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Social Philosophy in *The Lord of the Rings*

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Social Philosophy in *The Lord of the Rings*

Abstract

Describes LotR as espousing conservative and authoritarian values, and glorifying violence, yet still providing enjoyment.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Political aspects

Far into the land of the howling winds there is a land called Upper-Middle-World. We of Middle-Earth know little of this place, but the Wanderer brought these pages to Imladris recently. It is called The Great Chronicle of Upper-Middle-World, or, Round and Round We Go Again. The first pages are lost.

The fragment ends here. At least the Elvish trot ends here. Probably the Upper-Middle-World page does not go too much further. Though we searched for other evidence of this whole new world, we searched in vain. It's the only piece of Upper-Middle-World extant. Think though what areas of scholarship are opened by it! I look forward expectantly to the mountains of speculation and controversy which it will generate

Social Philosophy in The Lord of the Rings
by Barry Tunick

A liberal, democratic would-be pacifist, I enjoyed LotR in spite of my convictions. For Tolkien's trilogy is conservative and authoritarian and glorifies violence. Consider:

Conservative: The emphasis is on traditions, tales, legends and the restoration of a previous era. Our heroes are feudal kings, princes and knights. The Hobbits are of the landed, leisured gentry. Seldom do we hear of the common person--the farmer, the soldier, the serf.

Authoritarian: The world is seen as good vs. bad. Boromir and Denethor are the only bad-good guys. Everyone else wears (figuratively) black hats or white hats. Even Gandalf is gray only temporarily.

Violent: As in the Scandinavian sagas and myths (to which I was turned on by the trilogy), glory in battle is the highest goal. True, the violence is mitigated in that only un-human orcs and monsters are usually killed (just as currently we kill not human beings but only Viet-Cong or Communists).

LotR shows a romantic idealism. The pomp is perfect. The speeches, pageantry and ceremony always go off without a hitch. No flies bother the horses and no one ever hiccups or forgets his lines.

Don't get me wrong. I realize that Tolkien was writing escape fantasy, not socialist realism, and that a morality story must contrast good and evil. The above are just afterthoughts; I delighted in LotR.

But I prefer to think that my enjoyment despite the above conflicts with my idealism reflects less upon the depth or sincerity of my convictions than upon Tolkien's marvelous abilities as storyteller.