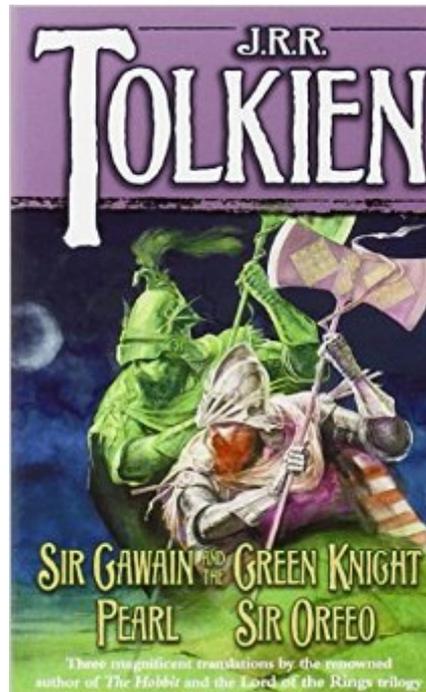


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Sir Gawain And The Green Knight; Pearl; [and] Sir Orfeo



Synopsis

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT, PEARL, and SIR ORFEO are masterpieces of a remote and exotic age--the age of chivalry and wizards, knights and holy quests. Yet it is only in the unique artistry and imagination of J.R.R. Tolkien that the language, romance, and power of these great stories comes to life for modern readers, in this masterful and compelling new translation.

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Customer Reviews

Between Tolkien's legendarium and scholarship fall his translations, which are by far the most regularly metrical translations in English. "Sir Gawain" includes 101 laisses or verse paragraphs of varying length, head-rhymed on the head-stave, each with an end-rhymed bob-and-wheel refrain; "Pearl" includes 101 12-line stanzas with regular (alternating) end-rhymes in addition to the head-rhymes, plus stanza-linking rhymes. Not even Professor Lehmann's Beowulf includes 101 bob-&-wheel refrains. Tolkien's international reputation as a scholar began with his revival of "Sir Gawain" in the early '20s, and he developed these translations over the course of some 50 years. Scholarly consensus has held that "Sir Gawain" and "Pearl," the masterworks of the 14th-century Middle English alliterative-stave revival (standing in relation to Chaucer as Marlowe to Shakespeare), were composed by a West Midlands author whose name has not survived, the authentically bereaved father of the "Pearl" herself. Tolkien's "Gawain" lecture (published in *The Monsters and the Critics*) enlarges very helpfully on the early-'50s radio preface included in this volume. "Sir Orfeo" is a mere frippery by comparison, in stichic ballad couplets, but probably originated as a single-author work as well. Admittedly there are more authoritative sources on the

Classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice than "Sir Orfeo," but that's part of the point: the Classical elements in these translations are real-life analogues of elvish/dwarvish influence in hobbit poetry.

These three texts from the translating pen of J.R.R. Tolkien comprise an uplifting trio that give the reader a glimpse of times when literature was aimed at both beauty and the edification of proper values. This is particularly true in the first two texts. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight presents a late Arthurian legend which was penned in a relatively obscure West-Midland dialect of early Middle English. The text, as translated by Tolkien, still maintains the auditory alliteration used to drive the poem itself. This in itself is a blessed treasure to the reader, as it is a rarely used method of poetry. The story is a gem in that it presents a fallible human, Gawain, who strives by the Grace of God to fulfill his oaths made. It is an exposition of piety, casting the Arthurian knight into a wholly Christian light. Pearl, written in a dialectic style of poetic meter, is a moving poem of grief and understanding in the face of the death of a two-year-old child. The imagery used in it is absolutely breathtaking, drawing heavily on the Apocalypse of John for its material. The discourse is a journey of enlightenment and eventual peace, marked with profound trust in God. I found this poem to be absolutely stunning in itself. Pearl, along with Gawain, exposes the existence of a great deal of Marian piety at the time of the writing. This presents an intriguing scenario which reminds Christians of the ongoing understanding of Mary's role in the Christian faith. Sir Orfeo, related in many ways to Classical myth, is a much more light-hearted adventure. It is a quick read that presents the reader with the brave quest of King Orfeo for his lost wife, Heurodis. The symbols used are mixed from Classical as well as English/Celtic sources.

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