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Tolkien at Eighty: An Appreciation

Tolkien at Eighty: an appreciation

by Glen GoodKnight

By the time most of you will read this, the date will be past. J.R.R. Tolkien was eighty on January 3rd, 1972. This issue of *Mythlore* is especially dedicated to him, in honor of his eightieth birthday. This appreciation from the start claims to be nothing more than my own individual subjective feelings. It does not intend to be comprehensive, but rather to highlight some of the qualities about him that impress me at this time in my own life: qualities which make him in my estimation one of the most admirable unique persons in the history of the West, and one of the greatest stellar lights in my own life.

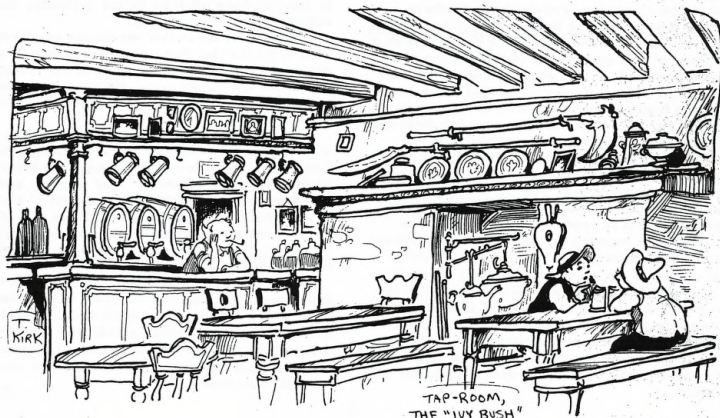
Little seems to be known about this man by most of his admirers, so I'll mention some of the details briefly for those who don't know them. His non-English name comes from his Danish grandfather. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born 3 January 1892 in Bloemfontein, South Africa (which is in the northern interior). His father, Arthur Reuel Tolkien, died when he was four years old, and his mother, Mabel (Suffield) took him and his younger brother back to Sarehole. This was a rural-suburb of Birmingham, in the English Midlands.

When he was eleven his mother died, and a Roman Catholic priest, Francis Xavier Morgan of the Congregation of the Oratory, became his and his brothers guardian, and saw to it that the boy's education continued through college. Tolkien earned his B.A. in 1915 from Exeter College and for three

years served with the Lancashire Fusiliers during WWI, where he saw hard fighting.

After the War he earned his M.A. degree at Oxford in 1919, and in 1920 he became reader in English language at the University of Leeds. During 1925, when he became the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford and fellow of Pembroke College, he met C.S. Lewis, who had just become a fellow of Magdalen College. This friendship proved to be a close and lasting one. From 1945 to 1959 he was Professor of English Language and Literature at Merton College, after which time he retired, and continued living at his home at 76 Sandfield Road in Oxford. When the "Tolkien craze" started in 1965-67, he was barraged by mail, reporters and fans. This eventually became such a torrent of distractions, that he moved out of his Oxford home to avoid having his time taken up with things, instead of continuing to work on the long desired, long awaited *The Silmarillion*. Today only his publishers and some very close friends know where he is, and they are not telling. We can't blame them, since if his address were known, then the distractions would begin again, and work on the epic masterpiece of the First Age of Middle-earth would be further delayed.

I think I can safely say that I would speak for many of his admirers in wishing him our very best and cordial greetings on becoming one of those fabled otocogenarians. I hope this issue will some-



how reach him, and that he will learn of our existence. I do not know for certain that he does.

One of the things that impresses me most about this man is his own character. One senses a deep integrity in his personality, not an integrity that he is consciously aware of, but one combined with an amazing modesty at the same time. This is borne out by his 'perfectionism and procrastination' in writing The Lord of the Rings, which spanned a period of over 14 years, and the elements of its mythology which began to form in his adolescence. Tolkien is the farthest from a "professional" author who wrote primarily to make money. His fiction is obviously written as an expression of his own worldview. In comparison to Lewis or Williams, his style is more aloof, and less personally involved on the surface level. I do not mean he is cold; rather that he seems to feel such style is appropriate for the kind of story he is telling, in imitation of the ancient panoramic epics he knows so well. Yet while he does follow this 'epic style' in The Lord of the Rings, there are moments when the "essential Tolkien" seems to shine through. Such instances as Frodo and Sam resting and talking together on the stairs of Cirith Ungol about Earendil and the Silmaril, and how the same story has continued on till their day, with them involved; or Sam seeing the star in Mordor. "...the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach."

Because of his modesty and lack of the desire to be a famous celebrity (as evidenced by his voluntary seclusion and bafflement over all the acclaim) and more deeply because of his unselfish attitude towards life, and his lack of self-centered ego, I feel he has had a special access and receptivity to what Jung calls "the collective unconscious." There is a cosmic, universal feeling about the secondary universe of Middle-earth; cosmic in the truths he writes about, and in the variety of the characters that inhabit it. I do not mean cosmic in the sense of the mythological sources he draws upon, which are those of Pre-Christian, Pre-Hellenic Northern Europe. By reading The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, my own mind was opened for the first time to the feeling of vast ancientness of life and the world, but even greater than that was that these books revealed to me the reality of reality; that there are things and truths that always were, are now, and always will be, and whose existence was not determined by my perception or lack of perception of them.

Professor Tolkien seems to be so open to these things, and the images that arise from the unconscious, that many parts of The Lord of the Rings seem to write themselves. I don't mean the style wrote itself, that is conscious and results from his artistic and creative genius. I mean the choices of actions and choices that have been unalterably made and set in action, running to their inevitable end accord to the ethical and spiritual laws of his sub-created secondary universe. It is obvious that Tolkien believes that the same ethical and spiritual laws apply in our primary world today. He never preaches to the reader; rather he shows so graphically to us the dangers and joys open to us in our own decisions.

I have said many times that a person really needs to read carefully and with understanding Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-stories" to have a more complete understanding of The Lord of the Rings. It is a masterpiece of writing, both in what is said, and how it is said. He comes much closer to revealing the "essential" Tolkien, than we find nearly concealed in the passages from Middle-earth.

Tolkien quotes from Andrew Lang in the essay: "He who would enter into the Kingdom of Faerie should have the heart of a little child." He then tells us "that possession is necessary to all high adventure, into kingdoms both less and far greater than Faerie. But humility and innocence — these things 'the heart of a child' must mean in such a context — do not necessarily imply an uncritical wonder, nor indeed an uncritical tenderness." In the same essay he speaks most movingly of his own Christian faith, and how it is related to his understanding of reality and fantasy, and sub-creation; how the Christian story is greater than fantasy, because in it "Legend and History have met and fused." I have never read a more eloquent or moving expression of personal faith than in that essay. I trust you will read it.

Someone has said before, in effect, that much of the imagery of The Lord of the Rings is based on the words of Saint John: "God is Light." This does bear out in many places. If Tolkien saw the One through the Biblical image of Light, he in grace saw himself as a kind of window or prism through which the light could pass and be recombined into new forms. This following passage is from the poem he wrote, included in the essay:

**Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.**

The One is the single White. Man (Tolkien, and us if we wish) is the refractor, the sub-creator, the re-combiner of the living shapes that shine in the mind from the One. To me, the moving from mind to mind is made possible by "the collective unconscious" shared by humanity.

Tolkien believes that our human creativity results from the fact that we are creatures: "Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker."

With that in mind, Tolkien concludes his essay with something so simple it is staggering. He feels that in Fantasy (Sub-Creation) man may actually continue the work of creation, "may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation." I take from this statement that Tolkien considered such pieces of sub-creation as "Leaf by Niggle" and The Lord of the Rings, as perhaps the highest form of worship that he could give the One.

If I see this clearly, then I believe Tolkien may have done more than any other man in this century to dignify on a high order the theological, moral, and artistic meaning of human creativity. I believe future generations will see him as one of the Western World's most significant expressions and one of its richest resources.

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