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Letters

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LETTERS

((In a cover letter, the writer has said this is meant to be delibarately provocative and intended to provoke a response from the faithful. —Ed.))

JOHN SCHWINDT TAJIQUE, NEW MEXICO

What's Wrong with The Silmarillion?

The problem with The Silmarillion is that it is dull. It is neither delightfully enchanting like The Hobbit nor profoundly engaging like The Lord of the Rings Trilogy. Even the most ardent Tolkien idolator finds The Silmarillion testing his patience and endurance. How could Tolkien write such a tedious book after writing a masterpiece of children's literature and the masterpiece of epic fantasy?

Actually, The Silmarillion wasn't written after the masterpieces, but before. It was begun in 1917 and when presented to publisher Stanley Unwin in December, 1937, it was promptly rejected. Unwin rightly perceived that "The Book of Lost Tales"--Tolkien's original title--should remain lost. The Silmarillion, then, is not the crowning achievement of the grand old man, but a collection of immature and abortive pieces.

Nor did Tolkien actually "write" The Silmarillion. The lost tales are collected, revised, and edited by Tolkien's son, Christopher. It was not his duty or intent to create new material to fill gaps in the manuscripts. In fairness to Christopher, we should recognize that the fifty-year accumulation of Tolkien papers, lacking design or coherence, was surely recalcitrant material.

What, specifically, is wrong with The Silmarillion? Surely the lack of hobbits and hobbit humor is at the heart of the failure. But also there are problems of plot, character, language, and ethos.

Unlike The Hobbit, The Ring Trilogy, and so many other classics of world literature, The Silmarillion is not a there-and-back-again journey, but rather is a collection of diverse and often unrelated narratives. In the Foreword Christopher Tolkien calls The Silmarillion "a compilation, a compendious narrative," but in the production and the promotion of the book, the publisher carefully avoided any indication that The Silmarillion is a collection of tales and not a sustained narrative of epic fantasy. Because the plot is episodic, The Silmarillion lacks the dramatic intensity and the suspense which makes the Ring Trilogy such compelling reading.

In The Silmarillion there are no memorable characters--no Gandalf, no Gollum, no Bilbo or Frodo. The Silmarillion reveals that Tolkien without hobbits is like pretzels without beer--dry, tastless, and hard to get down. Only Beren and Luthien emerge from the crowds of empty faces and the lists of meaningless names that we find on every page. Beren, a mortal man, and Luthien, an immortal elven-woman, journey to Morgoth's fortress hoping to cut a silmaril jewel from his iron crown. This quest might have been developed as an independent epic fantasy, but in The Silmarillion it is only a short story, though because of the deep personal feeling, probably the best. Throughout his courtship and marriage Tolkien identified himself with Beren and his wife with Luthien. Their tombstone reads: "Edith Mary Tolkien, Luthien, 1889-1971. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, Beren, 1892-1973."

The language of The Silmarillion is generally prosaic and often pretentious in its attempt to achieve epic solemnity by using archaic Biblical diction and syntax. Missing are the detailed pastoral descriptions of the beauty of Middle-Earth that make The Trilogy such a sensual work. Apparently Tolkien did not learn how to write about nature until he discovered hobbits and the hobbit point of view. None of the ecological or environmental concerns of The Trilogy can be found in The Silmarillion.

Finally, the ethos of The Silmarillion is distinctively fatalistic. Tolkien has fate determine the destiny of his characters, rather than allowing the moral choices of his characters determine their fate. This is evident in thematic motifs such as "the curse of Mandos." It is clear from the prominence of fate, doom, curses, and oaths that The Silmarillion is permeated by the Northern pagan spirit, whereas the joy of Tolkien's later works is derived from the Christian spirit, in which the eucatastrophe of the Gospels--the shocking resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth--is the model for deliverance from almost certain defeat. In his essay "On Fairy-Stories" (1938) Tolkien identifies the Gospels as the archetypal fantasy: "The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories.... This story is supreme; and it is true. Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of man--and of elves. Legend and history have met and fused." The persistence of doom and the lack of Christian joy in The Silmarillion confirm that it was written in his immaturity, while Tolkien still regarded the Northern epics as appropriate models for modern fantasy.

And what about the silmarils? In each of his major works Tolkien employs a symbol for human selfishness and possessiveness. In the Trilogy it is the desire for the One Ring, to which even Frodo succumbs. In The Hobbit it is "dragon-sickness," the desire for Smaug's hoard, to which even Bilbo succumbs. In The Silmarillion it is the desire for the silmarils, jewels containing the only light remaining from the original two trees. In developing myths surrounding each of these symbols, Tolkien's purpose throughout his work in fantasy remained constant: he wanted to warn us that we are very dangerous creatures capable of destroying ourselves, our neighbors and Middle-Earth itself in our insatiable desire to assert and possess. It is foolish for us to look around the world for parallels to Tolkien's symbols or for applications of his myths, for the problem, gentle reader, is in ourselves. We all have the dragon sickness, the desire to assert and possess, and especially those of us of the Faustian West who sit smugly on Smaug's hoard while others suffer and starve.

The Silmarillion, then, must be recognized as an apprenticeship piece, an immature work valuable mainly for revealing the problems of composition in epic fantasy which Tolkien was later to overcome. Those seeking a better understanding of Tolkien's mature fantasies, The Hobbit and the Ring Trilogy, should read "On Fairy-Stories,"

"Leaf by Niggle," and "Smith of Wooton Major," in which Tolkien explores the Platonic and Christian premises which are the source of the beauty of the power of his masterpieces of fantasy.

Patrick Wynne Fosston, MN

I'm currently reading Vergil's Aeneid for the first time and am fascinated by the similarity between certain of its plot elements and those in Tolkien's works. Looking through the Subject Index in ML 31, I found an article called "The Influence of Vergil's Aeneid on The Lord of the Rings.... Actually, I've noticed more similarities between Vergil and The Silmarillion than LotR. Aeneas' escape from the fall of Troy with his divinely-destined son Ascanius bears a strong resemblance to Tuor's escape from the fall of Gondolin with his divinely-destined son Earendil, and the burning of the Trojans' ships at Sicily reminded me of Feanor's burning of the ships at Losgar. Some of the names are similar too: Vergil's Agenor and Ucalegon to Tolkien's Aegnor and Ancalagon.

This reminds me of another interesting Roman/Tolkien similarity. In some of the names of the royal houses of the Noldor, the element fin 'hair' was used in a non-literal sense to emphasize one's lineage. In the names Fingolfin and Finarfin fin is used as a prefix to emphasize the fact that these two sons of Finwe were descended from the fair-haired Vanya Indis rather than Miriel. Both Fongolfin and Finarfin in turn gave their first-born sons names beginning with fin to mark them as their heirs; hence Fingon = 'Commander, Heir of the House of Fingolfin,' and Finrod = 'Champion, Heir of the House of Finarfin.' This makes more sense to me than taking the names literally as 'Hair-Commander' and 'Hair-Champion.' Anyway, what this has to do with Rome is that Caesar, originally the family name of the first Roman emperors, and later used used as a title by all Roman emperors, meant 'a head of hair.' A hair-raising coincidence indeed...

The 14th Annual Mythopoeic Conference
August 12-15, 1983
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THEME: Mythic Structures in J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. Guests of Honor: STEPHEN R. DONALDSON and C.S. KILBY. Registration: $10 until Nov. 20, '82; $15 until April 30, '83; $20 thereafter. Papers related to the theme are especially encouraged, as well as on the Guests of Honor and other subjects. Please send a brief abstract of your intended paper as soon as possible. Send all mail and make checks payable to: Mythopoeic Conference XIV, Post Office Box 711, Seal Beach, California 90740.

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PREVIEW
of The Next Issue

Issue 34 will feature "The Childlike Hobbit" by Tisa Ho, "Co-inherence in Lewis and Williams" by Nancy Hanger, "Norse Mythological Elements in The Hobbit" by Mitzi Brunsdale, "Lewis Carroll, scientifictionist" (part II) by Joe Christopher, all the regular features, and if space permits, other articles.

LEWIS CARROLL continued from page 28

Argonauts" in Science Schools Journal in 1888. This beats Sylvie and Bruno by one year. (The article on "Time Travel" in Nicholls' The Science Fiction Encyclopedia credits The Time Machine, not "The Chronic Argonauts" and not Sylvie and Bruno, with the first controlled trips in time.) Perhaps it is fairer to say that the idea of time travel was "in the air" about 1890.

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the "organic sanctity of meaning." He says "The meaning sanctifies the form, and the form the meaning, lifting the whole experience beyond pleasing instruction to belief. It is here that Lewis achieves the enviable result of making the reader feel the Joy, the sublimely indefineable exhaltation of the spirit, which he sought throughout his life." (p. 143)

Glover has stated clearly what Lewis achieves and has even attempted to give the result a name. One might add that despite his useful literary criticism he has not prepared a manual on the art of enchantment. Writers hoping to emulate Lewis in merging "theme and form," or, as Lewis put it, Poiema and Logos, will find that it is one thing to call the art by name. It is another to be able to achieve it!

Nancy-Lou Patterson

CAVALIER TREATMENT continued from page 39

by black magic. "As the incidents leading to Miss Fornario's death did not take place until some eighteen months after Moïna's own, the charge is scarcely worth refuting. Even if the latter had been living, the scratches found on the corpse are less likely to have resulted from an attack by Moïna in the form of a monster cat than from running naked in the dark over rough country, which Miss Fornario had done immediately before her collapse."

They gathered in secret, they wove formulae, they initiated each other and conferred degrees; there is depressingly little evidence that anyone came away happy. But some people of literary talent were affected by the association and among these Colquhoun lists Charles Williams, with critical reflections upon him. This aspect of her book is worth considering. [To be continued.]