First publication of J.R.R. Tolkien's collected poems offers new insights into author's personality

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If you have read The Lord of the Rings, there is a good chance that you skipped over one or more of the 75 songs and poems in J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy epic. Yet long before he was the "father of modern fantasy", Tolkien's great ambition was to be a poet.

He wrote hundreds of poems throughout his life, running the gamut from playful limericks to lengthy verse epics in Old English alliterative meter (verse that focuses on alliteration, the repetition of consonant sounds in two or more words or syllables). But despite his prolific poetic output, Tolkien remains best-known for his prose. Published by Harper Collins, The Collected Poems of J.R.R. Tolkien—the first tome to bring together all of his poetry—will not alter its author's reputation as a storyteller first and foremost, but it will offer readers illuminating new insights into this oft-neglected side of his personality.

This new book has been in the works since 2016, when Christopher Tolkien sent editors Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull several folders of his father's unpublished poetry. Hammond and Scull are two of the world's most respected Tolkien scholars, having written painstaking reference works such as the J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide (2017) and The Lord of the Rings: A Reader's Companion (2008). They have also edited previous works by Tolkien, including the short poetry collection The Adventures of Tom Bombadil (2014).

Between them, Hammond and Scull have precisely the obsessive eye for detail and encyclopedic knowledge of Tolkien's corpus required to pull off such an undertaking. And once you hold this deluxe, three-volume, 1,500-page tome in your hands, you will grasp just how monumental an undertaking it is.

The Collected Poems of J.R.R. Tolkien contains nearly 250 individual works spanning more than five decades, 70 of them previously unpublished.

Hammond and Scull do not present the poems as standalone texts. They meticulously document the manuscript history of each poem from initial fragments to final drafts, tracing their evolution over the course of years or even decades.

This is because Tolkien would frequently return to the same poem throughout his life, revising and reworking it over and over—much as he did with his literary mythology.

The Sea-Bell is a perfect example. In 1934, Tolkien published a poem in The Oxford Magazine entitled Looney. It describes a man's voyage to an enchanted other-world and his desolation upon returning to ordinary life afterwards.

Almost 30 years later, Looney underwent major redrafting to become The Sea-Bell, which was published in The Adventures of Tom Bombadil in 1962. The poem's basic narrative arc remained the same, but the imagery was darker, more evocative, more devastating. The protagonist is utterly cut off from his contemporaries, with no words to communicate an experience they cannot understand.

Both versions of the poem incorporate other recurring motifs in Tolkien's poetry: the "perilous realm" of Faërie, grief for the passing of an ancient world, the sublime mystery of the sea.

But The Sea-Bell is not merely a revision of its predecessor. Looney was conceived and published as an independent work. In The Adventures of Tom Bombadil, on the other hand, The Sea-Bell is framed as a text written by an unnamed hobbit within Middle-earth, which Tolkien had discovered and translated for modern readers. This conceit invites readers to put the poem in direct conversation with the themes of melancholy and sea-longing which run throughout The Lord of the Rings.

By charting how the poem and its context changed over time, Hammond and Scull show how its meaning changed too.

Poetry of re-enchantment

In Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment (2024), the philosopher Charles Taylor argues that much of western art for the past two centuries has been deeply concerned with the problem of disenchantment.

Many of us live with a nagging sense that industrialized modernity has cut us off from the cosmos, from nature and from our authentic selves. The Romantics and their inheritors believed that art could reconnect us to what is deepest and truest in ourselves and in the world around us—could re-enchant the world.

This is one way to read Tolkien's entire literary project. He suggests as much in his famous essay On Fairy-Stories (1947).

Eminent Tolkien researcher Verlyn Flieger reads The Sea-Bell as a profound expression of disenchantment, a reflection perhaps of Tolkien's service in the first world war. But the powers of re-enchantment are at work elsewhere in his work, in the elven-realm of Lothlórien for instance. This dialectic of disconnection and reconnection lies at the heart of Tolkien's enduring appeal.

As The Collected Poems of J.R.R. Tolkien attests, that same dynamic is at play in his poetry as much as his prose. But be forewarned: this book is not for the faint of heart. Its massive scope, and the academic presentation of the material, are better suited to the Tolkien scholar than the casual reader—certainly not the one who leapfrogs the songs in The Lord of the Rings.

But if you, like me, feel a compulsion to own everything released under the professor's name, that is hardly going to stop you.