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Letter

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Letter

LETTER

Dear Dick-

Here it is comment time again. Faced with the choice of discussing everything briefly or W.H. Auden's piece in depth, I choose the latter. I'm still not sure I, a lowly college student, am allowed to disagree with, or worse, critically analyze, one of the pillars of American literature. But anyway.

First, Mr Auden's linking moral choice and speech seems to me to imply that moral choices can only be made within the framework of a society. This is by no means an original idea (Aristotle started it), but when applied to Middle-earth seems to present some problems. Even in the Primary World there are numerous standards of morality; of course one can find a Kant-type absolute standard. But in a world with different species how can one determine a moral code applicable to all? I will admit that the races "both good and evil", as well as the elves, may be given a more or less common standard, but what of the evil beings? I do not agree with Mr Auden that Sauron "is an incarnation of absolute Evil", or at least with the implication that he has always been incapable of (our) good, and thus he can be included in this common standard. (This interpretation is unassailable if one agrees that Sauron, like Morgoth, is a fallen Vala, but I do not do so, as I shall show below.) But what about orcs and trolls? Why can't they have been created--or at least bred--by Morgoth or Sauron? It's a common enough futuristic science fiction idea to have specially bred groups, and special training is even more common an idea (even a practice: brainwashing); why can't so powerful a being as Morgoth have the power to breed a race and ensure that they are forever obedient? Remember, Sauron's trolls were "filled with the evil will of their master," and this is what accounted for their mental superiority. (Regular trolls were dull, lumpish creatures and, in the beginning, "had no more language than beasts." In the earlier world of Middle-earth it is likely the intelligence spectrum was more continuous than it is now; the extinction of the trolls was one cause of the current gap between man and beast.) After Sauron's fall they became insane and non-functioning. To deny Sauron's mental powers is to deny much of the grandeur of LotR.

The linking of speech and morality is certainly true now and was probably true then. But should the morality one judges orcs by be the same as that one uses to discuss elves? I think not. If a race has an instinct for (our) evil, it cannot be called wicked. Its extermination is probably justified, but that is the only value judgment we can make.

As regards Mr Auden's point about irredeemable wickedness, for the above reasons we cannot compare Germans and orcs.

Also, all this in no way lessens Eru's stature. Morgoth and Sauron have not created; they have changed. (The creation, but not the cross-breeding, of even an animal would cast doubt on Eru's claim to be the One. Incidentally, the flying steed of the Lord of the Nazgûl is conjectured to be the "last untimely brood" of something of an older world, not a beast cross-bred by Sauron.)

The second half of the article I agree with thematically, but I have a few disagreements with specific facts. For one thing, Gollum does not immediately arouse pity in Sam and Bilbo. In Bilbo's case, pity replaces curiosity, fear, and self-interest; Sam doesn't pity Gollum very much ever.

Also, a tentative quarrel about Mr Auden's discussion of the lust for domination. He says this lust makes one oblivious of physical passions, etc. Yet the dwarf-rings, tainted with Sauron's evil, inspire in

the indomitable dwarves a lust for gold. Perhaps this is for them a domination; dwarves seem to have the underground very close to their origins. Perhaps--and probably--there is a different explanation.

No, Sauron's greatest triumph was not "his seduction of the great wizard Saruman," but rather the corruption of Numenor.

I have doubts as to whether LoTR is a fairy-tale, even if it does have a eucatastrophe, but I am unready to defend this now.

Finally, Mr Auden should have added that any Fourth Age Sauron will be less powerful. The history of Tolkien's world(s) is one of not exactly deterioration, but shrinking. Sauron is less than Morgoth, Aragorn less than Beren, and Arwen less than Tinuviel. Would that I could sing the sword-song in Beleriand or walk the courts of Numenor in the days of its glory.

But I can't, so I might as well tell why Sauron isn't a rebellious Vala. For one thing, Bombadil says the Dark Lord came from "Outside" (Bal. I-182). It is possible that Morgoth is meant by the "Dark Lord," but I think not. More seriously, "Outside" to Bombadil could mean Valinor as well as (for lack of a better name) Chaos. But I think not. For one thing, if Sauron were a rebellious Vala, wouldn't he have been destroyed with his master? And, as such, would he not have knowledge of Good? Morgoth was defeated by superior force, not strategy, to apply Mr Auden's statement about the relative abilities of Good and Evil to know each other. Finally, would a Vala, when defeated, go up in a cloud of smoke but remain spiritually alive in a weaker form? I don't know enough about the Valar, but I doubt it. /This is probably a specious argument, Bob. Not all the Valar are the same. For instance, the Istari are Valar of a sort./

The most likely explanation, I feel, is that Sauron is some sort of minor pre-creation or very-early-in-creation Spirit of the Void. (For an explanation of the Void, see Michael Moorcock's Stormbringer or even Paradise Lost.) Or he could be an evil spirit of the earth. (Not Middle-earth, which seems to have an eastern boundary not too far from the Sea of Rhûn.) /You know better than that, Bob. Men were created "somewhere near Lake Baikal."/ That Sauron is basically a spirit is proven from the account of the fall of Numenor on Bal. III-393; he "assumed" shapes. Perhaps he was born with one of his own, but even this is uncertain.

(Incidentally, I just realized that the fall of Numenor has several striking parallels with the Eden story, especially the evil-spirit-causing-disobedience-of-the-one-command aspect.)

And one final incidental. The simile on Bal. III-279-80 about the defeat of Mordor by the Army of the West, "As when death smites the swollen brooding thing that inhabits their crawling hill and holds them all in sway, ants will wander witless and purposeless and then feebly die, so the creatures of Sauron...", is a perfect Homeric simile. The phrasing is perfect, the wording strongly reminiscent of the Lattimore Iliad's handling of such things, and the use of nature as the source of the simile also authentic. There's only one problem, what's the swollen brooding thing" in the ant-hill.

Somehow I get the idea I've written enough.

Y.m.h.a.e.s.

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