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Applicability and Truth in *The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*: Readers, Fantasy, and Canonicity

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Abstract

Questions the exclusion of Tolkien's works from "the canon," examining various reasons why critics may exclude them and what critical theory might be more suitable for studying them.

Additional Keywords

Critical theories; Fantasy—Criticism and interpretation; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Hobbit; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Silmarillion

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Sara Upstone

"Tolkien's critics, not his readers, are out of touch with reality. Never has the intellectual establishment so richly deserved defiance."[1]

A 1997 Waterstone's poll proclaimed Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* "the best book of the century": contrary to generally held opinion, Tolkien's popularity has not waned since the cult followings of the 1960s; sales of his three major works now total an estimated 92 million copies world-wide. Yet the academic, and in particular the wider literary community, react to proclamations of his genius with despair; the idea that Tolkien's works have significant literary worth is still dismissed by many in positions of literary importance and Tolkien himself is rejected as a possible entrant into the modern literary canon: an invisible institution that dominates our reading tastes, influences what our children are taught, and determines which works we privilege in academic institutions. This study aims to illustrate how the writings of Tolkien, and much fantasy writing, are excluded by traditional definitions of canonicity because of the critical criteria on which such decisions are often based. Shifting our focus towards "ordinary" readers and post-modernist and reader-response centred theories and away from the realms of practical criticism, we can approach texts in a way that allows re-appraisal of their literary significance. This will reveal in Tolkien's texts key elements of what Tolkien refers to as "applicability" and what will be defined as "truth," literature that is based on "a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it,"[2] leading to universals that are revealed yet at the same time allowing the work to be re-defined, and to a large extent re-created, by each reader. In addition, it may also lead us to more generally question whether concepts of canonicity are either helpful or relevant for literary studies in the twenty-first century.

Criticism

The Lord of the Rings
Is one of those things:

> If you like it you do:
> If you don't, then you boo!"[3]

Tolkien has been a victim of his own phenomenal success that leads many literary critics to approach him with pre-existing distrust. Germaine Greer's reminiscence of "full grown women wearing puffed sleeves [. . .] babbling excitedly about the doings of hobbits" serves to illustrate why some react so violently.[4] Yet it also leads to attacks based on personal reactions without the analytic processes normally pursued. Personal statements—"I won't keep the thing in the house"[5]; the books are "juvenile trash"[6]—are frequently substituted for serious criticism. Key critics such as Rosemary Jackson, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Tzvetan Todorov all see Tolkien as beyond their parameters.[7] Jackson's work is largely concerned with fantasy elements within realist literature, while Todorov and Brooke-Rose see Tolkien as a creator of secondary worlds, no longer a fantasy writer, but a creator of the marvellous, placing him outside their studies.[8] Therefore for Tolkien, genre has played a part in criticism of his texts, while hindering efforts to dispel such criticism. Inclusion in the fantasy genre appears reserved for writers considered "outside the power structure of the academy,"[9] recognised as a literature of the "other," outside the dominant literary discourse; like women's writing and non-western literature in its need to infiltrate the canon from the outside, and to forge new definitions of "canonicity" in order to find inclusion in concepts of "great literature."

Ultimately, criticism of Tolkien can be separated into four main categories: juvenility, nostalgia, escapism, and irrelevancy. The case of juvenility is represented by early writers on Tolkien: Edmund Wilson, Muir's comments that *The Lord of the Rings* is all about "boys masquerading as adult heroes,"[10] and Burton Raffel.[11] The criteria applied to Tolkien in such cases is an anachronism for today's English Studies, but Tolkien has found it difficult to escape new incarnations such as Brian Moorcock's defining *The Lord of the Rings* as "the prose of the nursery room [. . .] Winnie the Pooh posing as epic,"[12] and reactions to the Waterstone's poll emphasizing Tolkien as a writer for "adolescent boys."[13]

The second criticism is that Tolkien's texts are centred upon conservative nostalgia. Jackson cites that at the heart of fantasy is revolutionary desire and, on the basis of this, that Tolkien's fantasy is flawed because the desire it invokes is conservative rather than radical. Therefore, rather than striving forward, she claims Tolkien's texts turn to the past, becoming a vehicle for tyranny.[14] Historicity denies

vital tension and causes a passive relationship to history, discouraging dissent and encouraging the reader to see the past as somehow "better." Approaching *The Lord of the Rings* from such an angle, Aragorn's ascension to the throne becomes simply Tolkien's privileging of monarchy, and the Elves' desire for release through death his acceptance of the status quo. It is a comment echoed elsewhere; readers of *The Lord of the Rings* are cast as "the same lot who phoned in to make John Major man of the year and to keep the royal family."[15]

The final two criticisms—escapism and irrelevance—are closely linked. Much of the academic community fails to see any applicability to the "real" world from an author who "invents the era, the place, and a race of fictitious beings to inhabit it."[16] Tolkien is seen as a writer who deals only in "flight from reality"[17] and secondary worlds that "relate to the 'real' only through metaphysical reflection and never, or rarely, intruding into or interrogating it."[18] Tolkien refuses to explain evil, to confront characters such as Sauron and Morgoth, favouring instead a pastoral ideal of somewhere that may never have existed, what Moorcock refers to as "neophobia."[19] Despite Jameson's theory of revolutionary escapism, Tolkien's use of such, in the sense of his marvellousness, is to critics a factor that excludes him from the ability to be either subversive or radical. Brooke-Rose, to her credit, does substantiate her dislike with textual analysis.[20] She sees irrelevance not in escapism, but conversely in not being escapist enough, reducing the fantastic vision to a subsidiary of the action and, as a result, disrupting the tension that makes a successful fantasy. Yet the "megatext"[21] makes the story a realistic failure also. The marvellous and realistic are "bathetically juxtaposed"[22] and Tolkien is thus a failed writer, irrelevant, and an anathema in the study of fantasy's development.

These questions suggest a polemic debate indicating fundamental differences between the way critics assess canonicity and how readers bestow genius. So how can we move beyond this to find an inclusive and comprehensive reading of *The Hobbit, The Silmarillion,* and *The Lord of the Rings?*

Reading

The literature of the Other *is* other. It is different.
It does something different.
It does it, moreover, not in spite of the fact
that the Other in question does not exist,
but because it does not exist.[23]

Old views persist. Two of Tolkien's major works were first published between 1930-1965[24] when prevailing discourses saw the text as fixed and autonomous: "intentional fallacy" and "affective fallacy"[25] rejected reference to author and reader respectively, the literary work was ahistorical, judged independently of any socio-political context. Close reading established the merit that determined inclusion or exclusion from the modern literary canon. Such theory is problematic, however, when applied to Tolkien, where meaning comes not from individual passages but from the interaction of episodes with the whole. In *The Silmarillion* for example, the release of Beren from death is the conclusion of a particular plot line. Yet only when integrated into the whole does it gather its real significance: a portrayal of man's desperateness to escape such a fate; the act a breaking of the order of the universe and a union of separate races; an underlying of the work's evocation of pity which requires relation to context: the realisation that such an incident is written as a reflection of real man's own fear of death, and as a spiritual message. Tolkien is not a writer whose themes are illuminated by literary readers' persistent privileging of close reading practices.

Affective fallacy gives rise to notions of a "correct" reader: I. A. Richards studied "real" readers only to proclaim that certain reactions were "incorrect." Again this is problematic. While *The Lord of the Rings* may be for some Christian allegory, it is equally a secular metaphor and, unable to elucidate sections of the work in their terms, critics may easily declare Tolkien's works to hold no relevant meaning. Ideas of the "super-reader"[26] in the 1970s were equally damaging, echoing a New Critical position that there is a correct way to evaluate the text. Hence Howard Jacobson: "Tolkien—that's for children [. . .] or the adult slow [. . .] the folly of teaching people to read [. . .] Close all the libraries. Use the money for something else. It's another black day for British Culture."[27]

Critics who expect Tolkien's texts to function mimetically will undoubtedly see them as failures: the essential tenets of literary criticism as they interact with realist novels do not work for marvellous fantasy. Northop Frye and his definitions of literature based on its hero[28] would see both *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* as mixtures of folk tale, myth, and legend: different genres striving to compete. It is not the only case: Le Guin admits that by the "seven types of ambiguity" Tolkien fails completely.[29] Tolkien's idea of authorship is rooted in ideas of myth preceding such critical preference for mimetic realism, seeing reality not in accurate description but in capturing the essence of such a reality. This precedes metaphor and relies on readers' convictions that an element *is* something

else rather than being a consciously displaced representation into a separate vision. Such "sub-creation,"[30] which can never be truly independent, means work must always contain some incontestable truth, even if expressed fantastically. Myths are not "lies breathed through silver," but rather another way of asserting the reality presented by modern mimetic fiction:

> To you, a tree is simply a vegetable organism, and a star simply a ball of inanimate matter moving along a mathematical course. But, the first men to talk of "trees and stars" saw things very differently. To them, the world was alive with mythological beings [. . .] To them the whole of creation was "myth-woven and elf-patterned."[31]

A useful analogy is that of the abstract or realist painter. Both convey an image of the world yet their visions are different, almost to the point of juxtaposition. We can appreciate the artistry of both, there is no need for preference, but we must approach each one differently, with a changeable definition of reality. In order to appreciate literature based on such a premise, Tolkien suggests the reader must hold not Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" which suggests an "art that has for us failed,"[32] but rather a true belief. It seems a fair assumption that, while readers capably approach Tolkien's texts as he suggests, critics are able only to achieve Coleridge's approach. If such difference exists it is possible to see why readers might draw meaning from Tolkien's works, yet critics, coming with fixed ideas, might see only the juvenile or escapist.

Few critics have applied the reader-response and post-modern theories prevalent in contemporary criticism to fantasy, and virtually none have done so in relation to Tolkien. Texts unlike post-modernism—re-illuminating in contrast to its essential belief in deconstruction—nevertheless may benefit from its ambiguous relationship with concepts of meaning, while the idea of texts as linked to cultural and linguistic models allows us to consider why Tolkien has found resonance for people from remarkably different cultures and generations; difficulty finding inherent meaning is accepted as characteristic of all literature. Reader-response theories can be even more helpful, seeing meaning created only through reading, limited by inherent codes, and also finite cultural and linguistic experiences.[33] Stanley Fish's "interpretative communities"[34] allow us to examine Tolkien's focus on collective experience, and to appreciate multitudinous interpretations. Critics are part of this too: their expectations and literary experience as an interpretative community means that filling in the "blanks" in a Tolkien text makes it appear to them escapist, nostalgic, juvenile, and irrelevant. Aware of this, we can reject

them as "correct" readings. Can such theory therefore illuminate merits of applicability and universalism that are central to the "ordinary" reader's enthusiasm?

Applicability

Many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.[35]

Tolkien's popularity can in part be explained by his reflection of a particular period in history. This counters Tolkien's critics: if a work is rooted in reality and can be linked to the lives of readers it can be neither negatively escapist nor irrelevant. Tolkien's replacement of "allegory" with "applicability" to describe such work provides opportunities for taking new approaches to his texts: as Fish's "interpretative communities" found the same potential for meaning, so the texts' popularity grew.

The exact meaning of the difference between relevance created by the reader and by the author can be illustrated by comparison with T. H. White's *The Once and Future King.*[36] White's texts are far less open to applicability: the author's voice creates a definite application, providing the contemporary context: "It was not really Eton that he mentioned [. . .] but it was a place of the same sort. Also they were drinking Metheglyn, not Port, but by mentioning the modern wine it is easier to give you the feel" (*Future* 4).[37]

White restricts his text to being relevant to a particular social experience, encouraging allegorical readings. Tolkien, however, provides cultural codes that leave application of meaning unspecified: the culturally specific "Eton" and "port" would be omitted so that readers could apply their own experience to form purpose. Meanings become multiple and infinite, only constrained by the ability of the reader to find a contemporary analogy for the stimulus provided.

Initial readings of these texts, written between 1917 and the 1950s, echo an Anglo-centric view of change during these decades.[38] In line with the rise of tyranny, the texts evoke a sense of the corrupting influence of individuals, the presence of oppressive regimes, and the danger of desiring power. The ability of the orator to evoke support, key to the rise of dictators in the 1920s and 30s, is echoed in Saruman's voice, "its very sound an enchantment" (*LotR* 601), Sauron's corruption of men against the Valar with the "cunning of his mind and mouth [. . .] flattery as sweet as honey" (*Silmarillion* 326), and Smaug's attempts to overcome Bilbo with an "overwhelming personality" (*Hobbit* 215): "Whenever Smaug's roving

eye, seeking for him in the shadows, flashed across him [. . .] an unaccountable desire seized hold of him to rush out and reveal himself and tell all the truth to Smaug [. . .] he was in grievous danger of coming under the dragon-spell" (*Hobbit* 214).

Destructive power and desire centres upon an object personifying such conflict: the Arkenstone in *The Hobbit*, the Silmarils in *The Silmarillion*, and the One Ring in *The Lord of the Rings*. It is an ability to forgo such devices that marks heroic status: Beren relinquishes the Silmarils for Lúthien; Bilbo survives by placing no importance on wealth that dooms both Smaug and Thorin; Sam is able to accomplish his quest only by rejecting the power offering victory:

Wild fantasies arose in his mind; and he saw Samwise the Strong, Hero of the Age [. . . .] He had only to put on the ring and claim it for his own, and all this could be.

[. . .] he knew in the core of his heart that he was not large enough to bear such a burden [. . .] The one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm; his own hands to use, not the hands of others to command. (*LotR* 935)

The hobbit as a representation of the ordinary working man of the first half of the twentieth century is one of the few applications that Tolkien himself acknowledges: "My "Sam Gamgee" is indeed a reflection of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war."[39] Thus, despite containing the structure of myth and legend, Tolkien's heroes differ dramatically from those related to the classic myth: it is the ordinary hero of the folk tale who gains preference. This shift reflects post-World War One transformations in class boundaries. The rise of the small man, or the outsider in *The Silmarillion*, permeates the works: in *The Silmarillion* the Men (the ordinary) supersede the Elves (the aristocratic) in valour; Bilbo in *The Hobbit* gains respect from the eldest of mortal races, the Dwarves, while the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings* take their place among the greatest in folklore:

Ents the earthborn, old as mountains,
the wide-walkers, water drinkers;
and hungry as hunters, the Hobbit children,
the laughing folk, the little people. (*LotR* 609)

Despite Tolkien's deference to classic mythology, there is nonetheless a sense that adventure and valour must no longer be the prerogative of an elite few; qualities are possessed not only by elites but also by the "ordinary" people more commonly

found in folktales, who will be the true heroes of an age, for, as Elrond says, now is "the hour of the Shire-folk, when they arise from their quiet fields to shake the towers and councils of the great" (*LotR* 288). This merger of the realistic and fantastic is essential to the applicability that allows readers to create their own heroes from Tolkien's texts: without it the "blanks" would be vacant spaces, and the "ordinary" contemporary reader would be unable to complete them.

Difference is equally revealing. *The Hobbit* reflects optimism at the end of the Great War and lacks an inner darkness: the villains are comic Trolls rather than Orcs, and Sauron is merely the distant " Necromancer." *The Lord of the Rings*, in contrast, can be read as very much of World War Two, while *The Silmarillion* spans the experience of both wars and their consequences. Gandalf transforms to a man of power, a sorcerer rather than a conjuror: by *The Silmarillion* he has become emissary of the Valar. Bilbo and Gollum, the ring, even Nature, adopt more sinister complexions. As reality proves that inhumanity is cyclical and ultimately indestructible, so Tolkien replaces eucatastrophe with dyscatastrophe:[40] all victory is transient: "Yet the lies that Melkor [. . .] sowed in the hearts of Elves and Men are a seed that does not die and cannot be destroyed; and ever and anon it sprouts anew, and will bear dark fruit even until the latest days" (*Silmarillion* 307).

While Sam can heal the scourging of the Shire, the tragic impact on Frodo is irreversible: "I have tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them" (*LotR* 1067).

Such meaning in Tolkien is not discovered but created. Thus other meanings have been accepted by subsequent communities, their affinity with the texts based on alternative interpretations. This is highlighted by the ability of American anti-war protesters during Vietnam to relate the hobbits' struggle not to the rise of the working classes or the *pro-establishment* spirit of the ordinary Englishman during two world wars, but rather to their own *anti-establishment* struggle. In addition, it can be seen in the adoption of the text at the same time by groups who saw the fantasy as related to their experience of drug-taking, leading Tolkien to profess: "many young Americans are involved with the stories in a way that I am not."[41]

More recently, the texts have been adopted by modern ecological movements,[42] concentrating on naturalistic elements: Beorn, half bear-half man in *The Hobbit*; The Ents and Old Man Willow in *The Lord of the Rings*; and Huan in *The Silmarillion*. Tolkien is cast as radical defender of anti-industrialism;[43] Sauron's

domain in *The Lord of the Rings* is a "dun, shadowless world, fading slowly into a featureless, colourless gloom" (*LotR* 727), utilising industry in contrast to the Shire's rural simplicity; Melkor in *The Silmarillion* mars Ilúvatar's creation as he "cast his shadow upon it, and confounded it with darkness" (*Silmarillion* 48); in *The Hobbit* Smaug's tyranny has destroyed the landscape: "The land about them grew bleak and barren, though once, as Thorin told them, it had been green and fair [. . .] They were come to the Desolation of the Dragon" (196).

This quality to be open to multiple discourses counters charges of irrelevancy, illustrating how the texts are pertinent to the experiences of an international community of readers. Ability to surpass the limits of original audience is directly linked to applicability, which has allowed multiple "interpretative communities" to find relevance. Such application appears limitless: an official Russian translation of *The Lord of the Rings* in 1991, available underground for many years, saw the text function as a kind of Aesopian Language,[44] substantiating the ability of escapism to be subversive, socially sanctioned, and yet deconstructing the dominant discourse as it purports to reinforce it. This radical escapism is never acknowledged by critics, though Tolkien saw it: not the "flight of the deserter" but the "escape of the prisoner."[45] Hence M. Kamenkovich's report on the White House demonstrations in Moscow in August 1991: "Western readers must understand that for us Tolkien was never any kind of 'escape' [. . .] [M]any people remembered Tolkien when they made their barricades [. . .] The war machine got as crazy as Oliphants [. . .] And Gandalf stood before the King of Angmar saying 'You shall not pass.'"[46]

Such situations of meaning are equally valid due to cultural codes of reference and "blanks" that make them equally possible: the best evidence that, in line with the theories of Rosenblatt and Fish, it is readers' interactions rather than mere authorial intention that creates meaning. This substantiates the suitability of Tolkien's texts, "wide enough for other hands,"[47] for theories that dismiss excanonical ideas of "correct" readings. Altering our perception means criticism of Tolkien that accuses him of escapism and irrelevancy undoubtedly requires serious reconsideration.

Truth

The best literary formula is always the truth.[48]

Assertions that Tolkien is backward looking and unable to deal with reality have in part been countered: Tolkien has, in the experience of readers, been asserted as

relevant to the modern adult experience. Yet the claims' invalidity are best illustrated paradoxically by the fact that, in addition to such openness to applicability, Tolkien's texts also include what can be seen as fundamental, potentially timeless, "truths." This provides a potent defence: for the universal cannot be nostalgic, the fundamental never juvenile.

The use of "truth" is contentious in a post-modern climate that sees the notion of unquestionable truth as fallacious. Yet Tolkien's combination of this with applicability allows it to appear possible: Tolkien's "truths" are fundamental but they may take different forms in each community of readers: they are Tolkien's guides, essentially positive discourses. In terms of the three texts, four main "truths" can be identified: spiritual truth; communal truth; mythological truth; and, finally, individual truth.[49]

To Tolkien spiritual truth was essentially Christian, often resulting in a view of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* as mere religious allegory. In *The Lord of the Rings* both Frodo and Gandalf act as Christ figures, while in *The Silmarillion*, the very idea of "Eru, the One" suggests a pseudo-Christian monotheism. Christian pity is also present as a leitmotif in *The Lord of the Rings*, accompanying the story of Gollum and drawing parallels with The Sermon on the Mount:

It seemed to Frodo then that he heard, quite plainly but far off, voices out of the past:
What a pity Bilbo did not stab the vile creature, when he had a chance!
Pity? It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need.
[. . . .]
[. . . .] *Many that live deserve death. And some die that deserve life. Can you give that to them? Then be not too eager to deal out death in the name of justice, fearing for your own safety."* (*LotR* 639)

Yet, as Tolkien resisted allegory, these elements are obscured by an undefined spirituality. His position on *Beowulf*'s own religious ambiguity illustrates this: "not a half-hearted or a muddled business, but a fusion that has occurred *at a given point* of contact between old and new, a product of thought and deep emotion."[50]

Thus spiritual truth resists a "correct" application of its source, supportive of various religious and pagan doctrines. There is a clear sense of predestination in *The Hobbit*: "Surely you don't disbelieve the prophecies, because you had a hand

in bringing them about yourself? You don't really suppose that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit?" (*Hobbit* 285).

In *The Lord of the Rings* the message is remarkably similar: "Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it" (*LotR* 69).

Only *The Silmarillion*, charting as it does the beginning of time and religious disillusionment, is notably Biblical in structure and tone. Even here, the monotheistic presence of Eru is undermined by the more dominant Valar, the demi-Gods, who permit a polytheistic, or even pagan, view to be taken. The assertion of creation as akin to a musical symphony, the combination of both discordant and harmonious melodies in order to achieve the whole, suggests not Christian ideas but rather several influencing spiritual voices: "the voices of the Ainur, like unto harps and lutes, and pipes and trumpets [. . .] began to fashion the theme of Ilúvatar to a great music [. . .] and the music and the echo went out into the Void, and it was not void" (*Silmarillion* 15-16).

The benefits of alternative worship can be found in Aragorn's healing of the sick at Gondor, while Gandalf's statement that "Things are drawing towards the end now [. . .] there is news brewing that even the ravens have not heard" (*Hobbit* 257) is as much an indicator of the wizard's magical prescience as it is of a disciple of a supreme being. Tom Bombadil and Beorn act to indicate the power of nature to overcome evil: the mystical rather than the traditionally religious. The role of Fate—Sam's assertion that "I have something to do before the end" (*LotR* 758) and the story of Túrin Turambar with its lament "*A Túrin Turambar turun ambartanen*: master of doom by doom mastered!" (*Silmarillion* 269)—engages with pre-Christian and essentially Finnish myth.[51]

The truth of the individual, centred upon the notion of free will, is paradoxically in direct opposition to the predestination of spiritual truth. The idea of the power of the individual to change history can be seen as transcendent of context in its ability to relate to intrinsic human desires for justice. The resonance of Tolkien's themes allows the filling in of "blanks" with personal or collective experience: in *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo's struggle with the Ring; Aragorn's struggle with the palantir; Galadriel's testing of each of the company at Lothlórien, and Éowyn's ride to battle all represent the struggle of the individual to triumph against power structures for a common good.[52] Equally present in *The Silmarillion*, it is witnessed both in the moral of Túrin's downfall and also in Beren and Lúthien's

refusal to accept the social status quo, even to the point where this transcends the boundaries of mortality, changing the very nature of the World. Thus: "This doom she chose [. . .] Yet in her choice the Two Kindreds have been joined: and she is the forerunner of many in whom the Eldar see yet, though all the world is changed" (*Silmarillion* 225).

The truth of community also substantiates universality transcending the nostalgic or juvenile. It is seen in *The Hobbit* through Bilbo's alliance with the Dwarves and, conversely, through their gradual acceptance of him: "they would all have done their best to get him out of trouble, if he got into it, as they did in the case of the trolls at the beginning of their adventures before they had any particular reasons for being grateful to him" (*Hobbit* 204).

Yet it is in *The Lord of the Rings* that such truth finds its most powerful exposition, through the Shire's ability to protect its way of life during "The Scouring of the Shire"; the strength of the Fellowship; the sacrificing of difference in order to secure survival of individual communities. Multiple narrative viewpoints defy promotion of particular groups: the paths of Aragorn, a king, and the hobbits are "fates woven together" (*LotR* 811). Sam's initially narrow view of the world widens: "if we're found here, or Mr. Frodo's found [. . .] that's the end of us all, of Lórien and Rivendell, and the Shire and all" (*LotR* 759), thus becoming a concern not only for his own community, but for all that have contributed to the journey.

This leaves mythological truth, Tolkien's desire to create an "English mythology"[53] to replace that lost during the Norman Conquest, to remove the privilege given to "new mythologies" such as the Arthurian Legends, viewed by him as unacceptable due to their intrinsic allegory. The term "English mythology" means it is obviously difficult to accept as truly universal, yet the status given to the books by many as records of actual events, akin to real mythology, illustrates that the historicity of Tolkien's texts has indeed become universally accessible. The post-modern sense of fiction as history is clearly present, both through the use of appendices and maps, the creation of a vast imaginary geographical landscape that can be transposed upon our own, and through the publication of alternate versions such as *Unfinished Tales* and *The History of Middle-earth*, giving the sense of alternate writings of a mythic history foreshadowing official records. It is substantiated through intertextuality, an awareness of the creation of literature. The texts we read "are" Bilbo's; the history Aragorn tells is that of *The Silmarillion*, his own relationship with Arwen reflecting Lúthien and Beren before him. "The Road Goes Ever On" and "Where there's life, there's hope," originally present in

The Hobbit, are echoed in *The Lord of the Rings*, creating a resonance of cultural depth. *The Lord of the Rings* becomes just twenty-five pages in *The Silmarillion*, reduced from an epic to a mere part of one much greater in scope and immensity. Thus Tolkien travels from "the large and cosmogonic to the level of the romantic fairy story—the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the early—the lesser drawing splendour from the vast back cloths,"[54] creating a sense of a wider history beyond those tales recorded on the page, echoing both contemporary "historiographic metafiction" and at the same time the effects of true myth.

Tolkien's truths allow his works to achieve a universality, making it possible for very different readers to relate to the texts, finding their way in through ideas that transcend cultural or social specificity, paradoxically precisely because of this allowing very different individual readings. With such grand scope allied to particulars, the texts are revealed as neither nostalgic nor juvenile but rather relevant and significant, dealing with themes whose applicability will not diminish with time.

Conclusions

The primary aim of critical discourse, the impulse for talking about books, is to persuade someone else to appreciate what the critic finds valuable about a literary text.[55]

While some criticism of Tolkien has a basis in the text that requires acknowledgement, others are founded on personal distrust of the fundamental tenets of the fantasy. Utilising a theory more appropriate in the current academic climate, in which the New Critic can no longer assume privilege, offers the opportunity to re-approach the texts and question whether existing conclusions are justified. Assertions that Tolkien is negatively escapist, juvenile, nostalgic, and irrelevant are disproved by the evidence provided by readers and equally by the texts themselves. An altering of theory, therefore, might allow Tolkien to be accepted as canonical. Yet simply adjusting canonical definitions would not strike at the core of the debate. Rather, while the idea that "without the canon we cease to think"[56] is still acceptable, there will always be other writers such as Tolkien who are excluded, despite having had their quality affirmed by diverse and intelligent readerships. The revision required is perhaps much wider than Tolkien or even literary theory. It is a revision of the foundations of our categorisations of literature, the canon, and the dominant discourses it upholds, which must be the focus of our attention.

Notes

1. Joseph Pearce, *Tolkien: Man and Myth* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 8.

2. J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories." *The Monster and the Critics and Other Essays.* Ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 144.

3. Tolkien's own poem in response to critics of *The Lord of the Rings*: printed in Humphrey Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1977), 222.

4. Germaine Greer, writing in *W: Waterstone's* magazine and quoted in Pearce, *Man and Myth,* 6.

5. Susan Jeffreys, writing in the *Sunday Times,* 26/01/97 and quoted in Pearce 1.

6. Edmund Wilson speaking in 1956, a remark that was to set the trend for criticism of Tolkien. Quoted in Curry, *Defending Middle Earth,* 15.

7. Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981); Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Methuen, 1981); Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975).

8. See in particular Todorov, *The Fantastic,* 41, and Brooke-Rose, *Rhetoric of the Unreal,* 235.

9. Attebery, *Strategies,* IX.

10. Quoted in Pearce 130. Taken from *The Observer* (27/11/1955).

11. Burton Raffel, "Is Tolkien Literature?" *Tolkien and the Critics: Essays on J.R.R. Tolkien's* The Lord of the Rings. Ed. Neil Isaacs and Rose Zimbardo (South Bend: Notre Dame UP, 1968), 218-46.

12. Michael Moorcock, *Wizardry and Wild Romance* (London: Gollanz, 1987), 122-25.

13. Ann Barnes, quoted in Pearce 5.

14. See Jackson, *Fantasy,* 2-8 in particular for desire. See 153-156 for her rejection of Tolkien and the marvellous on the basis of this.

15. Nigel Planer, in response to the Waterstone's Poll: quoted in Pearce 2.

16. Greer, quoted in Pearce 6.

17. Ibid. 8.

18. Jackson 42.

19. Moorcock 126.

20. Brooke-Rose, *The Rhetoric of the Unreal.*

21. Brooke-Rose 254.

22. Brooke-Rose 255.

23. Peter Dickinson, "Fantasy: The Need for Realism." *Children's Literature in Education* 17.1 (1986): 47.

24. *The Hobbit* in 1937 and *The Lord of the Rings* in 1954-55.

25. For both the terms and their usage here see W. John Harker, "Reader Response and Cognition: Is There a Mind in This Class?" *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 26.3

(Autumn 1992): 27-29. For a more comprehensive analysis see W. K. Winsatt and M. C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (1954) (London: Methuen, 1970), 3-40.

26. The "super reader" is referred to in Brooke-Rose 31.

27. Howard Jacobson, in response to the Waterstone's Poll and quoted in Pearce 1-2.

28. Frye's definitions as found in his own *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York: Athenaeum, 1967), 33-34.

29. Le Guin: "The Staring Eye" in *The Language of the Night*, 150.

30. See Tolkien: "On Fairy-Stories," 132.

31. Tolkien quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1978), 43.

32. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 132.

33. See Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* (London: Heinemann, 1970).

34. See Harker, "Reader Response," 31-32, for a summary of Fish.

35. Tolkien in Carpenter, *Tolkien*, 190.

36. T. H. White, *The Once and Future King: The Complete Edition* (London: Voyager, 1996).

37. References to literary works are given parenthetically within the main text.

38. These dates have been specifically selected with the intention of stressing that Tolkien's works cover more than the years of their immediate publication. Tolkien's letters (*Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*) clearly illustrate that *The Hobbit* began to be formed in relation to the latter stages of World War One. While Tolkien continued *The Silmarillion* until his death it was ready for publication when *The Lord of the Rings* was first published in separate volumes in the 1950s.

39. J. R. R. Tolkien. See Carpenter, *Tolkien*, 81.

40. See Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 153.

42. Tolkien in Carpenter, *Tolkien*, 231.

43. In particular Curry, *Defending Middle-earth*, has taken this stance: see especially 59-97.

44. This is a characteristic borne out by Tolkien himself: see Tolkien, *Letters* 116, and his comments in Carpenter, *Tolkien*, 166.

45. See Lev Loseff, *The Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russia*, Trans. Anon. (Munich: Sagnerin Kommision, 1984), 1-13 and 217-223.

46. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 148

47. Quoted in Curry 56.

48. Tolkien in Carpenter, *Tolkien*, 89. This seems to suggest Tolkien as a self-aware proponent of what would now be termed reader-orientated literature.

49. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, in P. Mendoza, *The Fragrance of Guava, Conversations with Gabriel Garcia Marquez* (London: Faber, 1982), 28.

50. As with the critical categories these are my individual choices.

51. Tolkien, "*Beowulf*: Monsters and Critics," 20.

52. Tolkien's own comments suggest this Nordic myth as central to *The Silmarillion* in particular. See Tolkien, *Letters,* 87.

53. See Tolkien, *Letters,* 144.

54. Tolkien, *Letters,* 144.

55. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory,* 2nd ed., (London: Prentice, 1999), 48.

56. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (London: Papermac, 1995), 41.

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