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The Genre of *The Lord of the Rings*

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The Genre of *The Lord of the Rings*

Abstract

Attempts to define the genre of *The Lord of the Rings*, an “alien but very effective piece of work” that defies easy categorization. Settles on “a quest-story presented in an epic and fairy-tale medium.”

Additional Keywords

Genre; Genre and The Lord of the Rings; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Genre; Tolkien, J.R.R. “On Fairy-stories”

thus inadvertently (she claims) got into all the photographs taken of the panelists. Undaunted, she autographed the photos herself, and later presented Mr. Simak with an inscribed copy of her play, *Queen Ann*. The other notable event on this trip was automobile trouble encountered on the drive out to Minnesota, which for a while looked as if it would keep us from finishing the journey. John Bullis saved the situation by fastening some unruly engine parts with some S&H Green Stamps, and we had no further trouble with the car for the remainder of the trip, going either to or from Minneapolis. Such ingenuity deserves to be immortalized in the pages of *Orcrist*.

UWTS elections were held May 8th, with the result that Richard West was re-elected President (*Yegh*), and William Orr Secretary-Treasurer (*Gimli*), for the next academic year. James Robinson, however, has resigned as co-editor of *Orcrist*, apologizing that he will not be able to do enough to justify such status.

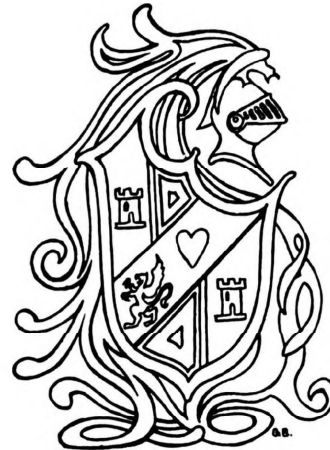
To date, too few misprints have been located in *Orcrist* #2 to bother with a separate page of errata. The following corrections should be made if they were not entered when copies were sent out: on page iv in the last paragraph, the initials of Prof. Cunliffe should read "W. G." instead of "W. E.", and the second series of initials in the signature should be "J. B. R." and not "J. A. R." (someday Editor West will learn what his friends' initials are); on page 11, "showmaker" in line 20 should read "shoemaker", and "Arawn's mythology" in line 27 is a mistake for "Alexander's mythology"; finally, item B46.1 in the bibliography on page 45 should end "which confront him" (the pronoun had been omitted). I also forgot, in the credits for last issue, to thank Mrs. Paulette Carroll for putting the lyrics and music for "Sing Along With Tolkien" on the masters.

For this third issue, I am pleased to thank Mr. Carl Carroll and Mrs. Julie Redding for their help with typing and Mrs. Redding for bravely doing most of the lettering, Mrs. Frances Wood and Miss Genevieve Gogot for tolerating my wear and tear on their typewriters,

Ed Meskys and Ivor Rogers for their assistance in making printing arrangements, and the gentle reader who has borne this lengthy introduction.

Remember to vote for Madison in 2001.

R. C. W.
June, 1969



The Genre of THE LORD OF THE RINGS

BY Alexis Levitin

The genre of *The Lord of the Rings* is intimately related to its subject matter. A rather thorough examination of the various literary genres of which Tolkien's work partakes will throw considerable light on its nature and purpose.

Tolkien's trilogy is, first of all, a fantasy, in that it concerns a world where fantastic, magical events occur, events which are unknown to us in what we call real life. There is an aura of "strangeness and wonder" in the telling of the tale, a quality which Tolkien designates as a primary element of fantasy, and an essential constituent of any fairy story. Considering Tolkien's great interest in fairy stories, it is not surprising to find that his trilogy displays many characteristics of this genre. In an essay entitled "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien says, "a 'fairy-story' is one which touches on or uses Faërie, whatever its own main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, fantasy. Faërie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic..."² In effect, Faërie is a land unlike any with which we are familiar, a land where magic is always to be expected, where the inexplicable often occurs. It should be noted that a fairy story may have several different purposes, which do not prevent it from retaining its function as a fairy story. Tolkien mentions adventure, morality, and fantasy as three possible purposes of a fairy story, and he intertwines these three elements throughout his own work.

In discussing the desired effect of the fairy story, Tolkien emphasizes the importance of the internal credibility of the artist's creation.

He says, "...the story-maker proves a successful sub-creator. He makes a secondary world which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is true: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed."³ Later Tolkien adds, "Probably every writer making a secondary world, a fantasy, every sub-creator, wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality: hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it."⁴

The idea of drawing on reality may well stem from Coleridge's widely-known formulation concerning imagination: "The primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception; and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I Am. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation."⁵ Coleridge's treatment of the secondary imagination as an echo of the primary, which itself is our finite view of the Infinite, is almost precisely the same as Tolkien's concept of the derivation of the secondary world from true Reality.⁶ All this should be kept in mind when we consider, presently, Tolkien's theory integrating the Christian myth with the common fairy story, propounding the belief that such tales are human attempts to imitate the divine fairy story created by God, namely, the story of Christ and our Redemption.



Tolkien's high respect for the place of morality in the fairy story was of particular importance in determining the nature of his own work. Speaking of the famous animal tales of Beatrix Potter, he says that they approach the borders of Faërie: "their nearness is due largely to their moral element: by which I mean their inherent morality, not any allegorical signification."⁷ This term, "inherent morality," is of utmost significance in discussing the works of Tolkien, for it is this factor that is always at work, imbuing his story with a certain flavor which makes it more than an amusing adventure story or romance. That Tolkien considers morality an essential ingredient of fairy stories is illustrated by his reflections upon the responses of children to such tales: "Far more often than asking is it true they have asked me: 'Was he good? Was he wicked?' That is, they were more concerned to get the Right side and the Wrong side clear. For that is a question equally important in History and in Faërie."⁸ Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is not only meticulously true, internally, but, even more important, it is itself a highly moral treatment of the conflict between good and evil.

Tolkien lists four elements which he considers characteristic of the fairy story: Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, and Consolation. Fantasy has already been touched upon, but will reappear in conjunction with an explanation of recovery. By "Recovery," Tolkien means a returning to and renewal of health by a reattainment of clear vision, of true perspective. The result is fresh sight, absence of triteness.⁹ In a review of Tolkien's *Rings*, Douglass Parker claims that fantasy, being "other-directed," escapes triviality. He remarks that often the abandonment of the normal world allows the author "to get nearer to a fundamental reality."¹⁰ This idea of recovery is illustrated in G. K. Chesterton's novel *Manalive*, a breathless paean of life. Innocent Smith, the hero of this strange and headlong tale, is engaged in, among other things, meeting his wife, time and again, in new places and new situations, and treating her as if she were a stranger, each time falling in love anew and proposing marriage. We are told that he had even fled from England and walked all around the world so as to be able to return afresh to his beloved family and home. It seems to be his unspoken theory (he never speaks, but rather acts) that *joie de vivre* must be maintained by leaving what one loves only to return to it again and again, happier each time.¹¹ The departure from normal life into the fantasy world is such a leaving, a departure from the ordinary, taken express-

ly to enable one to return with freshness to everyday life, to return blessed with an easy facility for seeing new aspects of everything, thereby finding life a dynamic, vivid experience.

Escape means defiance in the face of what happens to be our present situation. Tolkien defends escape as a positive aspect of the fairy story and points out that the reality to which such literature leads may be closer to the basic truths of existence than the ugly, but transient, reality of today's world. Superficial realities such as factories, smoke, and dirt may easily be blinding us to the real world, to the truths of nature, that existed before the factories came and will exist after they depart.¹²

The *Lord of the Rings* is most remarkable for its internal credibility, for its essential truth, and for its manifest ability to reinstate in the reader a more vivid reality, attained through flight into fantasy. Tolkien has followed his own definitions of the fairy story very well.

Consolation is the last but most important element that must be present for the true fairy story to exist. Tolkien coins the word "eucatastrophe" to indicate the sudden, totally joyous turn of events at the end of the fairy tale. He says that "The eucatastrophe tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function."¹³ He goes on to describe the necessary happy ending as the arrival of "sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur...it denies universal final defeat...giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief."¹⁴ It is here that Tolkien integrates Christianity into his concept of the fairy tale. It should be held in mind, as one reads Tolkien's discussion of joy and Christianity, that there is absolutely no reference whatsoever to Christianity in his *Rings*, and that in spite of this, the whole atmosphere of the work is pervasively Christian. Without a mention of Christ or even one direct reference to God, Tolkien succeeds in presenting his world through a Christian atmosphere, invisible, but strongly felt.¹⁵

The Epilogue to Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-Stories" makes evident his great Christian concern, thereby throwing much light on his own immense fairy story. It also specifically treats of joy as "the mark of the true

fairy-story...as the seal upon it,"¹⁶ and the knowledge of this concept is most important for the proper understanding of Tolkien's own work. For those who have experienced this Joy, nothing more need be said. For those who have not, it is hoped that Tolkien's lengthy discussion in the Epilogue will at least make this feeling understandable. Tolkien suggests that the life of Christ recorded in the Gospels is a fairy story authored by God, and continues:

It is not difficult to imagine the peculiar excitement and joy that one would feel, if any specially beautiful fairy-story were found to be 'primarily' true, its narrative to be history, without thereby losing the mythical or allegorical significance that it had possessed. It is not difficult, for one is not called upon to try and conceive anything of a quality unknown. The joy would have exactly the same quality, if not the same degree, as the joy which the 'turn' in a fairy-story gives: such joy has the very taste of primary truth. (Otherwise its name would not be joy.) It looks forward (or backward: the direction in this regard is unimportant) to the Great Eucaaaastrophe. The Christian joy, the Gloria, is of the same kind; but it is pre-eminently (infinitely, if our capacity were not finite) high and joyous. Because this story is supreme; and it is true. Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of men--and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused.

But in God's kingdom the presence of the greatest does not depress the small. Redeemed Man is still man. Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on. The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the 'happy ending'. The Christian has still to work, with mind as well as body, to suffer, hope, and die; but he may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed. So great is the bounty with which he has been treated that he may now, perhaps, fairly dare to guess that in Fantasy he may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation. All tales may come true; and yet, at the last, redeemed, they may be as like and as unlike the forms that we give them as Man, finally redeemed, will be like and unlike the fallen that we know.

It should be clear by now that Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is not only a fantasy, but also a "true fairy-story," at least in so far as one accepts Tolkien's concept of this genre. There are many other literary genres to which this tale is related. Patricia Spacks considers *Lord of the Rings* a myth, in fact she refers to Tolkien, as well as Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis, as a Christian myth-maker.¹⁷ She goes on to say of Tolkien that, "like true myth, his trilogy bears no specific message, despite its heavy overtones of moral significance."¹⁸ It is, of course, open to personal judgement to determine how heavy overtones of moral significance must be before one can say that a specific message is intended. It does seem to me that Tolkien intends a message concerning the absolute nature of the laws of good and evil, and the place of hope and goodness as eternal safeguards against universal final defeat. This becomes especially clear in the light of his essay "On Fairy-Stories." There are such diverse definitions of the term "myth," that certainly *The Lord of the Rings* must be included within the broader ones. C. S. Lewis considers Kafka's *The Castle* a myth because the pattern of events constitutes all that is essential, the medium being irrelevant. "I first heard the story of Kafka's *The Castle* related in conversation and afterwards read the book for myself. The reading added nothing. I had already received the myth, which was all that mattered."¹⁹ Such a broad definition of myth must result in great confusion, as fairy-tales, epics, detective stories, and adventure tales often are appreciated solely because of the action depicted, irrespective of the manner of presentation. Furthermore, the feeling that reading a certain book adds nothing to the tale, already disclosed, is such a personal thing that any sort of agreement as to which tales are myths and which not would immediately become impossible. It is interesting to note that C. S. Lewis ascribes to the myth one of the important qualities which Tolkien assigns to the fairy story, recovery: "The value of the myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by the veil of familiarity."²⁰

If we hold to the conventional definition of myth as a traditional story which concerns supernatural events and gods, often connected with religious ritual, then *The Lord of the Rings* is excluded. Moreover, it seems that all conventional myth is composed of stories of obscure and diverse origins, stories that develop along with the growth of the culture of the time, rather than emanate suddenly in their entirety, from the mind and pen of one author. The great mythologies with which we are familiar are composed of numerous variant tales concerning the central characters, gods and men, and these tales, from various sources, not only present different aspects of the characters involved, but sometimes even directly

contradict each other. For example, in Greek mythology we find several differing accounts concerning Leda and her mates:

Leda, Daughter of Thestius, and sister of Althaea, and wife of Tyndarcos. According to Homer it was by Tyndarcos that she became the mother of Castor and Pollux, and also of Clytemnestra, while Helen was her daughter by Zeus. Generally, however, Helen and Pollux are described as children of Zeus, Clytemnestra and Castor as those of Tyndarcos. According to the later story, Zeus approached Leda in the shape of a swan, and she brought forth two eggs, out of one of which sprang Helen, and out of the other Castor and Pollux.²¹

This is typical of mythology because of its far-flung sources, but such contradicting stories cannot arise in a unified work, created and written, one could say *de nihilo*, by one man. Even the popular medieval legends such as the *Quest of the Holy Grail* or *Tristan and Ysolt* are of uncertain origins, composed of several differing versions from different parts of Europe, with no one variant being proven conclusively the original one, the source of all the others.



Perhaps it is best to say that Tolkien's *Rings* is mythopoeic, although not a proper myth. There are a number of myth characteristics, one of which is the grandiose scope of the tale, involving an entire civilization, and focusing on its struggles, both internal and external. The adventures of the Fellowship of the Ring, in particular, is mythic material. On the other hand, there is an unspoken but strongly implied governing ethos, which is quite unlike the impersonal fate that rules the destinies of men and gods alike, both in Greek and in Norse mythology. This ever-present, but always half-hidden ethos, together with a vague power of Good, only once or twice hinted at, replaces not only fate but also the whole complicated hierarchy of gods so typical of the mythologies of antiquity.

The Lord of the Rings may be called a modern epic. It differs from the traditional epic literature of the Greek and Teutonic cultures in the introduction of a quite unostentatious but powerful Christian ethos that underlies the entire tale. Broadly speaking, epic deals with great actions, great in their physical extent and great in the personal spiritual quality demanded of the chosen hero. Huge armies clash, and at the same time an heroic personage is involved in his own internal struggles as well as the obvious external combat that surrounds him. There is the general clash and the specific clash, both on an heroic level. *The Lord of the Rings* satisfies all the above criteria with its immense battle between the forces of good and evil, a struggle that spreads to all regions of the map, and involves all peoples, a world-wide conflict that allows no neutrals, and its heroic quest involving several humble hobbits and their fellows, and centering on the actions of Frodo, the much tormented, sorely tried hero, who fights his own personal battle against Evil.

In his book *Epic and Romance*, W. P. Ker places great emphasis on dramatic characterization as an essential constituent of the epic. He says, "Without dramatic representation of the characters, epic is mere history or romance; the variety and life of epic are to be found in the drama that springs up at every encounter of the personages."²² In his highly critical review of Tolkien's work, Edmund Wilson complains that "for the most part such characterizations as Dr. Tolkien is able to contrive are perfectly stereo-typed: Frodo the good little Englishman, Samwise, his dog-like servant, who talks lower-class and respectful, and never deserts his master."²³ And yet there is drama every step of the way, for Frodo, being such a stereo-type of us all, is torn internally, as most of us would be, by the ardors of his task. He must beware the ring he carries, he must constantly fortify himself against its insidious attempts, and he must unceasingly press onwards in his quest, the ultimate success of which he is never certain. The final victory is so uncertain that only a seemingly chance occurrence, perhaps an act of grace, assures success after Frodo himself has finally succumbed to the evil power which he is bearing to its destruction. Wilson's observation of the lack of careful and inventive individualization is for the most part valid, but it is irrelevant, for in a quest-tale of this sort it is the progress of the action that is most important. What does one really know about Beowulf and Sigur that distinguishes them from other great heroes? They possess the usual heroic virtues, the most obvious one being their great prowess in battle. We know very little else about them, for they are epic heroes, and as such exemplify the heroic and moral values of the cultures from which they spring. They are archetypal, fitting snugly into an heroic pattern. They are the heroes who can do something essential which no one else can do, and all else is secondary. What we do learn about these heroes as men, we learn through observing them in action. This is equally true of Tolkien's characters. Frodo and Sam are stereotypes, and although they fit into a vastly different pattern from that of Beowulf, they are types, just as much as he, and reveal themselves through their actions, as is the case with Beowulf and pagan epic heroes. There is, by the way, a true epic hero, archetypal, replete with arete, a princely man named Aragorn, but he is of secondary importance within the context of the work.

Beowulf was clearly a source of inspiration for Tolkien in his work on *The Lord of the Rings*. It is interesting to note that Ker acknowledged that "the characters in Beowulf are not much more than types..."²⁴ while maintaining, of course, that the work is a true epic. He justifies his opinion by adding, "Yet all those abstract and typical characters are introduced in such a way as to complete and fill up the picture. The general impression is one of variety and complexity, though the elements of it are simple enough."²⁵ Ker's defense of Beowulf against his own criticism may equally be applied to *The Lord of the Rings*.

There are many criteria of the epic that Tolkien's *Rings* most obviously meets. His tale deals with nations and individuals, and their respective actions. It concerns the emotions of people, depicting Frodo and Sam bravely doing their best while fighting the fear within them, the Elven people courageously sacrificing their earthly existence for the good of all, the pity of Boromir for his own people followed by his anger and his pride, and the wrath of Gandalf toward Saruman and his gentle love for



Frodo. As is characteristic of the epic, *The Lord of the Rings* exemplifies the ideals, customs, traditions, and moral values of a whole society, in this case the Christian civilization. The events that constitute the action are typically epic. There are great feasts and immense battles. The epic is expected to contain universal significance and relevance, and Tolkien's tale fulfills this demand with its depiction of a struggle between good and evil, in which the good must join together to overcome the powerful Enemy, and prevent his ascendancy to a position of total domination. The adventure symbolizes man's unceasing role in the cosmic scheme, a role in which he must choose for good or against it.

W. P. Ker feels that Christianity had a deleterious influence upon the epic. Speaking of Beowulf, he points out that "the Christian sentiments and morals are not in keeping with the heroic or the mythical substance of the poem..."²⁶ In Beowulf, the sudden appearance of most obvious Christian preaching and moralizing in the midst of long pagan and heroic passages is certainly incongruous, but in *The Lord of the Rings* the Christian element is subtly felt, for it never intrudes upon the heroic narrative, never actually shows its face. By remaining hidden it avoids any blatant incongruities, while providing a stronger influence than it would if presented in the form of outright sermonizing. Ker's belief that the serious ascendancy of Christian thought and sentiment in the 12th century hastened the replacement of the epic by the romance seems valid. This does not mean that there cannot be a Christian epic. It is true, however, that *The Lord of the Rings* is not a pure epic of an heroic age. Written in contemporary times by a professedly Christian writer, it must differ significantly from its pagan predecessors. The important differences are due to the changes that the hero has undergone. Grandness and nobility are still present in the tale but the prosaic nature of the protagonist is strikingly non-heroic and non-epic, for he is the everyman of today. He is the potential hero smothered, but alive, dormant, but waiting, inside the soul of every Christian, no matter how unassuming and bourgeois he may be. When the time is ripe, the nobility reveals itself through the heroic answer to the epic challenge.

Romance and epic are not mutually exclusive. W. P. Ker recognizes that romance appears quite often to form interludes in epic narrative. Ker remarks, "...romance in many varieties is to be found inherent in Epic and in Tragedy...Possibly Romance is in its best place...as an element in the epic harmony; perhaps the romantic mystery is most mysterious when it is found as something additional among the graver and more positive affairs of epic and tragic personages. The occasional visitations of the dreaming moods of romance, in the middle of a great epic or a great tragedy, are often more romantic than the literature which is nothing but romance from beginning to end."²⁷ Tolkien's epic story has obvious romantic interludes. There are descriptions of the dreamy and quiet world of winding rivers and flitting creatures, of that rustic dweller, Tom Bombadil, and there are mysterious and fantastic episodes involving barrow-wights and walking and talking trees. Ker says, "Romance means nothing, if it does not convey some notion of mystery and fantasy."²⁸ Middle-Earth is replete with both.

W. H. Auden discusses romance in an essay entitled "Balaam and his Ass." "A Romance is a history, feigned or real. It recounts a series of unique and quite extraordinary events which have, or are purported to have, happened in the past. The source of interest is in the events themselves, not in the literary style in which they are narrated."²⁹ This definition seems ready-made for *The Lord of the Rings*. If one accepts the pre-eminence which Auden assigns to the depicted events, and relegates literary style to a position of secondary concern, then one is better prepared and able to appreciate Tolkien's story as it was intended. Edmund Wilson, the most vociferously displeased reviewer, criticizes Tolkien mainly for lack of imaginative characterization, as mentioned before, and for rather an uninteresting and unsuccessful style. Readers who are not concerned with the significance of the pattern of events will most certainly be troubled, as was Mr. Wilson, for the nature of this work is such as to place relatively little emphasis on characterization and to make literary style entirely subservient to the story and the message it conveys. The style is only a means to an end. It must adequately describe the events in an interesting manner, without distracting attention from the events to itself. Tolkien's style fulfills this purpose.

W. R. Irwin ascribes to romance what C. S. Lewis credits to myth and Tolkien to fantasy: namely, the deliverance of the reader over to a new and enriched life in the everyday world by a salutary immersion in another world. Speaking of the romances of Charles Williams, C. S. Lewis, and Tolkien, W. R. Irwin says that they "deliver the reader into the unknown and scarcely imaginable, so that he may discover there the fullness of a cosmic and moral order which he has before but dimly perceived, returning him to himself and his common experience enriched, revived, and amplified by the vision."³⁰ He goes on to praise documentation within romance, specifically the technique of naming places and things, and dating events. Because of such documentation, "the reader is simultaneously aware of the familiar and the strange, and aware further that both are demonstrations of principles which he has always known."³¹ Douglas



Beren and Tinuviel hiding from one of Morgoth's servants

Parker, in a review on Tolkien, also ascribes this effect to fantasy, stating that good fantasy is "employed not as an end but a means...towards a perception...of reality that can better be attained and expressed in that genre than in any other."³² He goes on to say that "the sloughing off of the normal world, while imposing its own restrictions, has enabled the author to get nearer to a fundamental reality."³³ R. J. Reilly and Patricia Spacks both agree that "Tolkien has rejected realism in order to talk more forcefully about reality."³⁴ It can be seen that although the classification of a literary work that produces such individual renaissances in the readers is disputed, the result is widely observed and notably agreed upon.

Most clearly of all, *The Lord of the Rings* belongs to the heroic quest genre. The usual quest involves a search for a precious object, generally extending over long distances and long periods of time. Often all searchers but the successful one die. During the search many adventures befall the seekers, many obstacles must be overcome, much struggling must be gone through. Crisis follows crisis, and each one is a test of the courage or virtue or goodness of the hero, in a word, a test of his worthiness. His struggles may be external, involving physical combat, or internal, involving resistance of temptation. Often the quest is both spiritual and physical in nature. This is most apparent in the legends of the Holy Grail. It is equally true of the quest of the Fellowship of the Ring. Although chastity proves essential for success in the Perceval legends, and compassion or pity has a similar role in *The Lord of the Rings*, it is goodness that is required of the searcher in both. In the Holy Grail legends, only the best man living could confront the Grail, while in Tolkien's tale, only goodness enables the adventurers to destroy the Ring, in the end. W. H. Auden, discussing the goal in a typical quest, remarks that "everybody would like to achieve it, but it can only be reached by the Predestined Hero."³⁵ In *The Lord of the Rings*, there is no clear indication of a predestined hero. Frodo is destined to bear the Ring, but his success in the venture is never assured. Events prove that alone he could not have completed his mission, for the loyal aid of his servant, Samwise, and the unwitting aid of an old enemy, Gollum, prove indispensable to the satisfactory achievement of the quest. In fact, all the members of the Fellowship of the Ring were needed to keep the dreadful journey going. Together, good-hearted people are able to succeed against an Evil Power, where alone one could never stand. The mighty wizard Gandalf hints at this fact time and time again and points out that he himself, with all his magic, cannot perform the feat alone.

The world of the quest is a world in motion. There is physical movement toward the goal, and there is the internal progress that is necessary for success. In the quest world one is presented with a picture of life as becoming: everything is of interest in its relation to the future, for the goal of the quest, and its fulfillment, lie in the future. Because of the constant motion, we are more interested in the action, the events, the tests, the combats, than in the characters as such.

The quest of the fellowship is atypical, for the band of searchers is attempting to get rid of the precious object, not to find it. The object is a Ring of Power, quite conventional as such, but it was wrought for evil purposes and ultimately will drive its user to evil, regardless of his innate goodness, just as the Nibelung Ring, won through renunciation of all love, inevitably brought a fatal curse upon all its possessors. Knowing that only ill could come from the power of the Ring, an intrepid band of adventurers undertakes to return with the Ring to the volcano in which it was forged, and there to destroy it. The volcano is in the heart of the land of Mordor, ruled over by the Evil One, Sauron, who is most desirous of recapturing the Ring. There are countless obstacles, some physical, in the shape of enemies, some spiritual, in the form of moral weakness, greed or pride, on the part of the adventurers themselves. Sauron is the final and most dangerous obstacle. The last step in a quest adventure always involves defeating, whether by force or cunning, the guardian of the precious object. In the Holy Grail adventures there are many ranks of preliminary guardians to defeat, but the final "enemy" is the imperfectness of the searcher, himself. In the Nibelung legend, a dragon guards the treasure, as is the case in the last adventure of Beowulf. Most guardians try to prevent the searchers from taking away the treasure, but Sauron tries to take it from them, while they, ironically, must bring it to his doorstep in order to destroy it.

In spite of all obstacles, the quest party pushes on, doing what it must do, never flagging for long. Their duty consists in acting now, in the present, as well as they possibly can. For the rest, it is not their concern.

A more complex quest that may throw light on that of the Fellowship is the mad hunt after Moby Dick. Ahab's monomaniac pursuit of the White Whale finds the object of the quest, the precious thing, and the guardian of the treasure combined in the shape of the Whale. Nature defends herself. This unique quest is destined to be fatal to the searcher, for it is a forbidden treasure that he seeks. Finding the whale can only seal Ahab's fate: ostensible success will be followed by immediate doom. The quest itself is destroying Ahab; the pursuit of the unholy quest, if persevered in, can only result in his own death and damnation. The quest, by its nature, is doomed to failure. For Frodo, the quest object which he carries, always, presents the temptation which could destroy him. He must hold onto the evil Ring and must resist it, unflinchingly. Frodo's superiority and advantage is that he is making the quest for the triumph of good over evil. His quest is a means to an end, a good end. Ahab's quest has become an end in itself, and is, in a way, the opposite of Frodo's. Frodo is serving all the land, all the people, and the vague powers of good whose visible emissary is Gandalf. Ahab will not serve, his quest is the symbol of his refusal, and he is damned through his pride.

The trilogy is not quite a parable, nor is it an allegory. It is a story with religious, moral meaning that is not overt, and in this it

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*Stevens, Cj. "Sound Systems of the Third Age of Middle-Earth," Quarterly Journal of Speech Vol. 54 (October, 1968), pp. 232-240. "This present study...seeks to present a more compact and systematic overview of one aspect of the language of the Third Age: the sound systems. Consideration is given especially to the dialects of Eldarin." (p. 232)

*West, Richard C. "An Annotated Bibliography of Tolkien Criticism," Extrapolation Vol. X, No. 1 (December, 1968), pp. 17-45. Somewhat revised and expanded version of Section B only of the bibliography from (basically) the first two issues of Orcrist. There can be

no question on the part of any impartial judge that this entry deserves to be asterisked.

#Wojcik, Jan. "Tolkien's Lord-of-Rings Quest Likened to Christmas Gospel," Boston Pilot (December 24, 1966), p. 8. See Orcrist #1 for annotation, and correct the date and add the page number for that entry.

Woods, Samuel, Jr. "J. R. R. Tolkien and the Hobbits," Cimarron Review Vol. I, No. 1 (September, 1967), pp. 44-52.



The Genre of the Lord of The Rings

(continued from page 7)

is a parable. However, it is the nature of a parable to make the bearer imagine himself as the central character, and to say to himself, "I am this person, now what do I see and how should I act?" In this sense, Kafka's The Trial is more clearly a parable. And within The Trial, the parable of the Law and the doorkeeper is particularly suited to demonstrate the immediate relation that must exist between the story and the listener, for it to be termed a parable. The listener must compare himself to the central character of the story and draw directly from this comparison his personal conclusions. This is the purpose of the parable. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings has a message for the listener; but, strictly speaking, the immediate personal involvement, the direct personal message, is absent and prevents it from being more than somewhat a parable. An allegory is a figurative story presenting an implied meaning without expressly stating it, making use of metaphors or signs to represent the undisclosed virtues, vices, and actions, which are the essentials of the allegory. Abstract virtues will be represented in a clear-cut, one-to-one relationship, by the metaphorical representative. For example, the lion may be the sign for bravery, in which case he will be always brave. The serpent will usually be the sign for evil, or cunning, in which case he will consistently be evil and cunning. The one-to-one relationship is fundamental to allegorical representation. Allegory uses analogy, and all correspondences are definite and complete. The Lord of the Rings is not an allegory as such, but, loosely speaking, one can claim that it has allegorical content. There are creatures peopling Tolkien's world which are clearly referential to aspects of human nature: there is the Ring which represents the inevitably corrupting influence of power; there is Sauron, the then current representative of the Common Enemy with his suggestive reptilian name promptly recalling his predecessor Wormwood. The correspondences, however, are rarely exact, and the analogies are suggested but uncertain, and it would be wrong to read the work as a connected allegory. Let us say that there is an underlying message suggested throughout, suggested by the everpresent inherent morality of the work itself and that without this continuous, unfailing undercurrent, The Lord of the Rings would be but an adventure story.

I have attempted to show the relationship of The Lord of the Rings to various conventional literary genres as well as to point out the chief merits and uses of these genres. By so doing, I hope to have indicated the nature of this unique story and set forth its strange position as an alien but very effective piece of work, a work which seems oddly isolated from and yet clearly significant in the contemporary literary scene. Although I consider all the genres discussed influential, it seems to me that The Lord of the Rings is basically a quest-story presented in an epic and fairy-tale medium.

The general relevance of this tale to our own world cannot be denied. As W. H. Auden says of it: "...however superficially unlike the world we live in its characters and events may be, it nevertheless holds up the mirror to the only nature we know, our own..."³⁶

NOTES

¹J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," Essays Presented to Charles Williams (London, 1947), p. 67.

²Ibid, p. 43.

³Ibid, p. 60.

⁴Ibid, pp. 82-83.

⁵Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (New York, 1939), p. 378.

⁶Cf. Jan Wojcik, "Tolkien and Coleridge: Remaking of the 'Green Earth'," Renaissance XX (Spring, 1968), 134-39, 146.

⁷Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," p. 45.

⁸Ibid, p. 61, n.1.

⁹Ibid, p. 74.

¹⁰Douglass Parker, "Hwaet We Holhytla," Hudson Review, IX (1956-1957), p. 601.

¹¹G. K. Chesterton, Manalive (London, 1921).

¹²Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," pp. 78-79.

¹³Ibid, p. 81.

¹⁴Ibid, p. 81.

¹⁵For further illustration of this point, see Sandra Niesel, "Some Religious Aspects of Lord of the Rings," Riverside Quarterly 3 (August, 1968), pp. 209-213.

¹⁶Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," p. 82.

¹⁷Patricia Spacks, "Ethical Pattern in The Lord of the Rings," Critique III (Spring-Fall, 1959), p. 30. Reprinted in Tolkien and the Critics, ed. Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo (Notre Dame, 1968), pp. 81-99.

¹⁸Ibid, p. 41.

¹⁹C. S. Lewis, George MacDonald: An Anthology (New York, 1948), p. 16.

²⁰C. S. Lewis, "The Dethronement of Power," Time and Tide XLV (October, 1955), pp. 1373-1374.

²¹Dictionary of Classical Antiquities, ed. H. Nettleship and J. E. Sandys (Cleveland, 1963), p. 345.

²²W. P. Ker, Epic and Romance (New York, 1957), p. 17.

²³Edmund Wilson, "Oo, Those Awful Orcs!" Nation CLXXXII (April, 1956), p. 313.

²⁴Ker, Epic and Romance, p. 165.

²⁵Ibid, p. 167.

²⁶Ibid, p. 158.

²⁷Ibid, p. 321.

²⁸Ibid, p. 4.

²⁹W. H. Auden, The Dyer's Hand (London, 1962), pp. 137-138.

³⁰W. R. Irwin, "There and Back Again," Sewanee Review LXIX (Fall, 1961), p. 567.

³¹Ibid, p. 570.

³²Parker, op. cit., p. 601.

³³Ibid, p. 601.

³⁴R. J. Reilly, "Tolkien and the Fairy Story," Thought XXXVIII (1963), p. 94.

³⁵W. H. Auden, The Dyer's Hand, p. 162.

³⁶W. H. Auden, dust jacket of The Two Towers, by J. R. R. Tolkien (Boston, 1962).