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Levels of Interpretation

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Levels of Interpretation

Abstract

A brief look at Tolkien's sources, particularly the medieval period as a cultural and moral source.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Sources

LEVELS OF INTERPRETATION

by Bob Foster

Source-hunting in *Lord of the Rings* is an interesting and rewarding pastime. On any page one can discover new correspondences--between the Eldarin and Sanskrit seasons, the months of the King's Reckoning and the French Revolutionary Calendar, the rings of Sauron and the Nibelungs--and all of these contribute to an appreciation of the demi-urgic labors of Professor Tolkien's scholarship. Yet to pursue this too far is to lose sight of the work as a whole. The mood of Professor Tolkien's Middle-earth writings, and the ethos which underlies it, is not merely a product of these specific borrowings, yet does in its own way relate to the primary world.

To digress for a moment, the four senses of interpretation of medieval criticism (a system which states that literature, especially the Bible, can be explained on four levels--the literal, the secularly allegorical, the moral or personal and the anagogical or spiritually allegorical) is an overly mechanical system, but it is motivated by a sensitive and vital conception of the nature of literature and the world. To the medieval mind, no event or phenomenon was isolated or meaningless, since the universe was created and controlled by an Absolute moral force. The measure of the accuracy of man's perception was the degree to which he saw that the perceived phenomenon or concept followed the laws of the cosmos, and it follows from this that one mark of excellence in literature was the conformity of literature to these laws. This attitude should not be confused with "realism", since the laws of the medieval mind were more than the "laws of nature", nor should it be assumed that medieval men implicitly believed everything they said; their orientation involved an appreciation of the significance of correspondences more than a concern with the correspondences themselves. Medieval etymologies are so absurd because their inventors could not imagine an important place or person whose name did not reflect, even foreshadow, that importance; however, what is absurd linguistically can be seen more sympathetically, and more profitably, as a serious religious or historical statement. To take a more literary example, the confusion between the love lyric and the religious lyric which produced the bulk of the literature of Mariolatry was not merely a conflation or confusion of forms and images, but rather grew out of a realization that the yearning towards God can be effectively described in sexual terms, and conversely that sexual passion and love are similar to religious desire--on a lower level, but the same process nonetheless. That this equation is still artistically effective may be seen from George Harrison's "My Sweet Lord."

This typically medieval orientation reveals itself in a number of ways in Professor Tolkien's work. Events in Middle-earth are often cyclical, and always significant. To an extent, they are allegorical in the medieval sense; the Fellowship represents (both literally and symbolically) the Free Peoples, just as in medieval writing Jerusalem is both a city and the Church. Even Sam realizes that his use of the Phial of Galadriel places him in a position with respect to Elbereth and the fate of Middle-earth similar to (although lesser than) that of Earendil. The three ages of Middle-earth end with the same wars (between Feanor and Morgoth, Gil-galad and Sauron with the Ring and Elrond, Aragorn and Denethor and Sauron without the Ring), except that each time the Elves become less noble and evil less powerful. Against this reiteration of the moral order, we see the rise of the Edain, a history which is mirrored in Elda-Adan marriages. The inherent goodness of Hador, Barahir and Beren are refined into nobility by the births of Dior, Earendil and Elwing. The Elvish and Mannish traits are sundered to an extent by the decisions of the Peredhil, but the marriage of Aragorn and Arwen reunites them and preserves Eldarin moral and esthetic virtues into the Dominion of Men. It is useful to note that for Tolkien blood is an important and real factor for the individual; Legolas perceives of Imrahil "that here indeed was one who had elven-blood in his veins."

Certain features such as this, as well as many turns of plot in *Lord of the Rings*, are often called "unrealistic" or

"implausible", but to react to them in this way is to deny the existence of a higher Order which arranges coincidences (and meaningfully employs the laws of causality and nature) so as to provide significant alternatives. In a morally ordered cosmos, a highly motivated and morally worthy hero cannot at the time of the ultimate confrontation between good and evil be denied a part in the battle (although he may have to struggle to obtain it), and he should not be denied a fighting chance of winning. Leaving aside the Istari, whose entire function is to further these principles, it is obvious that Seventh Cavalry rescues such as the arrival of the Rohirrim, and later of Aragorn's fleet, at the Pelennor Fields happen all too seldom in the "real" world. But they cannot be scoffed at in Middle-earth, for the recovery of Theoden Ednew, the tardy oath-filling of the Dead and the fortitude of the defenders of Minas Tirith indicate the superiority of the Free Peoples, a moral advantage which is significant in a moral universe. The implication for our world seems to combine the themes of Boethius and such works as the alliterative *Morte Arthur*: hope (which in these contexts means trust in God or Eru to reward virtue) strengthening fortitude--if necessary, fortitude even without hope--is the best stance for the individual confronted by death or evil.

If we can grant that a literary work does not have to realistically resemble the world it describes in order to make a point about it, it becomes easier to discover the relevance of Professor Tolkien's creation to the primary world. As a Christian, he no doubt intends the moral determinism of Middle-earth to apply to the general human condition, but his linking of the moral and heroic codes, as well as the superficial cultural borrowings, suggest to me that *Lord of the Rings* is also an exposition of the world-view of that most Christian of periods, the Middle Ages. In Middle-earth the links between men and God are tangible (the Istari and Valar) rather than purely spiritual, but we find the same moral ordering, including the danger of a powerful, ever-threatening but inferior and vanquishable Devil. Perhaps the most important correspondence is that, despite the mechanical differences, the position and ideal behavior of Man is the same in both worlds; seen in this way, as a statement of the medieval ideal, *Lord of the Rings* is more realistic than a history book, and almost as beautiful as the stars. I would like to thank Professor Tolkien on his eightieth birthday for this contribution to the literature of hope and for communicating so well and so beautifully his conception of the medieval world; I think I am not alone in being better able to understand *Middle-earth* and the modern world for having journeyed into *Middle-earth*:

Ripple in still water

When there is no pebble tossed nor wind to blow

Reach out your hand if your cup be empty

If your cup is full may it be again

Let it be known there is a fountain

That was not made by the hands of men.

-- The Grateful Dead



The Shire Post (continued from page 18)

thing, but to a man of Earth it would make very boring reading. As Tolkien himself has said:

Now it is a strange thing, but things that are good to have and days that are good to spend are soon told about, and not much to listen to; while things that are uncomfortable, palpitating, and even gruesome, may make a good tale, and take a deal of telling anyway.²

¹The Road Goes Ever On. 1967 Houghton Mifflin hardback edition, p. 66.

²The Hobbit. Houghton Mifflin nineteenth printing, pp. 61-62.