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Abstract
Describes five "laws" underlying Tolkien's Middle-earth and how the action of *The Lord of the Rings* proceeds logically from them: the cosmos is ultimately providential; the result of an action is influenced by its intent; moral and magical laws are as important as physical laws; states of mind influence physical reality; and experience is the realization of proverbial truth or romantic convention.

Keywords
Realism; Secondary Belief; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Structure

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The Structure and Aesthetic of Tolkien's _Lord of the Rings_

by Randel Helms

The integrity of critical discussion of _The Lord of the Rings_ is the outcome of its aesthetic principles by which a fantasy world operates are different both from the laws of our own world of common sense reality and from the aesthetic principles of historic literature; if we do not allow this difference, we shall find ourselves praising fantasy for the wrong reasons, or attacking it for not being what it was not meant to be in the first place.

The world of fantasy is a world of desire fulfilled, of beauty described in the terms of goodness and wickedness past, defying or redeeming, reflected in a world of action. But it will quickly make clear that the literature of fantasy is always in serious danger of slipping into mere wish fulfillment and sentimentality. For, the discipline of the fantasy needs a self-discipline analogous to but opposite from that required of the author of realistic narrative. Of course, fantasy's subject is the art of the imagination. "Anything that has a kinaesthetic range of available responses to the action, responses can readily determine whether there is enough meat in a book to justify a continued perusal. More difficult, and what must fully engage the attention of the critic of fantasy, is the quality of the action. This paper is an attempt to show the quality and value of the narrative in fantasy literature, dependent upon the complex of the interrelationships between the action, on the one hand, and the internal laws or structural principles of the created fantasy world, on the other.

It follows that the critic of fantasy must discover and formulate the internal laws of the Secondary World by examining in order fully to understand the narrative principles of the fictional action and to judge the success with which it fulfills its aim. I begin this study of the structure and aesthetic of _The Lord of the Rings_, therefore, with a list of what I take to be the internal laws of Tolkien's own Secondary World, Middle Earth.

(1) The cosmos is ultimately providential. (2) The result of an action is the product of its intent; that is, Middle Earth's moral structure works according to a kind of "truth table": (x+y(-+)(-+)(-+)). (3) "The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken: the magic, unless covered or overlapped in its effects, and some may even be subsumed under others. I have stated there are six of these laws. In the rest of this paper I hope to show that the structure of the fictional action in each of the six books of Tolkien's series depends upon some or all of these laws: for things happen as they do in Middle Earth, as in our own world, in keeping with its physics and metaphysics. I shall examine each book in turn.

All the action in Book I, and consequently in the rest of the trilogy, stems from Bilbo's act of mercy and pity in _The Hobbit_. This sparsity of major events sets up the possibility of Frodo's inheriting and bearing the Ring. The sense of an over-arching Providence is not strong in _The Hobbit_, especially when one considers the possibility that his adventures were not "managed by mere luck"; but in _The Lord of the Rings_ the actions of Providence are basic to the fabric of the narrative, and begin to be felt quite early in the first book, when Gandalf tells Frodo that Bilbo "was meant to find the Ring... In which case you also were meant to have it."

This really is where, as we say, the plot thickens: for Gandalf's speech corresponds to that by Elrond in Book II, when he announces to Frodo that "this task is appointed for you" (I, 255). Frodo's response to the challenges to his will and strength given by the revelations of Gandalf and Elrond are indeed the "productive moments, the seeds, from which the actions in Books I and II develop and coalesce: self-effacement provide the moral force that sees him through the adventures of the first two books. In other words there is already a set of laws of Middle Earth by the end of Book II: Law 1 (the cosmos is Providential), and Law 2 (the result of an action is the product of its intent).

By Book II, the "real" role of Frodo begins to be revealed. The reader begins to understand the narrative principles or "truth table" of the work. The cosmos is ultimately providential. The world is the product of the author's own art. The reader of fantasy needs, in order to remain inside the Secondary World, to accept Tolkien, not a negative suspension of disbelief, but a suspension of disbelief for Middle Earth. It is only after you have consented to enter the Secondary World, and since every fantasy is a new creation, a new world limits the imaginative freedom of its creator. (3) The world of fantasy must be judged by its own internal complexities. It follows that the critic of fantasy must discover and formulate the internal laws of the Secondary World by examining in order fully to understand the narrative principles of the fictional action and to judge the success with which it fulfills its aim. I begin this study of the structure and aesthetic of _The Lord of the Rings_, therefore, with a list of what I take to be the internal laws of Tolkien's own Secondary World, Middle Earth.

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Since there is not time here for a close study of all the six preliminary adventures of Book I, I shall instead merely list and describe the six in order, and then carefully analyze and interpret them. The six preliminary adventures: (1) the pursuit by the Black Rider, in which Frodo is saved by the providential appearance of Tom Bombadil and Old Man Willow and the Hobbits’ stay at Tom’s house; (2) the cal­mness in the Old Forest, in which Frodo is saved by the rapidly-natur­ing Sam, and by the providential appearance of Tom Bombadil; (3) the taking of the Ring at Amon Hen in Book I, in which Frodo first acts with courage, in striking off the hand of the Wight, but in which Tom Bombadil is still necessary to get the Hobbits out of this even more dangerous situation in which Frodo tries to act with dispatch in order to prevent the revealing of the Ring-bearer, but disastrously lets the Ring slip from his hand to be claimed by Strider, who providentially turns up just when he is needed; (3) the episode at Weathertop, where Frodo is foolish and courageous in about equal proportions, putting on the Ring but also fighting back to the end; and this alone is what saves him from being captured, while Strider’s meditating manages to keep his alive to (6) the last adventure of the forty-five leagues from Parth Galen to Fangorn in the Old Forest, where both Frodo’s courage—he refuses to put on the Ring, and crimes defiance even as he is fasting—and the miraculous assistance of Glorfindel and Gandalf, keep the Ring and the Quest safe.

How for a close look at the second preliminary adventure, in which both Frodo and Sam grow tremendously in stature. The Hobbits and their party leave the Shire, but even through the Old Forest, allow themselves to be "forced" by the malicious Will of Old Man Willow, into a "choice" chosen for them (I, 162)—it is into adventure and peril, to learn by experience the wisdom Elrond is later to summarize at the Council: the "road that seems easier... must be shunned." How at this last we must take a hard road, a road unforeseen? (I, 360).

Here, as in the first preliminary adventure, Frodo is as yet unable to act, but must rely on the help of Sam and Tom Bombadil. At the foot of the gigantic Old Man Willow, Frodo has been tipped into the river by a root which "seemed to be over him and holding him down, but he was not struggling" (I, 165), while Merry and Pippin have been ingested by the great tree. Sam, untouched by the tree’s sapping influence, "slowly, for some minutes, got his bearings. He manages to rescue Frodo, but can do nothing for the other two. Frodo then panics, running "along the path, crying for help! help! help!" Strider, the mysterious Strider, who providentially turns up, help him too. He saves the day with his courage and quick action. The rescue, with its aftermath, creating the possibility of a rescue and an aftermath that are absolutely necessary to the continuation of the Quest, for in the company of Tom Bombadil, Frodo learns another lesson that he must know, and that he could never have learned on his own in the entirely domesticated and well-protected Shire or in the Middle-earth of his Hobbit complacencies, leaving him standing face to face with Evil itself. Frodo exhibits great courage by stabbing with his sword, first at the hand of the Bard Wight in I, then at the foot of the cave Troll in II. He exhibits great courage by stabbing with his sword, first at the hand of the Bard Wight in I, then at the foot of the cave Troll in II. In both scenes, Frodo is especially brave, with his newly awakened courage, both to strive with pride and rooted wisdom, and with mace" (I, 181).

And more important even than Frodo’s grasp of the sin­cerity of nature, is the realization of the necessary fact, in Tolkien’s Secondary Cosmology, that the power of evil, that seeming principle in the universe personified in Sauron, despite its immense power, is powerless against the Ring. Ring cannot make Tom invisible; indeed he has the power to make it vanish and reappear at his will (I, 184-185). This moment in the Ring’s history, in which the Ring’s power becomes vulnerable, is book VI, when Sam, at one of his lowest moments, shares in this climactic insight, perceiving that among the stars of Elbereth there are none "bigger and heavier" (here, whose name means "filth") can never touch. (III, 244).

Tom Bombadil, Frodo’s mentor in all this, is Tolkien’s version of the "Golus" (after Thurbler’s figure). A Golus is the one romance-figure who can "elude the moral antithesis of heroism and villainy," and who "stands apart at Helén in the middle of nature... who represent partly the moral neutrality of the nonexistent element in Middle Earth. nature... who represent partly the moral neutrality of the intermediate world of nature and partly a world of mystery which is impersonal, where power is unapproached. Tom is the personification of nature’s power for good, even as Old Man Willow is nature’s power for malice personified. The Ring-bearer must learn to act in a world where the faces of the nonexistent Middle Earth, the natural and the super-natural; his second adventure schools him well in this regard, so that by the time of the third he is ready to act off the hand of the Bard Wight and to call for Tom Bombadil, whom he knows, to come before the end of the Lord of the Rings. The Ring-bearer, of course, is the reverse of the effects of the evil intent of Sauron, who has sent out a raiding party of Uruk-Hai to capture Hobbits and bring them back to Isengard; but it providentially turns out, however, the dace-seen, spending...
toward Saruman's tower, is dead and fallen, bent upon destroying the trespassers on their land. In the ensuing battle, it seems inevitable that Merry and Pippin will die as Orcs, and Saruman, thinking his right hand action has a good result—the greedy act of Grishnakh.

Seeing that his Orcs are surrounded, and anxious for his own safety, he sends one of the Ringwraiths off to the Hobbits away from the battle under his arms, only to be promptly killed. Frodo is then “ruled by fate” (II, 75), allowing Merry and Pippin to enter nearby Fangorn and go about their unthinking task. As Gandalf later learns, Merry and Pippin are driven only to bring Merry and Pippin with marvelous speed, and in the nick of time, to Fangorn, where otherwise they would have lost all hope.

Treebeard, having made friends with the Hobbits, takes them home with him; and there his hospitality plays a major role in their further adventures. This is a part of their later greatness in Book VI, where they lead in the securing of the Shire. As Treebeard says, “I can give you little to drink, and little to eat, but all I have is yours” (II, 87). Frodo finds himself with the same opportunity to kill the battle Plain to the passes of Mordor” (II, 266); but it is Muil until the night of February twenty-ninth (the same day

Frodo's trail since the Company entered Moria on January turns out, both good and evil, both Sméagol and Gollum, the only other possible way of entry. This can only be imagined by the evil will of Gollum, who hopes desperately that when “She” throws away the empty clothing of the Ring-wraith, she will throw it near the Ring. Ironical-

The final action of Book III that relates to the theme of the major power of evil (V, 56). Now at this time, there is, in Aragorn's mind, no will, as Legolas says to himself at the the hope of a quick destruction of its newly returned king.

The major action of Book V in the war of Gondor. The narrative, however, is not centered around the immediate actions of Gondor, nor even the major power of evil. It is rather centered around the immediate actions of Frodo and Sam. The major power of evil of evil will, so must Frodo and Sam cross the Dead Marshes, to the borders of Mordor, and cross those borders by one of the two evasive plans that could not be predicted. Frodo thought that he sensed a change in Collum again” (II, 296). As it turns out, both good and evil, both Sméagol and Gollum, show him the way.

Like Book III, the fourth book of LOTR is structured after the second internal law of Middle Earth: the effect of an action is not an action. For, as Tolkien said in Book III it is absolutely necessary that Merry and Pippin cross Rohan in three days and reach Fangorn, and just as they do so because of Saruman's overruling of evil will, so must Frodo and Sam cross the Dead Marshes to the borders of Mordor, and cross those borders by one of the two evasive plans that could not be predicted. Frodo thought that he sensed a change in Collum again” (II, 296). As it turns out, both good and evil, both Sméagol and Gollum, show him the way.

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and the Enemy's southern army, is also the only way to find allies sufficient to conquer that army. And as I said, it was only Aragorn's will that brought them to where they needed to be.

Again, just as Dwyer's proverb about will lies behind Aragorn's success, so describes the grandeur of the will of the human deity should not be checked by cold counsel. Aragorn's decision to risk his own life on the swiftest path south was countered by the cold counsel of the hand, which in the end, brought Frodo and Sam; and in the end, not checked by cold counsel, even though Aragorn called the idea "the greatest jest in all the world" (III, 196).

Book VI of Tolkien's trilogy brings together the two major plot-strands of the novel—the adventures of the two pairs of Hobbits (the major pair, and the minor pair, as I shall call them)—and presents the final adventures of each. We recall that the first five books of LOTR deal with the preliminary adventures of each pair of Hobbits, the two present in mirror images the preliminary adventures of the Ringbearer. Book III presents the first set of preliminary adventures of the major pair, and of a minor pair. Book IV finds the major pair seeking a way to enter Mordor. The fifth book shifts again to the minor pair, showing them finding their way to Mordor. Book V finds them attaining Túrin thrandil, half-king of Men, and of an heir to a throne. Recall now Frye's description of the structure of romance: "the action of a minor adventures leading up to a major or climactic adventure." Book VI presents the climactic adventure of each pair of Hobbits: Frodo and Sam struggling toward Mt. Doom to destroy the Ring, Merry and Pippin leading all the Hobbits in the Scouring of the Shire. As these final adventures proceed, we shall observe the realization in action of the force of all five internal laws of Middle Earth. We look first at the minor pair.

The final adventures of Merry and Pippin have been prepared for by the magical effects of the Ents and the Ents, who, by the objectified force of their wills, have betrayed Law (Law 4), and most importantly, by the overarching Providence which, as we shall see, has "trained" them for their great task. Book VI opens as Merry and Pippin, just before the Hobbits re-enter the Shire on October 28: "you must settle its affairs yourselves; that is what you have been prepared for. Understand? My time is over... And as for me, my dear friends, you will need no help. You are grown up now. Grown indeed and very high," (III, 259). Gandalf's humorous allusion to the height of the great height of the minor pair, who, under the influence of the Ents and the Ents, are approaching in their age, and whose growing hours are past. Merry and Pippin have learned the tricks of warfare, have earned great courage, and are ready now to lead in the scouring of the Shire. For them to enter the battle of the Ents in the forest, and takes no role in this final cleansing, except to save life whenever possible, for his task has already been completed in the recognition of the One Ring and the destruction of it. But he has been gradually fading, gradually moving toward the time when he must depart westward.

In the Prologue and Book VI, three major actions must take place: Frodo must be rescued from the tower of Cirith Ungol, the major pair must cross Gorgoroth and scale Mt. Doom, the Ring must be thrown into the very event, in each case, is the realization in action of the effects of all five laws. The escape from the tower is managed chiefly in accordance with the positive and negative sides of Law II, the law of the truth-table morality. Tolkien sets up the escape this way:

Sam listened; and as he did so a gleam of hope came to him...there was fighting in the tower, the Orcs must be at war amongst themselves. Pain was the hope that his guess brought him, it was enough to rouse him. There might just be a chance. His love for Frodo rose above all other thoughts, and forgetting his peril he cried aloud: "I'm coming, Mr. Frodo!" (III, 213)

The combination of the Orcs' own wickedness and greed for Frodo's enriching treasure, and Sam's own love for Frodo, gets the major pair safely out of the tower and onto the road to Orodruin.

There is something else to be mentioned here, however: Sam could never have gone into Cirith Ungol save for the effects of the two most important physical laws of Middle Earth: Law I (moral law and legal law) and Law IV (the force of physical law), and Law 4 (the objective reality of the force of will, evil or good). Sam cannot penetrate the force-field that invisibly guards the entrance to the tower; it stands as an impenetrable wall of evil will extending between the Two Watchers (and is clearly analogous to the force-field of Morgoth in the distance around the Ringwraiths). The only power that can break that wall is the Elvish magic contained in the phial of the Uruk-hai, which Sam removed and thought he believed was the corpse of Frodo; then, in his moment of need, "because he could think of nothing else to do," he held out the phial, and the wall of malice evaporates (III, 218). Sam enters, and the major pair are soon on their way to Gorgoroth.

This second major action closely parallels what happens to the minor pair in Book VII: for just as Merry and Pippin must cross Rohan in three days but are incapable of doing so without the reversed effects of the evil intention of Samurion's Orodruin and Samourion (see the ten days between March fifteenth and March twenty-fifth in order to forestall the destruction of the armies of the West at Minas Tirith), so without the ability of Frodo and Sam to cross Gorgoroth, the encamped armies of Sarouim; they must go north, then south, then south around the encampments west of Mt. Doom—a journey on foot of more than a hundred miles. And providentially, like Merry and Pippin, they are picked up as Orc stragglers, forcibly marched north at great speed, covering the fifty miles to Isenmarch in twenty-four hours. And they have not yet understood what the help of the Ores' whips! as the Orc-captain says, "where there's a whip, there's a way" (III, 256). Mordor's cruel parody of the proverb basic to the Verse of the Rinos, the Illree, the Seven, the Nine, and the Twenty Rings listed therein (Ibid., p. 197). The structuring force of proverb is even more apparent in the next episode. Because they have been exhausted, and with weakening will, Frodo and Sam (now carrying his master) would never have reached Samourion, but for one thing, Samourion's own road to the Chambers of the Tomes. Tolkien's elvish parodies of the proverb "Our Enemy's devices oft serve us in his despite" (III, 131). And last of all, of course, the Ring would never have been destroyed but for the reversed effects of the One Ring's lust for the Ring, "My Precious! O my Precious!" This brief study of The Lord of the Rings has been, as I hope, is by now evident, an attempt to show two things: first, that one can arrive at a valid critical judgement of a work of literary fantasy only on the basis of a grasp of the nature and significance of a "Secondary Cosmology": to show, in other words, that in this as in all cases, only relevant critical principles, applied with insight, will yield relevant critical statements.

FOOTNOTES
5 Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," p. 49.