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## "Death and the Desire for Deathlessness"

### Abstract

Reproduces a letter from Tolkien to Dr. Herbert Schiro (later included in Letters, but at this time previously unpublished). Discusses Tolkien's assertion that *The Lord of the Rings* is at heart about death and the desire for deathlessness, and speculates on its survival as a literary classic.

### Additional Keywords

Immortality and mortality in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R. Letter to Herbert Schiro, 11 Nov 1957

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# "Death and the Desire for Deathlessness"

The Counsel of Elrond by Glen GoodKnight

I would like to thank Dr. Herbert Schiro for sharing the following letter he received from J. R. R. Tolkien, and giving permission that it appear in print. He was a young medical student when the letter was received.

17 November 1957

Dear Dr. Schiro,

I was delighted with your letter, which I shall certainly keep. There is nothing much really to say (beyond recording the pleasure that your enjoyment and sympathy give me), as you understand the matter so well. There is no 'symbolism' or conscious allegory in my story. Allegory of the sort "five wizards = five senses" is wholly foreign to my way of thinking. There were five wizards and that's just a unique part of history. To ask if the Orcs 'are' Communists is to me as sensible as asking if Communists are Orcs.

That there's no allegory does not, of course, say there is no applicability. There always is. And since I have not made the struggle wholly unequivocal: sloth and stupidity among hobbits, pride and ((illegible)) among Elves, grudge and greed in Dwarf-hearts, and folly and wickedness among the "Kings of Men," and treachery and power-lust even among the "Wizards", there is I suppose applicability in my story to present times. But I should say, if asked, the tale is not really about Power and Dominion: that only sets the wheels going; it is about Death and the desire for deathlessness. Which is hardly more than to say it's a tale written by a Man!

Yours sincerely,  
J. R. R. Tolkien

The above letter, previously unpublished, gives a new and valuable insight into J. R. R. Tolkien's motivation for writing The Lord of the Rings. Most criticism has dealt with LotR as a book "about power," which is not incorrect, but which in light of the above is seen to be incomplete; the work is also about "death and the desire for deathlessness."

This desire is indeed a universal human desire, and has been shared in a unique way by Tolkien through his works — that is, no one else has spoken Tolkien's beliefs in Tolkien's mode to Tolkien's time.

Since Tolkien has died physically, in what sense may he be said to be "deathless?" There are three such ways: in his person, in his works, and in his readers.

As was indicated by Tolkien personally and as was shown in the various services conducted for him, Tolkien — a believing Christian — was confident that personal immortality is real. While this matter is of ultimate importance to each individual, it is beyond the scope of this organization to comment further.

Doubtless many will say that Tolkien "lives on in his works." We can say with reasonable certainty that LotR is a classic; but even that does not guarantee immortality either for the work or for its author. Being a classic is a dangerous thing for a book: its substance tends to be forgotten and its elements of form exploited. Such books also tend to be collected into lists of "good books" of the kind enjoined as required reading by English teachers far and wide. (Indeed, LotR itself is well on to being absorbed by that Literary Establishment so despised by Lewis, which so often comes between the good reader and the book fit for him.) Further, the classics are peculiarly vulnerable to the "Death of the Thousand Cuts" inflicted by literary "higher critics" in the form so well parodied in "The Genesis of The Lord of the Rings," published in Mythlore 9.

The survival of an author "in his works" is even more doubtful. However exhaustive, a man's works cannot be more than a pale penumbra of his real personality. Eventually LotR — as a classic — is doomed to fall "if not into oblivion, yet into the ghost-life of the museum and the specialist's study" (as Lewis suggested in another connection).

The Lord of the Rings's position as a classic is secured by its nature; but whether, being a classic, it continues to "work with power on the souls of men," and thereby achieve the only real deathlessness possible in time, is determined by its readers. How will the substance of Tolkien's works be received by each reader, and to what extent will he permit that substance to affect his personality and his view of life? Nothing is really alive, in time, unless it is incarnate in people; and thus the "good infection" of Tolkien lives on and spreads through us — not merely the members of this Society, but all those who have truly received that which Tolkien has so truthfully and masterfully given.

Easter 1975