10-15-1980

The Making of a Hobbit: Tolkien’s Tantalizing Narrative Technique

Steven C. Walker

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore

Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol7/iss3/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to: http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm
The Making of a Hobbit: Tolkien's Tantalizing Narrative Technique

Abstract
Calls Tolkien's fiction highly “audience-centered,” inviting divergent interpretations of everything from the appearance of hobbits to the landscape; through the technique of leaving room for imagination, Tolkien is “demanding that his readers participate with him in the creative process.”

Additional Keywords
Reader response theory; Tolkien, J.R.R. — Characters — Hobbits; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings — Narrative technique; Stephen Casey
No recent writer has been more extravagantly praised
than J.R.R. Tolkien. The Lord of the Rings has been com-
pared by apparently serious critics with The Prose Edda, with
Genesis, with Ariosto, Malory, and Spenser. Some think "its
congeners are ... Gilgamesh ... the Annals ... Chanson
de Roland ... Beowulf." Others believe "closer to the
Odyssy, Divine Comedy, Paradise Lost, or Faust." Modern-
nists find Tolkien "as good as War and Peace," "Spenglian,"
in the ranks with Eliot," located in superlative literary
proseminence somewhere between Dickens and Wordworth"—a
position vigorously proposed in art-critical literature by
Blake, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Browning, Tennyson,
Arnold, Tolkien’s fiction has remodeled readers of Chaucer
and Shakespeare, of Verdi and Wagner, of Wilde and Pound,
of Melville and Proust and Cervantes and Faulkner and Marlowe
and Henry James and Whitman and Kafka and Augustine and B.H.
Lawrence and Defoe and James Joyce—it "may surpass Joyce’s
more radical work." Tolkien’s fiction has also reminded
readers of James Bond, Buck Rogers, Tom Swift, Peter Rabbit,
and the "excruciating cutenesses of Walt Disney." Tolkien’s
fiction excites passionately divergent reactions. I suggest that those reactions, contradictory as they are, prove neither
insanity on the part of adulterers nor insensitivity on the part of revilers of The Lord of the Rings. Rather, the divergent
enthusiasts rest on a vital quality of the work itself: this fiction is to an unusual degree audience-centered. Involving the reader in the very
process of creation, Tolkien deliberately stimulates response which is an individual as it is intense. His designs
fiction that provokes readers to react personally, even idiosyn-
cratically. Tolkien manages that invitation to individual
reaction through a complex array of ingenious literary
entertainments, but his technique is at base a simple matter of
alloying vividness with sketchiness in art-critical fiction, a purpose-
fully fragmentary, an outline highlighted by tangible details
patterned to provoke readers to fill in its blanks. Tolkien’s carefulliy
wrought incompleteness lures the reader into personal involvement in the creation.

Take his hobbits, for example. In the Prologue to The
Lord of the Rings, Tolkien outlines hobbit characteristics
in what at first appears vivid detail:

They were a merry folk. They dressed in bright
colours, being notably fond of yellow and green; but
they seldom wore shoes, since their feet had tough
leathery soles and were clad in a thick curling hair,
much like the hair of their heads, which was commonly
brown. Thus, the only craft little practised among them
was shoe-making; but they had long skillful fingers
and could make many other useful and comely things. Their
faces were as a rule good-natured rather than beautiful,
bold, bright-eyed, red-cheeked, with mouths apt to
laugh, and to eating and drinking. And laugh they
did, and eat, and drink, often heartily, being fond of
simple jests at all times, and of six meals a day (when
they could get them).?

Those hobbit attributes, apparently straightforward at
first glance, turn out to be as "ramifying" as their con-
voluted tunnels. Indeed, hobbits prove not only complex but
contradictory creatures. One would think those bright
yellows and greens would make them colorful, but hobbits on
closer inspection turn out to be "unobtrusive." One would
expect curly brown hair on feet as well as heads to suggest
a certain hairiness among hobbits, yet, except for the
"down" on the chins of the source Stooks, no hobbit has "any
trace of a beard." One might from the description guess
hobbits to be peaceable, passive creatures, yet they prove
"curiously tough," "doughty at bay." And should one incline
to think them, on the basis of their eating habits, to be
portly, again one must think again: they are "less stout
and stocky" than dwarves. Note the hedging even on such
a measurable matter as height, which for hobbits ranges
"between two and four feet of our measure. The seldom now
reach three feet; but they have dwindled, they say, and in
ancient days they were taller. All of which manages to
seem somehow precise while allowing the reader a one hundred
per cent variation in hobbit height.

I propose, on the basis of this disconcertingly diverse
array of apparently precise hobbit statistics, that Tolkien is
inviting us to make of hobbits what we will. Not that he
allows the invitation to become so nebulous as to be un,
compelling. Though there is little between but room for the
imagination, the hobbit’s curly-haired feet and pipe-
puckered smile provide a provocatively concrete invitation
to speculation. Tolkien takes us into his creation just far
enough to entice us to go deeper on our own.

To test the success of that invitational technique in
provoking individual response, I tried a simple experiment.
I asked each person in three different groups of Tolkien
admirers—a lad’s, adult reading circle, a seminar of senior
English majors, and an arena full of rabid Tolkien fans—
to draw a picture of a hobbit. The results were dramatic.
Even though the hobbit in Tolkien’s best known and most
thoroughly delineated character, though all the respon-
dents were thoroughly familiar with that Tolkienian, and
even after drastic allowances for question-able artistic
abilities, the drawings confirmed emphatically that differ-
ent readers view Tolkien’s hobbit very differently.

About a third of the participants drew hobbits that
looked like men—hairy footed, to be sure, and diminutive,
but unmistakably men: "we," as one commentator suggested,
"on a smaller, furrier plane." Even among those who shared
the idea of hobbits as men, however, there seemed to be a
vast range of viewpoints as to just what sort of men they
may be. The majority pictured Tolkien’s heroes as tending to
middle-age spreads and middle-class placidity, but there
were intriguing extremes ranging from bowler-hatted British
businessmen types to the smallest sort of hobo.

Another third of each of the sample groups viewed
hobbits as boys, their perspectives contrasting with the
hobbit-as-man pictures in exuberance of expression, sur-
prising thinness of form, and a Peter Pan air of consistent
immaturity. But as with the mammish hobbits, the category
was a spectrum rather than a pigeonhole: apparent ages among
hobbits-as-boys, for example, ranged from eighteen years
down to no more than three.

The hobbit drawings of the other third of each group
were decidedly elvish. Partly the fairy quality was a
matter of clothes. But the elvish tendency extended beyond
detailed hats to pointed ears and ample beards upon over-
sized heads, creating a group of hobbits ranging in appear-
ance from Ringwolftakin to Santa Claus’s helpers. Some
drawings pushed the non-human qualities of hobbits even
further; an occasional hobbit looked very much like a
rabbit.

Should you suspect those differences among hobbits-as-
elves, hobbits-as-boys, and hobbits-as-men to result from
lack of skill in drawing, you might contrast the Robert J.
lee hobbit-men with Barbara Remington’s hobbit-boys with
David Levine's elvish hobbits. Pauline Baynes, the most frequent illustrator of the hobbit, acknowledges the challenge of the creature's ambiguity by drawing her calendar hobbits with noncommittal backs to us. For the conclusive illustration, check an original Allen and Unwin edition of The Hobbit, illustrated by Tolkien himself, where you can observe his oft-perhaps-small-some hobbits, too tiny (or blown up, too vague) for the discernment of any definitive characterizing detail.

The insistent ambiguity of Tolkien's illustrations of his hobbit implies that the vagueness of the experimental drawings, particularly those that seem deliberately vague, may be the most significant. Consider, for instance, the hobbit drawn in clear outline, with markedly furry feet, but, beneath a baldly needed hairstyle, a blank face. Another version of the hobbit had only a nose—no personality-defining eyes nor mouth. Some drawings showed hobbits walking away, Baynes-fashion, in such a manner that the features were impossible to discern, and some—despite my emphatic request that the hobbits be drawn large so the detail could be observed—were less than an inch high.

Other Tolkien fans were still more explicit about the impossibility of capturing the hobbit essence in a picture. One person insisted, "I couldn't show you what a hobbit looks like, I could tell you what one wasn't. None of the pictures I have seen come close to my vague illusions." And still another such-murvelled and pictureless page must suffice to represent the many who refused to attempt a drawing at all, often with a vehemence which intimated I was profaning something sacred by the very request to imprison a hobbit on paper:

I think any picture of a hobbit anyone could draw would be a crime, because he is a creature designed to live in the imagination. The only way he can be successfully depicted is outlined in words as the author has already done.

Bearing in mind that the creators of these divergent perspectives of Tolkien's hero were not novices in Middle-earth lore. In response to my ballot—

Indicate your reaction to The Lord of the Rings by circling one:

Among best ten/Rereadable/Recommended/OK/
Unfinishable/Nameless books I've read

--two percent considered it "Recommended," Thirty-seven percent "Rereadable," and a stunning sixty-one percent thought it "Among best ten books I've read." These are fans of Tolkien, and, as such, are the Tolkien experts. From my modest estimates based on raised hands, fewer than half of the respondents had read The Lord of the Rings only once, and a sizeable group had read it a half-dozen times. These are people who know hobbits about as well as they can be known from the pages of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. Yet they know them very differently.

The closest thing to a common denominator among the hobbit drawings was furry feet. But even this hallmark of hobbitdom was not universal; a few hobbits wore shoes. I considered exiling such hobbits on the grounds that they represented insufficient knowledge of Tolkien's description, until I looked again at his actual statement on the state of hobbit footwear: "They seldom wore shoes." From the soles of his leathery feet to the crown of his curly-haired head, "Tolkien's hobbit as revealed in these drawings was capable of incredible individuation—in physique, in age, in social status, in intelligence, in disposition, in virtually every way. The hobbit functioned for these readers rather like a literary Rorschach blot.

I conclude that J.R.R. Tolkien has with impressive success created a character whose vividly outlined incompleteness lures the reader into direct involvement in the creative process. The hobbit comes alive in the reader's imagination because his concrete embodiment depends upon the reader. That reader participation is essential not only in Tolkien's characterisation but in his narrative; indeed, in his entire fictive world. Middle-earth as an artistic locale has been much praised for its concrete ness. "Every- one of the Hobbit's heads feels the presence of a possible culture,"11 The intriguing thing is that individual readers are so sold on the precise nature of that culture they fail to notice the general disagreement about just what it is. One critic assures us, "Middle-earth is surprisingly fixed "... the Shire, the English Midlands near Birmingham," whereas another insists with equal certainty that the tale "does not take place in England."12 Other readers find in Tolkien's creation "exactly the same geographical relationship as the area of the epic in mid-western Europe" or, perhaps France, "considerable rugged Scandinavian terrain," a "real" similarity to "the Colorado mountains where I live."13

Tolkien's opened fictive technique might account for negative responses to The Lord of the Rings as well as for divergencies among positive responses. There may well be readers, and very good ones, who feel that Tolkien, in leaving his creation incomplete, has slighted the work of the artist. There may be those who regret what they view as the superficiality of the work, who see it as Edmund Wilson sees Sauron's lidless eye--not a hauntingly evocative suggestion of reader-imagination to personal imagination, but a graphic inability to create a head, let alone a body.14 There may be those, in short, who view Tolkien's invitation to reader imagination as a failure of Tolkien's imagination.

But I think Tolkien, in demanding that his readers participate with him in the creative process, has done the best thing a writer of fiction can do. For those who are able to involve themselves in the work, Tolkien's insistence on reader creation accounts for the most attractive quality of The Lord of the Rings: because it is to such a large extent reader-created, this weird fiction partakes of the quality of real experience. Thus it is that Tolkien addicts remark so frequently that they came back to Middle-earth, to The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings, or simply in daydreams, as to an old memory. To come to Middle-earth is to come more intently and at the same time more objectively to one's own deepest perceptions of life.

Tolkien actively demonstrates in his fiction his faith in the powers of human imagination.

The radical distinction between all art (including drama) that offers a visible presentation and true literature is that it imposes one visible form. Literature works from mind to mind and is thus more progressive. It is at once more universal and more poignantly particular. If it speaks of bread or wine or stone or tree, it appeals to the whole of these things, to their ideas; yet each hearer will give to them a peculiar personal embodiment in his imagination.15

Tolkien's fiction attempts a "peculiar personal embodiment" in the reader's imagination. Among these readers for whom it works, it works impressively well. Because it requires exercise of the imagination, it responds with unusual sensitivity to reader awareness. It also expands that awareness. The fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien, like the magic mirror of his Elfd-queen Galadriel, provides an almost infinite invitation to personal imagination. "What you will see, if you leave the Mirror free to work, I cannot tell. For it shows things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be."16

NOTES


(Continued on page 37)
Incidentally, Lewis’s inspiration came during a period of weather he greatly enjoyed—good wind and driving rain.

Kathryn Lindskoog

(Continued from page 7)


10Rings, I.10.


14Edmund Wilson, "Oo, those Awful Orcs!" Nation, 182 (14 April 1936), 312–313.


16Rings, I.377.