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Abstract

An overview of Tolkien's achievements in both fiction and scholarship, and an account of their work on editing the posthumous children's story *Roverandom*.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Career; Tolkien, J.R.R. *Roverandom*

J. R. R. Tolkien: The Achievement of His Literary Life

Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull

IT is a tall order to address the theme of the achievement of J. R. R. Tolkien, for Tolkien's achievement really should be in the plural. He achieved so much in his long life: scholar and storyteller, artist, inspiring teacher, husband and father. Of all his achievements, it may be that the most important is that his works have brought together so many thousands of readers, in the Mythopoeic Society and similar organizations. We meet, in person or by correspondence, in fellowship and in friendship, even in marriage. It is a great achievement for an author to have changed his readers' lives, changed them sometimes dramatically, and changed them for the better.

Nor are we alone in this feeling. In late 1996 Waterstone's, a bookseller in Britain perhaps best compared to Borders in the United States, and British television's Channel 4 Book Choice program asked people to nominate up to five titles as their "Books of the Century." Twenty-five thousand people voted, and from their nominations a list of the one hundred most popular books of the twentieth century was produced. The first five titles were: number five, *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller; number four, *Ulysses* by James Joyce; number three, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell; number two, Orwell again with *Nineteen Eighty-four*; and number one, *The Lord of the Rings*, with a third more votes than the runner-up. As at least one critic noted, books of fantasy won the top three spots. *The Hobbit* came nineteenth, and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis was twenty-first.

There was an outcry of horror from some members of the literary elite. The critic Auberon Waugh found the result suspicious, and suggested that the author's fans might have orchestrated a campaign (Alberge and Wagner). Germaine Greer said that as a lifelong teacher of English she regarded the list with dismay, that ever since she first met some Tolkien fans in Cambridge in 1964 it had been her nightmare that Tolkien would turn out to be the most influential writer of the twentieth century, and now her bad dream had materialized (4). A columnist in the *Times Literary Supplement* found the results "horrifying" and complained that there were only thirteen women writers in

the top one hundred, but did not suggest that men had deliberately conspired to fix the poll ("Nota Bene"). Chris Woodhead, the Chief Inspector of Schools in Britain, said that the choice of *The Lord of the Rings* as the nation's favorite book was an example of low cultural expectations (Charter). But Professor Richards of Lancaster University, in reply to Mr. Woodhead's statement, wrote to the *Daily Telegraph* in glowing terms, praising *The Lord of the Rings* and remarking that the more people of all ages who read it, the better for both the literary level of the country and its spiritual health.

The poll was addressed to the general public and not to the inner circle who consider that only they know what is worth reading. Many people in fact are put off by the unimaginative, ruthlessly realistic, and politically correct works that get good reviews but do not exactly make a good read. A Mr. Nick Beeson wrote to the *Times* to say that he was delighted that *The Lord of the Rings* had been chosen as the nation's favorite, and that it was a splendid starting point for Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Chaucer. Paul Goodman in the *Daily Telegraph* noted some weaknesses in *The Lord of the Rings* but felt that these were outweighed by its strengths. He said that one reason why it appeals to so many is that it faces conclusions as true as they are commonplace: that growing up is painful but cannot be avoided; that it involves hard choices, which we are free to take; that choices have consequences, and that even good ones will not bring back the past. He concluded that Tolkien's epic is not the greatest book of the century, but one should be wary of the judgement of anyone who hates it.

The *Daily Telegraph* repeated the poll among its readers, and the same three books came tops!

But worse was to come for the literary establishment. 1996 was the fiftieth anniversary of the Folio Society, a British book club which also operates in the United States. The Society publishes editions of classics, ancient and modern, commissioning special illustrations and bindings. To celebrate its golden jubilee it asked its members to nominate the ten books that had most inspired, influenced, or affected them, whether previously published by the Society or not. Ten thousand members voted, and in April 1997 the results were published. Yet again, *The Lord of the Rings* came first, this time beating not only its twentieth-century rivals but also works by Austen, Dickens, Shakespeare, Tolstoy (in places two through five), Kipling, Chaucer, the Brontës, Mark Twain, Dante, Homer, Melville, Dostoyevsky, Defoe, Cervantes, Flaubert, and even the Bible!

From these polls we learn that Tolkien is popular with the general public, but less so with university professors, literary critics, and writers. Of course there is nothing wrong with being popular. It is true that much popular writing is soon forgotten, but much also survives. Charles Dickens and Mark Twain were popular in their day; Shakespeare rather than Spenser is the best-known of Elizabethan writers. There are many reasons why Tolkien is so popular: he is a great storyteller, and readers appreciate his clear style, the breadth of his imagination, the care with which he created his Secondary World. They respond to the mythic resonances in his writings. And he does open new vistas, as Beeson suggests. His writings have inspired a new interest in works such as *Beowulf*, the Icelandic Sagas, and Middle English poems. Some people have even been inspired to study Anglo-Saxon or Old Icelandic. Surely this is an achievement that would have meant a great deal to Tolkien, who was both personally and professionally concerned with these languages and literatures.

But in Britain Tolkien is not included in university literature courses, and is not welcome as a subject for theses. He would not have been offended by this. He did not see the need for recent authors to be part of the university English syllabus, and he would certainly have hated having his creations constructed, deconstructed, and torn apart according to the prejudices and subjective ideas of current teaching. Of course, as Tom Shippey has pointed out, the Oxford English establishment were mortified that it was someone on the language, and not the literary, side who produced a bestseller, and have never forgiven him.

Tolkien was asked, late in life, by which of his achievements would he like to be remembered. He replied that he did not think he had much choice: if he was remembered, it would be for *The Lord of the Rings* ("Interview"). And so he is—and for *The Hobbit*, which long ago became a classic among children's books. Actually, Tolkien was not entirely right; and if the Oxford English establishment have never forgiven him his fame as a popular author, neither have they and many other scholars forgotten his academic achievements. He is still remembered, and honored, for his landmark essay on *Beowulf*, for his and E. V. Gordon's standard edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (still in print in the revision by Norman Davis), and, increasingly in children's literature studies, for his seminal essay "On Fairy-Stories."

But these do tend to be overshadowed, as Tolkien predicted, by his best known and most widely read work of fantasy fiction. *The Lord of the Rings* also

eclipses something more. Tolkien's popularity, given its high level and that it has been sustained for decades, is indeed a notable achievement. But that is not what we, the present writers, mean by the achievement of Tolkien's literary life. Popularity is easily won, and easily lost, and subject to fashion. The number of copies a book sells is not by itself a good indicator of lasting value. When speaking of Tolkien, we mean instead his larger, more difficult, and extremely rare feat of creating a world in fiction that seems to be as wide and deep and rich, as real, as our own—the paradigm of fantasy worlds in this century, as Clute and Grant's *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* calls it.

This is a truly great achievement in literature. How great is it? Greater than we knew, or could know, when we first read Tolkien years ago—we are now looking back three or four decades. At that time there were *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and the shorter works: *Farmer Giles of Ham*, *Smith of Wootton Major*, the "Tom Bombadil" poems. *The Silmarillion* was then only a promise. Tolkien's death in 1973, with his last work unfinished, seemed to bring his canon to a close. But Christopher Tolkien took up his father's mantle, and completed *The Silmarillion* for publication. And then that work appeared to be all that there would be, apart from the odd volume, such as *The Father Christmas Letters* and the translations of *Sir Gawain, Pearl*, and *Sir Orfeo*, and "Bilbo's Last Song" as an attractive poster. The word *last* in this title was ominous.

Three years after *The Silmarillion*, which had been announced with fanfare, *Unfinished Tales* arrived almost unheralded. Christopher Tolkien had hinted in his foreword to *The Silmarillion* of a great body of manuscripts that lay behind that work, or that were associated with it; but we could not have hoped for so much that now began to be published. Even Tolkien's unfinished writings were more precious than the "finished" clones of his imitators. Nor could we have hoped, or even suspected, that after only another three years would begin *The History of Middle-earth*, a work whose length and scope even Christopher Tolkien could not foresee, and which took twelve volumes and fourteen years to complete.

The twenty-eighth Mythopoeic Society Conference (1997) celebrated the achievement of J. R. R. Tolkien in the sixtieth anniversary year of *The Hobbit*, first published in 1937. It also marked the completion in 1996 of *The History of Middle-earth*, and acknowledged the great debt we owe to Christopher Tolkien for bringing some of his father's remaining works to our eyes, or for making this possible through the work of other scholars. As more of Tolkien's writings

have been published, the scope of his achievement has continued to grow. And as the scope of his work grows, so does the potential scope of Tolkien studies; and with more study, we learn to appreciate Tolkien's works even better.

We used to think, from time to time, that there was nothing more to be said about Tolkien—it had all been said already. In fact this was never true, even in those pre-*Silmarillion* days: *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Hobbit* too, are works too rich with meaning ever to be exhausted. Each reading, even now, illuminates new truths. Today, with *Unfinished Tales*, *The History of Middle-earth*, and other resources at hand—especially the published letters, which many still neglect—let no one say that the best of Tolkien studies are in the past! Indeed they are alive and well; and some of the credit for this goes to the Mythopoeic Society and its journal and bulletin, which provide outlets for Tolkien scholarship.

Tolkien studies in fact have hardly begun. This became clear to us while writing our book *J. R. R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator*. We had known some of Tolkien's art for *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion* as it had been published in calendars, and in the collection of *Pictures*, and his art also for *The Father Christmas Letters* and *Mr. Bliss*. But we had no idea, when Christopher Tolkien in 1992 asked us to write about this subject, that hundreds of Tolkien's paintings and drawings had been preserved. Nor did we suspect that his art had such a close relationship with his writings. Christopher had written in *The Book of Lost Tales, Part One* that "for the begetter of Middle-earth and Valinor there was a deep coherence and vital interrelation between all its times, places, and beings, whatever the literary modes" (7). That the same should be true between Tolkien's art and text was a revelation, and is a subject we have by no means fully explored in our book.

When we then turned to Tolkien's unpublished children's story *Roverandom*, we should have assumed that it would not be quite as simple as it appeared, or as it had been represented to us. You will have read Humphrey Carpenter's summary of the tale in his *Biography*:

When he was on holiday with the family at Filey in the summer of 1925, Tolkien composed a full-length tale for John and Michael. The younger boy lost a toy dog on the beach, and to console him his father began to invent and narrate the adventures of Rover, a small dog who annoys a wizard, is turned into a toy, and is then lost on the beach by a small boy. But this is only the beginning, for Rover is found by the sand-sorcerer Psamathos Psamathides who gives

him the power to move again, and sends him on a visit to the Moon, where he has many strange adventures, most notably an encounter with the White Dragon. (161-62)

You also may have seen the five illustrations Tolkien made for *Roverandom* which we published in *Artist and Illustrator*. We ourselves saw the art first, and when writing *Artist and Illustrator* read the story quickly in its latest typescript, to put the pictures in context.

HarperCollins commissioned us at the end of summer 1997 to edit *Roverandom* and to write a brief introduction. Could we have it done by the end of December, they asked? Apart from delays in obtaining a microfilm copy from the Bodleian Library in Oxford, so that we could work with it at home in Massachusetts, we had to read, decipher, and analyze one manuscript and three typescript versions; and in doing so we discovered that *Roverandom* was not at all a simple children's story. Although it was, in the first instance, invented for Tolkien's eldest sons, typically for this author it had multiple levels—not to mention layers of revision. We found it unexpectedly rich in sources, from the Icelandic Sagas to Gilbert and Sullivan; that it has lateral connections with the "Father Christmas" letters; that it looks forward in several ways to *The Hobbit*, which Tolkien began not too much later; and that it even briefly touches *The Silmarillion*.

This is how the story begins:

Once upon a time there was a little dog, and his name was Rover. He was very small, and very young, or he would have known better; and he was very happy playing in the garden in the sunshine with a yellow ball, or he would never have done what he did.

Not every old man with ragged trousers is a bad old man: some are bone-and-bottle men, and have little dogs of their own; and some are gardeners; and a few, a very few, are wizards prowling round on a holiday looking for something to do. This one was a wizard, the one that now walked into the story. He came wandering up the garden-path in a ragged old coat, with an old pipe in his mouth, and an old green hat on his head. If Rover had not been so busy barking at the ball, he might have noticed the blue feather stuck in the back of the green hat, and then he would have suspected that the man was a wizard, as any other sensible little dog would; but he never saw the feather at all.

When the old man stooped down and picked up the ball—he was thinking of turning it into an orange, or even a bone or a piece of meat for Rover—Rover growled, and said:

'Put it down!' Without ever a 'please'.

Of course the wizard, being a wizard, understood perfectly, and he answered back again:

'Be quiet, silly!' Without ever a 'please'.

Then he put the ball in his pocket, just to tease the dog, and turned away. I am sorry to say that Rover immediately bit his trousers, and tore out quite a piece. Perhaps he also tore out a piece of the wizard. Anyway the old man suddenly turned round very angry and shouted:

'Idiot! Go and be a toy!'

After that the most peculiar things began to happen. Rover was only a little dog to begin with, but he suddenly felt very much smaller. The grass seemed to grow monstrously tall and wave far above his head; and a long way away through the grass, like the sun rising through the trees of a forest, he could see the huge yellow ball, where the wizard had thrown it down again. He heard the gate click as the old man went out, but he could not see him. He tried to bark, but only a little tiny noise came out, too small for ordinary people to hear; and I don't suppose even a dog would have noticed it. (*Roverandom* 3-5)

You may have noticed that the wizard, whose name is Artaxerxes, bears a slight resemblance to Gandalf—wandering up the path into the story, and prone to quick anger. Two other magicians in *Roverandom*, Psamathos the sand-sorcerer (in fact a borrowing from E. Nesbit) and the Man-in-the-Moon, are also precursors of Gandalf, albeit in different ways. The Great White Dragon, whom Carpenter mentions, is rather like Smaug in *The Hobbit*; in fact Tolkien drew the two dragons exactly the same. The Man-in-the-Moon of course features in some of Tolkien's poems, and is in an unpublished part of one of the "Father Christmas" letters.

Later in the story Artaxerxes has become the Pacific and Atlantic Magician, or PAM—which is a play on the nickname of Lord Palmerston, a renowned British Prime Minister in the nineteenth century. As the resident wizard to the Mer-king, Artaxerxes has the job of dealing with the great and ancient Sea-serpent, who is waking up and causing trouble.

When he undid a curl or two in his sleep, the water heaved and shook and bent people's houses and spoilt their repose for miles and miles around. But it was very stupid to send the PAM to look into it; for of course the Sea-serpent is much too enormous and strong and old and idiotic for any one to control (primordial, prehistoric, autothalassic, fabulous, mythical, and silly are other adjectives applied to him); and Artaxerxes knew it all only too well.

Not even the Man-in-the-Moon working hard for fifty years could have concocted a spell large enough or long enough or strong enough to bind him. Only once had the Man-in-the-Moon tried (when specially requested), and at least one continent fell into the sea as a result.

Poor old Artaxerxes drove straight up to the mouth of the Sea-serpent's cave. But he had no sooner got out of his carriage than he saw the tip of the Sea-serpent's tail sticking out of the entrance; larger it was than a row of gigantic water-barrels, and green and slimy. That was quite

enough for him. He wanted to go home at once before the Worm turned again – as all worms will at odd and unexpected moments. (76)

Even in this very brief excerpt from *Roverandom*, there are several points of interest—and from these one can gather how much work we had to do in glossing this “simple children’s story.” The style of writing is similar to that Tolkien would use not very long afterwards in *The Hobbit*. Although this is a children’s story, Tolkien is not afraid to use big words: *primordial*, *prehistoric*, *autothalassic* (that means “sprung from the sea,” and as far as we can tell is not in the *Oxford English Dictionary*). Artaxerxes’s spotting of the Sea-serpent’s tail sticking out of the cave entrance sounds very like Garm coming suddenly upon the dragon’s tail in *Farmer Giles of Ham*, which also dates from this period. The continent that fell into the sea is presumably Atlantis, as Númenor had not yet entered Tolkien’s mythology. As for the Worm turning, there are many playful turns of phrase and twisted proverbs like this in *Roverandom*. Tolkien had fun writing it!

The Sea-serpent is connected of course with the Midgard serpent of Norse mythology, and possibly also with Leviathan in the Book of Job; but it also has a personal connection with the author. On the fifth of September 1925, while Tolkien and his family were on holiday at Filey, the north-east coast of England was struck by a terrific storm. The Tolkiens were kept awake into the night (this story is also told in *The Tolkien Family Album*). To calm his two older sons, Tolkien told them the story of *Roverandom*, and no doubt it was the storm that inspired the incident in the story of the Sea-serpent waking and wreaking havoc as “the water heaved and shook.”

The most striking of all the parts of *Roverandom* that connect with or prefigure or echo Tolkien’s other writings comes late in the story. The dog Rover has become known as “Roverandom”—because he does not know where he is going next—and he is now also a mer-dog, transformed by magic, and lives in the Mer-king’s palace under the sea. He has a friend, another mer-dog, and is acquainted with a great whale, Uin—not quite the same as the whale of that name in *The Book of Lost Tales*, but close enough.

Another day old Uin turned up again and gave the two dogs a ride for a change; it was like riding on a moving mountain. They were away for days and days; and they only turned back from the eastern edge of the world just in time. There the whale rose to the top and blew out a fountain of water so high that a lot of it was thrown right off the world and over the edge.

Another time he took them to the other side (or as near as he dared), and that was a still longer and more exciting journey, the most marvellous of all Roverandom's travels, as he realised later, when he was grown to be an older and a wiser dog. It would take the whole of another story, at least, to tell you of all their adventures in Uncharted Waters and of their glimpses of lands unknown to geography, before they passed the Shadowy Seas and reached the great Bay of Fairyland (as we call it) beyond the Magic Isles; and saw far off in the last West the Mountains of Elvenhome and the light of Faery upon the waves. Roverandom thought he caught a glimpse of the city of the Elves on the green hill beneath the Mountains, a glint of white far away; but Uin dived again so suddenly that he could not be sure. If he was right, he is one of the very few creatures, on two legs or four, who can walk about our own lands and say they have glimpsed that other land, however far away.

'I should catch it, if this was found out!' said Uin. 'No one from the Outer Lands is supposed ever to come here; and few ever do now. Mum's the word!' (73-4)

Roverandom is set in our own world, more or less contemporary with the date of the story, with a few surprising changes. But here, as he was to do later in *The Hobbit*, Tolkien drew upon the *legendarium* that occupied his thoughts and made it part of the foundation of his story.

Our work on *Roverandom* showed us once again that Tolkien's achievement was greater than we had imagined. It also revealed the unappreciated importance of what we might call Tolkien's "middle period," between his earliest work on the "Silmarillion" legends and the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*. He did not cease to work on his mythology; but the birth of his children sent him at the same time onto a parallel track. This was a period of storytelling, in which Tom Bombadil and Farmer Giles were invented, the "Father Christmas" letters were begun and developed, and *Roverandom* was written and revised. It began with stories told to young John Tolkien (born 1917), and culminated with *The Hobbit*.

Humphrey Carpenter wrote in his *Biography*:

So it was that during the nineteen-twenties and thirties Tolkien's imagination was running along two distinct courses that did not meet. On one side were the stories composed for mere amusement, often specifically for the entertainment of his children. On the other were the grander themes, sometimes Arthurian or Celtic, but usually associated with his own legends. Meanwhile nothing was reaching print, beyond a few poems in the *Oxford Magazine*. [. . .] Something was lacking, something that would bind the two sides of his imagination together and produce a story that was at once heroic and mythical and at the same time tuned to the popular imagination. He was not aware of this lack, of course; nor did it seem particularly significant to him when suddenly the missing piece fell into place. (172)

What was missing, Carpenter suggests, was *The Hobbit*. We would suggest, now that we have the evidence of *Roverandom* before us, that *The Hobbit* was the most ambitious of Tolkien's children's stories, and the last that he wrote; but the true merging of Tolkien's two sides—the storyteller and the mythologist—did not occur until *The Lord of the Rings*. *Roverandom* shows that elements and influences from Tolkien's invented "Silmarillion" world were straying into the stories he told his children, even before he wrote *The Hobbit*, while *The Hobbit* confirms, with its several stronger borrowings from the mythology, that this was the direction Tolkien's writings wanted to go.

He tried to resist the pull when he began *The Lord of the Rings* still in the *Hobbit* children's-story mode; but the movement fully into the world of the "Silmarillion" was inexorable, and probably inevitable. *Roverandom* now fills in more of the picture of the development of Tolkien's writing during the twenties and thirties, and it is not too much to say that *The Lord of the Rings* might not have come into being were it not for stories like this, for their popularity with the Tolkien children, and with the author himself, led to *The Hobbit*, and so to its sequel.

It is an amazing and amusing fact that more books bearing Tolkien's name as the author have been published since his death than while he was alive. Some reviewers have seized on this in remarks such as that Tolkien's publishers have been scraping the bottom of the barrel in bringing *The History of Middle-earth* and other works into print—or else they have simply ignored more recent volumes by or about Tolkien, as if they were more of the same, and of no consequence. But at the bottom of the Tolkien barrel are not dregs, but more gems; and the bottom in fact has not been scraped: we have not yet reached it. There remain interesting fragments of stories still unpublished, and great masses of material dealing with the languages of Middle-earth, and also academic papers and notes by Tolkien. We all have much to look forward to; and those of us who edit Tolkien or write about him have a lot of work ahead.

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