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## Lore of Logres - Arrows from a Twisted Bow: Misunderstanding Tolkien

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## Lore of Logres - Arrows from a Twisted Bow: Misunderstanding Tolkien

### Abstract

Ready, William. Understanding Tolkien and The Lord of the Rings.

# LORE OF LOGRES

## book reviews by Rand Kahl

### Arrows From A Twisted Bow: Misunderstanding Tolkien

Without hesitation let me say this: William Ready's Understanding Tolkien and The Lord of the Rings (Paperback Library, New York, 1969, \$0.75) is a sloppy, badly-written, dishonest book. I cannot remember ever having read a poorer book. If I had not committed myself to reviewing it, I would have never finished reading it, but the rules of the game say you must read the book you are going to review. At any rate Mr. Ready has passed judgment on himself: "Man dislikes the Truth; he never has believed in it enough to espouse it, nor will he ever". Mr. Ready has spoken for himself, about himself; I can only concur.

The deception begins immediately, and the publisher is probably the one at fault here. The low-quality artwork on the cover is an inadequate plagiarism of the cover of Ballantine's authorized edition of the second volume of the trilogy, The Two Towers. The style of script used for the title of Mr. Ready's book is exactly the same as that which is used for Tolkien's name on the Ballantine books. Thus, the Paperback Library is hoping to trick the unsuspecting buyer and make him think he is getting something closely related to or part of The Lord of the Rings, which he most definitely is not. Also the text seems to have an unusual number of typographical errors. These things I do not fault the author for; it is merely slovenly bookmaking.

However, the author must be held accountable for the innumerable errors of fact in his work of which I will mention several. Mr. Ready refers to Tolkien's 1936 lecture, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics", some five or six times. Twice he says the lecture was given to the British Academy, and three times he says the lecture was delivered to the British Association. It was delivered to the British Academy. Again, Mr. Ready mentions That Hideous Strength by C. S. Lewis, who is pilloried by Mr. Ready (but more of that later), and makes reference to an organization noted in that story — "The National Institute of Coordinated Research", N.I.C.R.(?). The correct name, of course, is the National Institute of Co-ordinated Experiments which enables us to have the beautiful, ironic acronym, N.I.C.E., that is an essential part of Lewis's story. Yet again, and here where Mr. Ready is on what ought to be familiar terrain — the stuff of The Lord of the Rings —, he insists that there were three Hobbits in the Fellowship of the Ring instead of four. And yet again, Mr. Ready, who attempts to be an amateur psychologist elsewhere in the book, lets his Oedipal Complexes run away from him because he has Bilbo marrying his own mother, "Belladonna Took became a Baggins, Bilbo's wife" — see Appendix C in the LOTR. I am sure these errors would not have occurred had Mr. Ready read his sources carefully and accurately.

Granted that the above are not large errors, but I feel they are indicative of the mentality and conscientiousness that produced the book. It is almost as if Mr. Ready were an undergraduate who had gathered all of his sources, primary and secondary, and notes for a paper, and then, after suddenly discovering that he did not understand them and could not organize them into a worthwhile essay, pushed them aside and proceeded to record a few of his own sophomoric, unconnected thoughts on a subject beyond his comprehension.

Before I deal with Mr. Ready's misunderstanding of the Oxford Christians, of Tolkien's theme, and of Tolkien's "great contribution to... literature", let me first examine his prose style. It appears



that Mr. Ready cannot decide where he wants his prose to take him: cliché/gulch, Sunset Boulevard, or Olympus. Sometimes his prose staggers along with common clichés: "The facts will out", "a chance to cop out" of the Fellowship of the Ring, "the hoods took over" King Arthur's Round Table, and "He (Tolkien) insists that he would rather have written the books in elvish, so there; put that in a pipe and smoke it". Or consider this "He (Tolkien) was no plum in the marriage garden, but they married anyhow and have been together ever since" (Mr. Ready sounds disapproving and disappointed). Occasionally Mr. Ready loses all control and becomes just too cute, too precious: "Tolkien brings our dragons home to roost", or when discussing the story of King Arthur he refers to Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere as "Lance" and "Jenny." The attempt is made to rise above the prosaic, but Mr. Ready's flight to Olympus is an excursion into irrelevance. Tolkien's move from Africa to Birmingham, England during his childhood is discussed. All that is being established is that England is far different from Africa. Fine. But let us follow Mr. Ready's flight of one interminable sentence:

Birmingham, in Warwickshire, is the town of all of England that is the farthest from the sea, where the troubles always come from, the sea that is England's moat, the fishy deep whence came the Phoenicians to trade, the Romans to establish order, the Norse to batter and later to rule, the sea that was to enter the bloodstream of England and make her what she has become, more than an Island, an Idea, a Vision that none beyond the sea could share, nor ever will, and there is the trouble with any understanding of Tolkien.

How the sea and understanding Tolkien are related is never mentioned again.

In case you have not noticed it yet, another one of Mr. Ready's problems is needless ambiguity. Think on the following and take my word for it that the contexts out of which these examples come do not make them any clearer. "Yet, above all, Tolkien is a prophet in a mist in a mask, a chronicler of Time and Earth, of Hobbits. The mask is in his being; the mist, the exhalation of Man". "A lord of language, Tolkien has broken through the crust of the alphabet, of the normal spelling, into the spelling of the supernatural". Finally, consider Mr. Ready's description of G. K. Chesterton, "a journalist as well as a genius, he had to produce for editors and public, so he served up prose and poetry as if it were foaming brown ale and swallowed his own bitter brew behind the bar". If one tries to think through these images they become absurd. Mr. Ready is either trying too hard or not hard enough. I suspect the latter.

Now let us examine the three areas where Mr. Ready most clearly exhibits his misunderstanding: the Oxford Christians (and C. S. Lewis, in particular), Tolkien's theme, and Tolkien's "great contribution to... literature". In the early part of his book Mr. Ready is more concerned with waging war against the Oxford Christians and C. S. Lewis than he is with explaining Tolkien. Mr. Ready is not mysterious about his feelings toward the numerous critics who have referred to "the so-called trio (Williams, Lewis, and Tolkien)" or "the 'Oxford Christians' as one writer has wretchedly designated them":

These pundits are all wrong, they multiply the error that is deep-rooted and mischievous. Of course the three of them share the theme of 'there and back again' that is intrinsic to The Hobbit and is the winding and the binding of The Lord of the Rings. But critics fail to see that the differences between these men are far more important than the appearance of their likenesses.

But Mr. Ready has failed to realize or to become aware of something he already has intimations of in another part of his book. In talking about the Inklings, a gathering in Oxford which included Williams, Lewis, and Tolkien, he says "...since these men came together first of all in friendship because of their likenesses, the great feature of Tolkien's work and thought were given full rein". Notice that when Mr. Ready is not being vindictive about the trio it is the "likenesses" that brought them



together. Mr. Ready makes another statement which explains more of the deep bond that drew these men together:

It is with a sense of unbelief that the young and unsure realize that among the scholars and men whom they most admire there is a sense of commitment, to some sort of religion, to some belief that governs their action. Many a one of them, in this day and age, is a 'thorough-going supernaturalist'.

Williams, Lewis, and Tolkien were among the many. Mr. Ready has all the raw material for an accurate evaluation, but he fails to make it. I do not understand why. The critics who have made Williams, Lewis, and Tolkien a trio are not forgetting the differences of these men when the term "Oxford Christians" is used, rather they are recognizing a vital and very basic bond between them—their faith, "mere Christianity". All three men have a Christian world view from which they begin. For them the Incarnation is the Center, and their varied subcreations radiate from that Center in bright and diverse rays. Their styles, genre, and language differ one from the other, but their Center gives them a point of lasting and intimate communion. Thus, when Mr. Ready says, "Trio they were not, never were", I can only reply, "Yes, they are, they are".

Related to Mr. Ready's aversion to the conception of the "Oxford Christians" is his condescending arbitrary, and unsupported attack on C. S. Lewis. Besides its being ungentlemanly and unscholarly, the attack on Lewis and sometimes Williams (its "propaganda... will ruin the work of Williams and Lewis in another generation") weakens the structure of the essay by expending emotion and energy in an area which does not help us understand Tolkien. As he does many times throughout the book, Mr. Ready makes pronouncements for which he gives no supporting evidence. He gives us no hint as to why he feels a certain way. The following are typical of the casual judgments sprinkled through the book and give an idea of his attitude toward Lewis: Lewis was "a profoundly perplexed man who found a haven in Christianity"; "whose only first-class book is his Allegory of Love"; "Lewis published far too much"; "Williams fascinated Lewis, above all, who used his friends almost like ice floes in a dark and deep stream, his life, that he had to cross"; "Lewis makes his people out of the world around him, the rather smug little higgledypiggledy world that he made for himself..." This is not the intellectual challenge that scholars dearly love to become a part of, nor the mind-invigorating debate over a controversial issue, but it is a petty vindictiveness that makes us sigh and shake our heads in pity.

We come now to what I feel is Mr. Ready's grossest misunderstanding of Tolkien and the one his book depends on to have some relation to truth. A series of quotations will reveal Mr. Ready's theme:

One of the great things in favor of Tolkien, in the opinion of many of his readers who have rejected formal religion, and they are in the millions, is that there is no religion in The Lord of the Rings, through, in fact, it is all Religion. (p 33)

The whole core of Tolkien's work is man-centered, and spiritual thereby... (p 58)

Tolkien ennobles Man, honors him, more than any other writer of creative spiritual fiction. (p 62)

Man is called to the side of Good in his tales, not by a promise of victory, not for a reward in the Hereafter, whatever that may be, but because that is Man's reason for being, to go down battling for the idea of Man, the only piece of Creation not bound by the forces of Nature alone. (p 69)



Behind the loneliness and hostility of this world there is throughout the Universe—Tolkien writes what he knows—waiting to be freed and seen, a real sense of communion that runs and merges all ages into one. But this union centers around Man: Man is more than a part of it; it is his. (p 72)

In assuming that Tolkien has made Man the measure of all things, Mr. Ready has made his greatest error—the apotheosis of Man. A reading of The Lord of the Rings will broaden our conception of what power, absolute power, means, of good and evil, of light and dark, of the insidiousness of temptation, of courage and love, of beauty and ugliness, of cultivated Nature and perverted Nature, of the importance and eternal consequences of life's choices, and of the very boundaries of reality. But nowhere does Tolkien deify man. Mr. Ready has picked up one idea from Tolkien's lecture on Beowulf, the concept of Northern courage in which man chooses to fight on the side of good against chaos and unreason despite the fact that defeat instead of victory is certain. Regardless of how courageous this choice is, it does not, as Mr. Ready suggests, make a god of man or make man the center of the universe.

If Mr. Ready was going to make use of Tolkien's essay on Beowulf, he should have studied it in more depth because it does reveal Tolkien's attitude toward the Beowulf poet. This in turn sheds light on the relationship of religion, or lack of it, to The Lord of the Rings and its subcreator, J. R. R. Tolkien. First, the idea of northern courage was not the only thing to influence the Beowulf poet; it was fused with the Scriptures and the growth of Christianity. Tolkien says Beowulf existed "in a northern heroic age imagined by a Christian, and therefore has a noble and gentle quality, though conceived to be pagan" ("Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" (BMC)). Speaking of the whole poem Tolkien says, "avoidance of obvious anachronisms... and the absence of all definitely Christian names and terms, is natural and plainly intentional" (BMC). However, he also adds, significantly, "but if the specifically Christian was suppressed, so also were the old gods" (BMC).

Thus in his Beowulf essay Tolkien has given us one of the best keys for the understanding of the spiritual environment of The Lord of the Rings. The world of The Lord of the Rings is Earth, Middle-Earth; the time, however, is removed far beyond historical, earth time; both the world and the time achieve reality through the imagination of a Christian author. It is a world in which a Northern-type courage is appropriate to its heroes; but like Beowulf, Gandalf, Aragorn, Faramir, Sam, and Frodo have "a noble and gentle quality". Again because Middle-Earth is beyond the womb of time, "the absence of all definitely Christian names and terms is natural and plainly intentional". They would be inappropriate in Tolkien's secondary world, whereas they are not in our primary world. Yet The Lord of the Rings abounds in themes amenable to the Christian faith: sacrifice, stewardship, substitution, redemption, and healing. Again taking the cue from the Beowulf essay, you can notice that while no specific Christian names nor terms are mentioned in The Lord of the Rings neither are there any types of pagan deities mentioned. Therefore, for both Beowulf and The Lord of the Rings, there is an author who is a Christian, but who, in keeping the interior consistency of his secondary world intact, avoids using specific Christian references. And all the while a Christian spirit lies beneath the surface of the words: a hint of joy, a glimpse of eternity as sure as Frodo saw that "the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise".

I must deal with one more error Mr. Ready insists on making; this time a misreading of Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories" is involved:

This is Tolkien's great contribution to the canon of supernatural literature, no more need there be even hope of a happy ending. The decision to struggle on when the defeat seems inevitable is the true glory of Man that Tolkien has brought forward again from the great Norse ideal.

I do not know where Mr. Ready gets his facts, but he always manages to ravage the truth. ("Man dislikes the Truth; he never has believed in it enough to espouse it, nor will he ever". This appears to be true for Mr. Ready. However, for the Christian like Tolkien this is not true because he does espouse the truth in Christ, who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life".) I have said enough above about Tolkien's use of the concept of Northern courage. What I must respond to is Mr. Ready's dismissal of the happy ending or even the hope of it, when the consolation, the joy of the happy ending is an integral, indivisible portion of Tolkien's being. And then he calls it "Tolkien's great contribution to... literature"! Just a few remarks from Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories" to remind Mr. Ready of what Tolkien has to say about "the Consolation of the Happy Ending"... "I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it"; "it denies... universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world"...; "The peculiar quality of the 'joy' in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth"; the Happy ending has as its ultimate inspiration and justification the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus Christ in human history, in our primary world. "The story begins and ends in joy".

I have spent my time in a thorough review so you will not have to waste yours reading Mr. Ready's book. I suggest you read either of the two Tolkien essays noted in this review, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" or "On Fairy-Stories", for they would be infinitely more interesting and rewarding.

# I I search for a world

With bounds  
Unbroken which beckons  
With its hunger  
And its beauty.  
Where my short reach  
Can yet touch  
The hearts of my companions.  
Where my living  
Makes a difference;  
When having done  
I can say  
Having loved  
Has made a difference.  
How the earth and people  
Are in my blood  
And I in them  
And we in you.

## HOBBIT DREAM?

II What wishes contend  
In the sun,  
In the green spring tears  
Within  
The inclocted cities,  
The nets of tension,  
Of a multiplicity of knots.  
Why do cities assume  
Then consume  
The coordinates of glory  
Which are drawn in a polar rush  
To tenement terrors  
And sublime  
Suburban placidities.

III My hand wishes some healing  
Within its scope and circle  
Upon the sadness  
Of creation in travail.

(C.) Randall Kuhl, 1969

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