in the study of factors that influenced on Tolkien's world view. Researchers attempted to trace the specific aspects of the impact, to identify motives of mythology, epics and folklore in his texts and correlate them with such a phenomenon as modern literary myth-making.

The initial stage of the mythological reading – adoption- contributed into the establishment of even more links of the writer's texts with the legacy of world literature and culture. Further the author's works were analyzed in terms of functioning of mythological archetypes, as it happened, for example, in the article "History of Turin: an attempt to reconstruct the idea" by S.Yu. Taskaeva, (Taskaeva, 2000). In terms of literary mythmaking Tolkien's texts were interpreted as an attempt to create "his own mythological system". [Taskaeva, 2000].

The academic study of Tolkien's works in our country began with its understanding of the phenomenon, the desire to define the place in the world literary process. Taking into account the views of foreign literary scholars national researchers turned to such issues as the specificity of the fiction method of the writer, the genre originality, relationship to the world of literature and culture. In the 1980s the subjects of research expanded and continued to form the main directions of their study in the 90s. At the beginning of the XXI century the study of Tolkien's works has gone the way of conceptual analysis. The mythological approach received a special place, within which the writer's work is seen as an example of modern literary mythmaking in natural connection with the literary and cultural heritage of the past.

**DISCUSSIONS:**

As Tolkien studies formed it became necessary to generalize the accumulated material theoretically. On the one hand, the works were classified on the base of the authors' positions in relation Tolkien's works, i.e. these are various approaches to the study of the writer's texts and analysis of applied methodology. On the other hand, there are bibliographies fixing the actual researches.

D.O. Vinohodov was one of the first to generalize approaches to the study of the writer's legacy. In the report "Approaches to the study of Tolkien's texts" (2000) he distinguished three main approaches: philological, canonical and historiographical, historical. He supported his thoughts by quoting Christopher Tolkien: "There are explorations to be conducted in this world with perfect right quite irrespective of literary critical considerations; and it is proper to attempt to comprehend its structure in its largest extent, from the myth of its Creation". [Vinohodov, 2002]. In another article "Tolkien studies: problems and principles of the methodology" (2002) Vinohodov complemented his concept, highlighting five approaches: philological, psychoanalytic, historical, visionary and religious. In the thesis "J.R.R. Tolkien's epic "The Lord of the Rings" in the context of Western European literary tradition" (2007) I.A. Maklakov emphasized the allegorical, mythological and religious trends that coexist within the literary approach to the study [Maklakov, 2007].

M.M. Mintz argued D.O. Vinohodov's concept. In his report "Theory and Methodology of Tolkien studies. (Reflections on the basics)" (2011), he indicated some shortcomings of the theoretical and methodological models proposed by Vinohodov and made his own ones. Thus, M. Mintz took Tolkien's personality, his ideas, spiritual quest, and finally, his works as the main object of Tolkien studies. [Mintz, 2004].

Thereby, according to national Tolkienists the study Tolkien's creativity cannot be reduced to the literary analysis of his works. A variety of points of view is caused by the specificity of the writer's artistic picture of the world. It shows the interest in his work and a desire to identify his texts.

Bibliography of the Russian-language Tolkienists streamline the body of research of Tolkien's creative writings, showing the change of research topics over time. The most revealing in this respect are bibliographies compiled by I. Belov and M. Mintz.

The analysis of the applied approaches to the study of J.R.R. Tolkien's works together with the data of bibliographies gives an idea of the development of Russian-language Tolkien studies as a branch of knowledge in general. However, attempts to review it in the synthesis of synchronic and diachronic analysis of its individual aspects have not yet been taken.

**CONCLUSION:**

So the study showed that the Russian-language Tolkien studies in diachronic terms went through certain stages of development. The initial stage matched 1970-80s, when J.R.R. Tolkien's writings gradually became available to the Russian audience. The stages of formation of Russian Tolkien studies as a branch of knowledge corresponded to 1980s-1990s, when the reflection and analysis of the texts became more systemic in nature and formed the main directions of further study. The third stage, which started at the beginning of the XXI century and continues to this day, demonstrated deep and structured understanding of J.R.R. Tolkien's works and their versatile learning.

With regard to synchronic study of J.R.R. Tolkien's creative writings the study has found that the scientific and critical coverage of Tolkien's books was partly determined by social and cultural situation in Russia and peculiarities of native literature, nevertheless it was conducted taking into account the achievements of foreign literary criticism. The Russian-language researchers

conceptualized the phenomenon of Tolkien's creativity in the context of his relation with the English cultural and literary heritage. It was highlighted in the mythological reading of his works.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.



### References

1. Khazanov I.R. (2009). 'Problema asocialnogo vospriyatiya tvorchestva J.R.R.Tolkien v russkoyazichnoj srede', 'Palantir': <http://www.tolkien.spb.ru/Pal-58.pdf> (accessed 2.03.2016).
2. Vinohodov D. O. (2002). 'Tolkinistika: principyi I probemi vetodologii. Tolkien texts translation. <http://www.nto-ttt.ru/dv/tmethod1.shtml> (accessed 2.03.2016). (in Russian)
3. Muravyov V.S. (1976). 'Tolkien u kritiki. Obzor': <http://www.kulichki.com/tolkien/arhiv/manuscr/murav76.shtml> (accessed 2.03.2016). (in Russian)
4. Apenko E.M. (1982). 'Trilogiya J.R.R. Tolkien 'Povelitel Kolec': <http://www.kulichki.com/tolkien/arhiv/manuscr/apenko82.shtml> (accessed 2.03.2016). (in Russian)
5. Apenko E.M. (2007). 'U istokov rossiyskoj tolkinistiki': [http://www.kulichki.com/tolkien/arhiv/manuscr/apenko\\_int.shtml](http://www.kulichki.com/tolkien/arhiv/manuscr/apenko_int.shtml) (accessed 2.03.2016). (in Russian)
6. Yakovlev D. (1976). 'Prikljucheniya Mistera Begginsa'. Leninskie iskry. (in Russian)
7. Skorodenko V. (1983). 'Otkrytie mira'. Inostrannaja literatura. № 5. 237 – 239pp. (in Russian)
8. Tolkien J.R.R. (2002). 'O volshebnyh istorijah. Silmarillion'. M. AST; SPb.: TerraFantastica. 419–497pp. (in Russian)
9. Kot Kamoshovij (1999). 'Ob Etike I kritike': <http://www.kulichki.com/tolkien/arhiv/palata/ethic.shtml> (accessed 2.03.2016). (in Russian)
10. Ivanickaja E. (1994). 'Orki dlya porki'. Stolica. 57-58pp. (in Russian)
11. Bykov D. (1994). 'Derevyannye laty'. Stolica. 59p. (in Russian)
12. Cvetkov A. (2001). 'Vlastelin serdec'. Radiogramma radio 'Svoboda' ot 29.05.2001': <http://kulichki.com/tolkien/podshivka/0A10529a.htm> (accessed 2.03.2016). (in Russian)
13. Koshelev S.L. (1981). 'Filosofskaya fantastika v sovremennoj anglijskoj literature: avtoref.' [http://www.fandom.ru/about\\_fan/koshelev\\_02.htm](http://www.fandom.ru/about_fan/koshelev_02.htm). (accessed 2.03.2016). (in Russian)
14. Koshelev S.L. (1985). 'Povelitel Kolec': <http://www.kulichki.com/tolkien/arhiv/manuscr/koshel85.shtml> (accessed 2.03.2016). (in Russian)
15. Kabakov R.I. (1989). 'Povelitel Kolec' J.R.R. Tolkien I problema sovremennogo literaturnogo mifotvorchestva: avtofererat. diss.'. 18p. (in Russian)
16. Kabakov R.I. (1988). 'Povelitel Kolec' J.R.R.Tolkien: epos ili roman?': <http://www.kulichki.com/tolkien/arhiv/manuscr/kabako88.shtml> (accessed 2.03.2016). (in Russian)
17. Taskaeva S.Yu. (2000). 'Istoriya Turina: popitkarekonstrukzii istorii zamisla': <http://kulichki.com/tolkien/arhiv/manuscr/anariel2.shtml> (accessed 2.03.2016). (in Russian)
18. Maklakov I.A. (2007). 'Epopeya J.R.R. Tolkien 'Vlastel in Kolec' v kontekste zapadnoevropejskih literaturnih tradicij: diss.. Kazan. 178p. (in Russian)
19. Mintz M. M. (2004). 'Teoriya I motodologiya tolkinistiki. Razmishleniya ob Osnovah', Palantir: <http://www.tolkien.spb.ru/Pal-63.pdf> (accessed 2.03.2016).
20. Kovtun E. N. (2010). 'Prodolzheniya J.R.R. Tolkien...: tradeciya povestvovanij o Sredozemje v novejshej otecjestvennoj fantastike'. Evoluciya ruskoj fantastiki na rubezhe tisyachiletij. Chelyabinsk. Encyclopedia. 69-85pp. (in Russian)