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Keynote Address: On Hobbit Lore & Tolkien Criticism

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Abstract

Keynote Speech, First Annual Tolkien Conference, Belknap College, October 1968. Discusses the contemporary state of Tolkien criticism and scholarship, classifying it into certain categories: bibliographic studies, literary criticism, Middle-earth studies (comparing this type of work to the Sherlockian tradition), and source studies.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Critical reception

PROCEEDINGS

First Annual Tolkien Conference

Belknap College - October 1968



Keynote

On Hobbit Lore & Tolkien Criticism

Fred Lerner

We are assembled here at Belknap College to talk about one of the strangest literary phenomena of our century. We have before us a book which, in the lifetime of its author, has become both a best-seller and a classic. In *The Lord of the Rings*, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien has told a story which simultaneously enthralled the most avid devotees of science fiction and those in our culture who most deeply fear and despise the progress of science and technology. Into a society obsessed with eroticism, Prof Tolkien has brought an extremely long novel in which nothing more sensual than a kiss -- and a precious few of those -- is shown to occur. To a readership increasingly inclined to regard good and evil as irrelevant abstractions, he has told a tale of courage and faith, of treason and cowardice. And from a generation with its eyes firmly on the future, he has evoked a new appreciation for our earliest literary and legendary heritage.

Since *The Lord of the Rings* offers so many things to so many people, it should not be surprising that its readers have responded in many different ways. Tolkien criticism owes its origin to many traditions, and during this conference we shall have the opportunity to sample several of them.

As I am an embryonic librarian, the bibliographical aspect comes to my mind first. It is probably too early for a definitive bibliography of Prof Tolkien: new editions of his books are being issued in many countries; and the recent copyright dispute has complicated the matter further. But the work has begun in this field.

The Lord of the Rings is a novel; a work of creative literature; and as such is grist for the critic's mill. As befits a product of a respected man of learning, some of the foremost writers of our time have applied themselves to Tolkien's fiction. Edmund Wilson and W H Auden were among the first to discuss his adult fiction in the literary magazines; their opposite opinions have been reinforced by latter critics.

From one segment of his readership, Prof Tolkien has received

an accolade accorded to few other authors; a refusal to accept wholeheartedly the realization that his work was fiction. The Sherlockian tradition, maintained for half a century by the devotees of Conan Doyle (or John Hamish Watson), is responsible for some of the talks we shall hear today. Something of this sort grew up about Austin Tappan Wright's *Islandia*; but I suspect that the scholarship of Middle-earth will be unsurpassed in the fantasy field.

My own favorite brand of Tolkien criticism is that which aims to point out the parallels between *The Lord of the Rings* and those sources of early English literature, and literature of other Northern countries, to which Prof Tolkien has devoted his academic career. My own debt to Prof Tolkien is that he inspired me to read these great books and enjoy them.

I shall conclude with some of the words of the man whom I consider to be the most authoritative Tolkien critic:

The illusion of historical truth and perspective, that has made [it] seem such an attractive quarry, is largely a product of art. The author has used an instinctive historical sense -- a part indeed of that ancient English temper (and not unconnected with its reputed melancholy), of which [it] is a supreme expression; but he has used it with a poetical and not an historical object....

...He esteemed dragons, as rare as they are dire, as some do still. He liked them -- as a poet, not as a sober zoologist; and he had a good reason.

Those are the words of Prof. Tolkien himself, discussing *Beowulf* in his essay "The Monsters and the Critics". But, in my opinion, his words are just as applicable to *The Lord of the Rings*; and they tell a lot about what Tolkien is doing with his fiction. He is writing poetry, with his theme, that upon which he has spent his life's work. How successful he has been is reflected by the appeal of his saga.

His success proves him a false prophet. At the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien said that hobbit-lore

...is not yet universally recognized as an important branch of study. It has indeed no obvious practical use, and those who go in for it can hardly expect to be assisted.

This disparagement is no longer entirely correct; hobbit-lore may indeed be lacking a practical use, but its importance as a branch of study is obvious to many. As we shall see this weekend.