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A Critical Approach to Fantasy with Application to The Lord of the Rings

Abstract
Analyzes The Lord of the Rings through Northrop Frye's theories as set forth in The Anatomy of Criticism, placing it in the Romance category and finding examples of the five modes throughout the work. Applies findings to fantasy in general.

Additional Keywords
Critical theories; Fantasy—Characteristics; Frye, Northrop—Theory of literature; Frye, Northrop. The Anatomy of Criticism—Relation to The Lord of the Rings; Marxist interpretations of The Lord of the Rings; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—As romance; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Marxist interpretations; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Psychoanalytic interpretations
A Critical Approach to Fantasy  
with Application to The Lord of the Rings  
William Stoddard

Contemporary fantasy, as a literary genre, is very much a product of the present age. At the same time, its characteristics often conflict with the assumptions of literary scholars about the characteristics of serious literature. As a result, works of this genre are read by many, discussed by some, and understood by few. Literary scholars too often regard them as subliterary and uncritical delight and resist any attempt at analysis of their literary characteristics. There is nothing necessarily wrong with uncritical delight—J. R. R. Tolkien, for example, firmly states that his motive for writing was to produce enjoyment in his readers—but reasoned understanding need not conflict with delight; it can in fact enhance it, and enable readers to lend fresh attention on works which offer richer and more durable forms of delight—works which, in fact, offer the same pleasures as any other form of serious literature. But, for such understanding to be attained, a critical theory of fantasy is needed; and such a theory has not been created yet.

The revival of fantasy as a form of writing addressed to adult readers began with J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. This novel remains a paradigm of the genre—a work which seeks to solve the problems of telling a story of this kind, and which solves them in an exemplary way, which has taught other writers how to do the same kind of thing. This novel remains one of the major achievements of this genre. Thus, it offers a useful test case for any theory of contemporary fantasy as a literary form. It is, in fact, the one work which has drawn the largest amount of scholarly attention, including bibliographies of the author, publication of his unpublished works and his letters, and discussions of the linguistics, history, geography, and other features of his invented world of Middle-earth. It has even been dealt with critically as a work of literature a number of times.

Yet, while all this material is useful and interesting, it does not address the more general questions of what kind of literature this novel represents, and how it is related to other kinds of literature. Lacking this, The Lord of the Rings can only appear as a sort of literary mutation, which may have charms of its own but need neither modify our understanding of literature nor be itself read for the same things as other works. And, if this is accepted, there can be no more place than before for contemporary fantasy as a genre in literature, and no more basis for judging contemporary fantasy by serious standards of literary merit.

One basis for the critical reading of literary works is psychoanalytic theory. This is clearly applicable to The Lord of the Rings. After all, this is a novel whose central image of power is the placing of a ring on a finger—an obvious symbol of the sexual act, used for example in the marriage service—and the climactic moment of the novel is the biting off of that finger with the ring still on it, an equally obvious symbol of emasculation. The psychoanalytic reader can readily see The Lord of the Rings as embodying profound anxiety about the sexual act and about sexual desire. Secondarily, the novel portrays phallic symbols such as magic swords, wizard's staves, and fortified towers, together with images of birth such as journeys through caves, through forests, and up winding stairs, in darkness, mystery, and danger; all these forms of psychoanalytic imagery might be multiplied greatly. Beyond this, the genre of fantasy can be taken as offering a vehicle of wish fulfillment fantasy, in which the obvious unrealism of the imagined events provides a reassuring guarantee that the reader will not have to endure the terror of having the wish realized other than in imagination. A psychoanalytic reading is all but inescapable.

Another theory of literature is derivable from Marxism. It might at first seem less likely than Tolkien can be read in Marxist terms. Consider, though, that the central idea of Marxism is that of class struggle. Are there classes in The Lord of the Rings? There are, in a somewhat unusual guise: that of different sentient races. Tolkien's heroes can be identified with the feudal order of "a learned clergy, a courageous aristocracy, a contented peasantry, and tradesmen [who] knew their places"; these groups are, respectively, elves, men, hobbits, and dwarves. The very lack of specification of the economic activities of elves and men, together with the clear identification of hobbits with agriculture and of dwarves with crafts, supports this; for a people must have some economic basis for their lives, but a class can exist within its society without apparent means of support. A major subplot concerns Aragorn's claim to be the feudal landlord of Gondor and Arnor by right of inheritance. As to the villains, Sauron and Saruman, both are enemies of tradition and lovers of technology. Both employ masses of laborer and of soldiers, whose individual members, typified by the orcs, are degraded. Both have elaborate administrative systems comparable to the managerial practices of corporations, and these are pervaded with rumors and subterranean power struggles. This suggests an identification of both with the innovative social order of capitalism, and a reading of the plot as portraying the struggle of feudalism against its displacement by capitalism. Saruman's treatment of the Shire could be a textbook example of the concept of imperialism, as described by Lenin: the exploitation of a country's natural resources and agricultural products—in this case, pipeweed—the installation of a puppet government, and the ruinous importation of technology all fit the pattern. The One Ring itself is a perfect symbol for capital as Marx conceived it: the formerly living labor power of individuals, now embodied in a nonliving form which nonetheless dominates living individuals and drains their power to sustain itself. This approach, of course, makes it necessary to feel that, however sympathetic the traditional ways of life Tolkien portrays may have been, the victory of either Sauron or Saruman would have been more progressive and thus more desirable, since it would have led ultimately to the formation of a workers' state by the rebellion of the orcs. But then, any Marxist would unhesitatingly classify Tolkien as a reactionist.

That the conclusions reached through these two approaches may at first seem startling, grotesque, or humorous does not necessarily invalidate them. In fact, both sets of conclusions turn out, if examined, to be suggestive and plausible. Both, however, have an important defect as literary analysis: they do not deal with the essential point about The Lord of the Rings, the pleasure it gives as a story. This is a general problem
of both these approaches to criticism: they reveal everything in literature except the literature. Telling, hearing, and reading stories is a human activity with its own distinct structure and characteristics, which are in themselves sources of enjoyment. Particular stories may also reflect concerns from other spheres of human life, including the sexual or the economic, but fiction as a whole is rich enough to offer such a mirror to human concerns because it is not only a reflection of any specific concern, but has its own purposes and nature. Criticism which does not deal with this is incomplete. For comparison, imagine a historian of clothing may understand the variety of clothing to express sexual feeling or class position, and the sexual and class divisions of labor involved in its production, but who did not concern himself with human anatomy and physiology, the properties of materials available to different cultures, or the variety of climates for which people must dress. Such a historical approach would simply fail to grasp the basic functions of clothing and the basic types of structure through which it achieves them.

What appears to be needed, then, is an approach to literature in terms of its own nature. From such an approach, it should be possible to develop an understanding of the specific genre of contemporary fantasy, and of *The Lord of the Rings* as a test case. There is at least one approach that does not concern itself with this: the Aristotelian approach, exemplified for tragedy by Aristotle's own study of this genre, the Poetics. Tolkien's own conception of fantasy is clearly informed by this model, as can be seen by reading his essay "On Fairy-Stories"; for example, his introduction of the term *integritas*, *consonantia*, and *claritas*, for which James Joyce offers the translation "wholeness, harmony, and radiance" (Joyce, 1966, p. 23). Tolkien's approach, however, deals only with one genre, tragedy; and much of the work of his followers is either fragmentary or dogmatic, as in the eighteenth century's preoccupation with dramatic unities. The essay "On Fairy-Stories" offers perhaps the closest approach to a parallel analysis of fantasy, but, having been written before the present form of fantasy was well established, and in fact before *The Lord of the Rings* was written, it does not deal with this specific genre except by anticipatory hints. Its concern is with shorter works, mostly either originally written or adapted for children, and therefore limited in complexity and unable to develop certain tendencies fully. Further, it does not seek to understand the place of fantasy within the realm of literature as a whole, explictly providing space for works of fantasy and romance, on the Aristotelian model. This is the approach set forth by Northrop Frye in *The Anatomy of Criticism*. By his own statement, Frye is sympathetic to works of the type he calls "romance", a category which includes works of fantasy, and whose central motif in Frye's view is the Quest (Ibid. pp. 186-206). This essay's central purpose will be to apply this approach to *The Lord of the Rings*, as an illustration of its potential value in reading fantasy.

Frye classifies romance as one of four basic patterns of narrative. Its polar opposite is satire; the other two forms are comedy and tragedy. In other words, for Frye, romance is not simply a defective form of narrative as judged by the standards of tragedy and comedy, but a distinct and fully developed form with its own autonomous standards. Each of the four basic genres has six typical phases, not all of which need be present in any one work. For romance, the first three phases parallel the first three phases of tragedy; the last three parallel the last three of comedy. This represents Frye's accounting for such works as *The Tempest*, often referred to as "tragicomedy" for their combining serious themes and consequences with happy endings.

The first phase of romantic narrative is the miraculous birth of the hero. This may be supernatural, as in the Immaculate Conception; or it may be given a scientific rationale, as in Superman's appearance on earth as an orphaned infant from another world; or it may simply involve being an orphan of unknown parentage and heritage. The second is the hero's innocent youth in pastoral or paradisal surroundings, such as the Shire. The third phase is the quest out of society to find something: true love, or power, or a name, or some treasure such as a magical ring. In the fourth phase, the quest's goal becomes the defense of a good social order against outer attack or inner corruption. With these two phases, it becomes possible to see *The Lord of the Rings* as the natural successor to *The Hobbit*, where Bilbo Baggins was simply having an adventure as an individual, Frodo Baggins is trying to preserve his entire world from threatened conquest. The use of the One Ring to tie these two narratives together is a mark of Tolkien's ingenuity in dealing with these complementary themes. The fifth phase is one of weddings of involvement with natural cycles, and of contemplative withdrawal from action. The sixth is entire detachment from the world of action to a realm of contemplation. Tolkien presents both of these well: the former in Sam's and Aragorn's weddings and the restoration of fertility to the Shire and to Gondor (each restoration symbolized by the growth of a tree), the latter in Frodo's departure to Elvenhome. In fact, all six phases are present in Tolkien's narrative, though the first is reduced to Frodo's being an orphan and to vulgar rumors about Bilbo's and Frodo's ancestry on the Took side.

Similarly, Tolkien's characters fall readily into Frye's categories for characters of romance. There are four of these: heroes; villains, who tend to be complementary to specific heroes; nature-spirits; and clown figure whose two functions are to deal with realistic problems and to provide a touch of comedy. Tolkien presents a full range of heroes, including the two central figures, Frodo and Aragorn; the band of companions of the hero; and the "sibylline wise mother-figure," Gandalf, and the "sibylline wise mother-figure," Galadriel, together with the other members of the White Council. The closest thing to a "terrible mother" is Shelob, but there are numerous villains of other types, including Gandalf's double, Saruman; Frodo's double, Sméagol; and the Black Riders, doubles of the Fellowship of the Ring. In the third class of characters, of whom Frye says:

> They represent partly the moral neutrality of the intermediate world of nature and partly a world of mystery which is glimpsed but never seen, and which retreats when approached... ...many of these children of nature are "super-natural" beings... (Ibid. p. 198)

the most important are Tom Bombadil and Goldberry. In the last category belongs Sam Gamgee; the importance of his role and the dignity which Tolkien grants him suggest an affinity with realistic narrative forms without stepping outside the conventions of romance.

One might of course notice any of these points without the aid of Frye's critical schema. But Frye is not writing specifically about Tolkien, nor even offering him as an example. Rather, he is discussing a specific form, or in his terms a mythos, romance, which he terms "the mythos of summer," as one of the basic recurring patterns of narrative. Frye's basic point is that romance, like comedy and tragedy, has its own decorum,
and that adherence to the conventions of this decorum does not make a work subliterary. In fact, much of the literature of the past follows those conventions and cannot be understood fully without reference to them. Frye's analysis of romance as following conventions is not meant disparagingly. There is in his view no such thing as literature without conventions; realism itself is simply one more set of conventions, not intrinsically better or worse than any other. The originality of Tolkien or any other writer lies rather in making skillful and insightful use of these conventions. In fact, conventions are simply typical devices of solving certain narrative problems which tend to arise in telling stories of certain types; if they did not exist writers would have to invent them.

However, certain conventions are more esteemed than others at present. This is why many literary critics disdain such writers as Tolkien, and class ventures from realism into fantasy such as Doris Lessing's Canopus in Argos trilogy (currently about to reach its fifth volume) as regrettable lapses. The nature of these changes in preference is another element of Frye's critical theory, one which both aids in grasping the sources of critical reactions to Tolkien and other fantasists, and offers an alternative view of fantasy more informed than either disdain or uncritical enthusiasm.

Frye's theory recognizes five basic literary modes. These are not genres, since they can occur equally well in fiction, drama, narrative poetry, or lyric poetry. The central point which distinguishes them is the degree of freedom of choice accorded to the explicit or implicit protagonist—an idea which Frye derives from Aristotle. In the first or mythic mode, the protagonist is a god, with unlimited freedom of choice, or at least with freedom of choice not nearly so constrained by natural laws as that of human beings. Then, for post-classical western civilization, the central literary work in the mythic mode is the Bible, and specifically the Gospels, a judgment at which Tolkien also hints by describing the Gospels as a fairy story ending in eucatastrophe ("On Fairy-Stories", pp. 70-73). The following stage, the romantic, portrays a mortal and a human hero, subject to natural law, but exempted from certain of its limitations, and freed with task of transcending human limits. After this comes the high mimetic mode whose heroes have powers no greater than those of other human beings, but is partially exempt, through possession of high rank, from social limitations and restrictions. The fourth mode, the low mimetic, presents a hero essentially on a level with common human beings in all respects. Finally, the ironic mode presents a hero whose freedom of action is less than that of other human beings, or nonexistent. In this category, three submodes might be distinguished: the psychological, in which the hero is trapped by his own obsessions; the social, in which he exists within a hostile society such as those of 1984 and Brave New World; and the supernatural, in which he is magically trapped in some sort of hell, such as that of No Exit or that of The Metamorphosis. This last type illustrates the tendency for this type to move back toward the mythic mode.

It is possible to read a given work as exemplifying one or another of these modes. The obvious reading of Tolkien's fiction, for example, is as a body of work in the romantic mode, since he writes about heroic quests, battles, and the like, and since his central characters are not everyday human beings. At the same time, it is characteristic of the better writers to include elements from other modes in the same works. Thus, John D. MacDonald, in a series of suspense novels, portrays his hero, Travis McGee, as struggling to survive in a corrupt and cynical modern world. At the same time, McGee's
self-image is that of a knight battling against evil, and the resulting suggestions of the romantic mode are vital to the narrative mode of his narratives. It is equally possible to read Tolkien's work to see how the strands of the various modes into one pattern. To illustrate this, let us describe the implied narratives in various modes which can be extracted from The Lord of the Rings.

On the mythical level, The Lord of the Rings can be read as a theomachy, a story of conflict among the gods. For this reading, consider how many of the characters in The Lord of the Rings are, in fact supernatural beings, originating outside of Middle-earth, or descended from such beings. The list includes Gandalf, Saruman, and Radagast; the descendants of Melian through Luthien, including Elrond, Elladan, Erohir, Arwen, Aragorn, and presumably a number of the people of Gondor; Sauron; the balrog of Moria; and even Shelob, a descendant of Ungollant. There are also Tom Bombadil and Goldberry, more ambiguous and more tied to nature, but clearly not simply part of the natural order or of any other various races of Middle-earth. Tolkien does not describe them in so many words as gods, but this is what they are—not omnipotent, omniscient, or omnipresent, but spiritual beings with powers transcending nature, which is all that could be said of many beings plainly called gods by peoples not constrained by a monotheistic theology. Imagine The Lord of the Rings as having genuinely been a translation from the Red Book, Tolkien's parody of the various Celtic books of lore written down by medieval monks, and remember that the beings of whom those monks wrote were pagan gods with part of their divinity trimmed off to make the rest fit into a Christian framework. One might imagine an archaic narrative from which the Red Book could have been derived, a tale of gods in conflict, whose central figures would be Sauron the god of darkness, Aragorn the reborn sun king, and Gandalf the steward of the setting sun for which Minas Tirith was named originally. Throughout this reading the image of light fading in the west and then being rekindled is present. Such a narrative fulfills a key function of myth within Tolkien's imagined history: it provides the foundational myth for civilization of the Fourth Age, legitimizing the dominion of men as established as the last act of the departed gods.

The romantic level of narrative is central to The Lord of the Rings and thus, being most familiar, needs least attention. At this level, the key figures are Frodo and Strider. Gandalf and the White Council remain important, but as advisors and protectors. Strider's quest for his kingdom, and for the right to marry Arwen, is the complement of Frodo's quest for the destruction of the Ring. In Fryean terms, one is a quest for achievement and identity—one might even say that Strider's quest is to become Aragorn—and the other is a quest to defend Middle-earth against an attack on what has already been achieved within it. Especially in the first volume, Tolkien's material is of the kind which is familiar in old fairy tales and ballads. All that would be needed to make The Lord of the Rings into a purely romantic work would be ruthless simplification, starting with removal of most of the subplots and minor characters; what remained might be a ballad, a fairy tale, or a pulp adventure story, but it could still be recognized as in some sense 'the same story.'

The primary assumption of high mimetic narrative is that the important people are those of high rank and heritage, with all that that implies; this is the most aristocratic of all the modes, typified by Greek and Elizabethan drama. Common people, in this mode, tend to be taken as inherently comic. The basis for a story
in this mode can be seen in the scenes at the courts of Rivendell, Rohan, and Gondor. In these, the hobbits are on the edge of being figures of fun much of the time. The central figure of the story in this mode would be Aragorn son of Arathorn—but not Strider the Ranger! The political conflicts among Aragorn, Elrond, Arwen, Galadriel, Denethor, Boromir, Faramir, Imrahil, Theoden, Eomer, Eowyn, and Saruman are least partly based on questions of rank and precedence, hereditary right and personal dignity, such as obsess aristocratic societies. The dialogue through which Tolkien reveals them conveys this atmosphere superbly, showing great lords and subtle councillors struggling among themselves to resolve issues of policy so grave that even naming them is perilous, while also being constrained by precise rules of honorable conduct, violations of which are punished—as in Eowyn's near death for rebelling against Theoden's order that she stay in Rohan and preserve his people, or Hama's death for setting aside Theoden's order that Gandalf's staff to be confiscated. There is material here which could make up a French tragedy. The elements of fantasy might seem problematic; Frye comments, however, that:

"the low mimetic, where we are within the order of nature, a ghost is relatively easy to introduce because the plane of experience is above our own, but when he appears he is an awful and mysterious being from what is perceptibly another world (Frye, op. cit., p. 90).

Perhaps the clearest use of this kind of fantasy material is the dream which sent Boromir to Rivendell in the first place. Gandalf's wizardry is not very different from Prospero's—if anything, usually less dramatic—and Saruman's is mostly that of the subtle and persuasive advisor. The only theme which seems not to fit into this is the quest of the Ring itself.

The next mode, the low mimetic, produces one of the most interesting readings. This mode is the one commonly thought of as "realistic". Its characteristic heroes are common folk, and its characteristic events and concerns are those which normally form part of human life; the extraordinary or magical, in this mode, is fully marked off as a distinctive realm with its own literary genres. In European fiction, this distinction began to break down after World War I, under the influence of such authors as Hesse and Kafka, and of such movements as dadaism, surrealism, and psychoanalysis. It has survived much longer in British and especially in American fiction, though even here it is weakening, as evidence by such books as Ursula Le Guin's Malafrena and Doris Lessing's The Golden Apples in Argo. In The Lord of the Rings, the common folk are the hobbits. As a realistic novel, The Lord of the Rings tells the story of a group of young men who go off to war, and return, matured, to find their homeland despoiled by misgovernment and industrial exploitation, to which they put an end. If this were made into an independent narrative, its central hero could well be Samwise Gamgee, and its central concern his rise individually from ignorance, immaturity, and humility to wisdom and self-respect, and socially from the low position of domestic servants to the office of Mayor of the Shire, the highest official of civil government in a country of probably a hundred thousand or more inhabitants. This kind of narrative of bourgeois success was the basis of many novels of the nineteenth century, though Tolkien infuses it with political concerns more likely to be associated with twentieth century Marxism. The high political message buried in it, one suggesting a fusion of radical diagnoses with conservative solutions to the problems they reveal. In this reading, Sam is a figure paralleling Aragorn: as the one rises from exile to kingship, the other rises from manservant to prosperous landowner and political leader. The inclusion of this realistic narrative is part of what is distinctive about The Lord of the Rings. Sam is the figure whom Tolkien most consistently links to realistic concerns, and who is most consistently presented as having moral limitations and finding ways to overcome his goals in spite of them: as such, he is shown to be of vital importance.

Another part of what makes Tolkien's achievement distinctive can be found in the fifth or ironic mode. The obvious "hero" at this level is pointed out by Tolkien himself: Gollum, or Smeagol. The ironic hero, remember, is characterized by a lack of free choice. Smeagol suffers this lack on many levels. He is psychologically divided, with neither the Smeagol-self nor the Gollum-self able to command his actions fully; and he is in the grip of an obsession. He is socially an outcast and, for most of the novel, a prisoner; and he is used as a pawn by the vast bureaucratic machine of Mordor. Lastly, he is possessed by the Ring, and in effect under a curse: if it is destroyed, he will be destroyed with it. Further, Tolkien makes it clear that his damnation is entirely arbitrary by one crucial scene, in which Smeagol, having come upon Frodo and Sam, both asleep, feels a moment's affection for them, and reaches out to touch Frodo, waking up Sam, who rudely chases him off and in the set drives his reemerging capacity for goodness away. Tolkien consistently shows Gandalf and, once he has worn the Ring, Frodo, looking on Smeagol with compassion; but this compassion is denied effect by Sam's suspiciousness, which itself is perfectly understandable in the circumstances, and even necessary. Smeagol is in Frye's terms a scapegoat or pharmakos, a character through whose unmerited death Middle-earth is purged of evil. This is confirmed by the central irony of the entire narrative: that the final act of casting the Ring into the fire is one Frodo cannot perform, which must be performed for him by the putative villain of his personal quest. In fact, at the level of an ironic reading, Frodo and Smeagol are twins, sharing the same undurable fate. Frodo too is a scapegoat, innocent but charged to bear evil out of the community which it endangers. Smeagol, being weaker and having gained the ring through his own wrongful actions, broke almost immediately under its power, while Frodo, being stronger and less guilty, held out against it, but ultimately even this makes no difference, for Frodo gives in to the desire for the ring, becoming for the moment as corrupt as Smeagol, and is saved and redeemed solely by Smeagol's violent seizure of the ring and accidental death. Tolkien's world has room in it for the bleakest of ironies.

One noteworthy point about all these levels of narrative is that they are bound together structurally by the presence, on each, of hobbits, mirroring the imagery of the larger narrative in some way. Smeagol, or Gollum, is an ironic figure, indeed the main one, though there are others. Sam is a low mimetic one. Merry and Pippin, sons of the Brandybuck and Took families, relatives and companions of Frodo, knights of Rohan and Gondor, are high mimetic ones. Frodo is a romantic one, the hero of the quest. Finally, there is Bilbo, who, in relation to the hobbits, is a mythic figure. He is the only one to become a figure of legend, as Mad Baggins: he is the sage who instructs the younger hobbits in knowledge ranging from simple literacy to the lore of the elves; he is a poet; he lives to a fabulous age; he is the character of whom the other hobbits constantly think during their adventures, both as waiting back in Rivendell to record them, and as their prototype, the first adventurous hobbit known to them and the finder of the
Ring. It is natural to them to compare their adventures to Bilbo's, as Aragorn compares his to those of Beren. The hobbit characters form a microcosm of Middle-earth. Since the primary narrative is a romantic one, Frodo is the central character among them; but Frodo is himself linked to all the other hobbits. Further, the fates of the hobbits reflect in microcosm the fate of the Middle-earth macrocosm, in that, at the story's end, the characters of the mythic, romantic, and ironic levels have died or departed, leaving the characters of the mimetic modes to carry on the world.

This growing disenchantment is itself part of Tolkien's theme, and is related to the sunset imagery which pervades his writing. This is the origin myth for a world from which the magic has vanished. All that survive is a memory of past magic, and a body of customs derived from an earlier age. This is, in fact, an image of the modern world, and the modern age: a realm in which such stories as The Lord of the Rings cannot be regarded, like myths, as true, or like romances, as plausible, but are set aside in a special category called 'fantasy'.

This historical succession is in fact part of Northrop Frye's theory of modes. Each of his five basic modes has its own age. In Western history, for example, the age of myth is the time of Christ, as projected into the past by our imaginations. The age of romance is the Middle Ages. The high mimetic age is the Renaissance; the low mimetic age, the period beginning with the democratic revolutions of America and France; and the ironic age, perhaps, begins with World War I, in which Tolkien himself took part, and whose landscape is reflected in the desolation of Mordor.

The genre of fantasy did not exist in the ages dominated by the romantic mode. When there is no literary convention of excluding the marvelous, and when in fact learned men spend much of their effort on the sagas recounting real marvels, the presentation of marvels does not make a story a special kind of story; it simply makes it a story. The separation in fact only became fully defined in the low mimetic period, with the emergence of nostalgia for the Gothic period, of the figure of the inspired poet, and at the same time of the concept of realism in fiction. At this point, it became conceivable that a writer could define the extraordinary events of the story he was writing as having no basis beyond his own pleasure in imagining them, and envisioning a world in which they could take place, a world in fact differentiated from our own by the very fact that such events do not take place in ours. This is the underlying point of Tolkien's discussion of Escape and Consolation ("On Fairy-Stories," p. 59-70). His fiction is different from that of the romantic mode precisely because it is written in an age whose inevitable judgment is not that it might be true, but that it cannot be true.

Yet, at the same time, it is a strength of Tolkien's work that he does not only retreat from the present world into fantasy. Rather, he takes the present world with him. This has been discussed very interestingly by Roger Sale, on the basis of Tolkien's brief comments about his experience of World War I and its relation to his interest in fairy stories. But we do not need these comments; we can learn as much from the stress which Tolkien gives to material whose natural home is not the romantic mode, but the low mimetic and ironic modes. Tolkien is not simply a fantasist; he is a fantasist who admits realism and irony into his fantasies, not simply as accidental inclusions or gestures, but as essential elements in the story he has to tell. He makes his heroes' acceptance of the right of even Gollum, a figure almost wholly ironic, to live, crucial to the success of the Quest. Frodo, Sam, Aragorn, Gandalf, all have chances to kill Gollum; all refuse to do so. Realistic difficulties test the heroes' courage and ingenuity; they are further tested by ironic difficulties—their integrity by the corruption of the Ring, their will by hopelessness, their compassion by contempt. Tolkien's vision of heroic courage is compatible with the bleakest irony; that Frodo could endure as long as he did under his intolerable burden is heroism beyond anything measurable by battles, and acknowledged as such. There is no special reason why Frodo should be chosen; and on the other hand there is no reason why he should not be chosen, since anyone of greater power would be likelier to be corrupted, and would still not be powerful enough to have greater chances of success. He is at once the common man of realistic fiction, the inadequate and corrupted figure of ironic fiction, and the hero of a romantic narrative, and all these elements are brought into harmony with one another. This is what has made Tolkien's writing able to serve an exemplary role for contemporary fantasy, and at the same time what has made it so difficult of emulation.

A writer is not compelled to work in any one of the modes—though, as critical reactions to Tolkien show us, he is likely to be poorly understood if his primary concern is with a mode his age does not value highly. But contemporary fantasy has been a genre of lengthy works; not merely novels, but trilogies, or multiple trilogies. It is difficult for a long fictional work to be successful through intense concentration on a single mode; a better approach is epic inclusiveness. Tolkien has such inclusiveness. His central interest was in myth and romance, which brought him the disdain of the critics whose standard of value in literature admitted only exclusively realistic or ironic writing. Such disdain, consistently maintained, would require that its adherents reject most of the classics, since these also include fantastic elements in many cases; and not many critics are prepared to do this. Nonetheless, they have a partially valid point to make: for a writer in the present age to exclude all realistic and ironic elements is a weakness of vision which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to write a good novel. But this is not a weakness of Tolkien's. Certainly his writing has some weaknesses—which there is no need to specify here—but The Lord of the Rings takes the grimiest ironies into account, and in fact makes their presence essential to the vision of heroic achievement which it offers.

What, now, have we learned from Frye's account? In the first place, we have gained some useful mental tools for understanding The Lord of the Rings. Frye makes us aware of the typical imagery of romance, of the different focal concerns of various modes, and of a number of other matters. If nothing else, these suggest that we can reread the novel in readiness to attend to new strands of the tapestry: to the diplomatic concerns of entering the court of Denethor or of Theoden, or to the systematic enthrallment and degradation of Frodo, or to various other matters. These are not the primary concerns of the narrative, perhaps—it could be told as a straightforward adventure story without them—but they enrich it immeasurably, and Frye offers a means of becoming more sensitive to them. His conceptual tools, including many not used here, offer a means of learning to seek works of fantasy more richly.

In addition, they offer the basis for an understanding of what exactly contemporary fantasy is. It is not
simply a return to the narrative patterns of the romantic mode, a telling of legends or fairy-stories in modern prose. By the nature of literature, it cannot be. The people who told such stories lived in a different age, one in which the ironic realism of our age had not yet emerged in any strength. Romantic narrative, for them, was a simple, natural response. Our history has made us more self-conscious, so that for us romantic narrative must always be a choice, and not an inevitability—a choice made in the midst of doubts. The writer can leave those doubts behind, making his writing a kind of holiday, or he can take them with him, and try to find the strength to deal with them within the environment of fantasy. His work will be stronger if he takes the second course.

Lastly, Frye's approach helps to define the place of contemporary fantasy in literature as a whole. It shows, first, that romantic narrative as such has a place in literature, one just as fitting as that given to tragedy or comedy, and that this place has its own natural decorum. Thus, it gives us reason to take fantasy more seriously as literature than it is often taken at present. But, beyond this, it shows us a pattern of historical succession which clarifies the disesteem which works of fantasy now often receive from critics; and it shows that it is possible for such works to be just as valid as literature as any others, when they are understood in the context of the full historical pattern of literary forms. In doing this, it also suggests how, how far, and on what basis critical standards applicable to literature as a whole can be applied to fantasy. Thus, a Frye-inspired approach to reading Tolkien helps to suggest what standards of merit may be applied to works with the characteristics of contemporary fantasy—to extensive novels portraying human or human-like beings dealing with serious matters in magical or legendary settings.


5. These include the following:

6. Some of these are:

   a. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977)
   b. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980)
   e. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)


   g. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)

   h. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)

   i. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)


   l. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)

   m. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)


   o. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)


   q. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)

   r. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)

   s. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)


   w. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)

   x. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)


   z. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)