



Tolkien as a Writer for Young Adults

By Jessica Yates

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Introduction

The Lord of the Rings has become one of the key books which teachers and librarians recommend to young adults to lead them towards adult literature; but it was not always so. The making of the book was a series of accidents, and, once published, young people insisted on reading it despite the hostility of literary critics and some educationalists, and the then difficulty of obtaining all three instalments in the right order.

Professor J.R.R. Tolkien made up the story of *The Hobbit* for his children, without intending to publish it. While Tolkien was advising the publishers George Allen and Unwin on a translation of the Old English poem *Beowulf*, an editor read *The Hobbit* in manuscript and recommended it for publication. Tolkien had not even written the final chapters. After *The Hobbit* was successfully published in 1937, Stanley Unwin, Tolkien's publisher, asked him for a sequel.

After beginning a supposed companion piece for children, Tolkien's creativity led him on an unexpected journey.

Sauron Remains

Ever since he left England and his newly-wed wife to fight in World War I, Tolkien had been developing a mythology based on a series of invented languages, into which he had poured his feelings about religion, love and war. This saga, later to be called *The Silmarillion*, told of the creation of the world of Middle-earth, and how the purposes of the one God were continually opposed by Melkor, the Spirit of Evil, once one of his greatest angels or Valar, and how God still brought good out of Evil. In this world, purporting to be ours at its earliest stage, Elves were created first, then Men, Dwarves, and Ents, while Melkor distorted creation to make Orcs, Trolls, and other creatures such as Dragons and Balrogs. Elves and Men made war on Melkor, now named Morgoth, for the three magical Silmarils which he had stolen, and at the end of the First Age, with the aid of the Valar, Morgoth was permanently imprisoned. Morgoth's chief lieutenant, Sauron, remained in Middle-earth to cause further trouble, especially the drowning of Numenor, the island given by the Valar as a reward to those Men who fought against Morgoth.

In composing *The Hobbit*, Tolkien drew on this mythology, and set the story in the same Secondary World of Middle-earth in a later era; thus, as he developed the sequel, he began to make connections with *The Silmarillion*. He had already said that Bilbo's sword was made in Gondolin (an Elven city at war with Morgoth); now he discovered that Bilbo's magic ring had been made by Sauron; it was the Ruling Ring which governed all the others; and Sauron was also Necromancer. the sorcerer whom Gandalf had defeated in *The Hobbit*.

Over twelve years *The Lord of the Rings* developed into a massive typescript, not the children's book his publishers had requested, and initially they rejected it, for Tolkien wanted *The Silmarillion* published as well. Several years later, owing to the enthusiasm of Stanley Unwin's son Rayner, Unwin and Tolkien reconsidered, and over 1954 - 1955 *The Lord of the Rings* was published in three instalments, with the cliff-hanger at the end of Volume Two causing tremendous frustration to many devoted readers.

A New Fantasy Genre

Many critics, however, were hostile because the book did not fit current fashions of adult fiction: it was not a realistic contemporary novel, and in the words of Edmund Wilson, it is essentially a children's book - a children's book which has somehow got out of hand. Such misunderstandings were anticipated by the three authors commissioned to write the jacket "blurb," who concentrated on genre and comparable authors: Malory, Ariosto, science fiction, and heroic romance. As we now know, Tolkien re-awakened an appetite for fantasy literature among readers and inadvertently founded the genre of "adult fantasy." Since publication, those critics who enjoy Tolkien have striven to establish criteria by which Tolkien and other fantasists should be judged.

Among them was Elizabeth Cook, who wrote: The inherent greatness of myth and fairy tale is a poetic greatness. Childhood reading of symbolic and fantastic tales contributes something irreplaceable to any later experience of literature...The whole world of epic, romance, and allegory is open to a reader who has always taken fantasy for granted, and the way into it may be hard for one who never heard fairy tales as a child. (*The Ordinary and the Fabulous*, Cambridge University Press, 1969, 1976).

Tolkien's reception in the USA was more whole-hearted. Independently of Tolkien, a popular style of heroic fantasy had developed, entitled "Sword-and-sorcery," usually written by science-fiction authors as recreation from stories of space-ships and aliens. Barbarians, sorcerers, seductive princesses, and treasure hoards were common features of yarns set amid a mix of fantasy cultures and periods, from Viking saga to the Arabian Nights. So, although Tolkien saw himself in a literary tradition running from the Volsung Saga and Celtic legend through Rider Haggard, William Morris, Dunsany, and Eddison, there was another "pulp" tradition from legend, Haggard, Dunsany, E.R. Burroughs, Cabell, H.E. Howard's Conan the Barbarian, Fritz Leiber and L. Sprague de Camp. Typical of this American style is an anti-heroic, tongue-in-cheek attitude to great deeds which invites the reader to bridge the gulf between "real life" and fantasy: Tolkien does employ this anachronistic approach in *The Hobbit*, in the person of Bilbo and in the authorial comments, but in *The Lord of the Rings* this self-consciousness disappears, replaced by a pervading down-to-earth quality in the four hobbits' response to the heroic world, to accustom readers to heroic attitudes and archaic language, without inviting ridicule.

A Best-Seller Twice

After hardback publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, American SF fans put the word out that Tolkien was an essential read. Paperback reprints of the Conan stories popularised sword-and-sorcery in SF bookshops, and the market was prepared for paperback Tolkien, but there were more obstacles in the way. Tolkien disliked paperback editions and wanted to revise the text. In 1965 Ace Books forced his hand by publishing a legal but unauthorised paperback, with cover illustrations and blurb to appeal to fans of SF and fantasy, and *The Lord of the Rings* became a best-seller twice over: selling well in the Ace edition, and then as a controversial book when the

story of the author's disapproval broke, and an authorised, revised edition came out months later. At last young people could afford to buy Tolkien for themselves: in England a one-volume paperback appeared in 1968.

Since then youngsters have continued to fall in love with the Middle-Earth sagas, overwhelmed by the suspense, joy, beauty, and poignancy of this unique reading experience. In fairness, Tolkien's work should be judged by the conventions of its genre, not by criteria devised for contemporary fiction. I will now propose reasons for asserting its literary value and attempt to counter some anti-Tolkien views.

First, the book's readability throughout its epic length helps novice readers to progress, giving them confidence and a sense of achievement so that they may tackle other long works. A series of cliff-hangers and surprise confrontations maintain the suspense, the whole epic being intricately patterned so that characters separate and reunite, and all tends towards the climaxes of Volume three, when the reader is thrilled by first, the arrival of the Riders of Rohan to relieve the Siege of Gondor, then Eowyn's challenge to the Lord of the Nazgul and his death, which fulfils the prophecy that "no living man" would slay him, and finally Aragorn's arrival in the fleet of corsairs' ships.

Through the Eyes of Hobbits

Then the book is written by a master of language, ranging from plain English through archaisms to poetic prose in such scenes as Gandalf's defiance of the Lord of the Nazgul, and Aragorn's healing of Eowyn. Tolkien's use of epic diction has earned him much criticism: he responded that high deeds in a heroic setting needed that "ancient style," and he revelled in "the wealth of English which leaves us a choice of styles." Tom Shippey points out that Tolkien's success with millions of ordinary readers proved the critics wrong, and that Tolkien did the best he could to bring the heroic world close to the modern reader through the eyes of the hobbits.

In recalling features of myth and legend, *The Lord of the Rings* inspires its readers to search the past: Norse and Welsh legend, and Old English poetry. Teachers might encourage this, and also recommend fantasy authors who owe Tolkien a debt: he created the appetite for fantasy by which they have profited: published for children are C.S. Lewis, Alan Garner, Susan Cooper, Lloyd Alexander, and Ursula K. Le Guin for adults and young adults, Jane Yolen, Robin McKinley, David Eddings, Terry Pratchett, and Stephen Donaldson.

Tolkien has been criticised for flat characterisation: but in genre literature the reader must identify with the main character (or his partner, e.g. Dr. Watson), who must be an ordinary individual facing extraordinary pressures. Tolkien's main characters are drawn to three patterns: they have individual qualities; archetypal qualities; and they represent their species. All the main characters are well differentiated: the five hobbits, of course, and also the four heroes, Aragorn, Boromir, Eomer, and Faramir. Gimli and Legolas represent their races, and in the experiences of Gimli, Tolkien includes a plea for racial tolerance. Wherever the Company goes, Gimli meets hostility because he is a Dwarf, but the Company stands by him and he wins the esteem of Elves and Men.

Tolkien's view of Evil has also been criticised. However, it is appropriate for supernatural genres to depict creatures of ultimate evil, like aliens and monsters, whereas fictions set in the real world cannot do this. So we need fantasy to experience the extremes of Good and Evil, testing real life against the fantasy. Sauron, in his desire to conquer and control the world, is not very

different from a real-world dictator: it is his methods which count. Do not real-life soldiers deport and even massacre civilians? Consider the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews, taking place at the time when Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings*. Issues in the real world may date: Shakespeare's play Richard III is a timeless portrait of a tyrant, but the real Richard III was probably not guilty of all the murders he commits or orders in the play.

"Those Awful Orcs"

Tolkien's orcs are not of course intended to stand for Germans or any other nation of the "real world"; they represent the worst aspect of humankind when engaged in indiscriminate violence. Tolkien does not show his orcs at their worst, in rape and massacre, and there is nothing observed or reported of the orcs which has not happened in our world. The human-like characters who choose evil, however - Denethor, Saruman, Wormtongue, and Gollum - are tempted, fall, and are given chances to repent. Moreover, throughout the epic Gollum's life is frequently spared: part of the essential patterning of the plot in order for Gollum to reach the Crack of Doom and save Frodo from the Ring.

Tolkien urges his readers to choose Good over Evil; but as a Roman Catholic believing the doctrine of original sin, he feared for the world's future. He was particularly concerned about ultimate war, which he predicted before the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima: "Shall there be two cities of Minas Morgul, grinning at each other across a dead land filled with rottenness?" In his hatred of industrial pollution and his portrayal of the Ents, he was also ahead of his time. Meanwhile the contemporary novel of personal relationships may ignore wider issues which Tolkien pondered throughout his life.

Of Tolkien's works, the YA library should have *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*, and also *Unfinished Tales* - with further material from *The Silmarillion* and an adult love story, "Aldarion and Erendis." Tolkien's son Christopher has edited Tolkien's early versions of *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*; under the overall title *The History of Middle-earth* the series totals twelve volumes; the YA library could acquire these in paperback if there is demand, and also Tolkien's Letters and Biography. Tolkien's work is not only enjoyable, but also relevant to contemporary life: we should recommend it to young people and rejoice when they become enthusiastic for tales of Middle-earth.

An Outline of Tolkien's Life

TOLKIEN, J(ohn) R(onald) R(euel). British. Born in Bloemfontein, Orange Free State, South Africa, 3 January 1892; came to England, 1895. Educated at King Edward VI's School, Birmingham, 1900-1902, 1903-1911; St. Philip's School, Birmingham, 1902-03; Exeter College, Oxford (open classical exhibitioner; Skeat prize, 1914), 1911-15; B.A. (honours), 1915, M.A. 1919. Served in the Lancashire Fusiliers, 1915-18: Lieutenant. Married Edith Mary Bratt in 1916 (died 1971); three sons and one daughter. Writer. Freelance tutor, 1919. Assistant, Oxford English Dictionary, 1919-1920; Reader in English, 1920-23, and Professor of the English Language, 1924-25, University of Leeds, Yorkshire; at Oxford University: Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon, 1925-45; Fellow, Pembroke College, 1926-45; Leverhulme Research Fellow, 1934-36; Merton Professor of English Language and Literature, 1945-59; Honorary Fellow, Exeter College, 1963; Emeritus Fellow, Merton College; Honorary resident fellow of Merton College, 1972-73. Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecturer, British Academy, 1936; Andrew Lang Lecturer, University of St. Andrews, Fife, 1939; W. P. Ker Lecturer, University of Glasgow, 1953; O'Donnell Lecturer, Oxford University, 1955. Artist: individual show: Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 1977. Recipient: New York Herald Tribune Children's Spring Book Festival award, 1938, for *The Hobbit*; International Fantasy award, 1957, for *The Lord of the Rings*; Royal Society of Literature Benson Medal, 1966; Foreign Book prize (France), 1973; World Science Fiction Convention Gandalf award, 1974; Hugo award, 1978; Locus award for best fantasy novel, 1978, for *The Silmarillion*. D. Litt.: University College, Dublin, 1954; University of Nottingham, 1970; Oxford University, 1972; Dr. en Phil et Lettres: Liège, 1954; honorary degree: University of Edinburgh, 1973. Fellow, Royal Society of Literature, 1957. C.B.E. (Commander, Order of the British Empire), 1972. *Died 2 September 1973.*