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Editorial: Fantasy and Personal Involvement

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Editorial: Fantasy and Personal Involvement

EDITORIAL

FANTASY AND PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT

The symptoms of increasing alienation of the individual from his total environment are increasingly apparent in our society today. The failure to really communicate and the resultant intense frustration bring about explosion or isolation.

The understanding of how former generations fumbled through with inconsistent and inadequate ethical and cultural systems is beyond many today. The apparently unreal systems of the past just do not seem to authentically work in the present. Can there be much wonder why there is alienation, frustration and anger today. To me there are three alternatives open for those who find themselves in this dilemma: 1) destroy the system, 2) drop out, 3) work within the system to bring constructive change and revitalization.

We can say the present system is hopeless, and more than that, it has become abhorrent and should be overthrown. Some are saying this now. Assume that happens, then what? For human beings to live together in any culture or civilization, some system is demanded. It would seem that alienated, frustrated people, in general, would not have the accumulated experience to build a workable new system. I honestly fear (as critical as I am about many things in the present system) that any new system on that basis would be far worse than that which we struggle with now. Cynicism is a corrosive poison; it can tear down, but is impotent to create new life.

The second choice is to withdraw from the system; ignore the conditions around you, and attempt to live a beautiful and reflective life. This to a point is necessary for all of us. Vacations are a common attenuated example. However there are different kinds of dropping out. The second alternative is complete denunciation and permanent rejection of the system; the withdrawal to our self-centered universe; to become in the words of the song by Simon and Garfunkle, a rock, an island feeling no pain, thus feeling nothing. The third alternative is to temporarily withdraw a distance from the system, have a detached view, and return refreshed with new perspective. Man as a whole person has the quality to transcend any human system he daily lives in. In other words, whole man is potentially greater than any human system he creates.

Fantasy can be either way of dropping out. To me the real function of fantasy is related to the third alternative. The fantasy of Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams (among others) have this beneficial effect.

Fantasy has been accused of being "escapist;" that it gives people a distorted view of reality. Critics point to the fact that Tolkien is a favorite of the hippies, thus proving their

charge of "escapism." Why do hippies enjoy Tolkien? I do not know for sure. (I find things that I both agree and disagree on with the hippies.) Probably because people of all kinds respond to the creative art and the "inner consistency of reality" that exemplify his works. But I do not think the values of hippies and of Professor Tolkien are by any means the same.

You don't have to "drop acid" to be a drop out. The hobbits of the Shire were drop outs in their own way. The only thing the culture of the Shire and the hippies have in common (contrary to Ramparts Magazine) is the simple, naive unconcern and almost congenial hostility with the out-side world. Perhaps this is the special reason why hippies like Tolkien. But this attitude of the Shire-folk led nearly to their destruction. It was only the return of the heroic hobbits, the ones that had been away and involved with the struggles of the larger world that turned the tide against the tyranny and exploitation of the Shire.

Frodo, in contrast to his environment, was not a drop out. His initial reluctance to assume responsibility makes his commitment more believable. He took upon himself the destiny of a whole world by choice in his own home. Tolkien, through the examples of Frodo and Sam, is saying just the opposite of a drop out philosophy. Personal involvement is necessary to save a world in danger, and probably to save one's self.

Thus for me, as for many, this kind of fantasy is a psychic vacation; an opportunity to temporarily escape the stream of immediate sense experiences and view, from a different and perhaps breathtaking perspective those questions and issues that are always present and demand dealing with. Because these questions and issues are the same, whether in Middle Earth or Narnia or our own world, this fantasy is not escapist in an ultimate sense, but healthy and inspiring. The third alternative does not mean sticking with the system with blinders on. To bring change and new life to a system without vision, we need transcendence: transcendence not from the issues, but transcendence to see the issues in a larger context.