

Summer 7-15-1972

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### Recommended Citation

Bisenieks, Dainis (1972) "The Hobbit Habit in the Critic's Eye," *Tolkien Journal*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 3.  
Available at: [https://dc.swosu.edu/tolkien\\_journal/vol5/iss1/3](https://dc.swosu.edu/tolkien_journal/vol5/iss1/3)

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### The Hobbit Habit in the Critic's Eye

#### Abstract

Discusses ways in which criticism can or should deal with fantasy, and examines several critics' takes on *The Lord of the Rings* for usefulness to the reader. [Reprinted in revised edition due to numerous typesetting errors in its original appearance.]

#### Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Critical reception

# THE HOBBIT HABIT in the Critic's Eye

by Dainis Bisenieks

## FOREWORD

This essay, on its previous appearance in TJ was printed with so many errors as to seriously mar its argument. Whole lines were omitted, some subsequent additions to the essay were not incorporated in it, and there were typographical errors of which "readers experience" for "renders experience" will have been the most baffling. (We would like to hear from any reader who was able to make the correction for himself.)

We print a corrected and revised version here and offer our apologies to the author, who had not been given the chance to read and correct proofs of his essay. Readers and bibliographers will please consign the earlier version to oblivion.

Middle-earth is not our private preserve any more. Posters, lapel buttons, and travel books of a sort now advertise it to hoi polloi--as some may think, feeling as much dismay as they would at an invasion of orcs. Tolkien's work has been read by SF fans over since LotR appeared (and there are even some veteran Hobbit fans) but now it has captured at one stroke the readership of Kahlil Gibran, J. D. Salinger, and Mad magazine, to say nothing of the Harvard and National Lampoons. Critics and commentators, from the anonymous pundits of Time upward, have put in a word, not always very polite, about work and readers both. No wonder some of us dislike this publicity, even though it brings money to Tolkien and the British tax authorities. (Having made as much money, I surmise, as one Beatle, he has now been awarded the appropriate honors.) We like to think that our interest in The Lord of the Rings is both individual and judicious: the critics will not acknowledge this, preferring to think of us as conforming to a type... different for each critic, of course.

But I don't think that a private delight has been spoiled for me, and I have found the criticism--even the worst of it--instructive and even entertaining. If some of it has been unfair comment, it offers the chance to temper our reactions and learn something about the nature of such. S-F and fantasy have for some time been my Number One problem in criticism. What is literature for, and how can it be relevant to life even when it is fantastic? Thanks to the controversy over The Lord of the Rings, I have entered my profession with at least the beginnings of an answer to this question.

A point that I will not yield is that this is an important, complex, and enigmatic work. As much so as, let us say, Moby Dick. But there's a difference. The readers of Melville's work do not make themselves noticed, though they may be no less numerous. If ever they did, we might see more of the kind of criticism that Tolkien's work receives today: it is praised (or damned) not only for itself but for its supposed effect on its readers. But readers are of many kinds, and such generalizations simply will not stand. The Bible, e.g., should not be judged by the Spanish Inquisition. But since those who deplore the hobbit habit have been most categorical with their remarks, I wish to make some remarks about them.

A theory of literature is at the same time a theory of the ways in which literature is read. If critics ignore this, no wonder they are so often at loggerheads. They fail to treat a book as one element in a relationship, or rather as an element in many and varied relationships. To deal with only one element is clearly insufficient. We all form our theories of art on the basis of our likes and dislikes, and we should be careful not to elevate them into universal principles. Within a certain range they may serve us well. But if a work of art falls outside that range, we should be prepared to admit that there are readers different from us. I know, then, that I can only write for a certain kind of

reader. I don't think I can, by any argument, change the views of those who were so deeply dissatisfied with The Lord of the Rings, but I would like to look at their doctrines and ask whether they fit my experience as a reader and my knowledge of other readers and of stories.

Edmund Wilson has seen fit to reprint his notorious blast at The Lord of the Rings.<sup>1</sup> There are some, even today, who think it has a place in the corpus of Tolkien criticism as a statement that should be answered by reference to Tolkien's book. This I deny. As its title reveals, it is an expression not of reason but of feeling. Its operative words are "children's book", "juvenile", and possibly "drama of life." These are what is left after we have passed by the innuendoes and expressions of personal dislike. How Mr. Wilson defines himself as a reader must be read between the lines of his critical work - a task I do not need to undertake here. I assume, however, that he would differ with many points of "On Fairy-stories" or C. S. Lewis's "On Three Ways of Writing for Children."<sup>2</sup> This is the ground on which the argument belongs. He considers the children's book (he classes LotR as one) to be an inferior category; Tolkien and Lewis do not. The point can not be rationally argued; we can only agree to differ.

It is difficult to keep one's cool about Joseph Mathewson.<sup>3</sup> The editorial policy of the magazine he writes for seems to prescribe making statements by implication and innuendo. He flatters his readers by suggesting, with a word or a phrase, a shared sophistication: You and I know what's important. So, after misquoting the title of Tolkien's Beowulf essay, he says that it is "said to be well thought of by people who think about such things." Comment is superfluous. And though he seems to have read "On Fairy-stories"--for he quotes from it--he uses the words "fairy tale" ("nothing more than...") and "escape" (+ "ism") as if he had never given a moment's thought to the meanings Tolkien gives to these words--if only to refute them. We have met his like before: indignation would be wasted on him. I only wonder how much we can be harmed by those who are willing to be flattered by him. Having read his article, they know what to think of people who enjoy Tolkien's work.

Of Paul West we can see that he is baffled--and he loses his cool and resorts to irrelevancies, nonsense, and name-calling.<sup>4</sup> Matthew Hodgart, while acknowledging Tolkien's skill in using the material of epic and saga, charges that "he brings everything down to the black-and-white of the fairy tales."<sup>5</sup> We need not accept the word "down." John Malcolm [Peter Dickinson] says:

But still it is a children's book: the one thing it does not rely on for its effects is an adult experience of the world, the reader's recognition that the writer is portraying an emotional truth about humanity.<sup>6</sup>

All these critics evidently believe that a story should be as much like life (with all its complexities and ambiguities) as possible, and that where it is not, it deceives. But can they be right in this? What would such a doctrine not condemn? If Mr. Mathewson finds the outcome no more in doubt than "in a classic Western", the appeal to form should strengthen my argument rather than his. For I believe that form is necessary to a story, is perfectly natural, and does not deceive. Compare "On Fairy-stories", Note H:

The verbal ending...'and they lived happily ever after' is an artificial device. It does not deceive anybody. End-phrases of this kind are to be compared to the margins and frames of pictures, and are no more to be thought of as the real end of any particular fragment of the seamless Web of Story than the frame is of the visionary scene, or the casement of the Outer World.

A comedy ends, according to the old adage, in a wedding, and a tragedy in a funeral. A eucatastrophic tale ends in



joy: the Field of Cormallen: "And all my wishes have come true!" It is not unaware of the sorrow that may come, but "The New Shadow" lies outside the frame of the story.

When we begin to read a book, we generally know what kind of a story it is--and therefore, what its conventions are. An exception might be the modern novel. A certain critic (who has not, to my knowledge, dealt with Tolkien) has offered the viewpoint that the novel "renders experience."<sup>7</sup> It is, so to speak, about Everyman. But is this rendering of experience or portrayal of emotional truths sufficient purpose for the writer? I think he deceives himself if he believes so. There must be some meaning, some purpose, and to show human behavior without showing its consequences is to leave the job unfinished. So, for example, the people in D. H. Lawrence's novels habitually indulge in "games" as defined for us by Dr. Eric Berne. They seem to say, "I won't promise you anything because I don't know how I might feel about you tomorrow." Any writer who does not show this to be wrong is as much in error as the writer of adventure stories who sustains his plot by the blunders of his hero, without seeing that they are blunders. (The "idiot plot".)

It has also been said, to the same effect, that the modern novel has no convention. But this notion about "experience" begs the question. Whose experience? Experience cannot be generalized. What any story-teller offers us is an interaction of character and fortune. What interests us is what the hero does with his fortune. I mean by this term everything in the story which we must treat as axiomatic, i.e., not to be analyzed or questioned: everything that is given at the beginning of the story in order to have a beginning. Every story begins, in effect, "There was a man who..." What follows may be as fantastic or improbable as we like (or as we can stand). As long as all the cards are on the table. Lear's daughters Goneril and Regan are wicked: we need not ask why; that is his fortune. What matters is the fate of Lear, that terrible-tempered old man, with such friends and enemies as he has. Now no story written today and pretending to be about the real world would follow its fairy-tale pattern. We cannot believe in a perfect hero whose motives are "pure", nor in a perfect villain who cannot understand good faith and has to be eliminated by force. History has taught us - is still teaching us - that we must understand the "enemy's" point of view. But if a 20th century writer cannot give human form or origins to perfect villains or heroes, he can enter the realms of fantasy.

I must qualify that statement about heroes. With a few exceptions such as Prince Zorn in *The Thirteen Clocks*, we have heroes who learn to choose the good; e.g., Ged in *A Wizard of Earthsea*: which is why the story is told. Such is its form. So, Tolkien has given his hobbits real enemies (who, by definition, do not understand good faith) and real allies (who, by definition, have no credibility gap). To do so is not to pretend that such exist on earth: see, in the preface to the revised edition of *LotR*, Tolkien's remarks on what his story would have been if it had paralleled the course of events of World War II. It would have been, in brief, a story without form, without an actual or foreseeable ending. In the story as written, a real, demonic enemy--Sauron--is completely defeated, although--"Other evils there are that may come...Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world..." (III, 190, Ballantine, 1965). It reminds to wrap up the loose ends of the story, and the author may properly write "The End."

When Mr. West speaks of "a virtue that triumphs untested or an evil that dies uninvestigated" (and other critics have made the same charge) I think he is mistaken on the first point, and the second is largely irrelevant. The hobbits, with whom we are mainly concerned, certainly are tested. I do not think Aragorn presents a problem here: his basic education is over, and we can put him among the "allies" (defined above). Can we dispute that, with all their aid, it was yet a close thing? That is what makes it an exciting story. The evil of Sauron or of the orcs does not need to be investigated, and that of Saruman and Gollum has been. The orcs, certainly, can be considered soulless: we note that our heroes kill them without compunction. It has been hinted, and the *Silmarillion* ought to show us, that Sauron was not always evil. But it's been a long time; in our story he is sufficiently corrupt to need no examination. There remain only the human allies of Sauron and Saruman,

spear-carriers all; difficult to focus on their decisions without a dilution of effect. To do justice to their point of view would need a story very much like *The Worm Ouroboros*, a tale of quite another kind.

A point that may be disputed is whether all of Tolkien's cards are on the table. Has he dealt out his heroes' fortunes quite openly? Their great good fortune is, of course, to have such allies as Gandalf and Aragorn. But why are Frodo and his friends chosen? We are told that the Hobbits of the Shire "were...sheltered, but they had ceased to remember it...Nonetheless, ease and peace had left this people still curiously tough. They were, if it came to it, difficult to daunt or to kill; and they were, perhaps, so unwearingly fond of good things not least because they could, when put to it, do without them..." (I, 25). We know Gandalf's good opinion of our heroes: they are the most adventuresome and curious hobbits of the Shire. Subtle advantages, these: the fate of Fredegar Bolger comes closer to the average of "experience." So it is possible that Tolkien has somewhat stacked the cards in favor of his heroes, making their world more idyllic than it has a right to be. Perhaps the book does indeed owe some of its appeal to this.

John Boardman's criticism on this score is the most judicious that I have heard.<sup>8</sup> He has pointed out medievalist and reactionary elements in *The Lord of the Rings*: the Shire, quite impossibly, has no sanitation or public health problems (only a plague in the distant past is mentioned), and there are no sympathetic portraits of people who like machinery. He has said it so well that I cannot doubt that these features of the book affect readers. And do I, for all my fascination with gadgets, share that anti-machine bias?

I think there can be no common meeting ground for those who call in question the entire conception or structure of this work and those who do not. The future of Tolkien criticism (as distinct from hobbyism) lies in the exploration of such questions as those I have touched on above. I might note that Tolkien's opinion of machinery can be learned from "On Fairy-stories", and it is by no means one-sided. Nor is the medievalist element, I think, the most important in his work, or the chief cause of its wide appeal. If it were, more people might be reading the prose romances of William Morris. I believe the current revival of his work is largely a commercial byproduct of the interest in fantasy sparked by Tolkien. It will be noted that the books without elements of fantasy, like *The Sundering Flood*, have not found a place in Ballantine's publishing program. And why is the work of Morris of so little interest? Mostly, I think, because his heroes are rather uninteresting, their decisions of little moment. (His style is difficult for today's readers, but that is beside the point.) What the Hobbits do with their fortune is, after all, what gives shape and direction to the story (no matter what other virtues it has). I think its portrayal of decisiveness and courage is not at all improbable. Not the idyll, but the deeds of elves, dwarves, men, and hobbits make it the exciting and moving story that it is.

#### NOTES

1. Edmund Wilson, "Oo, Those Awful Orcs" in *The Bit Between My Teeth* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1965), pp. 326-332.
2. C. S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1967), pp. 22-34.
3. Joseph Mathewson, "The Hobbit Habit", *Esquire*, Sep. 1966, p. 130.
4. Paul West, "Nondiwasty Snep-vungthangil?", *Book Week*, Feb. 26, 1967, p. 1.
5. Matthew Hodgart, "Kicking the Hobbit," *New York Review of Books*, May 4, 1967, pp. 10-11.
6. *Punch*, Nov. 16, 1966, p. 755.
7. Alan Friedman, *The Turn of the Novel* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966). See especially the preface.
8. "Forward to the Middle Ages With Tolkien," delivered at the Tolkien Society meeting in New York, Dec. 29, 1967.

Note on "The Peril of the World": we regret that we don't have the author's name for this article. After it had been typed up and planned for inclusion in the issue, we noticed that no name was on the original manuscript. We felt that it was worth including, nevertheless, and have printed it. If you know who the author is, please let us know, and we will make special note of it in the next issue. — Editor.