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## Fantasy and Reality: J.R.R. Tolkien's World and the Fairy-Story Essay

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### Abstract

Examines how Tolkien applied a central concept of “On Fairy-stories,” the idea that fantasy must be firmly based in reality, to his writing of *The Lord of the Rings*.

### Additional Keywords

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

## Fantasy and Reality: J. R. R. Tolkien's World and the Fairy-Story Essay

Verlyn Flieger

IN introducing students to the fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien, I have often begun by quoting what I have always felt was an especially relevant dictum from his essay "On Fairy-stories," that "fantasy depends upon reality as nonsense depends upon sense." Largely so I could cite the page for inquiring students, I recently looked through the essay to verify the quote, but although I turned page after page, I could not find it. It was not there. What I did find, to the considerable embarrassment of my memory, was that my oft-quoted dictum was not what Tolkien wrote at all. What he actually said was much richer and more complex than my snappy little one-liner:

The keener and clearer is the reason, the better fantasy it will make. [. . .]

For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it. So upon logic was founded the nonsense that displays itself in the tales and rhymes of Lewis Carroll. ("On Fairy-Stories" 144)

What this goes to show, which I should have known all along, was that one should not rely on memory, for the disparity between what I thought Tolkien said and what he really said is considerable. The difference is obvious. While the key terms—fantasy and nonsense—are the same, as is the semantic structure—seemingly opposed concepts which are actually interdependent—the resemblance stops there, for Tolkien's thought is more profound and his language more exact than my inadequate shorthand version.

Where in describing Carroll I used the word sense, a quality of thought, Tolkien more correctly and far more precisely cited logic, not an elusive quality but a system of rules governing words and their relationships. He saw how firmly grounded in the logic of language are the puns and literalities that create Carroll's fantasy, how reliant for their effect on the very system they seem to flout. He was equally percipient about fantasy. The phrase he opposes to it, "the hard recognition that things are so in the world," is more accurately descriptive as well as being more psychologically observant than is my word

reality, a rather vague and general term. And although he does go on to talk about “reality” in his essay (it is easier to repeat one word than a whole phrase), his word “recognition” is the key to the whole idea, for it places the emphasis where it belongs: on the beholder rather than on something called “reality,” about which there could be and often is disagreement. Recognition brings the idea home to the reader. We can neither understand nor appreciate a thing we cannot recognize. However apparently alien, however jarring to the imagination, fantasy, to be successful, must be recognizable by the perceiving human consciousness.

I am not going to try to define fantasy. Excellent critics such as Tzvetan Todorov, Kathryn Hume, Harold Bloom, Darko Suvin, and Erik Rabkin have all tried, yet they are no nearer a definition that does more than define their own theories. Tolkien, wiser than most, did not try to define it, but he did in the fairy-story essay lay out the principles of his fantasy. We are all familiar with his working terms—sub-creation, secondary world, inner consistency of reality, primary creation, the real world, and the outer reality of which consistency is the hallmark—but it is easy to lose track of their references. In the section of the essay subtitled “Fantasy” Tolkien gets down to the nuts and bolts of the creative process, and his discussion stands as the best description anyone has made yet of his own art. It is his creative manifesto.

“Anyone,” Tolkien asserts,

inheriting the fantastic device of human language can say *the green sun*. Many can then imagine or picture it. But that is not enough. [. . .]

To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft. (“On Fairy-Stories”140)

It is in describing that elvish craft that he makes an implicit comparison with Carroll, for he declares unequivocally that, “Fantasy is a rational not an irrational activity” (139). This statement could easily describe Lewis Carroll, whose reasoning capacity was certainly clear, and who was a supremely rational individual. If he had not been, he never could have conceived the rational fantasy of the Alice books, whose apparent irrationality is so firmly grounded in syntactic and semantic logic. But Tolkien went on to say that, “Fantasy is made out of the Primary World” (147), and here he was describing his own work. He declared about his own creation that “Middle-earth is not an imaginary

world” (*The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* 239) and stated more directly that “Middle-earth is our world” (Carpenter 91). He also said (although confessed might be a better word, for while his statement is general, it is also clearly personal),

Probably every writer making a secondary world, a fantasy, every sub-creator wishes in some way 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. If he indeed achieves a quality that can fairly be described by the dictionary definition: ‘inner consistency of reality’, it is difficult to conceive how this can be, if the work does not in some way partake of reality. The peculiar quality of the ‘joy’ in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth. (“On Fairy-Stories” 155)

Here is the recognition to which he refers in the first quote, recognition not just that “things are so in the world,” but also that there is a reality or truth that underlies that fact. And if the writer, the sub-creator, is an honest craftsman—and Tolkien certainly was—it will sometimes be “hard” recognition, for there are some underlying realities or truths that do not always bring joy. And if the secondary world is to reflect the primary one, it must acknowledge that.

Not only is fantasy made out of the primary world, it must point back to its source if it is to be effective. But this requires the very elvish skill and craft that Tolkien cites, for he also argues that the attraction of fantasy as a genre is its “arresting strangeness” (139). Fantasy allows us to escape into a world other than our own. Otherwise we could not call it fantasy. We desire escape, which of course implies strangeness. That is why we read fantasy. The particular skill of the writer of fantasy, especially in devising a sub-created Secondary World, lies in effecting the escape and still keeping the recognition; the craft resides in achieving and maintaining that delicate balance between fantasy and reality that will lead us to the underlying truth. Nobody does it better than Tolkien.

Indeed, I propose that nobody since Tolkien has managed to do it half as well. With the possible exception of Frank Herbert’s Arrakis, and Ursula LeGuin’s Earthsea and Gethen and Anarres, Tolkien’s Middle-earth outshines every sub-created world that has followed it, and most that came before. Not only must one be able to recognize reality before one can depart from it into fantasy, one must also have a pretty good sense of how far one can go before recognition disappears and there is no point of reference. In point of fact, Tolkien did not go very far, much less far (when one thinks of it) than the worlds his work has

inspired, the proliferation of Secondary World fantasies, the role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons and their related spin-off books.

It is no exaggeration to say that *The Lord of The Rings* is the most important and most influential fantasy of the twentieth century. But if examined closely, one finds that for a major fantasy it has surprisingly few actual fantastic elements in it—far fewer, indeed, than in the multitude of later fantasies his fiction has spawned. There is very little in his work that is not either derived from reality or rearranged from primary material. Tolkien's "fantasy" is both attractive and powerful not because of its fantasy but because of its reality, because his world shows us that things are "so" in our own world.

I propose to examine the way in which Tolkien follows his own principles, to look at his fantasy in the context of his reality and examine the relative proportions of each. I will show how un-fantastic is the quality of his world, and how grounded in reality are the elements of arresting strangeness in his work. There is some straight fantasy, of course. There are talking eagles. There is a Balrog. There are Elves, Orcs, Ents—creatures we certainly do not meet in the primary world—and we see more of them than either eagles or Balrogs. But with the exception of the Ents (and even they destroy Isengard by acting like trees) the fantastic aspects of these characters is at the periphery of the action. It is largely decoration, and has very little to do with advancing the story.

In this respect, *The Lord of The Rings* is notably lacking in what any good science-fiction work displays—the integration of the science (or in this case the fantasy) with the plot. There is some integration or we could not call it a fantasy at all. Eagles can talk and carry people, and they do, twice, effect an important rescue. The Balrog is directly responsible for the death and therefore the resurrection of Gandalf. But out of eleven hundred or so pages that is not a great deal of fantasy. And for the rest, how much does the fantasy serve the plot? Gandalf has his staff, and he can command fire, but on the two occasions when he uses it, it does not appear to help much. Saruman's flame-throwers mirror those of our own world, and aside from this technology he manifests remarkably little wizardly power. Galadriel's Mirror can range over time, but its function is to foreshadow action, not to affect it. Again, in so large a story, that does not seem very much.

To be sure, simply to call an individual an Elf is to invoke a quality of "arresting strangeness." It thus satisfies one of Tolkien's criteria. But what about

the other? What about recognition? How elf-like is the behavior of Tolkien's Elves? Not very. They are recognizably human, in fact super human in looks and behavior. What is really strange about the Elves of Middle-earth (and Valinor, for that matter) is that we have trouble recognizing them as elves, for they depart radically from the folk and fairy tale conventions that traditionally govern the elven-kind. They are not diminutive in size. They are not pixies or corrigans or leprechauns or boggarts. They do not befriend poor woodcutters' third sons. They do not mend shoes, or tidy up the house while you are asleep, or come out at night and dance in fairy rings, or steal human babies and substitute their own. They have neither wings nor wands. Instead, they are recognizably human. Legolas vies with Gimli over the number of orcs each has killed, and debates with him the relative beauties of forests and caves. Lórien makes use of Elven technology, not Elven magic, as the Elves themselves are careful to point out when Pippin asks them. Elven cloaks are effective camouflage, but they are not magic cloaks of invisibility, and when Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli stand up, the Riders of Rohan have no trouble seeing them. Elven rope is tough and strong, but as far as we are told it is simply rope. Gollum's reaction to it—"Elves twisted it, curse them!" (*The Lord of the Rings* 642)—and his pain when it binds him are more psychological responses than they are the effects of magic.

The connection with Elves associates the rope with light, and its silvery gleam brings Frodo light in the darkness of the storm, but it is worthy of note that Tolkien leaves this phenomenon deliberately inexplicit. When Sam has let the rope down the cliff-face to Frodo, "The darkness seemed to lift from Frodo's eyes, or else his sight was returning. He could see the grey line as it came dangling down, and he thought it had a faint silver sheen. Now that he had some point in the darkness to fix his eyes on, he felt less giddy" (632). Note the careful listing of options: either the darkness "seemed" to lift, "or else" his sight was coming back, as sight does when eyes become dark-adapted. The rope offers him a point to focus on, and his dizziness abates. These are all naturally occurring operations of the body, but readers can translate light into Light, focus into faith, as and if they choose. The rope itself acts like rope, and the final question of whether it unties itself after Frodo and Sam use it to descend the cliff is deliberately left unanswered.

Similarly, Elven bread, waybread, acts like bread. One cake will keep a traveler "on his feet for a day of long labour," as the Elves assure Gimli (390).

This is what bread is supposed to do. It is nourishing and sustaining. It is the staff of life. Nevertheless, Sam and Frodo find it pretty dull as a steady diet, and it does not hit the spot like rabbit stew. Gollum's reaction to Elven bread, as to Elven rope, is more psychological than magical. He has met it before, when he was a prisoner of the Elves, and the memory still haunts him. He cannot eat it; he coughs, chokes, and spits it out. But we know the kind of food Gollum likes: "Worms or beetles or something slimy out of holes," as Sam conjectures, and the thought of Gollum's food makes him choke and sputter (650). Again, we are free to make of this what we wish. The author has supplied a perfectly reasonable, natural rationale for Gollum's dislike. Those who wish can see in waybread a reference to the Way, but the author uses lower case and leaves interpretation to individual inclination. As the narrative progresses, both rope and bread undoubtedly acquire metaphoric value, but the metaphor is in the mind of the reader.

To call someone an Orc certainly invokes "arresting strangeness," since few readers are (or were before Tolkien) familiar with this word. Tolkien's first name for them was "goblins," and they are far closer to the goblins of literature than are his Elves to their fairy tale namesakes. But a closer look shows Orcs also to be recognizably human, and very little they do to be outside the realm of human behavior. Like soldiers everywhere, they march, they complain, they quarrel, they are insubordinate, they fight among themselves. They snarl and murder and betray. I do not mean to suggest that this is typical military behavior, but it is certainly recognizable. Orc food is simple meat and drink (although the meat is quite possibly human and the drink—described as "burning liquid—is probably alcoholic), but except for the cannibal implications these properties are even less fantastic than Elven bread. Indeed, the cannibal implications reinforce (albeit negatively) their kinship with humanity, not their alienness from it. Orcs are certainly ugly, but while their looks can be seen as an external metaphor for an internal condition, these are no more a fantasy characteristic than is Elven beauty. We see our idealized selves reflected in the Elves. We see our shadow, the unadmitted, the worst side of human character in the unadmirable but depressingly human behavior of the Orcs. And we are forced to recognize it.

But what about hobbits? They are entirely Tolkien's invention, deriving from no established literary tradition, and they stand as his most striking, most enduring creation. They have added a new word to the *Oxford English*



*Dictionary* and a new folklore to children's literature. But how fantastic are they? How removed in nature and character and even appearance are they from the primary world? They are half-sized humans. The primary world is filled with little people. They have big appetites and furry feet. So do lots of people we all know. They live in holes in the ground, but those holes are as spacious, as comfortably furnished, as "real" as any real-world household. The second line of *The Hobbit* takes the fantasy out of hobbit-holes, and the second paragraph relates them firmly to the recognizable, real world by means of doorknobs, panelled walls, tiles, carpets, bedrooms, bathrooms, cellars, pantries, wardrobes, kitchens, and dining-rooms. Hobbiton is modeled on a pre-industrial rural English village like the one where Tolkien spent his happiest years of childhood. Hobbits like to get presents, and have a tendency to accumulate objects. When they accumulate more than they have room for, they put the resultant clutter in a museum.

All the hobbit attributes I have cited and more besides are recognizable as aspects of humanity. The reason we dislike Ted Sandyman and love Sam Gamgee and develop a grudging respect for Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, the reason we admire Merry and develop an exasperated affection for Pippin, and the reason we break our hearts at the tragedy of Frodo is not because they are hobbits, but because we recognize them as human beings. Ted Sandyman is any unimaginative, scoffing skeptic who makes fun of weird tales. I have spent most of my life arguing with Ted Sandyman. Sam's romanticism, his common sense, his devotion to his cooking-gear, his loyalty and self-sacrifice are among the best and most appealing of human characteristics. Lobelia is every nosey, busybody old lady who has ever triumphed over adversity by sheer bad temper. The mature dependability of Merry and the adolescent impulsiveness, curiosity, and big mouth of Pippin, are not just recognizable human traits, they are typical.

Of fairy tale talismans the story has remarkably few—only two, in fact. But neither, I suggest, will qualify as truly fantastic. The most mystical artifact in the story is the Phial of Galadriel, but no reader, I venture to guess, would ascribe its light to magic, for the Phial transcends fantasy to become myth in the best sense of that word. It is an object whose meaning is greater than the sum of its parts. It is not founded on reality but on what for Tolkien was Truth, and as such it offers precisely that "glimpse of underlying reality or truth" which he said successful fantasy should bring. Within the story the Phial is

both a link to past history, the light of Eärendil's Silmaril, and a link to the future when the three jewels will be recovered. Beyond the story it is a metaphor for hope, and in this respect its light must be seen as at once literal and symbolic. It is both a light and the Light, and as such it is without a doubt the most explicitly Christian reference to be found in the whole story. But for that very reason, it will not stand as fantasy.

I will close with an examination of the most indubitably magical, most prominent object in the whole story, the fantasy element that gives its name to the whole work—the Ring. Just how magical, how fantastic an artifact is the Ring? I suggest that it is more fantastic in *The Hobbit* than in *The Lord of The Rings*, and that as the latter work developed, its magical properties came more and more to recede behind its metaphorical and psychological significance. I grant its most obvious magical function, the ability to make people disappear. This is un-recognizably so in this world and unarguably contrary to the reality we know. But as the story progresses, this faculty becomes less and less the nifty invisibility device of *The Hobbit* and more and more a metaphor for a psychological state, and finally for a disastrous erosion of moral and spiritual being and a perversion of the will.

But perversion of the will is actually a secondary function of the Ring. Its primary function, the one on which the whole story turns, is to command obedience. Here again, overt evidence of fantasy seems strangely lacking. The one truly fantastic thing that the Ring is said to do—to confer absolute power, to be a super-weapon, to command armies and influence wars—is just what we do not see the Ring doing except in the very moment when it cannot do it any longer. That is, when it is destroyed and the Nazgûl are pulled in and down in the undertow of its descent. It is a measure of Tolkien's genius that he can convince us of the Ring's power without ever showing it. The hinge on which the whole story turns is at once the most and the least fantastic element in it. Look at it. It is a plain gold ring whose power is never conclusively demonstrated. Tolkien himself said,

You cannot press the One Ring too hard, for it is of course a mythical feature, even though the world of the tales is conceived in more or less historical terms. The Ring of Sauron is only one of the various mythical treatments of the placing of one's life, or power, in some external object, which is thus exposed to capture or destruction with disastrous results to oneself. If I were to 'philosophize' this myth, or at least the Ring of Sauron, I should say it was a mythical way of representing the truth that potency (or perhaps rather potentiality) if it is to be exercised, and

produce results, has to be externalized and so as it were passes, to a greater or less degree, out of one's direct control. A man who wishes to exert 'power' must have subjects, who are not himself. But then he depends on them. (*Letters* 279)

What is shown instead of the actual power of the Ring is the reactions of characters to it. Bilbo lies to maintain his right to it, and cannot freely give it up. Gandalf is afraid of it, Galadriel is tempted by it, Boromir is corrupted by it (as is Denethor who has never even seen it), Grishnakh covets it, and Saruman loses his wisdom and his position as head of the White Council for it. We see all these manifestations, and we refer them back to the Ring. It is we, not Tolkien, who confer power on the Ring, and he was wise enough to know that we would, and to let us do it.

The most extreme operation of the Ring is the terrifying effect it has on Frodo—the eroding of his will as he is driven more and more to use it, until at the last he loses his very self. Nowhere more obviously than here does Tolkien's adjective "hard" in his phrase "hard recognition" become the operative word. Frodo's transformation is not just hard to watch, it is unbearable. It is even more unbearable to recognize, and yet it is impossible to deny, that things like this occur in the world, that what happens to him not only could happen to anyone, indeed it does happen—all the time. It happens when people fall victim to their appetites and surrender their humanity to their desires. It happens when soldiers come back from war, or when children are abused, or when anyone is damaged by catastrophe. Post-traumatic stress syndrome is not confined to hobbits.

So how fantastic is the Ring? Hardly at all; it is the very embodiment of reality as reality acts on people all the time—as they are affected by power, by greed, by envy, by violence, by shock, by serious injury to mind or body. It is Tolkien forcing us into "the hard recognition that things are so in the world." The Ring, then, is not so much a fantastic artifact of Tolkien's Secondary World as it is a direct reference to the Primary World, a sign pointing to and standing for an inescapable, underlying reality or truth, a hard recognition of the human condition. In this respect, the Ring is synecdoche, the part that stands for the whole. As the Ring is to humanity, so Tolkien's fantasy world is to our Primary one—founded on it, grounded in it, and standing for it.

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