

Rings and Wizards: The Spell of Middle Earth

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Tonight as we gather to learn about and discuss The Lord of the Rings, we represent a small portion of people around the world who have become fascinated by these books and now by the movies based on the books. Before the release of the movies, The Hobbit had sold about 40 million copies worldwide and The Lord of the Rings, the trilogy, had sold in excess of 50 million copies since it was first published. I am sure by now those figures have increased dramatically. In addition, the books have been translated into more than 35 languages, so their popularity is not reserved for the English-speaking world.

Why, we should ask, have so many fallen under the “spell” of Middle Earth? Why does this story attract millions of readers and moviegoers? Tonight I would like to say a little bit about why Tolkien’s writing is so popular. I will begin by giving a brief glimpse at Tolkien’s life and the origin of *The Lord of the Rings*. Then I will suggest some reasons for the great appeal of these books to many over the past few decades and even now as the movies have taken the Hollywood spotlight.

The Life of J.R.R. Tolkien

J.R.R. Tolkien was born in 1892 and died in 1973 at the age of 82. He was born in South Africa but only spent a few years living there before his mother and siblings moved to England following his father’s death. Tolkien was three years old when his family resettled in England and he spent the rest of his life there.

As a child, Tolkien had a passionate interest in literature which continued through his university education. He joined the British Army during World War I and was engaged in trench warfare in France from 1916-17. In 1917 he was discharged from the army with shell shock and taken back to England. He then continued his studies and began teaching.

Tolkien took great delight in ancient literature and in ancient languages. He worked for several years on the *Oxford English Dictionary* and then became a teacher at Leeds University in the north of England. After teaching at Leeds for about four years, he went to Oxford University (1925) where he became a professor and spent the rest of his life.

Tolkien’s field of expertise was the history of the English language, in particular Middle English and Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, and the history of the Germanic languages. In addition to Anglo-Saxon, he was very interested in the Old Norse or Old Icelandic language and history. He wrote many textbooks and had a passion for the myths and sagas of the Germanic and Norse peoples. *The Hobbit* was the first of his fantasy books to be published (1937). *The Lord of the Rings* followed nearly two decades later. *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers* were published in 1954. *The Return of the King* was published in 1955. It was not until after his death that *The Silmarillion*, which is the account of the origins of Middle Earth, was published with the help of his son Christopher in 1977. Two volumes called *Lost Tales*, a book called *Unfinished Tales*, and other smaller works were published later as well.

The Origins of Tolkien's Books

Tolkien's delight in the languages of the Anglo-Saxon and Norse people was the starting place for the tales of Middle Earth. He devised the languages of the elves and other characters before he devised their histories. As you may know, the languages are developed to the point that readers can actually learn the languages and speak them. He also wrote long poems about these peoples before writing the books.

In the early 1930s, Tolkien started telling stories to his children. He was a wonderful storyteller. Many of his published stories find their origin in tales that he would tell his children. Some of the stories he told his children were about Bilbo Baggins, the hobbit.

Right up until the end of Tolkien's life, he carried on writing the history of Middle Earth. One of the fascinating things about *The Lord of the Rings* is that there is such a rich background to everything said in it. Tolkien produced maps, family trees of all his characters, poems, songs, legends, philological notes on the languages, and histories of those languages.

Why Such Popularity?

So why do people enjoy these books so much? Why is it that books published in the 1950s could create such a stir today?

The Stories

These books have achieved such popularity, in part, because Tolkien is a great storyteller who captures the reader's imagination very quickly. Donald Barr, a professor at Columbia, puts it this way, "*The Lord of the Rings* is an extraordinary work, pure excitement, unencumbered narrative, moral warmth, barefaced rejoicing and beauty, but most of all excitement—excitement of a great storyteller."²

The compelling nature of the story is also one of the reasons why this trilogy has made such exciting films. *The Lord of the Rings* is filled with exciting events and situations that lead you to wonder how on earth the characters are going to get through. A reader or moviegoer can experience wonder and suspense again and again through these stories even though he or she knows exactly what is going to happen. That is one of the marks of a wonderful story.

The Writing

Second, these books are beautifully written. There are no wasted words. Tolkien wrote and rewrote his stories and poems. He would send bits and pieces to close friends like

C.S. Lewis. Lewis made his comments and even when the comments were almost entirely positive, if there were any sort of editorial suggestions at all, Tolkien would rewrite the whole segment over and over again. Every single word adds to the picture that we are given.

One test that can be used to determine if something is well written is to hear it read out loud. I first became acquainted with Tolkien's books when my father read them to my siblings and me after they were initially published in England. For months we were occupied getting through these books. Since then I have read the books over and over both for my own enjoyment and the enjoyment of my children.

A book that is not well written, no matter how compelling the story is, will not be reread multiple times. I know people who reread *The Lord of the Rings* every year. Christopher Lee, the actor who plays Saruman in the movies, says he reads the books once a year. And like many, Lee is able to imaginatively enter into and enjoy Tolkien's Middle Earth again and again.

The Characters

The Lord of the Rings story is captivating because of the characters we meet. There are thousands of characters that are part of the history of Middle Earth. Essential to the value of this literature is the fact that, in the midst of many lesser characters, the main characters are developed with real depth. People like Bilbo, Frodo, Sam, Gandalf, and Aragorn are thoroughly realized people. You can imagine yourself having a conversation with them. They become real individuals through this story, and of course that was one of the real challenges for the filmmakers. The filmmakers were challenged not to offend many people who were already familiar with the characters through the books. But they were also at an advantage because the characters in the books are so well developed—they had something with which to work.

The Place

A fourth reason why people fall under the “spell” of Middle Earth is because Middle Earth itself is so thoroughly realized. Every sentence in this trilogy is related to a vast story that stands behind it. Everything mentioned contributes in some little way to this extraordinarily intricate story. That is one of the most remarkable and engaging aspects of these books. There are Tolkien societies and Middle Earth societies made up of people who do such things as learn these languages and write letters to each other in Elvish.

The Realism

It is interesting to use the word realism in relation to books that are fantasies. But people constantly try to relate what takes place in *The Lord of the Rings* to events in the modern world. I have read reviews that see the movie as a commentary on the war on terrorism today. When the books were first published in the 1950s, many people saw them as a commentary on the rise of Hitler and the Nazis in Europe and the events of World War II.

Tolkien always denied that the books had anything to do with what took place in World War I and II, though he himself had experienced some of the appalling events of World War I in Europe. Even though Tolkien denied that they were about these great wars and we can deny that these books are about the present-day terrorist crisis, the books are so realistic in their depiction of human life that they touch us all at a very deep level. This is another major reason why people immediately flocked to the movies as well as love the books.

Flannery O'Connor wrote something in *Mystery and Manners* which relates to this point of realism. She wrote, “I’m always highly irritated by people who imply that writing fiction is an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality.”³ Those words are very appropriate as a description of Tolkien’s books. They are a plunge into reality, even though they are fiction, even though they are fantasies about a completely other world.

The Myth

As we think about this plunge into reality, we see it is a plunge into reality that is informed by Germanic and Norse myths and sagas. I read a review of the first film which said that these books have nothing to do with Christianity, they are purely about Germanic and Norse sagas. It is certainly true that the books are influenced greatly by Germanic and Norse myths and sagas. But they are also deeply influenced by a Christian, by a Biblical, account of the world. The stories reflect the Bible’s account of creation, the Fall of man due to rebellion against God, and redemption.

Commentators who are antagonistic toward Christianity recognize this Christian background to *The Lord of the Rings*. I read an interview with Phillip Pullman who has written some fine fantasy works. He said one of the reasons he is writing is because he is fed up with the Christian impact of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. I have read statements by passionate humanists who have said they hate Tolkien and Lewis because they see them as riding in on a white horse, trying to rescue civilization by turning people back to the Christian faith.

Yet W.C. Dowling who teaches at Rutgers says, “These books contain no trace of religious belief, ritual, or theology.”⁴ We must ask how a narrative that demands readers conceive of the world within religious categories is able to do so without any overt mention of religion. That is the question that Dowling asks. When the books first came out, and for years

afterward, there were many people who thought of *The Lord of the Rings* and the stories of Middle Earth as an elaborate Christian allegory. But Tolkien himself denied that they were a Christian allegory. He wrote to his publishers saying, “*The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* is not about anything but itself. Certainly it has no allegorical intentions, general, particular, or topical, moral, religious, or political.”⁵

Tolkien said he personally was not interested in writing allegories, and that he had no intention of being didactic, that is, teaching certain moral standards or values as he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*. He said they are just stories. But of course, they are stories that reflect truth.

Tolkien specifically regarded them as fairy stories. And it is important to understand what Tolkien said about fairy stories. He believed that there can be far more truth revealed in a fairy story or in a myth than in a realistic novel. The fact that Tolkien thought of them as fairy stories, or myths, does not mean in any way that he thought of them as being less serious in what they were communicating.

There are some fascinating things that we can discover about Tolkien’s view of myth or story in the correspondence between Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. In 1929, before Lewis’ conversion to Christianity, Tolkien sent Lewis a copy of his poem *Beren and Luthien*—a poem about a human being and elf who fall in love. The elf then has to reject her immortality to marry a human. Lewis wrote back to Tolkien saying, “The two thoughts that come out clearly are the sense of reality in the background,” (again the point that this is about the real world), “and the mythical value.” Then Lewis added, “The essence of a myth being, that it should have no taint of allegory to the maker.”⁶ In other words, Tolkien does not intend it to be an allegory, but in Lewis’ words, “it will constantly suggest allegories to the reader.”⁷ Tolkien had no problems with that statement, he was just insistent that he was not writing an allegory.

If you read a biography of either Lewis or Tolkien, you will see an encounter between them later in 1929, the same year that the above letter was written. At this point C.S. Lewis was not a committed Christian, yet he was on the move toward the Christian faith. Lewis, Tolkien, and another friend met one evening with Dyson, another teacher at Oxford. At that time, Lewis was struggling to see how an event that happened almost two thousand years ago, that is the death of Christ on the cross and His resurrection, could have any meaning almost two thousand years later, except as a moral example. Tolkien replied to Lewis by pointing out that Lewis had no difficulty at all being moved by myths and sagas which are not true in the sense of being true historical accounts. Tolkien said that those myths and sagas speak to a person at a deep level about human folly, pride, sin, and cruelty, as well as about hope, longing, joy, beauty, and the desire for redemption. Lewis’ account of his own conversion in *Surprised by Joy* and *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, tells that it was those elements, especially the element of joy in Norse mythology and in other legends, which were God’s means of drawing Lewis to Himself. The myths brought him to think about the truth of Christianity.

Tolkien could point out that Lewis had no problem at all with being excited and impacted by myths, legends, and fairy stories. And Tolkien said the Gospel is exactly the same kind of story except it is true historically. In fact, Tolkien said the Gospel is the greatest fairy story ever told—the story of Christ’s death and resurrection. For anyone who is interested in Tolkien’s understanding of issues such as these, I would commend the essay in *Tree and Leaf* titled “On Fairy Stories.”

Lewis responded to Tolkien saying, “that’s like lies breathed through silver.”⁸ Tolkien then went home and wrote a poem, called “Mythopoeia,” where he reiterated the arguments that he had made to Lewis that night. The poem shows that myths are, at a very deep level, telling us the truth about the human condition. Human beings are by nature mythmakers, fairy story makers. Fairy stories tell us the deepest things about who we are.

Lewis was converted to Christianity 12 days later. What Tolkien said to him that evening was the nail in the coffin, so to speak. It was the last thing which convinced Lewis that he indeed ought to become a Christian and that Christianity was the truth. Tolkien wrote about that conversation later. He knew it was a conversation that was particularly important in Lewis’ life.

Fairy Stories Showing Truth

So we can look at *The Lord of the Rings* with the understanding that Tolkien saw fairy stories showing truth. Tolkien saw the making of myths as something like a memory of what humanity was before the Fall, before rebellion against God, a memory of paradise that is absolutely fundamental to our human nature. That is why children love fairy stories and play imaginative games in their minds. This is why stories like *The Lord of the Rings* appeal to us at such a very deep level.

When people read these books or watch the movies they are touched at a deep level possibly without realizing it. And everything they are learning, everything that touches them, is coming, fundamentally, from a Christian understanding of reality, of our condition as human beings.

Christian Virtues

Finally, I would like to point out that one of the qualities that makes the *The Lord of the Rings* truly great is that the virtues most treasured in the stories are the virtues that are at the very heart of Biblical Christianity. Let me give some illustrations of this.

The first virtue we must consider is *meekness* or *humility*. It is no accident that the heroes of *The Lord of the Rings* are hobbits—that is, halflings. Hobbits are little people, just three feet tall. Most of the people in the outside world do not even know they exist. Yet these little people are at the heart of this story. There is a wonderful statement in *The Fellowship of the Ring* by Elrond, one of the great leaders of the elves who says, “The road must be trod, but it will be very hard...Neither strength nor wisdom will carry us far upon it. This quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong, yet such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world. Small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere.”⁹

During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” (Matt. 5:5) That virtue is at the very heart of *The Lord of the Rings*. These are people who do not want power. They are interested in what is good and true, no matter what it costs them. As Francis Schaeffer used to say, “There are no little people in God’s world.” In fact, little people are all extraordinarily significant and that is, of course, the point that Tolkien is making in these stories.

A second, closely related virtue that is central to this story, is the *service* of others without desire for recognition or fame. A fascinating example of this is shown in Strider, or Aragorn, who is basically unknown and unappreciated and has no interest in being known. The appendices at the back of *The Return of the King*, tell us that Aragorn has already spent decades working as a very close military leader and advisor, both to the Rohirrim in Rohan, and also in Gondor. In both places he just fades out of the picture because he has no desire to be recognized or have power. There are many other examples of this in the trilogy. Of course, Aragorn becomes the king in the end. Yet he spends many decades living a life where nobody knows who he is and he has no desire to receive recognition.

A third virtue displayed in the stories is *self-sacrifice*. Self-sacrifice is, of course, at the heart of what Christianity is all about—the sacrifice of Christ. And self-sacrifice is at the center of *The Lord of the Rings*. Whether it is Gandalf, prepared to sacrifice himself in Moria, or Theoden going out to battle, knowing he is going to die, repeatedly someone is willing to give his or her life. Frodo and Sam go to Mount Doom with no hope of surviving, but ready to sacrifice for the sake of the salvation of others.

The list of virtues could go on, but time [space] does not permit. All along Tolkien paints a picture of extraordinary realism about evil and death. Galadriel refers to their fight saying, “Together through the ages of the world we have fought the long defeat.”¹⁰ Yet the stories give foretastes of redemption. There are hints of a divine providence in the midst of it all, the providence of God. It is the existence of genuine goodness and the hidden hand of God behind these stories that is the most vivid presence.

Footnotes

- 1 Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery And Manners – Occasional Prose*, (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, New York, 1970) 77-78
- 2 Donald Barr, 'Shadowy World of Men and Hobbits,' Book Review of 'The Two Towers', *New York Times*, May 1, 1995
- 3 Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery And Manners – Occasional Prose*, (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, New York, 1970), 77-78
- 4 W.C.Dowling, *English 321: Tolkien & Oxford Christianity*, (Department of English, Rutgers University)
- 5 Philip Norman, Interview, 'The Prevalence of Hobbits,' *New York Times*, January 15, 1967
- 6 Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien, a Biography*, Book Club Associates, By arrangement with George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., London, 1977, 30
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid. 147, also see Tolkien's poem *Mythopoeia*, subtitled 'to one who said that myths are like lies breathed through silver'. One manuscript of this poem is marked 'For C.S.L.,' Carpenter, 147 footnote
- 9 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings, Part One – the Fellowship of the Ring, Book II, Chapter 2 – 'The Council of Elrond,'* (Ballantine Books, New York, 1965), 302
- 10 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings, Part One – the Fellowship of the Ring, Book II, Chapter 7, 'The Mirror of Galadriel,'* (Ballantine Books, New York, 1965), 400

Francis Schaeffer, for whom the Institute is named, led a ministry that was marked by a willingness to give honest answers to honest questions. As a Christian, he sought to create an environment with those to whom he ministered where no question was "off limits." Question-and-answer time is an irreplaceable part of FN@TI. The following is a sampling of the Q and A that followed Jerram Barrs' talk.

Questions and Answers

Q. It seems strange to say that fantasy stories portray realism. Can you speak more to that point?

A. Let me read something that Lewis wrote to Tolkien: "The real life of men is that mystical and heroic quality. The imagined beings have their inside on the outside; they are visible souls. Have we seen man at all, 'til we have seen, that he is like a hero in a fairy tale?" Lewis' point is that we learn about who we really are by reading stories. That is the quality that attracts so many millions of people to Tolkien. Yes, he is a great storyteller, but there is something operating at a very much deeper level. People recognize the struggles of the human condition, sorrows and joys, in these stories. I have no doubt that is the fundamental reason for their popularity.

The stories are so rooted in a true account of the human condition, of our brokenness. There is a kind of terrible sober realism about what Galadriel calls "the long defeat" against evil. The truth is that every one of us is going to die. We fight a long defeat against evil until the last enemy, death, is destroyed. That is the reality of the human condition and this comes out so powerfully in Tolkien's books.

And at the same time, there is also such a realization of joy in human relationships, of tenderness between people, of faithfulness and loyalty, and of genuine goodness and service to one another and self-sacrifice. Tolkien expresses love without any sentimentality, kitsch, or shallowness. It is extraordinarily difficult to write well about goodness. C.S. Lewis makes that point in his introduction to *The Screwtape Letters*. While it is actually quite easy to write about evil, it is much more difficult to write about goodness and make it seem real. One of the extraordinary things about the Gospels, is that Jesus is shown to be perfect but He is real. The story has a ring of truth about it. Tolkien works at that level too because people see both the sorrows and joys of human existence constantly communicated.

Q. Do you see Tolkien's political views communicated in these stories?

A. This is a question that I am not able to answer very well because I don't know enough about Tolkien's political views. I do know that Tolkien said that these stories are not to be read as either political allegories or political teaching.

Q. I do not think the holiness or the goodness of the elves is very well realized in the movie. Why is this so difficult to portray?

A. Several of the critiques I read of The Fellowship of the Ring movie criticize it just at that point. Particularly the scenes with Galadriel do not convey the deep holiness and goodness of the elves which is expressed in the books. If we ask why that is difficult to communicate, I think it is because we are so unfamiliar with perfection ourselves. None of us has a heart without deception and all kinds of ugliness and pride. It is a difficult task for an actor to portray a person who is thoroughly and completely good. The moviemakers tried to do it by using a lot of light, which is understandable because that is one of the things that Tolkien himself does in the stories. While I think Tolkien certainly succeeds in portraying goodness in the books, I do think this is a shortcoming in the movies. Yet I am not very critical on that note because I think representing moral perfection in visual form is extraordinarily difficult to do. It is so alien to our experience.

Q. Do you think it is a fair criticism to say that the average moviegoer is seeing the movie just for the action and violence?

A. My first response to that question is that I do not think so poorly of people. I think that the great masses of people who have gone to those movies are not just simply interested in action and violence and dramatic portrayals of evil, but are seeing other things. Many of the people who went to the movies have no idea of the stories. When my wife went to see the first movie there were people crying all over the cinema at the point when Gandalf falls into Moria. They thought he was gone for good.

Some Christians have criticized the books and the movies because evil is so horribly real in them. I would respond to that by saying that evil is horribly real in this world. We are not living in a world where everything is pleasant. I certainly would not fault the movies at that level. I think it does have a palpable sense of evil. I think it portrays this much better than it portrays holiness, but that is a human problem.

I have a much higher view of the average person going to the movies. I think people have been deeply involved in the stories, in the excitement and commitment characters to do what is good. While I do think there are problems with the portrayal of the elves, I think that the commitment to goodness and to self-sacrifice comes across very well.

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