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The Ultimate Time Travel Machine

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Abstract

Response to earlier *Mythlore* article by Beare (issue #81). Addresses issue of time-travel, putting it in broader context—focusing not on the character but on the reader.

Additional Keywords

Time travel; Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"; Sue Dawe

The Ultimate Time Travel Machine

DEVIN BROWN

The summer 1996 *Mythlore* (Issue 81) carried an article entitled "Time Travel" in which Rhona Beare provides an interesting and well-documented catalogue of early time travel stories as well as incidences of time travel in the work of Williams, Lewis, and Tolkien. The article's conclusion touches on a point of particular significance for Tolkien studies, a point which deserves further consideration.

Beare concludes her essay by raising a question that challenges one of Tolkien's fundamental principles regarding the function of fairy stories:

Apart from Faustus, I do not know any story of time travel earlier than the 19th century. Yet Tolkien in his essay on fairy stories (in *Tree and Leaf*) says that the desire "to survey the depths of space and time" is one of the "primordial human desires" that magic exists to satisfy If he is right in thinking that stories of time travel satisfy a primordial human desire, why was no such story written till the 19th century? (34)

The article is correct in suggesting that Tolkien believed time travel stories capable of satisfying this ancient human desire "to survey the depths of space and time." However, in its implication that Tolkien would view time travel stories as the sole means of satisfying this particular desire, it may be focusing too narrowly, and in doing so misses the much broader sense and significance of his intent.

Tolkien devoted much of his well-known essay to the effect a fairy story has on its audience. "The magic of Faerie is not an end in itself," he writes, "its virtue is in its operations" (41). He maintains that one of the defining qualities of the fairy story is its ability to transport the reader outside of time to realms otherwise inaccessible. These stories "open a door on Other Time, and if we pass through, though only for a moment, we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself, maybe" (56). Here Tolkien is not so much interested in the travel or transport of some story character through time, but rather with the transport of *the reader*. The focus here is not on the satisfaction of the protagonist's primordial desires, but those of the story's audience.

One of Tolkien's criteria in judging a fairy-story is its ability to satisfy

... certain primordial human desires. One of these desires is to survey the depths of space and time. Another is (as will be seen) to hold communion with other living things. A story may thus deal with the satisfaction of these desires, with or without the operation of either machine or magic, and in proportion as it succeeds it will approach the quality and have the flavour of fairy-story. (41)

Paul Kocher makes a compelling argument that Middle

earth is in fact northwestern Europe, much changed by the passing of "eons" of wind and wave (4). A tale set in the far distant past, as Tolkien's was, transports us to a far away time without a machine; and although magic is used by wizards and elves once we are there, the story allows us to move through time with no other sorcery than the magic of its creator's imagination.

Thus, the story itself becomes the ultimate time travel machine, allowing us "to survey the depths of space and time" hobbit-style, without having to leave the snug comfort of our easy chair. And the answer to the question posed at the end of Beare's article is that there were *many* stories written before the 19th century which take their readers back in time, including such noteworthy examples as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* — a tale of events that transpired 700 years before its composition, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* — stories from the Greeks' highly mythologized past, and the first chapter of Genesis—a narrative that takes its readers through time allowing them to be present "in the beginning." ☛

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