



Literary Criticism and Improvements in 'The Fellowship of the Ring'

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Abstract

The classic fantasy text of the twentieth century, the Lord of the Rings, suffers from notable literary flaws. The current portrayal of the first book of the trilogy by Peter Jackson, 'The Fellowship of the Ring', is a substantial improvement that manages to overcome Tolkien's own biases and intellectual failings, yet also makes additional use of Tolkien's heretical Catholicism.

Competing Claims to the Lord of the Rings

The Lord of the Rings trilogy is considered one of the finest fictional stories in the twentieth century, with sales in excess of one hundred million. For example when Tempe Public Library attempted to compile a list of the greatest works of literature for the twentieth century, John Bradford, their reference librarian commented:

'Never before or since has been created such a convincing other world, with history, languages, and cultures all its own'. (1) Likewise, in January 1997, Waterstone's bookstore conducted a poll of Books of the Century with Channel 4; with over 25 000 participants, Tolkien's Lord of the Rings was voted as 'Book of the Century'. (2) Even academics, the sober creatures that they are supposed to be, pay enormous attention to this literary modern classic (3).

Yet the feeling is by no means universal. Critic Edmund Wilson in 1956 said that the book was "a poverty of invention which is almost pathetic" and poet John Heath-Stubbs described it as "a combination of Wagner and Winnie-the-Pooh." (4) According to Chris Henning's recent article in the Sydney Morning Herald, it is also deeply racist:

'Middle Earth is inhabited by races of creature deeply marked off from one another by language, physical appearance, and behaviour. It is almost a parody of a Hitlerian vision: orcs are ugly, disgusting, brutal, violent ? without exception; elves are a beautiful, lordly, cultured elite; in between are hobbits, short, hairy, ordinary, a bit limited, but lovable and loyal and brave when they have to be.?(5)

One can also note the minimum and submissive role played by female characters, alternately absent, pallid or useless. All of the Fellowship are male, all of the Nazgul are male, Sauron is male (or rather, was), all of the Wizards are male and so forth. Arwen has no discernible personality except to be a consort to Aragon and Goldberry is a little more than a magical servant for the ridiculous Tom Bombadil. Even the most powerful Elvish witch of the land, Galadriel, holder of a ring of power, does nothing except engage in stereotypical maternal protection of her very pretty little nest, Lothlorien.

How can such contradictory expressions be held simultaneously? It is sometimes popular to avoid such problems to slip into the ambiguity of individual and relative tastes. But this is far from sufficient: politically it may make sense, of course, as it represents the legal recognition of individual rights ? but in terms of literary critique it is next to useless. Such radical relativism and removal of critique would mean that the literary studies would mean that scholars would have no more that well-read people. Theory dissolves into matters of quantity; a professor of literature could just as easily (and justifiably) be knowledgeable in Hagar The Horrible as the Poetic and Prose Edda, the Gesta Donarum and Futhark.

Additionally, removal of critique removes the capacity of reflection. Yet, as individuals themselves are (eventually) happy to admit, deeply held convictions can be just another version of deeply held prejudices. Without reflection, tastes are simply reduced to rampaging monsters of the id and quality literature becomes a matter of marketing titillation. The point isn't, of course, to determine what sort of tastes in content are superior or inferior ? as the saying goes ?taste is the only accounting for taste?, but to understand how biases and contradictions weaken the process of determining such tastes.

Modern analytical literary analysis is used in this inquiry, independent of particular market domination whether based on sex, ethnicity or class; this is an essay on aesthetics, not norms. In this inquiry such components of analysis - characterisation, setting, narrative, theme and style ? are utilised in analysing both the book and elaborated for the film ?The Fellowship of the Ring?. Such an analysis notes Tolkien's (northern) European mythical influences in terms of characterisation and motif, and Catholicism in narrative and theme and as a metaphorical European historical setting. In terms of style, mystical Anglo-Celtic traditions and Hellenic epic presentations are discerned.

A Brief Literary Analysis

It is generally accepted that Tolkien borrowed freely from northern European mythology. The use of magic and the main character species (Elves, Dwarves, Trolls, Orcs, Ents, Giant Eagles, Dragons, Wights, Wraiths) are abundant in Nordic, Germanic and Celtic mythology and are in some cases unique to those cultures. Tolkien's own species contribution, the Hobbit, seems to pick the ?plains and hills? lay of the land gap between the Dwarven halls of stone and the Elvish forest and stars (6). Further, the personalities of members of these species and their prejudices match with those found in these mythologies, with the Hobbits again providing a unique contribution.

The contribution of northern European mythology is repeated for event descriptions and motif. Tolkien acknowledged borrowing for the Finnish in the development of the Elvish language and the Nordic and Celtic for the runic scripts. The material manifestations of motif in *The Fellowship* also matches those found in the European mythical tradition; the cairns of the dead, the rings of power, the seeing-stones, mithral and magic swords all match to the content of European mythology.

The influence of Catholicism is less obvious. However Tolkien was quite emphatic about this influence. Tolkien wrote: "Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision...For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism." (7) Many reviewers ? primarily Catholic ? have made much about this commentary on a thematic level. Common to the Catholic thematic worldview, modern industrial technology leads to corruption and has an evil teleology (eg., Sauruman), whereas traditional artisan technology may transcend the world of the mundane and due to its beauty, also become magical (eg., Catholic relics ? Elven/Dwarven craft). Catholic reviewers themselves seem particularly infatuated to extract mileage from the themes of simple faith and tenacity, however it is surely obvious that Catholicism has nowhere near a monopoly on such behaviour. They might be better off attempting with the analogy of a world where reproduction exists, but sensuality is less than even that of Chaucer.

The metaphysical setting and historical structure of Middle-Earth is analogous to the Catholic interpretation of medieval Europe, even if the name does directly derive from Nordic paganism. Starting from the mighty Italic and Provençal cities of Gondor, (Tolkien once described Venice and being like Pelagir (8) and Italy is Italien in German, cf Tolkien's Ithilien), structural equivalents are found with the fragmented kingdom of Arnor and those of Britain and northern France (Langue Oil). Rohan is almost comically Germanic, the ?good Slavs? of Poland can be found in the Woodmen of Mirkwood and Esgaroth. The mystic far western Ireland has equivalence to Grey Havens. On the side of evil, Mordor is interestingly generic, yet has swayed ?the weak races?, the Altaic peoples of Rhun, the Saracens of Umbar, and the Arabs of Harad. The troubling existence of the Orthodox faith is easily dispensed with the early fall of Byzantium in the form of Minas Morgul.

Stylistically, Tolkien is well within the formula utilised by English writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a modicum of Celtic influences. Some over-enthusiastic Tolkien reviewers consider this sort of writing ? and

Tolkien in particular ? to be the work of genius. For example, Shippey considers the following "one of many brilliant passages of natural description in *The Lord of the Rings*": (9)

?A golden afternoon of late sunshine lay warm and drowsy upon the hidden land between. In the midst of it there wound lazily a dark river of brown water, bordered with ancient willows, arched over with willows, blocked with fallen willows, and flecked with thousands of willow-leaves. The air was thick with them, fluttering yellow from the branches; for there was a warm and gentle breeze blowing softly in the valley, and the reeds were rustling, and the willow-boughs were creaking.?

It is difficult to see where the brilliance is in the passage. It is descriptive and it is pleasant, but the adjectives and adverbs are childishly simple. This simplicity matches the scene described, a simplicity that can only be achieved in the non-industrial zones of Tolkien's beloved England and one can only deal with human expression in an unbelievably moderate, albeit liberal, manner.

Despite this propensity to florid and languid descriptions, the Hellenic epic also influences Tolkien. *The Lord of the Rings* is no mere tale of sheep-stealing or other modest deeds that populate the Celtic mythos, nor is a tale of mighty gods, such as is found in the Nordic. Rather, it uses the human epic adventure, such as is found in Homer, but with the proportions of the Nordic. Unlike either the Nordic or the Hellenic versions of epic literature however, Tolkien's protagonists are not gods and demigods or other legendary figures. Tolkien's heroes, more true to the Anglo-Celtic tradition, are common, unassuming people.

As a literary whole, the influences Tolkien's location in space-time are so strong, that as an author he seems to be almost oblivious to self-reflection. In this regard, we are dealing with a very simple text, with an equally simple author. For these reasons the characterisation and descriptive style of Tolkien is relatively impoverished. On the other hand, the depth of Nordic, Germanic and Celtic influences on the setting is relatively impressive, as is the stylistic influences to the narrative (few attempt such epics with such modest protagonists). There are huge literary gaps in Tolkien, and this should indicate that claims that it will become a classic are far from justified. Yet in a world that is weary of the technologisation of war and disrespectful of both nature and mythology, *The Lord of the Rings* has extraordinary resonance.

Tolkien's Heresy and Jackson's Recreation

An unnoted strength in Tolkien's work is the fact that he was a heretic. Catholic reviewers have, of course, not noted this and will remain in denial of his heresy. To be sure, Tolkien's deep and profound commitment to Catholicism remains important for his own personal identification and as a political right. But a professor of literature is not necessarily a theologian, or for that matter is entirely honest with beliefs vis-à-vis their circumstances. Indeed, whether or not Tolkien acknowledged or was conscious of his heretical traits is largely irrelevant to aesthetic considerations. The fact of the matter is that it allowed him to weave together several mythical traditions without having to resort to metaphysics or divine intervention. The angelic wizards are as far as intervention goes and even then, their role is exceedingly subtle.

The specifics of Tolkien's heresy are of three parts. Firstly Tolkien, like the Nicean Monophysites and the Unitarians, denies the Trinity. There is no Holy Spirit, there is no Son of God, and there is no God the Father. As *The Silmarillion* makes clear in its opening pages, there is Eru, the One, who initiates creation of matter content through the form of music (shades of Pythagoreans!). Secondly, Tolkien clearly also subscribes the Culdee, or Celtic heresy. The various fey species are not universally considered demons under the service of evil powers, but often include the greatest of the good. Tolkien's term for 'heaven' (the Undying Lands) is even the same of that of the Celtic Christians (Annwyn, the Land of the Ever Young). Thirdly, Tolkien subscribes to traditional paganism and modern agnosticism. Eru is a disinterested and external deity, residing in the Timeless Halls and effectively outside of the universe and without intervention ? that is the work of the Valar, who are revered as pagan deities are. (10)

The use of the film medium allowed Jackson some significant advantages. Being staged in Aotearoa, a land renowned

for such geographic diversity, significantly reduces the necessity of descriptive passages. Indeed, because Tolkien's descriptions are actually quite twee, Jackson has been able to make middle-earth even more impressive than the texts immediately indicate. The viewer is largely saved from Tolkien's propensity to song and fortunately the film does not become a musical. A balance is reached between visual extravagance and subtle poetry.

The script, composed by Peter Jackson, Fran Walsh, Stephen Sinclair, and Philippa Boyens, includes changes that improve characterisation. Firstly, there is the improvement of the role of women to an active basis. Secondly, there is the additional personality that is added to the Hobbits. Finally, Tolkien's own errors, such as Tom Bombadil, have fortunately been removed. This character served no purpose in the wider narrative, was utterly anachronistic in presentation, was a plot device of bizarre proportions, and quite clearly a fantasy invented by the overuse of Hobbit pipeweed. Notably, he is the only chapter from *The Fellowship of the Ring* text that is utterly abolished.

Jackson et al have substantially improved Tolkien's treatment of women and emotions, which seems to be more of the undeveloped ignorance variety than that of ethnic malice. The use of Arwen as an active character and the emphasis of Galadriel as a witch, rather than hippy-earth-mother bodes well for future development. It will be very interesting to see how Eowyn is portrayed in future films. Of course, this opinion is not universally shared; witness the contempt described by a young woman on the Tolkien movie commentary website (11)

?What does she symbolize strutting about on a horse chased by the Nine? I think she is intended to represent the twisted theme feminism has become: Women can not only do everything men can do, they can do more. At best, this absurd alteration in the plot is only a reckless ploy to allow Miss Tyler more time on camera, even if theme must be altogether forsaken.?

The theme is hardly that women can do more than men as, contrary to the view expressed above, the plot suffers no change. The scene in fact exactly the same in the film as it does in the text, except that instead of a male rider there is a female one. Indeed Jackson et al have done very well to provide an opportunity to increase the narrative time of a female lead character in active rather than submissive role. Further, they have done so without any possibility of anachronism. Far from being ?twisted? and ?absurd? such sensitive elaborations are to be wholeheartedly encouraged. Indeed, it is one the films greatest scenes, and not only for the special effects.

The scriptwriters are also to be commended for including a degree of sensuality in their portrayal of the Hobbits. If it isn't screamingly obvious, the love and loyalty shared between Sam and Frodo has homoerotic content far in advance of anything that the kindly professor may have considered, let alone felt comfortable writing about in a public arena. Further, whereas Pippin and Merry may as well have been a single person in the text, the scriptwriters have both remained true to Tolkien's portrayal and advanced it. By allocating them the roles of endearing working-class larrikins, whom as we know, always seem to appear in pairs and with a clear allocation of duties.

In conclusion, Tolkien's world is a deep embodiment of Nordic, Germanic and Celtic mythology within an analogous medieval European monotheism threatened by outside sources and the onslaught of modern technology. The richness of this setting, the modern use of ?ordinary heroes? within the epic narrative and Tolkien's own unconscious heretical attitudes provides justifications for the text's impressive reviews and loyal fans. The film direction of Jackson and the script writing of Jackson et al has substantially improved the text in terms of descriptive efficiency, character development and narrative. The setting and characterisation however is replete with an extraordinary depth of racist myths that Jackson is unable to dispel ? that will require a different mythology to that of Tolkien, and one which indeed, if written, may even surpass the popularity and resonance of this tale loved by millions.

References

1. <http://www.tempe.gov/library/adult/adultbib/bestbook.htm> [1]
2. <http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/tg/stores/static/-/waterstones/water...> [2]
3. The most recent contribution in this field is Jane Chance's ?The Lord of the Rings: The Mythology of Power?, University of Kentucky Press, 2001. See also <http://www.discovery.org/comingEvents/celebratingMiddleEarth/lotr.htm> [3]

4. <http://www3.tolkienonline.com/docs/5346.html> [4]

5. <http://www.smh.com.au/news/0112/13/opinion/opinion3.html> [5]

The use of the term 'species' is quite deliberate here as it equates certainly with the differences that can be found in the respective European traditions and Tolkien's own mythology, even if Tolkien himself referred to 'races'. There are of course, specific points of debate (eg., whether Orcs are a separate species to Elves).

6. <http://www.charlescoulombe.com/tolk.html> [6]

7. http://www.thenewrepublic.com/012802/jenkyns012802_print.html [7]

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8. These features are heresies as described by the Catholic encyclopedia online at www.newadvent.org/cathen/ [8]

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